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**STABILISING THE DEMOCRATIC ORDER:
ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR IN SPAIN**

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Introduction¹

The first democratic elections after the death of Franco were held on 15 June 1977. On that warm, bright sunny day, almost twenty million Spaniards turned out to vote, sharing the feelings of responsibility, hope and satisfaction which characterise founding elections: they felt themselves to be the protagonists of a new era in Spanish history. And rightly so, for these elections marked the beginning of the longest period of democratic life and electoral competition Spain has ever known. Although Spanish electoral history, like that of the other Western European countries, dates back to the final decades of the nineteenth century, it has suffered much more than most from the negative effects of political discontinuity and systematic falsification of the popular will. In 1868, Spain became one of the first countries to adopt universal (male) suffrage. Nonetheless, this was suspended for over twenty years by the liberal Restoration monarchy and, long after, manipulation, fraud and abusive practices were the defining characteristics of the Spanish electoral process. In the early 1930s, three successive free and competitive consultations were held under the Second Republic; but electoral polarisation, political instability, and the breakdown of the democratic regime paved the way for the Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship (1939-75), one of the most protracted of the many authoritarian regimes to appear in inter-war Europe.

In this light, it is perhaps not surprising that a Socialist leader from the early decades of the century could comment that ‘in Spain, only bull-fighting arouses more passions than elections.’² Yet this no longer seems to be the case. Since 1977, dozens of elections have been held for the two chambers of the *Cortes*, the 17 parliaments of the Autonomous Communities, the over 8,000 town councils and the European Parliament. They all have proceeded with the most complete *normality*, and in many cases proved typically *dull*. But they are no less

¹ This paper will appear in the special issue of *West European Politics* 21/4, 1998, edited by Paul Heywood on “Politics and Policy in Democratic Spain”.

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² Luis Araquistáin, *España en el crisol: un Estado que se disuelve y un pueblo que renace* (Barcelona: Minerva, c. 1920), quoted in Amando De Miguel, *El rompecabezas nacional* (Barcelona: Plaza y Janés, 1986), p. 133.

significant for that. At the theoretical level, they provide a unique opportunity to identify some of the distinctive characteristics of Spanish electoral behaviour in comparison with similar processes in some Western European democracies in the 1940s, or in the new Central and Eastern European countries in the 1990s. It is clear, for example, that the conditions in which the political parties were founded and became institutionalised help explain the relations between voters and their parties, the patterns of inter-party competition, the social and ideological bases of electoral choices. And at the political level, elections have played a vital role in the consolidation of democracy in Spain: they served to ratify the new Constitution, reaffirm the legitimacy of the new regime after the failed coup attempt of 1981, change the party in government on two occasions, replace the administrations of all the local councils, construct the complex *Estado de las Autonomías*, and allow Spain to participate in European politics through its own elected representatives in the European Parliament. In other words, electoral processes have sealed the definitive break with a past of fraud and polarisation and guaranteed Spain's admission into the select club of countries with stable and efficient democratic systems.

In this article I shall briefly examine some of the most interesting aspects of electoral behaviour in Spain.³ Here I shall refer only to the legislative elections to the Congress of Deputies; this decision not only reflects the central role that Congress plays in Spanish political life, but also the much greater importance that citizens attach to these, as opposed to other, elections. I will focus above all on issues relating to electoral stabilisation, that is, the establishment of the relations between the new parties and citizens, and among the parties themselves.⁴ This process is obviously of crucial importance for the institutionalisation of the

³ There are now large numbers of studies on elections and electoral behaviour in Spain; see in particular Juan Linz et al., *Informe sociológico sobre el cambio político en España, 1975/81* (Madrid: Euramérica, 1981); Richard Gunther, Giacomo Sani and Goldie Shabad *Spain After Franco: The Making of a Competitive Party System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Juan Linz and José Ramón Montero (eds) *Crisis y cambio: electores y partidos en los años ochenta* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, 1986), and Pilar del Castillo (ed.) *Comportamiento político y electoral* (Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 1994). For a more complete bibliography see José Ramón Montero and Francesc Pallarès *Los estudios electorales en España: un balance bibliográfico* (1977-1991) (Barcelona: Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials, Working Paper 49, 1992); José Ramón Montero 'Sobre las preferencias electorales en España: fragmentación y polarización (1976-1993)' in Del Castillo, *Comportamiento político*, and José Ramón Montero 'Vent' anni di elezioni democratiche in Spagna (1977-1996)', *Quaderni dell' Osservatorio Elettorale* 36 (1996).

⁴ Leonardo Morlino, 'Political Parties and Democratic Consolidation in Southern Europe', in Richard Gunther,

party system and hence for the development of predictable patterns of electoral competition. The results of this process have been the subject of different interpretations. Peter Mair, for example, has suggested that the new Southern European democracies are characterised by their very open electoral markets, enhanced electoral availability, and intense inter-party competition, all of which, he concludes, 'inevitably hamper the stabilisation of an enduring democratic order.'⁵ Independently of the fact that these countries have undeniably been consolidated democracies for some time,⁶ here I will try to demonstrate that, despite appearances to the contrary, Spanish voters have long been rooted in specific ideological spaces, their electoral preferences have undoubtedly become stabilised, and that electoral competition has followed predictable patterns.

These arguments will be developed in the four parts of this article. After a brief description of the evolution of the election results since 1977, in the second part I shall discuss continuities in electoral behaviour which have evolved despite the context of new parties and inexperienced voters. In the third section I will discuss some factors which help explain the stability of relations between the parties and their electorates, despite the absence of structural and organisational mechanisms that are often said to account for such stability. Finally, in the last section I will analyse the constraining impact of the electoral system on inter-party competition.

Electoral outcomes: unstable parties, stable voters

Seven elections have been held for the Congress of Deputies since 1977. The results, which are shown in Tables 1 and 2, define three different electoral periods in terms of the

P. Nikiforos Dimandouros and Hans-Jürgen Puhle (eds), *The Politics of Democratic Consolidation. Southern Europe in Comparative Perspective* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p.317.

⁵. Peter Mair, *Party System Change. Approaches and Interpretations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p.174.

⁶ Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Gunther, Diamandouros and Puhle, *Politics of Democratic Consolidation*.

format of the party system and the character of inter-party competition. Two different readings can be made of these results. In terms of the parties, instability appears to be the norm. Many people considered that party stabilisation was unlikely to happen in a democratic system emerging from almost forty years of authoritarian rule, not least because of the lack of continuity between the new democratic parties and leaders and their predecessors from the Republican period, and the uncertain relations between the parties and cleavages that had been transformed during the long authoritarian interval. In practice, the main parties did experience a more or less traumatic period of mergers, coalitions, and splits.⁷ Moreover, they all suffered crises of one kind or another which ended in resignations, the redefinition of party images, and the development of re-equilibrating mechanisms with different outcomes; one striking thing about these *intra-party* conflicts is that they coincided with the *inter-party* elite transactions which brought the successful transition to, and consolidation of, democracy.⁸ The low-point in the stability of the party system came in 1982, with the collapse of the *Unión de Centro Democrático* (UCD), the governing party which had triumphed in the two previous elections and successfully overseen the transition. But this was not the end of the instability in the various ideological spaces. None of the different attempts to create centre parties (the most important of which was Adolfo Suárez's *Centro Democrático y Social* [CDS]) met with any success. *Alianza Popular* (AP), which had replaced the UCD in the conservative space, experimented with various ineffectual coalition and leadership arrangements before re-launching itself as the *Partido Popular* (PP) in 1989 in a bid to break its record of electoral stagnation. On the left, the continuity shown by the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) after its crisis at the end of the 1970s contrasted with the upheavals within the *Partido Comunista de España* (PCE). A series of splits and expulsions in the early 1980s were followed by the formation of the coalition *Izquierda Unida* (IU), but to relatively little avail. Nor have the many nationalist or regionalist parties with parliamentary representation escaped this instability; only the Catalan coalition

⁷ Maurizio Cotta, 'Structuring the New Party Systems after the Dictatorship. Coalitions, Alliances, Fusions and Splits during the Transition and Post-Transition Stages', in Geoffrey Pridham and Paul Lewis (eds), *Stabilising Fragile Democracies* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁸ Richard Gunther, 'Spain: The Very Model of the Modern Elite Settlement', in John Higley and Richard Gunther (eds), *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Southern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Convergència i Unió (CiU) and the *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV) have been present in all the legislatures, but they too have had their fair share of coalitions and splits.

