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## The Spanish Party System and the Issue of Assigning Responsibility

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## **THE SPANISH PARTY SYSTEM AND THE ISSUE OF ASSIGNING RESPONSIBILITY**

### ***Abstract:***

The article addresses the dependency between the level of institutionalization present in the Spanish party system, electoral accountability and assigning responsibility. The primary research objective of this article is to determine the extent to which electoral volatility is present in Spain, both at the aggregate and individual level, which is a measure of the degree of institutionalization reached by a party system. Next, the dependency between electoral volatility and fluidity of elites at the electoral and parliamentary level is analysed. This allows for an answer to the question of whether there is a problem in Spain with assigning responsibility, having regard to the fact that the presence of extensive electoral volatility among both voters and political elites makes it difficult to speak of effective accountability.

### ***Key words:***

party system, Spanish party system, assigning responsibility, electoral accountability

There is undoubtedly an association between the type of party system, electoral accountability and assigning responsibility. G. Bingham Powell claims that if the citizens of a democratic state are not capable of determining responsibility for a policy, they are also unable to use elections as a tool to enforce responsibility for the pursuit of that policy. When responsibility is not conclusive, politicians' motivation to understand and fulfil the expectations of citizens also declines. Thus, conclusiveness of responsibility is an important condition for the exercise of electoral oversight by citizens [Powell 2006: 57]. Guillermo O'Donnell, however, feels that elections are becoming a process in which the elected politicians are accepting responsibility themselves, and that

they should be held accountable for their decisions. Elections are therefore a type of cyclical accountability mechanism employed ex-post [O'Donnell 1997: 143-167].

Using research on the effect of the economy on the popularity of the F. Gonzalez government in Spain during the period 1982-1996, José María Maravall and Adam Przeworski demonstrated that the strength of electoral accountability is inversely proportional to that of political parties' entrenchment [Maravall, Przeworski 2001: 35-76]. It would result from the hypothesis advanced by J. M. Maravall and A. Przeworski that in the context of accountability, at least in young democracies, of particular importance is one aspect of the party system: its degree of institutionalization. As it turns out, the stronger the party system is institutionalized, the more frequently we encounter ideological voting. Therefore, the economic vote, which is the measure of electoral accountability, fails to be applied<sup>1</sup>. Thus, there is a correlation between the institutionalization of the party system, the related strong or weak entrenchment of political parties, and electoral accountability. No less important is the institutionalization of political parties themselves; however, in the context of electoral accountability, the institutionalization of the party system itself would seem to be of far greater significance, which to an extent is a derivative of the institutionalization of political parties.

The entrenchment of political parties is most often measured by the electoral volatility index. However, as Radosław Markowski correctly points out, high electoral volatility is not necessarily the result of failure to develop a political "electoral horde", but may instead flow from an excess of cleverness among political elites [for more, see: Markowski 2007: 155]. In this model, electoral volatility need not result from the absence of stable electoral preferences, but rather from the offer presented to voters. For this reason, many researchers draw attention to the need for introducing a distinction between fluidity and volatility, or that the volatility index should be redefined in a manner that renders it operational in countries with low levels of institutionalization in the party system<sup>2</sup>.

This is also way the following analysis of the impact of institutionalization on vertical accountability will be performed in two dimensions of accountability, demand and supply. Part of the analysis will involve the extent to which we may speak of electoral volatility in Spain, both at the individual and aggregate levels. This will be followed by analysis of the dependency of electoral volatility on the fluidity of elites, at the electoral and parliamentary levels. It should be kept in mind that when there is significant volatility among both

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1 Other studies, conducted e.g. in the UK, confirm the hypothesis advanced by J.M. Maravall and A. Przeworski. *Inter alia* Harold D. Clarke, Marianne C. Stewart and Paul F. Whiteley [2002] have demonstrated that the stronger voters' identification with the Conservatives or the Labour Party, the less they acted on the basis of their feelings about the economy.

