# Perceptions of parliamentary absenteeism and its impact on governmental stability in nineteenth-century Spain

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## 1.- Interpretations of Absenteeism – an Introduction

Thanks to the most recent investigations in the field of cultural political history much light has been shed on the political vision of liberal parties in nineteenth century. At that time, the liberal political vision identified political citizenship with ownership. Thus it was thought that financial autonomy endowed men with the capacity for political autonomy. For this reason, only a small part of the society was considered as active citizens.[1] In Spain, following the electoral law of 1846, a sum of 400 reales was required to vote; meaning only 0.8% of the population could afford to do so. In 1865 this was reduced to 200 reales, which was affordable for around 2.7% of the population and in 1878 an annual contribution of 25 pesetas in territorial contribution or 50 pesetas in industrial subsidy meant that 5% of the population could vote.[2]

The situation was similar in other European liberal countries, such as France where in 1831 200 francs of direct contributions were required, which meant only 0.5% of the population could vote, increasing to around 0.7% in 1846.[3] In Italy less than 2% of the population were eligible to vote in 1871 and in Great Britain about 3.4% of the population could vote from 1832 on, increasing to 8% by 1868.[4] The electorate could be enlarged or restricted by adjusting the amount of money required, but ownership remained the main prerequisite for

[1] See, among others, S. KAHAN, A. *Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe: The political culture of limited suffrage*. Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2003; SIERRA, M.; PEÑA, M. A.; ZURITA, R. *Elegidos y elegibles: La representación parlamentaria en la cultura del liberalismo*. Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2010.

[2] VARELA ORTEGA, J.; LÓPEZ BLANCO, R. A. «Historiography, sources and methods for the study of electoral laws in Spain», in NOIRET, S. [ed]: *Political Strategies and Electoral Reforms: Origins of Voting Systems in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1990, p. 185-259.

[3] COLLINGHAM, H. A. C. *The July Monarchy: a political history of France 1830-1848*. London/New York: Longman, 1988, p. 70-71.

[4] RUSH, M.; CROMWELL, V. «Continuity and change: legislative recruitment in the United Kingdom 1868-1999», in BEST, H.; COTTA, M. [ed]: *Parliamentary representatives in Europe, 1848-2000: legislative recruitment and careers in eleven European countries*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 463-492.

political citizenship, at least until the end of the century. This situation only changed with the arrival of universal male suffrage, which was adopted in the last years of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. Only in France was it adopted earlier, from 1848 on, whereas in Spain it was temporarily implemented in 1868 and finally established in 1890. In Italy and the United Kingdom universal male suffrage only arrived with the twentieth century (in 1912 and 1918 respectively).

At the same time, when those economic conditions were not met, a man could still vote if his intellectual competence compensated for his lack of financial resources. In other words, those with particular occupations or roles in society were eligible to vote. For instance, in 1831 retired French officers or members of the National Institute could vote for the sum of 100 francs of direct contributions instead of the 200 required of the rest of the population,[5] whereas the Spanish electoral law of 1846 allowed retired army officers, lawyers, doctors and architects, among others, to vote for the half the fee of the general population.[6]

In brief, political citizenship was linked to capacities -particularly to the economic ones. Thus, participation in elections was ultimately a confirmation of status and social influence. It was a communitarian vision of the society, which was transferred to politics and ratified the prominence of owners and, therefore, their supposed natural influence.[7]

From this perspective, the function of Members of Parliament (MPs) in the first modern European parliaments was to act on behalf of the population. Indeed, as only a small part of the nation was eligible to vote, MPs guided the entire society. Thus, MPs were perceived to be performing a service on behalf of the nation; and, if MPs understood their function as a service, it was consequently not viewed as a compulsory activity. Attendance at parliament was thus seen as voluntary, and absenteeism was the unsurprising consequence of that attitude – as recent investigations of the concept of liberal political representation have shown.

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[5] *Recueil des lois et ordonnances d'un intérêt général depuis le 7 août 1830*. Paris: Bureau de l'administration du journal des notaires et des avocats, 1831, vol. I, p. 148.
[6] «Ley electoral para el nombramiento de diputados a Cortes, 18-3-1846».
[7] ROMEO MATEO, M. C. «De patricios y nación: Los valores de la política liberal en la España de mediados del siglo XIX». *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez*, n. 35 (2005), p. 119-141.

Absenteeism has traditionally been linked to a quantitative statistical measure, which has been described as an extension of the prosopographical studies, which could include the age, the socioprofessional condition or the ideology of the deputies, among other issues. Lawrence Stone uses the prosopographical method to study a group of historical personalities as a social subject. This universe of analysis entails dealing with information from various sources (for instance, political, economic, social and cultural) in order to identify significant quantitative variables.[8] The phenomenon of absenteeism in politics has been seen as another measure which can be prosopographically analysed in order to study a historical collective, such as the parliamentarians of a country and/or of a concrete period.[9]

With the contributions of cultural political history, and the clarification of a deputy's significance during the liberal period throughout the nineteenth century, the study of absenteeism has also formed part of investigations of liberal political representation. In other words, the study of absenteeism among MPs in the first modern European chambers has presented an opportunity to think about parliamentarism itself and, more concretely, to consider and revise the dominant concept of political representation. That is, the capacity of politicians to act for the voters. So, if the role of an MP was viewed as a service, how they could serve voters if they were absent? Absenteeism has allowed a historiographical revision of political relations between the electorate and its representatives regarding the possibilities the former had to influence the latter in response to their absence. Such studies have been possible by looking more closely at the different concepts of political representation these actors held.[10]