This party instability contrasts with the remarkable degree of institutional stability. As will be seen in the final part of this article, none of the dimensions of the electoral system have been changed, and its effects have always operated in the same direction regardless of the processes of party change or party system change. Similarly, the rules on party funding, the formation of governments and parliamentary relations have not been modified since the Constitution was introduced in 1978. Nor have the patterns of party competition for government varied: in accordance with Mair's classification, these are still characterised by a high degree of closure.⁹ At the same time, the voting behaviour of Spaniards has been closer to a model of stabilisation than one of recurring availability in an open electoral market subject to unpredictable variations. The party changes that took place in 1982 or 1993 have been compatible with the processes of electoral stabilisation that preceded, and followed, both these elections. In this light, one could even suggest that Spain constitutes a case of 'volatile parties' and 'stable voters'.¹⁰ This apparently paradoxical situation suggests that variations in a party's electoral performance are not the result of sharp modifications in voters' preferences, but rather of major changes in the perceptions of the party.

The relative stability of the vote was already remarkable in the first electoral period. Despite upheavals in the internal lives of all the major parties, there were hardly any significant changes in voters' electoral choices in the two elections of 1977 and 1979 (see Table 1). In fact, an analysis of voting shifts suggests that political spaces of left and right were already crystallised, and that there was greater relative movement between the parties *within* each of these two spaces. This pattern, which has remained substantially unchanged ever since, contrasts with the high volatility generally seen in the second elections in new democratic regimes. In 1977, most voters opted for the UCD or the PSOE, which between them won 64%

⁹. Mair, *Party System Change*, pp.206 ff.

¹⁰ Samuel H. Barnes, Peter McDonough and Antonio López Pina, 'The development of partisanship in a new democracy: the case of Spain', *American Journal of Political Science* **29** (1985), pp.695-720.

of the votes and 81% of the seats. Both were flanked by minority competitors on the extremes: the PCE on the left and AP on the right. And they all, in turn, faced competition from a variety of nationalist and regionalist parties, the most important of which were the Catalan coalition CiU and the PNV. The results shaped a moderate multi-party system characterised by intense competition between the two main parties, the almost equal split between the left (an average of 42.2% of the vote) and right (43.3%), and the difficulties the minority UCD governments had in forming coalitions.

TABLE 1. *Spanish Election Results: First (1977-1979) and Second (1982-1989) Periods*

	1977		1979		1982		1986		1989	
Party	Votes (%)	Seats (%)	Votes (%)	Seats (%)	Votes (%)	Seats (%)	Votes (%)	Seats (%)	Votes (%)	Seats (%)
PCE/IU	9.4	5.7	10.8	6.6	4.0	0.8	4.5	2.0	9.1	4.8
PSOE	29.3	33.7	30.5	34.6	48.4	57.7	44.6	52.6	39.9	50.0
UCD	34.6	47.4	35.0	48.0	6.5	3.4	-	-	-	-
CDS	-	-	-	-	2.9	0.6	9.2	5.4	7.9	4.0
AP/PP	8.8	4.6	6.1	2.6	26.5	30.3	26.3	30.0	25.9	30.6
PNV	1.7	2.3	1.5	2.0	1.9	2.3	1.6	1.7	1.2	1.4
CiU	2.8	3.1	2.7	2.2	3.7	3.4	5.1	5.1	5.1	5.1
Other	13.4	3.1	13.4	4.0	6.1	1.5	8.7	3.2	11.0	4.1
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Parties:

PCE/IU	Partido Comunista de España and (since 1986) the coalition Izquierda Unida.
PSOE	Partido Socialista Obrero Español.
UCD	Unión de Centro Democrático.
CDS	Centro Democrático y Social.
AP/PP	Alianza Popular and (from 1989) Partido Popular.
PDC/CiU	Pacte Democràtic per Catalunya and (since 1979) the coalition Convergència i Unió.
PNV	Partido Nacionalista Vasco.

This situation, however, did not last long. Often described as an *earthquake*, the 1982 elections transformed both the party system itself and its component parts. As can be seen in Table 1, the UCD was annihilated by an electorate which rejected the party's continual factional infighting and ineffective governments. The PSOE doubled both its vote and parliamentary group. If there were few precedents in European history for the UCD's defeat, the PSOE's triumph was no less momentous: the party was able to govern alone for the first time since its foundation over a hundred years before; it was also the first time in Spanish history that a party had won an absolute majority of seats, and that a left-wing party had held power since the end of

the dictatorship. The PCE lost ground, in part due to internal divisions which culminated in the existence of three contending communist parties. And the AP enjoyed a spectacular increase in support, replacing the UCD in the centre as well as on the right of the political spectrum, although tempered by the fact that in terms of both votes and seats the AP lagged a long way behind the PSOE.

The significance of these elections was magnified by the persistence of their outcome. For although the political elites were convinced that it would be followed by another readjustment which would *normalise* the party system, the 1986 and 1989 elections only confirmed the existing alignments. Thus, the electoral changes of 1982 marked the beginning of a prolonged period of electoral stability: in the three general elections in the 1980s, the average vote for the left (50.2%) clearly surpassed that of the right (35.1%). The extraordinary electoral realignment of 1982 produced a predominant party system, in which the PSOE occupied an exceptionally strong position and faced an opposition that was as weak as it was divided.

After more than a decade of Socialist ascendancy, a new electoral period opened in the 1990s (see Table 2). The political implications of this were felt in two stages. The first came in 1993, when the PSOE lost its parliamentary majority, and the PP (as the AP had re-christened itself) enjoyed another sharp rise in electoral support. Voters for the parties on the left (48.3%) still outnumbered those for the right (34.8%), and the nationalists, above all CiU and the PNV, maintained their position in terms of both votes and seats. Nonetheless, the tighter competition between the PSOE and PP, on the one hand, and between the PSOE and *Izquierda Unida* (IU, a coalition of small parties dominated by the PCE), on the other, spelt the return to a moderate multi-party system. These changes crystallised in the March 1996 elections. The campaign was dominated by the certainty that the PSOE would lose (hounded by a severe economic crisis, corruption scandals, and allegations of state-sponsored death squads in the *GAL* case) and the certainty that the PP would win (following the highly aggressive parliamentary and media campaign against the Socialist government, as well as its success in the regional elections the year before). However, the PSOE's defeat was far less conclusive, and the PP's victory much more modest, than expected: the Socialists lost by a margin of only 340,000 out of a poll of over 25 million votes. Although the PP increased its vote, emerged as the party with the most votes

overall, and won power for the first time, it took only 45% of the seats in the Congress. Equally, in the case of the PSOE, the blow of losing power was softened by seeing its vote rise and retaining 40% of all seats in Congress. The PP's *bitter victory* and PSOE's *sweet defeat* did not, therefore, signal the end of the predominance of the left (with 50.9% of the vote) over the right (with 38.8%). However, this third period has seen a major change in the way governments have been formed. Both the PSOE in 1993 and the PP in 1996 opted to form single-party minority governments, kept in power by the more or less formal parliamentary support provided by nationalist parties, above all CiU, and to a lesser extent the PNV. Following the collapse of the CDS (which, much like the *Freie Demokratische Partei* [FDP] in Germany, could have allied with either socialist or conservative governments), and the IU's rejection of any type of alliance with the PSOE, the nationalist parties are the only source of support for minority, and above all conservative, governments. The nationalist (and hence particularist) logic of these parties' parliamentary alliances makes this an unusual situation in the European context, and raises interesting questions about the future development of regional conflicts and inter-party competition between political forces operating at different territorial levels.