2 For more, see: [Toole 2000], [Powell, Tucker 2013], [Artiga González 1998].

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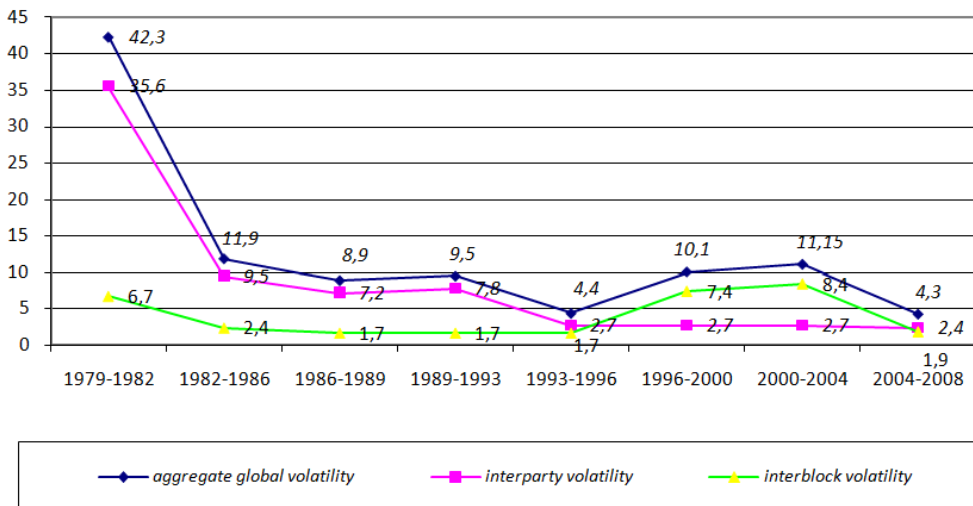
voters and political elites themselves, it is difficult to achieve effective accountability. In particular, frequent transfers of politicians and party name changes result in politicians responsible for bad governments successfully avoiding the punishment of not being re-elected.

***The demand dimension of accountability: electoral volatility***

As it occurs, the level of institutionalization of a party system is not always associated with the time that has elapsed since the moment of systemic transformation. The example of Spain clearly demonstrates that even a relatively young democracy can be characterised by a stable party system distinguished *inter alia* by a low degree of electoral volatility.

In Spain during the period 1982–2011, aggregate global, interparty and interblock volatility were relatively low. The calculated averages for each type of volatility in the period under analysis were 12.82%, 8.83% and 3.99% respectively. Doubtlessly, these results indicate a high level of institutionalisation in the Spanish party system. The highest value of aggregate global volatility was recorded in 1982 at 42.3%, while the lowest value of 4.3% occurred in 2008. A similar dependency occurred in respect of interparty volatility. In 1982, the highest level of this volatility was recorded- 35.6%, while the lowest in 2008, at 2.4%. However, in the case of interblock volatility, the highest value was noted in 2004 – 8.5%, with the lowest in 1986, 1989 and 1993 at 1.7%.

Chart 1. Electoral volatility in 1982-2008 (in %)



Source: [Montero, Lago 2010: 38].

Thus, in Spain we may observe low electoral volatility—whether global, interparty or interblock. The sole exception was the year 1982, when nearly half of Spanish voters changed their preferences. Nevertheless, in later years a low level of electoral volatility was observed, with minor fluctuations in 2000 and 2004. This state of affairs likely results from the fact that Spain features a very stable set of election laws, as well as a very faithful electorate.

One factor that distinguishes the Spanish election system and is universally emphasized by Spanish scholars is low proportionality<sup>3</sup>. Representativity has been sacrificed at the altar of the Spanish electoral system in the name of stability. By the same token, the low level of fractionalization within the party system has been achieved precisely at the expense of representativity. This system was implemented in 1977 via the Decree on Election Rules [RDLNE 20/1977]. Elections were conducted under the rules of this Decree in both 1979 and 1982, in spite of the intent for the Decree to be a temporary measure. It should also be added that the election law adopted in 1977 was the product of negotiations among various political powers; to a large degree it served to ensure representation for the then-ruling UCD. This party sought to ensure electoral success through strengthening the votes of conservatives located in the central regions of the country. This was to ensure that the UCD would achieve the necessary parliamentary majority in 1979. On the one hand, the constitutionalists worked to avoid electoral fragmentation, which would facilitate the formation of strong governments, while on the other it was to provide for domination of rural and conservative interests over progressive urban forces. In practice, this meant the privileging of centre-right interests over left-wing ones [Montero et al. 1992: 7-56]. Most likely, the fact that the same electoral law adopted under the Decree of 1977 allowed PSOW to come to power in 1982 lead to the 1985 Fundamental Electoral Law (LOREG), which repealed the previous decree, failing to implement any significant changes in the electoral system [LOREG 5/1985].