Francesco Soddu is one of the authors that has paid attention to absenteeism, focusing on the Italian chambers of the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, and concentrating on the implications of absenteeism for political representation. As Soddu has stressed, given that the Italian political nation was just being formed and consolidated, absenteeism could

[8] STONE, L. «Prosopografía», in STONE, L. *El pasado y el presente*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986, p. 61.
[9] An example of this perspective in ANCEAU, E. *Les députés du Second Empire: Prosopographie d'une élite du XIX^e siècle*. Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2000, especially p. 687-689.
[10] LUJÁN, O. «El síndrome del escaño vacío: Absentismo y representación política en la España liberal de mediados del siglo XIX». *Revista de Estudios Políticos*, n. 176 (2017), pp. 47-77.

be explained as a result of the dominance of localism among Italian MPs. That situation emerged as the candidates were generally well rooted in their electoral district. Therefore, this could explain absenteeism and shed light on political representation in Italy's first national parliamentarian experience.[11]

The Spanish electoral law of 1846 also enabled a similar situation. It introduced single-member districts as a way to link deputies to their constituency.[12] Thus, representatives were not entirely disconnected from their district. In fact, work in recent decades has been crucial for the Spanish historiography to challenge the political theories by which the centralisation of the government absorbed all sorts of powers.[13] Therefore, local powers also played their role and had an influence on the results. So, the concept of political representation, which had an influence on the parliamentary activities, concerned both the national and the local dimension. That is, the deputy had to combine the general interest with the problems concerning the district represented. Thus, I would argue that attributing absenteeism to local interests is only a partially valid explanation.

Complementing those contributions, our understanding of absenteeism and its connections to parliamentarism may also be furthered by the most recent investigations coming from the political science. Focusing on the changes of parliamentary proceedings, political science has analysed current absenteeism as a means to show implicit government loyalty or opposition. That is to say, under political systems with decisions taken by absolute majority, absenteeism should be counted as an expression against the government. As the government needs absolute majority, absenteeism undermines their support. On the contrary, when talking about systems when decisions are taken under less than an absolute majority, absence benefits the government.[14]

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[11] SODDU, F. «The Italian Parliament at work, 1861–1876». *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, núm. 25 (2005-1), p. 135-148.

[12] ESTRADA SÁNCHEZ, M. *El significado político de la legislación electoral en la España de Isabel II*. Santander: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Cantabria, 1999, p. 59.

[13] As an example of this perspective see VARELA ORTEGA, J. «De los orígenes de la democracia en España, 1845-1923», in FORNER, S. [coord.]: *Democracia, elecciones y modernización en Europa: Siglos XIX y XX*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1997, p. 129-201. To deepen in this debate see MORENO LUZÓN, J. «Political clientelism, elites, and caciquismo in Restoration Spain (1875-1923)». *European History Quarterly*, núm. 37/3 (2007), p. 417-441.

[14] LOUWERSE, T. «Unpacking "positive" and "negative" parliamentarism, in "The Evolution of Parliamentarism and Its Political Consequences"», in *Joint Sessions of Workshops of the European Consortium of Political Research*. Salamanca, 10-15 April 2014.

This perspective is useful to current politics, as governments' initiatives are easily identifiable. In the nineteenth century, however, not all the initiatives were so easily distinguishable. An amendment could be introduced by an MP or group of MPs and approved or refused indistinctly by some members who formed the government. Those politicians could divide their vote provided that the initiative did not concern the stability of the cabinet. In fact, in the first decades of the century parties were not at all settled and they were perceived as evidence of social division.[15] Furthermore, parliamentary proceedings were quite different. For these reasons, such deliberations could only be partially accepted when analysing nineteenth-century politics.

The present paper will analyse parliamentary absenteeism in nineteenth-century Spain in order to explain how this phenomenon affected the government's actions. First of all, this paper will provide proof of the extent of absenteeism, considering the presence and absence of deputies within the Spanish lower house throughout the century. The results will be compared with other cases, mainly that of Italy and France. The paper will then examine the perception of absenteeism among Spanish deputies and how absence could be explained from their point of view. Who denounced absenteeism, when, and how such behaviour conditioned political representation, will also be explored. Finally, the paper will focus on the effects of absenteeism. That is, if the presence of deputies was reinforced or not during some special debates or if absence really could be seen as support of or opposition to the governments. Those mechanisms could help us better understand the role of governments in Spanish nineteenth-century parliamentarism.

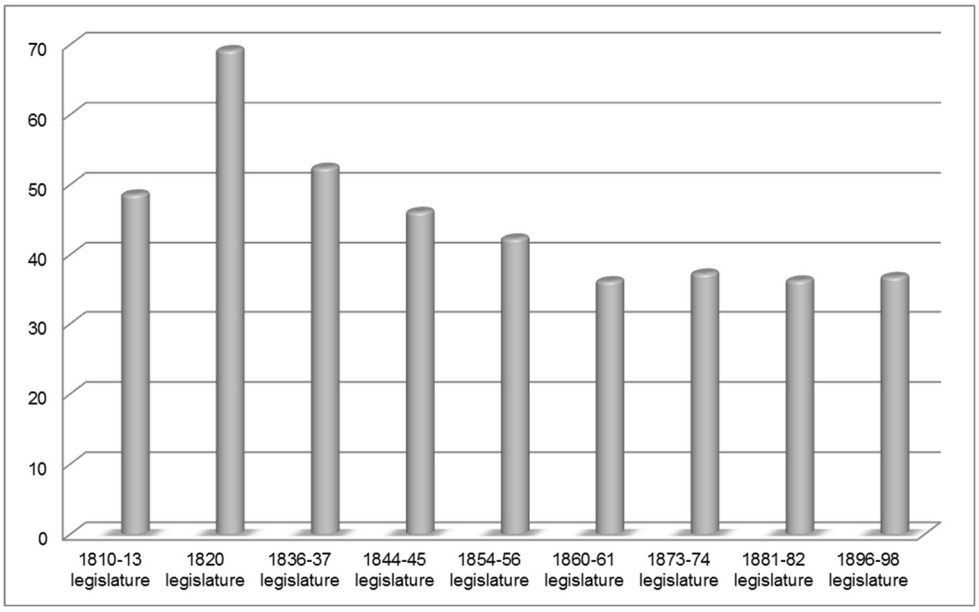
## 2.- Spanish parliamentary absenteeism during the nineteenth century