TABLE 2. *Spanish Election Results: Third Period (1993-1996)*

Party	1993		1996	
	Votes (%)	Seats (%)	Votes (%)	Seats (%)
IU	9.6	5.1	10.6	6.0
PSOE	38.8	45.4	37.5	40.3
CDS	1.8	-	-	-
AP/PP	34.8	40.3	38.8	44.6
PNV	1.2	1.4	1.3	1.4
CiU	4.9	4.9	4.6	4.6
Others	8.9	2.9	7.2	3.1
TOTAL	100	100	100	100

Parties:

PCE/IU Izquierda Unida

PSOE Partido Socialista Obrero Español

CDS Centro Democrático y Social

PP Partido Popular

PDC/CiU Convergència i Unió

PNV Partido Nacionalista Vasco

Electoral features: continuity through change

We should find evidence for the stabilisation of the Spaniards' electoral behaviour in the usual indicators used to measure voting shifts in successive elections, the number of relevant parties, and the ideological distances separating the parties and their voters. If Spain constituted a case of electoral availability and party competition on unpredictable bases, these indicators should reveal high, relatively constant volatility, shifting party fragmentation, and changes in voters' ideological positions as a function of their equally unstable preferences. But this is not the case. In fact, the increasing stabilisation of the electorate is reflected in the relative continuity of these indicators over the course of the past twenty years.

Electoral volatility

At first sight, it might appear that Spain has seen considerable electoral volatility: indeed, the existence of three distinct electoral periods itself would testify to the many changes that have taken place in the parties' electoral support. Moreover, the collapse of the UCD and the CDS, the oscillations in the PSOE's and PCE/IU's share of the vote, and the great leaps forward in the AP/PP's electoral support would suggest that these changes have also been considerable. This impression appears to be confirmed when we look at the aggregate volatility index for Spain,¹¹ and compare its averages with those for elections in other European countries since the mid-1970s: the Spanish indexes are the highest, followed closely by those of the other new Southern European democracies.¹² However, the data in Table 3, which show the Spanish

¹¹. Expressed as a percentage, the volatility index measures the net difference between the results obtained by the main parties in two successive elections. See Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair *Identity, Competition, and Electoral Availability. The Stabilization of European Electorates, 1885-1985* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.20 ff.

¹² José Ramón Montero and Richard Gunther 'Sistemas "cerrados" y listas "abiertas": sobre algunas propuestas de reforma del sistema electoral en España', in José Ramón Montero, Richard Gunther and José Ignacio Wert et al., *La reforma del régimen electoral* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, 1994), p.471, Morlino, 'Political Parties and Democratic Consolidation', p.318.

aggregate volatility indexes for each pair of elections, reveal a rather different picture. Two points should be highlighted. The first concerns the evolution of the index. I have already referred to the scant volatility between the first and second elections, which was, in any event, much lower than that seen in other countries emerging from more or less prolonged periods of authoritarian rule. In the Spanish case, these readjustments were *postponed* until the third election, when they occurred for different reasons. Table 3 indicates the extraordinarily high volatility in 1982: figures of over 40% are extremely rare in Europe. There have only been two similarly high cases since the 1970s, Italy (1994-1992), with a volatility index of 41.9%, and France (1986-81), with 37.4%, coinciding, respectively, with the breakdown of the Italian party system and the aftermath of the Socialist alternance in the presidency of the French Republic. In fact, the elections in Spain in 1982 (and Italy in 1994) are by far the most extreme cases of total aggregate volatility seen in Europe this century: of the more than 300 elections held since 1885, only the Weimar elections of 1920 and the French poll of 1906 (with 32.1% and 31.1% volatility respectively) come anywhere close.¹³

TABLE 3. *Aggregate Electoral Volatility in Spain, 1977-1996* (in percentages)

Elections	Volatility		
	Total	Interbloc	Intra-bloc
1979-77	10.8	2.2	8.6
1982-79	42.3	6.7	35.6
1986-82	11.9	2.4	9.5
1989-86	8.9	1.7	7.2
1993-89	9.5	1.7	7.8
1996-93	4.4	1.7	2.7
Average	12.5	2.3	10.2

¹³ Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, Competition, and Electoral Availability*.

Source: Richard Gunther and José Ramón Montero, 'Los anclajes del partidismo: un análisis comparado del comportamiento electoral en cuatro democracias del sur de Europa', in Pilar del Castillo (ed.), *Comportamiento político y electoral* (Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 1994) p.477, updated with data from 1996.

Secondly, one should note the remarkable drop in volatility after 1982, since when it has remained below the European average.¹⁴ It might be hypothesised that following the exceptional *earthquake* in 1982, Spanish electoral behaviour stabilised simply with the passage of time. But I do not believe that this is the case: even in the highly volatile elections of 1982, inter-party voting shifts followed a certain logic. We can compare Spain with two other countries which have also experienced very volatile elections, Greece (with 26.7% in 1981-1977) and Portugal (with 23.2% in 1987-1985). The difference between the Greek and Portuguese cases, on the one hand, and Spain (and Italy), on the other, is that a very large part of the total volatility in the Greek and Portuguese party systems has consisted of *inter-bloc* volatility. That is, not only was there a redistribution of the vote among the parties, but also significant movement *across* the left-right ideological divide. In contrast, the Spanish elections of 1982 (like those Italy in 1994) combined very high total volatility with surprisingly low *inter-bloc* volatility (6.7% and 5.8% respectively). Thus, this massive electoral change was compatible with the fact that the Spaniards (and Italians) gave their support to a different party than in the previous election, but one *within* the same ideological space. Spain and Italy, therefore, show higher than average levels of *intra-bloc* volatility (that is, that which occurs exclusively *within* each of the blocs of parties grouped in function of class or left-right cleavages). This pattern highlights the importance that the *barrier* between the main parties on the left and right has for the stabilisation of the electoral decision and the *anchoring* of inter-party competition: this is a barrier which very few voters cross, and hence limits transfers of votes between the two blocs of parties.¹⁵

¹⁴ Mair, *Party System Change*, p.182.

¹⁵ Data for aggregate volatility are similar to those for individual volatility, which are based on estimates made from post-electoral surveys which measure individual voting shifts in two successive elections. See José Ramón Montero 'Las elecciones legislativas' in Ramón Cotarelo (ed.) *Transición política y consolidación democrática en España (1975-1986)* (Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 1992), pp. 289-295.

Party fragmentation

The stabilisation of Spanish electoral behaviour is also reflected in the scant variation in the number of relevant parties. To date, electoral preferences have systematically converged on just a few parties: this can be seen from the effective party index shown in Table 4.¹⁶ This level of fragmentation is amongst the lowest in Europe; it puts Spain even below France, only a little above the United Kingdom and close to Greece, Austria, the Federal Republic of Germany and Ireland.¹⁷ It should be noted that despite the constant expansion of the electoral supply, both the electoral and parliamentary indexes have remained virtually unchanged. Already low at the beginning of the transition, both have fallen even further since the major realignment of 1982. It seems clear that the electoral market is relatively closed to new actors, and that the electoral system operates very strongly against openness; this is quite obvious from the differences between the electoral and parliamentary indexes shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4. *Effective Number of Parties in Spain, 1977-1996*

Elections	Number of parties		Difference
	Electoral	Parliamentary	
1977	4.16	2.85	1.31
1979	4.16	2.77	1.39
1982	3.33	2.32	1.01
1986	3.57	2.63	0.94
1989	4.16	2.77	1.39
1993	3.53	2.70	0.83
1996	3.28	2.72	0.56
Average	3.74	2.68	1.15

Source: José Ramón Montero 'Sobre las preferencias electorales en España: fragmentación y polarización (1976-1993), in Pilar del Castillo (ed.), *Comportamiento político y electoral* (Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 1994) p.70, updated with data from 1996.