Stability of the electoral system is an element of the Spanish political system which is subjected to criticism. For years a stormy debate has been underway concerning the necessity of changing the election law. Since the explosion of the economic crisis in 2008, it is precisely this “petrification” of the party system resulting from the majority effects of the electoral system that has been pointed to as the root of Spain’s poorly-functioning political

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3 Focusing on the lower chamber of parliament, due to the Spanish Senate’s function as essentially a chamber for second readings, it is worth emphasizing that the d’Hondt formula is applied in translating votes into seats. Close electoral lists were also introduced at the same time. Thus the voter votes for a party without the possibility of changing the order of candidates on the list. Another characteristic of the Spanish electoral system is that independent candidates cannot be chosen. It should also be added that the electoral threshold was set at 3% at the electoral district level, which are constituted by provinces (52 electoral districts).

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system. Apart from the question of whether the electoral system is to blame for the dire straits Spain has found itself in recently, it should be emphasized that the compensation of large parties is significant, something demonstrated in the data contained in Table 1, which in effect leads to low levels of proportionality and poor reflection of electoral preferences.

Table 1. Difference between the number of votes received and seats in parliament in Spanish elections during the period 1982–2011\*

Elections	PSOE	AP/PP	CDS	UCD	PCE/IU	UPiD	CiU	PNV
1982	+10.4	+4.7	-2.2	-3.1	-2.4	-	-0.2	+0.5
1986	+8.5	+3.9	-3.8	-	-2.7	-	+0.1	+0.2
1989	+10.4	+4.8	-3.9	-	-4.3	-	+0.1	+0.2
1993	+6.0	+5.5	-	-	-4.5	-	0	+0.2
1996	+2.8	+5.7	-	-	-4.6	-	0	+0.1
2000	+1.6	+7.8	-	-	-3.2	-	+0.1	+0.5
2004	+4.2	+4.6	-	-	-3.5	-	-0.4	+0.4
2008	+4.6	+3.6	-	-	-3.2	-0.9	-0.1	+0.5
2011	+2,6	+8,5	-	-	+3,7	-3,2	+0,1	+0,1

Source: own calculations based on [Montero, Riera 2008: 24].

\*Plus signs denote overrepresentation, minus signs denote underrepresentation.

Here it should be noted that the primary cause of the Spanish election system's rather low proportionality is not only the use of the d'Hondt formula for translating votes into seats, but rather its use in conjunction with a large number of districts having a small number of seats. For example, in 2000, over 30 districts had between 1 and 5 seats, whilst the proportional effects resulting from the application of the d'Hondt formula kick in when there are 7 seats available. These 30 electoral districts held 25% of the population and 33% of the seats in the Congress of Deputies [Moreno, Oñate 2004: 123-151]. The situation has changed little since 2000; in 2011, 35 of 52 electoral districts represented not more than 5 seats.

However, in respect of the high level of electoral loyalty in Spain, consistent with the results of studies conducted on the basis of post-election polling by José Ramón Montero and Ignacio Lago, faithful voters, meaning those who voted for the same party in two consecutive elections, amounted in the following periods to: 1982 – 48%, 1986 – 59%, 1989 – 62%, 1993 – 64%, 1996 – 72%, 2000 - 62%, 2004 – 70%, 2008 - 75% [Montero, Lago 2010: 40]. This is associated with the strong ideological divide present on the Spanish political scene, which functions as a sort of “barrier” against high electoral volatility. In addition, the Spanish party system, referred to as a system

of “two-and-a-half” parties, creates structural limitations which clearly result in reduced electoral volatility. There is no other significant political party on the right side of the political spectrum aside from PP. PSOE occupies nearly the entire left side of the political scene; since the moment of systemic transformation, IU has never truly succeeded in becoming a serious political force. The strong division in Spanish society between the centre and the periphery also results in nationalist and regional parties’ electorates remaining true to their preferences.

Table 2. Number of parties competing in the electoral and parliamentary arena in the period 1982–2011

Number of parties	1982	1996	1989	1993	1996	2000	2004	2008	2011	Avg.
Total number of parties and coalitions contesting the election	29	30	30	23	19	26	21	27	25	25,56
Total number of parties receiving seats in the Congress of Deputies	11	12	13	11	11	12	11	10	13	11.56
Number of new parties receiving seats (entries)	1	4	2	1	2	1	1	1	0	1.56
Number of parties which did not receive seats after the previous term of office (exits)	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	3	2

Source: own calculations based on electoral announcements.