The perception that absenteeism was widespread among Spanish deputies of the nineteenth century has been traditionally accepted by the historiography. Nevertheless, we lack an exhaustive quantitative study of the phenomenon. There are a few examples, but they only partially address the

[15] KATZ, R. S.; MAIR, P. «Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party». *Party Politics*, núm. 1 (1995), p. 9.

matter.[16] Here I will examine the phenomenon in the Spanish lower house, studying one legislature for every decade. Each legislature has been chosen for its significance: the first national parliament in 1810-13 or the Constituent Courts of 1836-37, 1844-45, 1854-56 and 1873-74. I have also complemented periods when conservatives dominated the chamber (e.g. 1844-45 or 1896-98) with periods when other parties were in power: the progressives -1836-37 and 1854-56; the Liberal Union -1860-61; the republicans -1873-74; and the Liberal Party -1881-82. As there were no proceedings of the deputies' attendance, absenteeism has to be documented through roll-call votes.

Figure 1 – Average attendance in the Spanish chamber of the deputies during the nineteenth century (expressed in %)




Source: Diario de Sesiones del Congreso de los Diputados (DSC, from now on): legislatures of 1810-13, 1820, 1836-37, 1844-45, 1854-56, 1860-61, 1873-74, 1881-82 and 1896-98

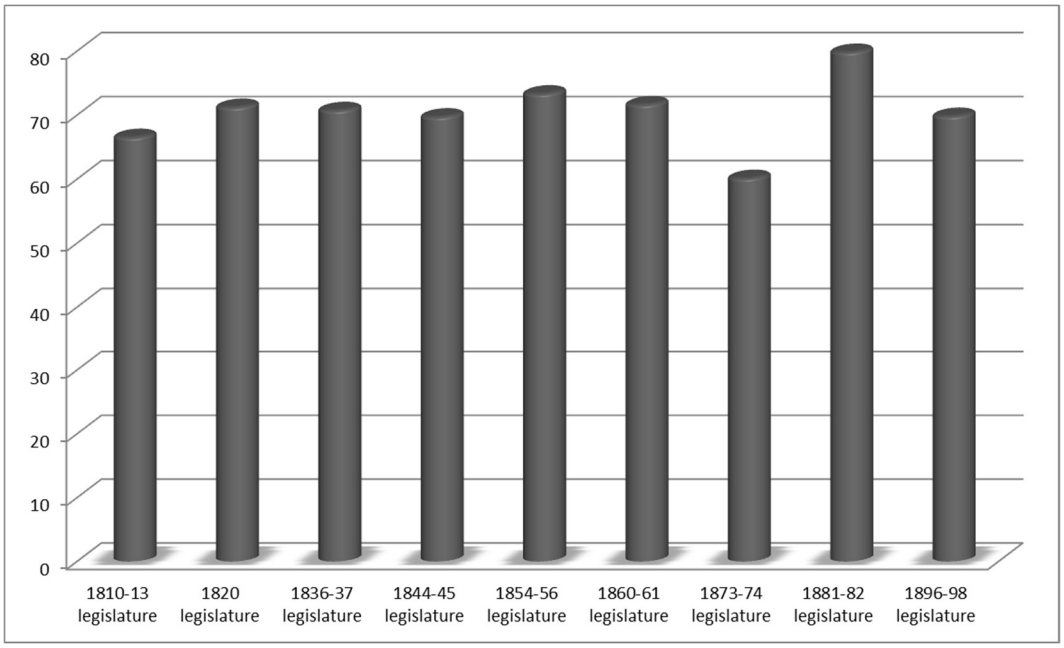
As the graph confirms, absenteeism was widespread. With the exception of the 1820 legislature –where only a few roll-call votes were effectuated, and in contrast to the other legislatures studied, which ranged from as low as 40 roll-call votes to more than 370-, the average attendance of the deputies is between 36% and 52% and the general average tends to be set at around 45%. In other words,

[16] For instance, a statistical study of the deputies' attendance during the 1834-35 and 1835-36 legislatures can be read in CASALS BERGÉS, Q. *La representación parlamentaria en España durante el Primer Liberalismo (1810-1836)*. Cádiz: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Cádiz, 2014, p. 181-183.

only between one third and a half of the Spanish deputies of the nineteenth century always attended the sessions. The remainder were usually absent.

This situation was not uncommon among other European parliaments of the nineteenth century. The Italian lower house of the beginning of the 1860s showed an average attendance of about 48%,[17] whereas in the French parliament of the Second Empire (1852-70) regular attendance of the deputies was intermittent, as the use of licences of absence was a common practice.[18] In brief, absenteeism in European parliamentary chambers of the nineteenth century was not the exception but the norm.