¹⁶ This index shows how many parties compete in elections, and how many do so in parliament, in both cases taking into account their respective relative sizes. See Rein Taagepera and Matthew F. Shugart *Seats and Votes. The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp.79 ff..

¹⁷ José Ramón Montero, 'Sobre las preferencias electorales en España: fragmentación y polarización (1976-1993), in Del Castillo, *Compartamiento político*, pp.67-72.

Another unusual feature of the Spanish case is the combination of limited parliamentary fragmentation and the relatively large number of parties and coalitions with seats in the Congress of Deputies: 12 in the 1977 elections, 14 in 1989, and 11 since 1996. This reflects the presence of nationalist and regionalist parties, which have enjoyed varying degrees of access to the Congress. The Basques and Catalans have always had specific parliamentary representation, and by more than one party, whilst voters in the Canary Islands, Aragon, Andalusia, Galicia, Navarre and Valencia have been more sporadically represented by regional parties. This situation confirms the importance of the regional cleavage, which is reflected in a number of complex regional party systems. In any event, the *assistance* of the electoral system and the distribution of the Spaniards' preferences among just a few parties have facilitated the formation of single-party governments, as well as the exceptional run of three consecutive absolute majorities in Congress during the 1980s. This moderate fragmentation has also meant that the governments of the new democracy have been able to count on working majorities, assemble the parliamentary support required to push through their main policies, and enjoy an unprecedented degree of institutional stability in Spanish parliamentary history.

Ideological polarisation

The Spanish electorate has not only tended to vote for just a few parties, but also for moderate ones. Since the 1970s, most initially chose centre-right parties (such as the UCD), before switching to the centre-left (such as the PSOE), and more recently to a party like the PP, which hovers between the right and centre-right. Democratic parties have covered almost the entire parliamentary spectrum, whilst the extremist parties have obtained only minimal electoral support: only two anti-system parties have held seats in the Congress, one on the right (*Unión Nacional* [UN] in 1979), and another on the radical, nationalist left (*Herri Batasuna* [HB] since 1979).

This electoral moderation accords with the Spaniards' ideological moderation. A whole series of indicators¹⁸ show that this moderation encompasses different social classes, age cohorts, and occupational groups, and has enjoyed an unusual degree of continuity since the 1970s. The electorate's mean positions on left-right scales (like those shown in Table 5 which have been compiled from various post-electoral surveys),¹⁹ clearly reveal both the weakness of the extremes and the strength of the centre. The continuity of the centre-left positions suggests that the Spaniards form one of the least conservative electorates in the European Union, and accords with their tendency to adopt reformist attitudes to political, social and economic questions. With the partial exception of the anti-system parties in the Basque Country, voters' ideological moderation is also reflected in the subcultures of the different parties.²⁰ The data in Table 5 shows that PCE/IU and AP/PP voters stand on the edges of the continuum, whilst the PSOE's and (in its time) the CDS's electorates are closer to the centre.

In comparative terms, these patterns are similar to ones found in other Southern European countries, which also have significant communist parties, no strong centre parties, and relevant conservative parties. This configuration broadens the party space, widening the distance between its component parts: that is, it increases the polarisation of the party system. Spain stands out in terms of the ideological distance between the 'extreme' parties (that is, IU and PP); it also shares with France the greatest ideological polarisation between competing parties (that

¹⁸ The indicators of polarisation are usually obtained from representative surveys that include questions about the respondents' self-placement on a left-right scale, normally consisting of ten positions. See Giacomo Sani and Giovanni Sartori 'Polarización, fragmentación y competición en las democracias occidentales', *Revista del Departamento de Derecho Político* 7 (1980).

¹⁹ The 1979 survey was carried out by DATA in April-May from a representative nation-wide sample of 5,439 Spaniards aged 18 or over (for details, see Gunther, Sani and Shabad, *Spain After Franco*); the 1982 poll was undertaken by DATA in October-November from a sample of 5,463 adult Spaniards (Linz and Montero, *Crisis y cambio*); and the two waves of the 1993 panel survey was carried out by DATA in May and June that year using a sample of 1,448 citizens (Montero, 'Sobre las preferencias electorales'). The polls in the Data Archive (*Banco de Datos*) of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) were carried out in June-July 1986, October-November 1989, and March 1996, with representative, nationwide samples of 8,236, 3,084, and 5,350 adult Spaniards, respectively.

²⁰ The peculiarities of the parties, party competition, and the party system in the Basque Country are too numerous to mention here; they are discussed in Juan J. Linz et al. *Conflicto en Euskadi* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1986). and Francisco J. Llera *Los vascos y la política. El proceso político vasco: elecciones partidos, opinión publica y legitimación en el País Vasco, 1997-1992* (Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco, 1994).

is, the PSOE and PP) of any of the European countries.²¹ Nonetheless, these comparatively high levels of polarisation are not a cause for concern *per se*. Reflecting the absence of a strong centre party and the predominant distribution of the Spaniards' ideological preferences, since 1982 the bipolar configuration of the party system has encouraged centripetal electoral competition, whereby the parties try to attract the voters in the centre of the ideological continuum. The current format of the party system means that this centripetal logic is compatible with the evenly-balanced competition between IU and the PSOE on the left, the undisputed pre-eminence of the PSOE on the centre-left, and the PP's solid monopoly on the centre-right and right. However, the patterns of inter-party competition are much more complex in some Autonomous Communities, where the regional cleavage has spawned nationalist parties across the ideological spectrum which compete amongst themselves and with other state-wide parties on various dimensions.

TABLE 5. *Self-placement on the Left-Right Scale of Party Voters, 1978-1996**

Party	1978	1979	1982	1986	1989	1993	1996
PCE/IU	2.6	2.7	2.3	2.5	2.6	2.6	2.9
PSOE	3.8	3.9	3.8	3.6	3.7	3.4	3.7
CDS	-	-	5.4	5.2	5.3	5.1	-
UCD	5.6	5.9	5.6	-	-	-	-
AP/PP	7.7	7.0	7.2	7.4	7.2	7.2	6.5
(N)	(5,989)	(5,439)	(5,463)	(6,573)	(3,084)	(1,448)	(4,360)

*Figures are means of 10-point scales.

Sources: For 1978, Juan Linz, Manuel Gómez-Reino, Francisco O. Orizo and Darío Vila, *Informe sociológico sobre el cambio político en España, 1975/81* (Madrid: Euramérica, 1981) p.368; for 1979, 1982 y 1993, DATA surveys DATA 1979, 1982 and 1993; for other years, Banco de Datos, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS).

²¹ Montero, 'Sobre las preferencias electorales, pp.101-103.

Electoral anchors: structuring voting choices

The stabilisation of the Spaniards' electoral behaviour is related to a number of factors which have also shaped the specific profiles of the electorates of the different parties. These factors provide some kind of *anchoring* of electoral choices, in the sense that they tend to fix the options among the different parties, so helping to stabilise voters' preferences over time.²² In this section I will briefly examine the most significant electoral anchors and their relative importance in the last few elections.