In spite of this, the data in Table 2 demonstrates that in Spain there is a large number of parties participating in individual elections, as well as a significant number of “entries” and “exits” at the parliamentary level. However, in the case of the Spanish party system, except for the year 1982, data depicting the number of new parties which succeeded in winning seats in particular elections as well as data concerning political formations which failed to secure their presence in successive Congresses of Deputies, are related to small parties frequently of a regional profile. The only exceptions were the disaster of the Adolfo Suarez bloc in 1982, and the new UPiD, a national party. It should, however, be added that in the 2008 elections UPiD received only 1 seat, while in 2011 it won 5 seats.

***Demand dimension of accountability: fluidity of political elites***

The issue of fluidity of political elites in Spain at the parliamentary level is not a problem. This does not mean, however, that the transfer of deputies at the parliamentary level is not discussed, all the more so in light of the closed lists characteristic of the lower house of the Spanish parliament. Furthermore, in Spain we frequently see single-party majority or minority governments. In the period 1982-2011 parliamentary coalitions in the case of minority governments were created by two large national parties - PSOE and PP –and regional parties, save for IU during the 2004-2008 term. Excluding IU, it is precisely those regional parties in 1993-2000 and 2004-2008, *i.e.* CiU, PNV, ERC, BNG and CC, which gave their support to minority governments at the national level. Regional parties provided stable parliamentary support to the fourth government of F. González, the first government of J.M. Aznar and the first government of J.L. Rodríguez Zapatero. This support was negotiated prior to the formation of the government and was of a formal nature. Furthermore, parties supporting particular governments clearly indicated their preference for maintaining a parliamentary coalition beyond the investiture process. There is also no doubt that both PSOE and PP during the period 1993-2000 also wanted to form coalition governments at the national level. In this situation, the loss of even a few seats in the Congress of Deputies could determine the fate of the government. This is why the issue of “*transfuguismo*” has not only long been the subject of broad discussion, but has even landed on the docket of the Constitutional Tribunal. The Spanish Constitutional Tribunal, basing its ruling on the traditional concept of prohibition on the imperative mandate, held that the application of any sanctions at all towards politicians changing party affiliation in the course of a given parliament would constitute a violation of the constitution<sup>4</sup>.

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4 For more see: Verdicts of the Constitutional Tribunal: 5/1983, 10/1983, 20/1983, 30/1983, 28/1984, [hj.tribunalconstitucional.es](http://hj.tribunalconstitucional.es).



Table 3. Parliamentary fractions in the period 1982-2011\*

Parliamentary groups in GP – as of start and end of term	II Term 1982-86	III Term 1986-89	IV Term 1989-93	V Term 1993-96	VI Term 1996-00	VII Term 2000-04	VIII Term 2004-08	IX Term 2008-11
eGP Socialists	202-201	184-181	176-175	159-159	141-141	125-124	162-164	169-169
GP People’s Party	105-102	84-89	106-106	141-141	154-155	179-183	148-147	154-152
GP Catalanian Minority (CiU)	12-12	18-19	18-18	17-17	16-16	14-15	10-10	10-10
GP Centre	12-11	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
GP Basque (PNV)	8-8	6-4	5-5	5-5	5-5	6-7	7-7	6-6
GP Mixed	10-14	34-18	10-17	5-6	5-11	5-9	5-9	4-8
GP CDS	-	19-28	14-12	-	-	-	-	-
GP IU-IC/GP Federal IU/	-	-	17-17	18-18	21-16	8-8	5-5	7-5
GP Canary GP-New Canary	-	-	-	5-4	6-4	7-4	5-2	-
GP ERC	-	-	-	-	-	8-8	8-8	-
Groups within the Mixed Group operating from the beginning to the end of the term	II Term 1982-86	III Term 1986-89	IV Term 1989-93	V Term 1993-96	VI Term 1996-00	VII Term 2000-04	VIII Term 2004-08	IX Term 2008-11
GP Mixed – Bloc IU-IC/ Bloc IU-IPc	-	7-6	-	-	-	-	-	-
Groups within the Mixed Group which concluded activity in the course of a term	II Term 1982-86	III Term 1986-89	IV Term 1989-93	V Term 1993-96	VI Term 1996-00	VII Term 2000-04	VIII Term 2004-08	IX Term 2008-11
GP Mixed – Christian Democrats	-	20-21	-	-	-	-	-	-
GP Mixed – Liberal Party Bloc	-	10-7	-	-	-	-	-	-

Source: own work based on data from the official website of the Congress of Deputies, [www.congreso.es](http://www.congreso.es) and [www.historiaelectoral.com/](http://www.historiaelectoral.com/).