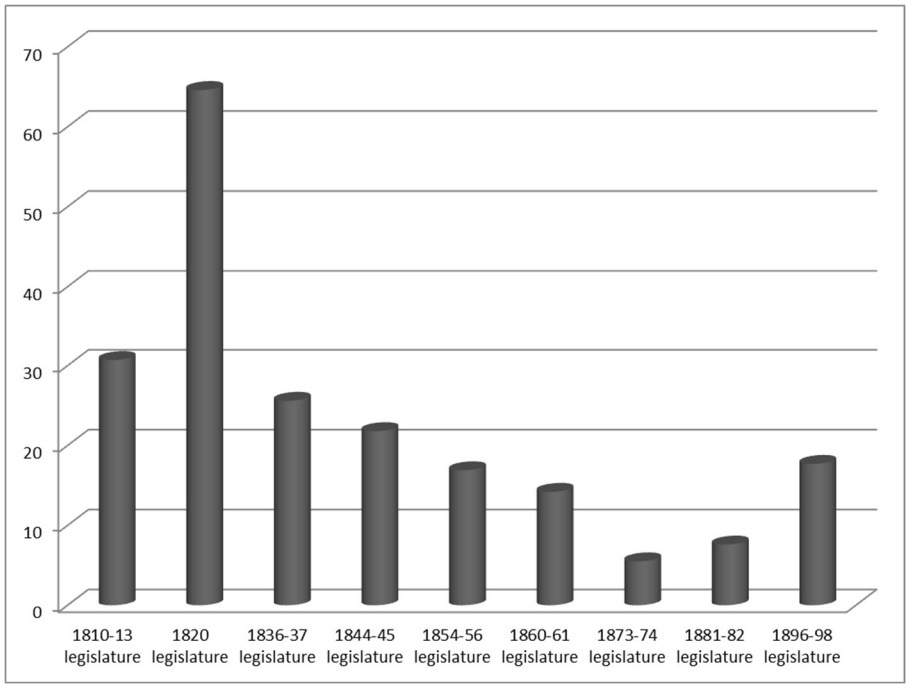
Figure 2 – Maximum attendance in the Spanish chamber of the deputies during the nineteenth century (expressed in %)




Source: DSC: legislatures of 1810-13, 1820, 1836-37, 1844-45, 1854-56, 1860-61, 1873-74, 1881-82 and 1896-98

[17] SODDU, F. «The Italian Parliament…», p. 141-142.
[18] ANCEAU, E. *Les députés du Second Empire*… p. 687-688.

Figure 3 – Minimum attendance in the Spanish chamber of the deputies during the nineteenth century (expressed in %)




Source: DSC: legislatures of 1810-13, 1820, 1836-37, 1844-45, 1854-56, 1860-61, 1873-74, 1881-82 and 1896-98

On the one hand, the first graph shows that maximum attendance settled at between 60% and 80%, with an average of 70%. Thus, three of every ten deputies elected almost never attended the sessions in the lower house. The situation can be compared with the aforementioned Italian lower house at the beginning of 1860s, as the maximum number of voters was set at around 67%.[19] On the other hand, in Spain the minimum attendance was more variable, as the indexes move from 5.5% for the 1873-74 legislature to 30.7% for the 1810-13 legislature or even 64.8% in 1820. The average minimum parliamentary attendance in Spain was around 22.7%. What is important to highlight here is that on some occasions attendance was so low that sessions were suspended due to the absence of quorum. This occurred, for instance, on at least three occasions during the republican sessions of 1873-74, as well as during other periods.

At the Progressive Biennium (1854-56) the Marquis of Albaida, a politician of the Democratic Party, demanded during the sessions that a list was made of absent deputies, who did not vote (despite being in Madrid at that time). That

[19] SODDU, F. «The Italian Parliament…», p. 141-142.

occurred on 4 December 1855, as on the previous day only 140 deputies (around 40% of the deputies) voted in the chamber.[20] On some occasions the resolutions could have no legal effect as the number of voters was insufficient (lower than one fifth).[21]

In the republican legislature of 1873-74 the issue of absenteeism was so significant that every morning the president of the chamber would count the number of deputies in attendance. When they were too few, the session was suspended or adjourned until a sufficient audience was achieved. For example, at 8 o'clock in the morning of the 26 August 1873 only 21 deputies were present and the session was postponed until 3 o'clock when the quorum was finally reached.[22]

Indeed, it was not unusual for only a few deputies to be present at the beginning of a session and for other deputies to arrive as the day progressed. For this reason, when the sessions had to be suspended or postponed repeatedly, the president of the lower house would inform the deputies of the topics due to be discussed in the next sessions.[23] It was not a decision that only affected Spain. Francesco Soddu also finds echoes of this during Giolitti's epoch. In the Italian upper chamber «*the highest attendances were registered when important bills, like the transfer of the management of the railway system to state control, were debated*».[24]

Concerning Spain, the conclusions ought to be quite similar when considering attendance for the most relevant bills. For instance, the approval of the 1845 Constitution was achieved after a roll-call vote with 150 deputies, when the average attendance at that legislature was about 114.[25] A similar situation occurred during the discussion of the 1837 Constitution: the approval of the renovation of the Constitution was made with the presence of 136 deputies, when

[20] DSC: legislature of 1854-56, p. 8813-8814 and 8849-8852.
[21] Following the regulations of the parliament of 1837, a minimum attendance of 70 deputies (out of 246) was required to open the session. See *Constitución de la monarquía española. Ley electoral para el nombramiento de diputados a Cortes. Reglamento para el gobierno interior del Senado. Reglamento del Congreso de Diputados y Ley de 19 de julio de 1837*. Madrid: Imprenta Nacional, 1848. In 1873-74 the quorum was still set at 70 deputies (but out of 383), according to DSC: legislature of 1873-74, p. 1085.
[22] DSC: legislature of 1873-74, p. 1821-1825.
[23] DSC: legislature of 1881-82, p. 4984.
[24] SODDU, F. «The Italian Senate in the era of Giolitti and the House of Lords: some comparative insights». *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, núm. 18 (1998-1), p. 103-133.
[25] DSC: legislature of 1844-45, p. 822-823.