Party identification

As in other countries, scholars have used a variety of different empirical criteria to measure party identification in Spain; nonetheless they all agree that it is particularly weak.²³ According to the *Eurobarometer* surveys, since 1985 Spain has systematically shown the lowest levels of citizen identification with parties of all the European Union countries. On average, between 1985 and 1992 just 12% of Spaniards declared that they felt 'very close' or 'fairly close' to a party, whilst 54% stated that they did not feel at all close to any party. In 1992, for example, the proportion of respondents identifying with a party in France (20%) and Belgium (22%) - two countries usually considered to have the weakest party identification in Europe - were higher than in Spain (14%). At the same time, only Ireland (60%) surpassed Spain (54%) in terms of the number of citizens denying any sense of identification with political parties. Evidently, the weakness of the relations between parties and voters stands out even amidst the general tendency towards party dealignment.²⁴ So too does the Spaniards' distance (if not

²² Richard Gunther and José Ramón Montero, 'Los anclajes del partidismo: un análisis comparado del comportamiento electoral en cuatro democracias del sur de Europa', in Del Castillo, *Comportamiento político*.

²³ See for instance Barnes, MacDonough and López Pina, 'The development of partisanship in a new democracy', and Hermann Schmitt, 'On Party Attachment in Western Europe and the Utility of Eurobarometer Data', *West European Politics* 12 (1989), pp.122-39.

²⁴ Roberto Biorcio and Renato Mannheimer, 'Relationships between citizens and political parties', in Hans-Dieter Klingemann and Dieter Fuchs (eds), *Citizens and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

alienation) from their parties; this is just one element of a broader cultural syndrome which is reflected in numerous other attitudes and values.²⁵

The organisational roots of the vote

If party identification cannot explain the stabilisation of the Spaniards' electoral behaviour, to what extent might this be due to the existence of organisations which mediate between their members or sympathisers and the candidates for whom they vote? In many countries, a whole series of organisations (such as parties, trade unions, or religious groups) not only fulfil basic functions of social intermediation and political integration, but also channel the electoral preferences of their members. In this respect too, Spain is a rather unusual case. First, because the parties themselves have a very limited organisational presence in society: the levels of party affiliation are extremely low in comparative terms. Indeed, along with France, Spain has amongst the lowest party affiliation rates in Europe.²⁶ After the 1996 elections, for example, the PP, which won 9.6 million votes (39%), had a membership of 536,500, whilst the PSOE, which won 9.3 million votes (37.5%), had a membership of 383,462. At the same time, the union affiliation rate among salaried workers is also very low. In this respect too, Spain ranks alongside France towards the bottom of the European league table.²⁷ Moreover, organisational ties between the unions and the (respective) parties have become increasingly tenuous, and

²⁵ Richard Gunther, José Ramón Montero and Mariano Torcal, 'Anti-party Sentiments in Southern Europe: A Preliminary Exploration' (paper presented at the conference on 'Political Parties: Changing Roles in Contemporary Democracies', Instituto Juan March, Madrid, 1994).

²⁶ José Ramón Montero, 'Partidos y participación política: algunas notas sobre la afiliación política en la etapa inicial de la transición española', *Revista de Estudios Políticos*, 23 (1981), Pilar Gangas, 'El desarrollo organizativo de los partidos políticos españoles de implantación nacional' (PhD dissertation, Instituto Juan March, Madrid, 1995), Richard Katz, Peter Mair et al., 'The Membership of Political Parties in European Democracies, 1960-1990', *European Journal of Political Research* 22 (1992), pp.329-45.

²⁷ Jacint Jordana, 'Reconsidering Union Membership in Spain, 1977-1994: Halting Decline in a Context of Democratic Consolidation', *Industrial Relations Journal* 27 (1996), pp.211-24 and Bernhard Ebbinghaus and Jelle Visser, 'When Labour Institutions Matter: Union Growth and Decline in Western Europe, 1950-90' (paper presented at European Sociological Association Conference, University of Essex, 1997).

cooperation ever looser. This has been further undermined in the case of the PSOE, whose relations with the *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT) deteriorated during the 1980s, leading to a situation of chronic conflict and the breakdown of party-union relations.²⁸

The low levels of party and union affiliation form part of the broader phenomenon of the weak development of voluntary organisations in Spain. Data from the 1981 and 1990 European Values Surveys show that the proportion of Spaniards belonging to one association, which in the 1980s was already amongst the lowest in Europe, fell still further by the early 1990s. Equally, according to the 1993 post-electoral survey, fully 76% of Spaniards were not members of any organisation; only 18% declared that they belonged to one organisation, 5% to two, 2% to three, and just 1% to more than three. Thus, parties find it particularly difficult to *anchor* voters through the organisational dimensions of political life. The Spaniards' electoral behaviour must be seen in the light of the virtual absence of psychological ties with the parties and the weakness of relations between the parties and significant societal organisations. This, in turn, determines the weakness of the loyalties usually found in party and organisational subcultures.

Social cleavages

A third group of factors comprises the principal social cleavages and the parties' capacity to articulate the demands of citizens affected by them: that is, to stabilise their relations with voters by *encapsulating* political conflicts.²⁹ In the Spanish case, the significant cleavages are of a socio-economic, religious, and regional nature. The timing of the return to democracy significantly reduced the impact of the first of these cleavages: the fact that the Spanish parties (re-)emerged in a relatively modern, well-educated society, in which television was the principal

²⁸ Javier Astudillo, 'Los recursos del socialismo: las cambiantes relaciones entre el PSOE y la UGT (1982-1993)' (PhD dissertation, Instituto Juan March, Madrid, 1998).

²⁹ Bartolini and Mair, *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability*.

mass media, meant that the social cleavage was very different to that which had existed when most European parties were founded. The impact of this cleavage has been weakened still further by the typically catch-all strategies that the main parties have adopted in their ideological definitions and electoral tactics³⁰. During the 1980s, the PSOE occupied most of the space on the left, condemning the PCE/IU to a clearly subordinate position. At the same time, it was also able to win most of the votes in the centre thanks to the CDS's inconsistency and the difficulties the AP/PP found in substituting the UCD. The PSOE's electoral strength also confirmed the success of its interclass strategies, which enabled it to obtain the support of very different social and occupational groups. However, competition has been much more intense since the early 1990s. The 1993 election results show that the IU increased its support on the left and centre-left, whilst in 1996 the PP made decisive progress towards its long-awaited *conquest* of the centre and centre-right space.

The religious cleavage has also evolved in a distinctive way. Whilst religious conflicts have been a recurring feature of Spanish political life over the last 150 years, the circumstances surrounding the transition to democracy prevented the formation of a christian-democratic party, and significantly reduced the influence of the Catholic subculture. They did not, in contrast, mean the end of considerable polarisation over religious issues.³¹ But political and religious elites have consciously avoided activating this potential source of conflicts which, in any event, has been weakened by the progressive secularisation of Spanish society. In electoral terms, this depolarisation is apparent from the evolution of the religiosity indexes of the voters of the different parties since 1977 (see Table 6).³² The distance between the extreme parties has narrowed, at the same time as the religious profiles of all the parties have become more blurred, albeit to varying degrees. Nonetheless, all the parties still have a characteristic *trademark* in

³⁰. Gunther, Sani and Shabad, *Spain After Franco*.

³¹. Juan Linz, 'Religión y política en España', in Rafael Díaz-Salazar and Salvador Giner (eds), *Religión y sociedad en España* (Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 1993).