Analysis of the data contained in Table 3 clearly shows that in Spain there is little fluidity of elites at the parliamentary level. A certain exception was the 1986-1989 parliament, which resulted from the disintegration of the People’s Coalition. The People’s Coalition was initially composed of AP – People’s Coalition (69), PDP – People’s Democratic Party (21), PL-Liberal Party (12), UPN – Navarran People’s Union (2), CiG – Galician Centrists (1). One day after the elections, DPL decided against entering into the People’s Coalition, but rather chose the Mixed Group<sup>5</sup>. In September 1986, deputies of PDP formed the Christian Democrats’ Group within the framework of the Mixed Group. At the request of AP, in January 1987 DPL also joined the ranks of the Mixed Group, creating the Liberal Group. For two years, the People’s Group was composed solely of MPs from AP, UPN and CdG. However, as quickly as February 1989

5 The Mixed Group is composed of MPs from political groups that do not fulfil the criteria for creating their own parliamentary bloc. Under Art. 25 of the Regulations of the Congress of Deputies, the requirements for forming a parliamentary bloc are: a minimum of 5 MPs and 5% of all votes or 15% of votes in the districts where candidates of a given formation stood for election, [www.congreso.es/portal/page/portal/Congreso/Congreso/Hist\\_Normas/Norm/reglam\\_congreso.pdf](http://www.congreso.es/portal/page/portal/Congreso/Congreso/Hist_Normas/Norm/reglam_congreso.pdf)

the People's Alliance had transformed into the People's Party, and its ranks were reinforced by members of DC and PL. During the same parliament PNV lost two deputies, which was the result of the newly-formed party of Eusko Alkartasuna, whose members joined the Mixed Group [Sroka 2008]. PSOE also lost three MPs, as did IU. In addition, deputies elected from slates put up by HB refused to take their seats, which *de factos* topped PSOE from achieving a governing majority. Nevertheless, in accordance with the information in the table, it is clear that in later parliaments the level of fluidity among elites practically dropped to zero. It should also be added, however, that Spain allows for the procedure of 'loaning' MPs in order to form a parliamentary bloc. This was the case with the Canary Parliamentary Group during the V, VI, VII and VIII terms of parliament.

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In summary, Spain is characterized by low levels of electoral volatility, which can be viewed as evidence of political parties' strong roots. The situation is similar in the case of fluidity and volatility of political elites. At the electoral and parliamentary levels, these changes are insignificant. Two types of consequences for electoral accountability thus emerge. First, the high level of institutionalization present in the Spanish party system leads to a situation in which there is little trouble with assigning accountability; the negligible number of changes at the electoral and parliamentary level means that voters have little difficulty in determining which party is responsible for the current state of the economy and politics in the country. On the other hand, however, the strong foundations of political parties may impose limitations on the use of 'carrot and stick' mechanisms, as the Spanish political system is deprived of parties presenting similar programmes which dissatisfied voters could shift their support to. Furthermore, the stability of electoral regulations characteristic of the Spanish system contributes to voting based on ideology rather than on pocketbooks, which in turn reduces the use of carrot and stick mechanisms by reinforcing party- and ideological-based ties.

Nevertheless, changes occurring in the political party scene during the last parliament and leading to the emergence of new parties such as Podemos and Ciudadanos with strong support, may be indicative of a change in the balance of power among political parties in Spain. Public polling demonstrates that support for Podemos since January 2015 has averaged over 20%, while Ciudadanos can count on over 15%. This means that just behind PP, with its 23%, and PSOE, which can boast slightly over 21%, Podemos would constitute the third-largest political power in the country, with Ciudadanos fourth [El País 2015/07/04]. If this declared support translated into votes during the elections planned for autumn 2015, it will lead to a political earthquake. This will undoubtedly impact electoral volatility; however, considering the reality in Spain, it will not influence fluidity or

volatility of political elites. The appearance of new political parties will, however, doubtlessly lead to greater use of carrot and stick mechanisms as a portion of the left-leaning electorate will have an alternative in Podemos, while the right-leaning electorate can turn to the centre-right Ciudadanos. The next elections to the Cortes Generales will show the extent to which the party system in Spain has been transformed, and the degree to which the transformation has influenced electoral accountability and assignment of responsibility.

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