the average was then less than 129.[26] Or even in the republican sessions of 1873-74 the maximum turnout of 230 deputies, when the average was of less than 143, occurred when the chamber gave support to the president of the government, Francesc Pi Margall. The political context was fragile, with a war with the carlists (1872-76), a political movement which sought the establishment of a separate line of the Bourbon dynasty, and some intransigent ministers whose difference of opinion caused ministerial difficulties, among other problems. Then, a legislative initiative was approved, with 185 votes in favour and 45 against, which gave the president of the government the capacity to designate and remove ministers at will.[27]

3.- The vision deputies had of absenteeism

Since MPs understood their function as serving the entire population, and as only a small part of the population could vote, they consequently were not tied to that task. They saw it as a non-compulsory work and did not believe attendance was mandatory. This attitude helps to explain the prevalence of absenteeism among Spanish deputies throughout the nineteenth century. For the majority of the deputies then, absenteeism was seen as their right. They benefited from this advantage as they were offering a political service to the whole society. For instance, the progressive Pedro Calvo Asensio referred to the option of non-voting, which is effectively the same as absenteeism as a «*legitimate right*».[28] That episode is significant as 87 deputies did not vote despite being in Madrid and a further 87 deputies did not vote because they were not in Madrid. So, in all, 174 deputies (nearly 50% of the chamber) did not vote.

Ultimately, and despite being considered as a right, absenteeism came with certain conditions. In general, it was accepted as something the deputies could do if they wished. They offered a service, and if they had something more important to do then they did –often without offering apologies or explanations. It is important to bear in mind that the role of deputy was not a paid position in Spain and deputies often depended on another occupation for their income.

[26] DSC: legislature of 1836-37, p. 2270-2271.
[27] DSC: legislature of 1873-74, p. 250-252.
[28] DSC: legislature of 1854-56, p. 8849.

Failing to attend on a regular basis, or indeed permanently, was another matter entirely. For example, Diego María García, who had represented the district of Gergal (Almería) between 1846 and 1850, lost the support of the Progressive Party in the following elections –because he had only attended the first legislature out of the four he was supposed to follow. The opposition of the Progressive Party, which was formed by no more than 60 deputies out of 349, was weakened by such behaviour. As a consequence, the leaders of the party supported another candidate in the general election of 1850.[29]

Moreover, absenteeism was not tolerated among deputies if it disturbed the normal development of the sessions. For instance, when the sessions had to be suspended on 15 July 1873, as only 39 deputies had turned up, some of the deputies that had attended called for a register to be taken so that absentees would be noted. The same situation occurred at the following session on 1 August 1873.[30] Note that no other measure was taken.

In brief, although absenteeism was usually tolerated among deputies, if it prevented the parliament from functioning it was criticised. The most advanced liberal sectors were at least keen to regulate the phenomenon. During the progressive Biennium (1854-56), when the moderate progressives and the progressive moderates were in power, a debate on regulating absenteeism was raised. For instance, they proposed that every session should be approved by a roll-call vote, so that attendance was recorded, and if a deputy did not attend the sessions for 15 days, and did not have an absentee's licence, he was presumed to have renounced his post. In fact, they proposed that absenteeism should be regulated by the parliament –with a maximum number of licences conceded at the same time, which was less than 60- and if they contravened what had been approved by the parliament, it was understood they had also rejected the post.[31] This measure was approved by the parliament, but with only 56 votes in favour and 38 against from a total of 349 deputies.

As the resolution implies, the most critical views of absenteeism came from the progressives and the most advanced liberal politicians. Pedro Calvo Asensio, who defended such a measure, declared: «*our commitment to respecting the*

[29] «Elecciones». *El Católico* (19-08-1850), p. 6-7.
[30] DSC: legislature of 1873-74, p. 727 and 1085-1086.
[31] DSC: legislature of 1854-56, p. 4985.

*decision of the parliament is imperious for all of us, as there would be little value when after taking such resolution by the Constituent Courts, deputies, individually, removed from here and national representation was reduced to a so insignificant number that it was insufficient for the votes at the sessions*». In particular he highlighted the need to represent the voter's desires: «*if deputies thought, when they were elected, that they would accept the election as an honorific post or as puerile vanity, without taking into account the interests of peoples, they* [the voters] *(if they knew it) would not vote for them*».[32]

At the heart of his argumentation, Calvo sustained the idea of national sovereignty. In other words, parliaments were institutions which represented the nation, as they had been elected by electors and so deputies had to serve them. However, a *iusnaturalist* vision of the rights was lost in the official discourse of the Progressive Party from the 1840s on.[33] That vision only survived in the most advanced liberal sectors, so that they believed that individuals –not authorities- had the capacity to regulate their rights.

Conversely, from the Constitution of 1845 on –and ratified by the Constitution of 1875, and only contested between 1854-56 and 1868-74- the concept of national sovereignty, which the Constitution of 1812 had established and the text of 1837 ratified, was then reformulated. Shared sovereignty, between the parliament and the Crown, was introduced. These circumstances made the Crown the competent institution to designate and remove the president of the government and the ministers. At the same time, the legislative function resided in the parliament, but the Crown also had competences through law making or legislative approval. So, as the executive power did not depend on the parliament, but on the Crown, governments could act with autonomy from the parliament and did not have to report to this institution. I will explore this idea in more depth in the next section, but as moderate and conservative governments did not depend on the parliaments to keep their political position, absenteeism was generally not a problem for them. Thus, the issue of absenteeism was not usually discussed in periods of moderate or conservative governments.