³² The index of religiosity has been compiled from post-electoral surveys and calculated by assigning the values of 5 to 'very good Catholics', 4 to 'practising Catholics', 3 to 'not very practising Catholics', 2 to 'non-practising Catholics', and 1 to those who identify themselves as 'indifferent or atheists'.

terms of the religious composition of their electorates, reflecting the relative continuity in the differences between leftists and conservatives in this respect.³³

TABLE 6. *Indexes of religiosity of party voters, 1977-1993*

Voters	1977	1979	1982	1986	1989	1993
PCE.....	1.64	1.69	1.69	1.96	2.18	2.08
PSOE	2.46	2.59	2.62	2.52	2.62	2.86
CDS	-	-	3.29	3.87	3.05	2.88
UCD	3.55	3.44	3.70	-	-	-
AP	3.92	4.17	3.62	3.95	3.55	3.32
Electorate	2.47	2.94	2.98	2.71	2.80	2.82
Ratio AP/PCE.....	2:39	2:46	2:14	2:01	1:62	1:59

Sources: For 1977, Juan Linz, Manuel Gómez-Reino, Francisco O. Orizo and Darío Vila, *Informe sociológico sobre el cambio político en España, 1975/81* (Madrid: Euramérica, 1981) p.303; DATA surveys, 1979, 1982 and 1993; and Banco de Datos, CIS, for 1986 and 1989.

The cleavage structure is complicated still further by the presence of the regional cleavage, which is particularly significant in a number of Autonomous Communities. Spain is a multicultural, multinational, and multi-linguistic society, which is even more complex than other linguistically or nationally heterogeneous countries such as Belgium, Switzerland or Finland. This complexity, which dates back to the 19th century if not before, contributed to the breakdown of the Second Republic in the 1930s and, for obvious reasons, resurfaced during the transition.³⁴ The extraordinary process of the construction of the State of the Autonomies, which

³³. José Ramón Montero, 'Secularization and Cleavage Decline. Religiosity, Electoral Behaviour, and Generational Change in Spain' (paper presented at the workshop on 'Religion and electoral mass behaviour in Western Europe', ECPR, Bern, 1997).

³⁴ Juan Linz, 'De las crisis de un estado unitario al Estado de las Autonomías', in F. Fernández (ed.), *La España de las Autonomías (pasado, presente y futuro)* (Madrid: Instituto de Estudios de Administración Local, 1985).

in just a few years replaced a highly centralised territorial distribution of power with 17 Autonomous Communities enjoying a wide range of resources, powers, and institutions, definitively consolidated this new phase in the life of the regional cleavage. The current importance of this cleavage is reflected in the existence of strong nationalist parties in a few Autonomous Communities, and a wide variety of regionalist forces in nearly all the others.³⁵ The data shown in Table 7 are revealing in this respect. Since 1983, when the first regional elections were held in all the Autonomous Communities, nationalist parties have won relatively high average shares of the vote in a number of regions. The resulting mosaic has been dubbed the ‘electoral Spains’³⁶: in the absence of a better term, this expression accurately reflects the great diversity of patterns of party competition in the different Autonomous Communities. Whilst the general pattern covers 13 Communities and some 60% of the population, the *eccentric* (in the literal sense of the word) patterns are those found in the Basque Country, Catalonia, Navarre and the Canary Islands. In these Communities, electoral preferences are structured around ideological and nationalist conflicts, which determine the existence of different voting logics and party systems. In other communities, since the 1980s regionalist parties have benefited from a number of developments, including the reorientation of local elites after the collapse of the UCD, the new political resources generated by the creation of regional bureaucracies, and their ability to make more or less demagogic use of local sentiments of comparative discrimination or relative deprivation. The resulting map is exceptional in Western European terms. The particular complexity of the Basque Country and Catalonia means that their respective party systems have systematically interacted with the national system in the processes of electoral competition, regional agreements, parliamentary alliances and negotiations of support for governments.

³⁵ Francesc Pallarès, ‘Las elecciones autonómicas en España: 1980-1992’, in Del Castillo, *Comportamiento político*.

³⁶ Josep Maria Vallès, ‘Sistema electoral y democracia representativa: nota sobre la Ley Orgánica del Régimen Electoral General de 1985 y su función política’, *Revista de Estudios Políticos* 53 (1991), pp.7-28.

TABLE 7. *Average results of nationalist and regionalist parties in general and regional elections, 1983-1997 (in percentages of valid votes)*

Autonomous Community	Averages		
	Regional elections	General elections	Total
Basque Country	63.9	52.0	57.9
Catalonia	51.6	35.0	43.3
Navarre	53.9	27.3	40.6
Canary Islands	30.6	21.7	26.1
Aragon	25.3	16.5	20.9
Galicia	19.3	10.9	15.1
Cantabria	22.5	3.4	12.9
Balearic Islands	17.4	5.7	11.6
Valencia	9.1	5.9	7.5
Andalusia	7.2		5.6
La Rioja	6.4	1.1	3.7
Extremadura	5.5	1.3	3.4
Castilla-León	2.6	0.1	1.3
Asturias	1.2	0.6	0.9
Murcia	1.5	0.1	0.8
Madrid	0.2	0.0	0.1
Castilla-La Mancha	0.3	0.0	0.1

Factors of electoral anchorage

How have all these characteristics affected electoral behaviour? Table 8 offers a tentative answer. It shows the results of a multivariate analysis which attempts to explain voters' electoral choices through basic indicators of social class, religiosity and ideology.³⁷ The table

³⁷ This section rests on arguments which are developed more extensively in Gunther and Montero 'Los anclajes del partidismo', which also discusses the characteristics of the empirical analysis and its findings. Only the post-electoral surveys of 1979, 1982, and 1993 have been used here. This is a Probit-type multivariate analysis, in which the dependent variable is the declared vote for a party, and the independent variables are a series of indicators of objective and subjective class position, union membership, religiosity, membership of religious associations and proximity to the parties on the left-right ideological continuum. The small number of cases means that it has not

gives the R^2 weighted averages, which measure the impact that a variable or group of variables has on the prediction of the vote for a party. All the parties' averages have been weighted in accordance with their respective share of the vote.³⁸ Three important results can clearly be seen from Table 8. First, objective indicators of class have little capacity to explain voting choices. The increase in 1982 (when this variable accounted for 17% of the variance) was due to the collapse of the UCD, whose inter-class appeal was not inherited by the AP, which had a much more clearly defined social identity. Nonetheless, the class bases of electoral choice have declined subsequently, as the PP has attracted voters from more diverse social groups. In 1993, for example, objective indicators of class explained 16% of the PSOE's vote (compared to 19% in 1982), 12% of the PP's (compared to 23% in 1982), and 12.7% of support for the national parties taken as a whole.³⁹

TABLE 8. *Factors of electoral behaviour in Spain, 1979-1993: A multivariate analysis of the influence of social class, religiosity and ideology*

Variables	Elections		
	1979	1982	1993
Objective social class	.064	.170	.127
Union membership		.056	.023
Subjective social class	.054	.044	.024
Religiosity	.145	.206	.058
Ideology	.206	.226	.405
Total*	.548	.808	.781

*The figures refer to the weighted average R^2 , and represent the accumulated sum of the preceeding variables. *Source:* Richard Gunther and José Ramón Montero, 'Los anclajes del partidismo: un análisis comparado del comportamiento electoral en cuatro democracias del sur de Europa', in Pilar del Castillo (ed.), *Comportamiento político y electoral* (Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 1994), pp.516-530.

been possible to include variables relating to the nationalist cleavage.

³⁸ In fact, R^2 weighted averages are measures of the percentage of variance explained by each variable or group of variables, and indicate the propensity to vote for a specific nationwide party of the left or the right. Thus, they can also be seen as measures of the strength of the anchoring of the vote in each of the two ideological spaces, or in other words, a measure of the barrier dividing the parties on the right from those on the left.