[32] DSC: legislature of 1854-56, p. 5088-5089.
[33] SIERRA, M. «La sociedad es antes que el individuo: El liberalismo español frente a los peligros del individualismo». *Alcores: Revista de Historia Contemporánea*, núm. 7 (2009), p. 63-84.

In consequence, the most advanced liberal sectors and progressive politicians were commonly the ones who denounced absenteeism. They were in favour of another distribution of power and they wished governments should depend on parliaments to undertake their task; thus, they wanted to at least regulate absenteeism and prevent it if possible. For example, in 1849 the progressive Luis Sánchez Silva said of his moderate-dominated chamber: «*If we were counted now, it would be with difficulty that we would find* [here] *the 70 deputies required by law to open this session*. […] *Why they do not come here? They do not come, because they have lost faith, not in the representative government, but in the people who make up the government* […] *the representative government is completely distorted in Spain; because they believe, and I agree with them, that here it is only about* […] *spending time, doing what is indispensable for those who govern and less urgent for those who obey. This is an unequal struggle, sirs*. […] *we are playing an improper role of our rights, improper of the people's rights who had sent us here, and highly effective to discredit liberal institutions*'.[34]

So, absenteeism was in general tolerated and accepted by most of the Spanish deputies of the nineteenth century and therefore seen as a right for those who believed that they were offering a service to the whole community. The difference in ideological sensibilities towards parliamentary absence arose when that right was abused. Then, the progressives and the most advanced liberal politicians wanted to regulate absenteeism to prevent from cancelling sessions due to insufficient quorum. These sectors formulated this idea, as they advocated national sovereignty and, therefore, to the control of the parliament over the executive. Conservatives, on the contrary, were more permissive regarding absenteeism, as the shared sovereignty between the parliament and the Crown meant that governments did not depend on parliaments, but on the Crown. This implied that absenteeism did not affect their stability, as I will discuss in the next section.

## 4.- Absenteeism and the government's stability

[34] DSC: legislature of 1848-49, p. 672.

At the beginning of this paper I presented some insights which introduce absenteeism as a means to show implicit government loyalty or opposition. That is to say, under political systems with decisions taken by absolute majority support, the absence should be counted as an expression against the government. As the government needs absolute majority, absence undermines their support. On the contrary, when talking about systems when decisions are taken under less than an absolute majority, absence is counted towards the government.[35] Therefore, as nineteenth-century Spanish parliamentary laws were generally approved with absolute majority,[36] absenteeism should also be interpreted as implicit loyalty to the government, especially as the opposition was mostly insignificant.[37] After all, as I have previously argued, that argument has to be nuanced when talking about nineteenth-century politics as the processes of current politics are different to those of the first national parliaments. Even so, I will try to place this theory within the context of the epoch.

Firstly, low attendance in the Spanish parliament did not generally mean that governments lost their important propositions -or that the opposition could approve their initiatives. As an example, at the legislature of 1860-61, when the Liberal Union was in government, the progressive Pascual Madoz proposed an amendment to the provinces' governance law, which sought to diminish the unilateral power of the Crown in suspending and dissolving provincial councils. The progressives, however, desired a more decentralised distribution of power. With Madoz' measure governments would have to submit a report to the parliament explaining the dissolution, which would need to be approved by the

[35] LOUWERSE, T. «Unpacking "positive"…».

[36] Concretely, following the regulations of the parliament of 1837 and 1866, the approval of the president of the chamber needed absolute majority. The approval of laws required the presence of the half plus one of the deputies, while the other decisions could be taken when the quorum was raised (70 deputies). Then, the ordinary decisions had to be taken by at least a difference of 4 deputies, which supposed the need of absolute majorities. Otherwise, they had to be repeated through roll-call votes with simple majority. See *Constitución de la monarquía española. Ley…* and *Reglamento del Congreso de los Diputados y Ley electoral*. Madrid: Banco Industrial, 1866.

[37] After the 1850 general election more than 300 deputies out of 349 were identified as ministerial, and so they supported the moderate government of the time. After the 1884 general election the situation was similar and about 311 out of 393 deputies were in favour of the conservative government. But that also occurred when the Liberal Union governed –for instance, in 1858 251 out of 349 supported this formation- or with the administrations of the Liberal Party, in the Restoration. Even in the 1854 general election, when the progressive liberal politicians governed and did not exert such an influence on electors, the great majority of the deputies supported the government, as the most conservative ones were not involved in the elections. A much wider opposition existed, but it was again a minority of the whole parliament (the most the opposition achieved was 48%, divided in different formations).

deputies.[38] The government did not mobilise their supporters, as only 121 deputies voted, when the average attendance of that legislature rose to 130. The mobilisation was not necessary, as only 21 were in favour of it.

Madoz protested that the government had not taken into consideration the convictions of the progressives: «*I believe the commission has been intransigent with the progressive minority and it has accepted neither any of our ideas nor has been convinced by our arguments, despite being introduced with good will*».[39] The moderates, and also those with conservative sensibilities, associated the government with regime, thus any opposition to them was seen and communicated as a sign of aggression against the political regime. When voting in the parliament, the option which won was perceived as a result of the desires of the nation, whereas the losing one, and for this reason a minority option, were misjudgements of such national ambitions.[40]

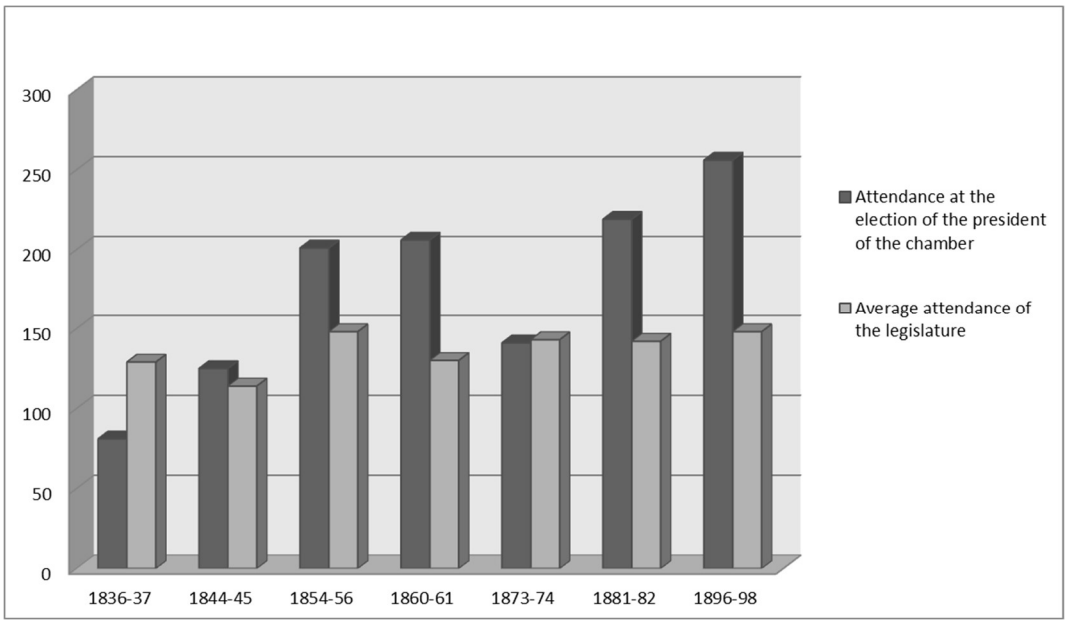
Another similar example is the legislature of 1881-82, when the Liberal Party was in the government. The conservative Rafael Atard introduced a particular proposition, which was against the debt conversion draft law. Indeed, he defended the suspension of the project.[41] All in all, after a long discussion, his dissenting vote was rejected with only 74 votes against and 18 in support.[42] Throughout that legislature only on six other occasions –out of a total of 55- did less than 92 deputies vote and the average attendance recorded in the roll-call votes was over 142.

Examples like these show that absenteeism did not usually harm the government's stability. But, at the same time it is true that in the most important parliamentary debates, attendance grew significantly. Some crucial questions for the stability of the government awoke the interest of the deputies, like the approval of the annual budgets, the presidency of the parliament or the answer to the Crown's speech. These questions were fundamental for the government's continuity. Despite the fact their approval did not always imply a maximum presence of deputies in the chamber, it tended to grow significantly. The election

[38] DSC: legislature of 1860-61, p. 2135.
[39] DSC: legislature of 1860-61, p. 2147-2148.
[40] FERNÁNDEZ SARASOLA, I. *Los partidos políticos en el pensamiento español: De la Ilustración a nuestros días*. Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2009, p. 82.
[41] DSC: legislature of 1881-82, p. 2533-2534.
[42] DSC: legislature of 1881-82, p. 2605-2606.

of the president of the chamber in the 1854-56 legislature is an example. Although the names of the deputies that voted are unknown, it is known that 201 attended the session and voted, at a time when the average attendance was 148 deputies.[43]

Figure 4 – Attendance at the election of the parliament's president (number of deputies)




Source: DSC: legislatures of 1836-37, 1844-45, 18545-6, 1860-61, 1873-74, 1881-82 and 1896-98

The statistics for the first two legislatures considered -1810-13 and 1820- cannot be given, as they are not mentioned in the proceedings. The other legislatures confirms the tendency stated, since the attendance at the election of the president of the chamber showed constantly higher attendances of the deputies, by comparison with the average attendance of each legislature. Only in the legislatures of 1836-37 and 1873-74 was the situation reversed, but even in the latter case attendance (141 deputies) was similar to the average (143). So, attendance rose by 10% on average.

To understand this situation, moreover, it is important to bear in mind that for most of the nineteenth century Spanish sovereignty resided not exclusively within the nation, but was shared between the nation and the Crown. As has been explained, from the Constitution of 1845 onward the concept of national

[43] DSC: legislature of 1854-56, p. 12.

sovereignty which the Constitution of 1812 had established was reformulated with shared sovereignty. These circumstances made the Crown the competent institution to designate and remove the president of the government and the ministers. So, as the executive power did not depend on the legislative power, but on the Crown, governments could act with autonomy from the parliament and did not have to report to this institution.

Other countries had also conceded significant competences to the Crown, such as in Portugal, where the Constitution of 1826 –not revoked until 1910- also left to the Crown the capacity to designate and remove governments. In France, on the contrary, the monarchy could designate the members of the upper house from 1814 on, but this ended with the July Monarchy (1830-48). In fact, the French Crown progressively adopted a passive role and its capacities were limited by the Constitution.[44] The arrival of liberalism also weakened the power of the English crown. A formal duplicity of powers between the monarchy and the parliamentary institutions existed, but the executive remained under the control of the parliament. In the end, while in Spain or Portugal the Crown was reinforced, in other liberal countries the Crown only remained as a symbolic institution, representative of the national sovereignty and, therefore, dependent on the population from which the national sovereignty derived.