³⁹ However, it has recently been suggested that the party elites' deliberate strategy of politicizing some social dimensions through the development of specific public policies may mean that social class has again become a significant explanatory variable for competition between the two parties. See Pradeep Chhibber and Mariano Torcal 'Elite Strategy, Social Cleavages, and Party Systems in a New Democracy. Spain', *Comparative Political Studies* 30 (1997), pp.27-53.

The second interesting tendency is the decreasing importance of religiosity. Although it had a significant impact in 1979 and, especially in 1982 (with 14.5% and 20.6% of the explained variance, respectively), secularisation and the political elites' determination to avoid politicising religious issues considerably weakened the impact of this variable. In 1993, the religious factor played a minimal role in anchoring the Socialist vote (2%), and relatively little in distinguishing between PP voters (8%) and those of the left-wing parties. As a result, the social and religious components of the barrier separating the two blocs of parties have become much more permeable: whilst in 1982 the sum of the variance explained by these variables amounted to 41%, by 1993 it had fallen to 21%.

It should be noted, finally, that the impact of union membership on the anchoring of the vote for the parties has followed a similar downward path. In 1979, membership of *Comisiones Obreras* (CC OO) explained 17% of the variance of the PCE's vote, compared to a figure of just 8% for the UGT in relation to the PSOE. In 1993, the drop in union affiliation rates and the clash between the UGT and the PSOE significantly reduced both unions' contribution to the electoral support for the left-wing parties: it explained just 2.3% of the variance.

These factors' limited influence on the vote appears to reflect their relatively scant importance in determining citizens' electoral choices or in explaining the stability of the parties' electoral support. At the same time, we have already seen that the anchorage of the electorate is not explained by the parties' organisational presence in society, which is minimal, nor by the strength of party identification, which is also very low. We must find, therefore, another explanation. The data suggest that the key factor is ideology - that is, the way that voters see themselves and the parties in left-right terms.⁴⁰ To return to Table 8, it can be seen that ideology is the factor which best explains the stability of the parties' electoral support: its R^2 weighted averages are the highest in every election, and rose considerably in the 1993 elections when this variable alone explained 40.5% of the variance in the vote. The 1982 electoral realignment increased the importance of the socio-structural anchorage for the main parties, and for the AP in particular as a result of the collapse of the UCD. But the influence of class, religiosity and

⁴⁰ Gunther and Montero, 'Los anclajes del partidismo', pp.528 ff.

trade union affiliation has declined ever since, and the influx of new voters has weakened the impact of these factors still further. Hence, the strength of ideological anchoring has almost doubled.

Thus, voters' ideological identification with the left or right space serves as a substitute mechanism for party anchorage when socio-structural or psychological factors are weak or lose force over time. It is true, certainly, that in contrast to the other factors, this type of ideological anchorage does not tie voters to a specific party, but rather to the generic spaces of left, centre and right - that is, to ideological spaces or blocs which may be home to various parties. Hence, it does not rule out electoral changes *between parties* competing within a given ideological space. But it does hinder *inter-bloc* volatility, that is, it prevents voters from leaping over the barrier separating the two opposing ideological camps. The bipolar competition between the PSOE and the PP, which began in the mid-1980s, was consummated in the 1993 elections: for most electors, the PP had established itself as the only party in the centre and on the right, whilst, despite the competition from the IU, the PSOE was still the principal party on the left. In this way, the cleavage which currently divides the Spanish party system is no longer an accurate reflection of voters' class position or religious identity, but essentially expresses a vision of politics associated with the spatial terms of left-right. Evidently, the content of these concepts are imprecise, debatable, and shifting. Nonetheless, it can be suggested that they still fulfil the basic functions of mechanisms reducing political complexity and serve as a code for simplified communication in the political system: indeed, this is only confirmed by the frequency with which politicians and citizens alike resort to them.⁴¹ And it is also clear that these terms have again revealed their flexibility and adaptability by incorporating the competition between the PSOE and PP into their imagery and conceptual framework.⁴²

⁴¹ Giacomo Sani and José Ramón Montero, 'El espectro político: izquierda, derecha y centro', in Linz and Montero, *Crisis y cambio*.

⁴² Leadership also figures prominently among the factors influencing the vote: evaluations of political leaders do not appear to be related so much to the decision to vote for one or other party belonging to different ideological blocs, but in the decision to do so for a particular party *within* one or other of the blocs. See Gunther and Montero, 'Los anclajes del partidismo', pp.534-536.

The electoral system: constraining competition

The Spanish electoral system belongs to the category of *strong* systems as a result of its capacity to constrain voters' behaviour and exercise a reductive impact on party life;⁴³ it has, therefore, made a major contribution to electoral stabilisation. In comparative terms, Spain's electoral system also belongs to the category of *young* systems; in contrast to most electoral systems in Europe, which date from the second decade of the century, the Spanish system is, at most, little more than twenty years old. As a result of the various processes of elite negotiation, the system used for elections to the Chamber of Deputies combines (i) the constitutional principle of proportional representation and the d'Hondt formula; (ii) a small, 350 seat chamber, with the 52 provinces serving as the same number of electoral districts; (iii) the allocation of at least two seats per district and the distribution of additional seats in accordance with the size of the population; (iv) a minimum 3% legal threshold for representation, applied at the district-level; and (v) the use of blocked and closed party lists.

Given the very varied size of the electoral districts, the mechanisms used to allocate seats have generated very serious distortions in representation: in 1996, for example, the ratio of electors to seats ranged from 26,143 to one in Soria to 124,678 to one in Barcelona. At the same time, the small size of the Congress and the large number of districts mean that two-thirds have fewer than five deputies, whilst Madrid and Barcelona have over 30 seats each. As a result, the average district magnitude is extraordinarily small (6.73 seats per district) and is close to what is usually seen as the minimum for a truly proportional system. Of the 21 electoral systems which have used d'Hondt electoral formulae and single-level, multi-seat districts between 1945 and 1990, only the ephemeral French system of 1986 had a smaller average district size (5.79); and of the 11 systems which have employed some other kind of proportional system, only Ireland has smaller districts than Spain.⁴⁴ Consequently the d'Hondt electoral formula has had a

⁴³. Giovanni Sartori, *Comparative Constitutional Engineering. An Inquiry into Structures, Incentives and Outcomes* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p.37.

⁴⁴ Arend Lijphart, *Sistemas electorales y sistemas de partidos. Un estudio de veintisiete democracias, 1945-1990* (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, 1995), pp.62-63.

particularly strong impact because of the small average district magnitude: whilst this does not interfere with the proportionality of the result in large districts, it does produce significant majoritarian biases in the smaller districts, since the party with the highest number of votes accumulates the remnants of all the other parties. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that whilst in most districts it has never been necessary to apply the 3% legal threshold, the effective threshold has often been much higher, and is in fact the highest of all comparable systems.⁴⁵

The electoral system has contributed to the fragmentation, disproportionality, and format of the party system. We have already seen, firstly, that there has been relatively low fragmentation, and that the principal *mechanical* effect of the electoral system takes the form of the gap between the number of electoral and parliamentary parties (see Table 4). A testimony to the reductive capacity of the electoral system, this gap has usually only been wider in the United Kingdom. The presence of many small nationalist or regionalist parties in the Congress of Deputies is not inconsistent with this moderate fragmentation: it does not pose particularly serious problems for parliamentary business, as the two main parties together hold some 80% of all seats, and the four-most voted parties 90%. Nonetheless, the political importance of these small parties has increased significantly since 1993, as they are the only ones able to provide parliamentary support to single-party minority governments. Secondly, the other side of the coin is the high level of disproportionality generated by the system. These can be seen from Table 9, which shows the differences between the parties' share of the vote and of seats in the seven general elections since 1977. The two largest parties (the UCD and PSOE in the first period, and the PSOE and AP/PP ever since) have always won a significantly larger proportion of seats than of the vote: this disproportionality has been especially beneficial for the most-voted party (the UCD in 1977 and 1979; the PP in 1996; and the PSOE on all the other occasions), and even more so when that party is conservative (like the UCD and PP). Minority parties whose support is spread thinly throughout the country have systematically been discriminated against in terms of the relation between their share of the vote and of the seats: this was the case of the AP in the first period, the CDS in the second, and the PCE/IU throughout the three periods. In contrast, parties whose electorates are concentrated in one, or just a few, districts - that is, normally,