That is why Juan Ignacio Marcuello identified the Spanish parliamentary system of the epoch as *parliamentarism in negative*.[45] In other words, as executives did not depend on parliaments, deputies had only a few occasions on which to express their opposition to the government. This situation was amplified by the fact that most parliaments of the century were full of ministerial deputies and hosted very few of the opposition. Hence, governments were used to seeing their propositions approved and only on a few occasions were their actions challenged. Deputies had the possibility to contest them, rejecting the approval of the annual budgets, the presidency of the parliament or the answer to the Crown's speech. Only in those circumstances, when the political programmes had to be accepted or declined –and roll-call votes were not always effectuated-

[44] DÍEZ DEL CORRAL, L. *El liberalismo doctrinario*. Madrid: Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, 1984, p. 119-124.
[45] MARCUELLO BENEDICTO, J. I. *La práctica parlamentaria en el reinado de Isabel II*. Madrid: Congreso de los Diputados, 1986, p. 171.

, was contrariety understood as an account of the executive action. Participation usually grew, because governments wanted to assure their continuity so they put pressure on their closest political representatives.

As an example, during the latter months of 1848, the minister of the government Luis José Sartorius compelled the deputy Josep Francesc Ixart to attend the sessions to give support to the government over the approval of the answer to the Crown's speech. The member of the government said: «*The government believes the main issues which will be addressed at the following legislature are of major interest and it is suitable that the deputies of our political party* [Moderate Party] *hurry to take their seats in the parliament. I believe the government will obtain the full approval of its conduct from its friends*».[46]

On that occasion the action of the government was approved with 147 in favour and 40 against,[47] the second major assistance of that legislature, when the average was nearly 144 deputies.[48] So, such votes were considered as a vote of confidence. For instance, when a political candidate failed to secure the presidency of the parliament, this was perceived as a failure of the government to assure the support of the chamber and thus the cabinet was expected to resign.

Such circumstances were not typical, but they did occur –an example being the beginning of the legislature of 1852. Despite the fact 230 deputies voted, the governmental candidate lost the presidency.[49] This was possible as the Moderate Party was increasingly divided between the most conservatives members, which had progressively governed by applying reactionary measures and without the approval of the parliament (they benefited from the approval of decree-law, which only needed the government's sanction).[50] So, the most conservative faction was alone in front of the progressives and the progressive moderates and the major and central line of the Moderate Party, who wanted to recover the executive.

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[46] ROVIRA GÓMEZ, S. J. *Josep-Francesc Ixart i Pi (1784—1852) (Un burgès català de la 1ª meitat del segle XIX)*. Barcelona: Fundació Salvador Vives i Casajuana, 1989, p. 163-164.
[47] DSC: legislature of 1848-49, p. 193-194.
[48] LUJÁN, O. «El síndrome del escaño vacío…».
[49] DSC: legislature of 1852, p. 4.
[50] For more details see PRO RUIZ, J. *Bravo Murillo: Política de orden en la España liberal*. Madrid: Síntesis, 2006.

Briefly, until the parliament did not show any explicit opposition, through some of these proceedings, the government could act with incontestable autonomy and the absenteeism of the deputies in general did not affect their trajectories. So, if absenteeism in the Spanish parliament of the nineteenth century could be seen as an implicit expression of support towards the government, this was due to the political system itself. It was not only that most decisions were taken by absolute majority, but also that the opposition had little representation (so it was unlikely to lose any resolution). Moreover, as the major decisions did not concern the continuity of the governments, losing one vote was not decisive. Only when it was decisive did governments encourage their supporters to shun absenteeism. Therefore, it is difficult to sustain in such occasions that absenteeism was a means of supporting the government, as its members would be disappointed with the absentees.

## 5.- Conclusions

This paper has analysed parliamentary absenteeism in nineteenth-century Spain in order to examine its prevalence, as well as its impact on the government's stability. It has documented the extent of absenteeism, considering the attendance of the deputies in roll-call votes and during different legislatures, one for each decade of the century. The results have revealed that between a half and two thirds of Spanish deputies were usually absent from the sessions. The situation was similar in other European parliaments of the epoch, such as in France and Italy. As has been argued, attendance grew when certain laws or debates were raised, but even in such circumstances the maximum attendance almost never surpassed two thirds of the lower house. The laws that regulated the chamber made the presence of all deputies unnecessary and only for the definitive approval of laws was the attendance of more than half the deputies required.

These circumstances reflect the attitude of the deputies toward absenteeism. Since politicians were perceived from their linkage to ownership, and thus only a small part of the population could vote and be elected, they guided the entire society. Thus, the function of MP was understood as a service on behalf of the whole population. They were not tied to that task and, therefore, their attendance was also voluntary. Absenteeism was predominantly perceived as a

right. Since MPs understood their function as a voluntary occupation they saw it as their right to attend to other major matters.

However, the government's tolerance of absenteeism was seen differently within different ideological sectors. While in general the moderates and conservatives accepted the frequent absence of deputies, the progressives and most advanced liberal politicians were not so lenient. They wanted to regulate absenteeism, as they considered that, as representatives, they could not serve the electorate well if they were permanently absent. The conservatives had a more indulgent vision, as from their outlook sovereignty was shared between the parliament and the Crown and thus governments were not subjected to the lower house to secure their stability. That is why they made no effort to limit absenteeism by legally enforcing attendance. According to this, absenteeism could be understood as a sign of implicit support towards the government.

Nevertheless, at the same time this phenomenon could also be understood as a sign of resignation or as a challenge to the political system, regardless of the type of vote by which decisions were taken, especially from the opposition's perspective. Since governments acted independently from parliaments and benefited from extensive majorities within the lower house, it was more difficult to beat their resolutions. Even if that situation was achieved, only on a few occasions -when the programme of the government was judged-, was the resolution read as an account of government's action, like the authorisation of the annual budgets or the presidency of the chamber's approval. According to such circumstances, absenteeism should be read not as an implicit support of the government, as cabinets could be defeated and in fact some failed, but also as a way to demonstrate opposition or at least indifference.