⁴⁵ Lijphart, *Sistemas electorales*, pp.59-60.

nationalist or regional parties - have obtained fair representation; although only the figures for the most relevant nationalist parties (CiU and the PNV) are shown in Table 9, this holds true for many other small, regional parties. A more detailed analysis of the data shows the key importance of district size in this respect: the index of disproportionality increases systematically as the size of the district decreases.⁴⁶ Thus, the Spanish electoral system is one of the most disproportional of all the countries employing proportional representation systems.⁴⁷ The combination of the gap between the electoral support for the PSOE and AP/PP during the 1980s and the different elements of the system (and above all the ratio of electors to seats, the size of district, and the d'Hondt formula) has produced majoritarian biases comparable to those in countries using different types of majoritarian systems.⁴⁸ This same combination of factors also facilitated the series of *manufactured* majorities produced by the three general elections during the 1980s, when the PSOE obtained absolute parliamentary majorities from shares of the vote ranging between 48.4% and 39.9%.

TABLE 9. *Differences in the share of votes and seats in general elections, 1977-1996**

Party	1977	1979	1982	1986	1989	1993	1996
PCE/IU	-3.6	-4.2	-2.4	-2.7	-4.3	-4.5	-4.6
PSOE	+4.4	+4.1	+10.4	+8.5	+10.4	+6	+2.8
CDS	-	-	-2.2	-3.8	-3.9	-	-
UCD	+12.9	+12.9	-3.1	-	-	-	-
AP/PP	-3.8	-3.5	+4.7	+3.9	+4.8	+5.5	+5.7
CiU	-0.6	-0.5	-0.2	+0.1	+0.1	0	0
PNV	+0.6	+0.4	+0.5	+0.2	+0.2	+0.2	+0.1

⁴⁶ Montero and Gunther, 'Sistemas "cerrados" y listas "abiertas"'.

⁴⁷ Michael Gallagher, 'Proportionality, disproportionality and electoral systems', *Electoral Studies* **10** (1991), pp.33-51.

⁴⁸ These biases are at the heart of the debate between those who classify the Spanish electoral system as majoritarian (even if *attenuated*), and those who argue that it should be considered a proportional (even if *corrected*) system; see Vallès, 'Sistema electoral y democracia representativa' and Mario Caciagli 'Spagna: proporzionale con effetti (finora) maggioritari', in Oreste Massari and Gianfranco Pasquino (eds) *Rappresentare e governare* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994).

*The plus sign indicates overrepresentation; the minus underrepresentation.

Thirdly, the electoral system has had less pronounced, but nonetheless significant, effects on the parties themselves. Given the system's representative biases, it is scarcely surprising that it has been dominated by two main parties since 1977. In fact, the only surprising thing is the spectacular change (itself magnified by the electoral system) in the identity of the two parties following the electoral realignment of 1982. As can be seen in Table 10, the two largest parties have never won less than 80% of the seats in the Congress of Deputies. In contrast, the smaller parties with geographically dispersed electoral support have been progressively pushed out of the chamber: in 1977 they won 41 seats, shared out among three parties (PCE, AP and the *Partido Socialista Popular* [PSP]); in 1989, they won 31, distributed among two parties (IU and the CDS); and in 1996 they took just 18, all of which were held by the IU. The direct effects of the electoral system have led many small parties to merge or ally with other larger forces, and discouraged many minority leaders from breaking away from established parties, since to do so would mean parliamentary suicide. At the national level, the party system has been simplified still further by the largest parties' constant calls for *useful voting*, as well as the widespread tendency for voters to engage in *tactical voting*, to the detriment of small parties with little or no chance of winning a seat.⁴⁹ In consequence, the *psychological* dimension of the electoral system has reinforced its *mechanical* effects by anticipating and accentuating their impact: it has reduced the number of parties, favoured those with the greatest appeal, and penalised the small parties whose voters are spread over a large number of districts. The effects of the system vary at lower territorial levels. Although its representative biases work against parties with dispersed electoral support, the system does not necessarily discriminate against minority parties whose voters are concentrated in just one Autonomous Community, or even a single province. In fact, a party with less than 1% of the national vote can receive sufficient electoral support in just one district to achieve reasonably fair representation, or even over-representation in parliament. As noted above, this can be seen clearly in the case of the Basque and Catalan nationalist parties. Thus, the electoral system operates in two, contradictory directions: whilst at the national level it

⁴⁹.Richard Gunther, 'Leyes electorales, sistemas de partidos y élites: el caso español', *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas* 47 (1989), pp.73-106; Montero and Gunther, 'Sistemas "cerrados" y listas "abiertas"', pp.18-19.

contains incentives against fragmentation, it also allows the fragmentation produced by the increase in electoral support for regional or provincial parties. This tendency became slightly more pronounced during the 1980s, before apparently stabilising in the 1990s (as can be seen in the final column in Table 10).

TABLE 10. *Seats (and percentage of the total) obtained by the different types of party in Congress, 1977-1996*

Elections	Two major parties	Small national level parties	Regional and provincial parties
1977	283 (81%)	41 (12%)	26 (7%)
1979	289 (83%)	33 (9%)	28 (8%)
1982	308 (88%)	18 (5%)	24 (7%)
1986	289 (83%)	26 (7%)	35 (10%)
1989	282 (81%)	31 (9%)	37 (10%)
1993	300 (86%)	18 (5%)	32 (9%)
1996	297 (85%)	21 (6%)	32 (9%)

Concluding remarks

In June 1977, the first elections held after the Franco dictatorship gave the vast majority of Spaniards their first opportunity to vote in a democratic consultation. The 4,513 candidates who contested the 350 seats in the new Congress of Deputies were little more experienced. To what extent were these new political elites able to transform their rudimentary organisations into parties capable of competing for the stable support of voters? In this article I have examined some aspects of the parallel processes of electoral stabilisation and party system institutionalisation which followed those founding elections. I have discussed some of the most frequent assumptions behind the idea that the lack of stable patterns of inter-party competition or the absence of cleavage encapsulation means that ‘third-wave’ democracies are inevitably

subject to electoral fluidity. In the Spanish case, a superficial reading of the undeniable party instability or electoral volatility has often given rise to mistaken conclusions about the weak foundations of the party system or the Spaniards' high degree of electoral availability. I have tried to show that, despite the changing format of the party system and the structural weakness of traditional cleavages, Spanish electoral behaviour has been stabilised. To a large extent this is explained by the particular social and economic conditions surrounding the transition to democracy and the birth of the new political system.⁵⁰ Another, equally important, factor comprises the decisions taken by the new party elites when fixing the rules of electoral competition, adopting catch-all strategies in defining their objectives and party images, and stably aligning with their voters.⁵¹ The continuity seen with respect to the principal dimensions of the electoral *market*, the force of the left-right ideological anchorage, and the intensity of the effects of an institutional variable such as the electoral system, have all contributed to the evolution of increasingly predictable patterns of inter-party competition.

⁵⁰ Paul Heywood, 'The Emergence of New Party Systems and Transitions to Democracy. Spain in Comparative Perspective', in Pridham and Lewis, *Stabilising Fragile Democracies*.

⁵¹. Gunther and Montero 'Los anclajes del partidismo'.