

# **A Qualitative Approach to Electoral Abstention**

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Working Paper n. 98

Barcelona 1994

## THE CRISIS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

It is a postulate in any democratic society, that its governability depends, in the end, on the effective degree of citizens' internalization of democratic values. The first one of these values is, undoubtedly, civic responsibility, co-responsibility in collective affairs, -direct or indirect- participation in the process of political action which constitutes the very same dynamics of the democratic regime. To govern the subjects is not really to govern, but only to be in command. To govern, in democracy, is not to manage, but to direct and redress in a coordinated way the convergence of a common project, integrating the plural actions of individuals and of conscious and free groups. Thus, governability implies making this convergence possible, integrating the various social interests and the various individual projects in a political order that, at least, should be functional and effective; that is to say, it should allow for a common public policy and, at the same time, assume pluralism and existing differences. Such governability is, then, directly affected by the kind of political culture (values, attitudes and behaviors) of the governors. The more they identify with the system, the rules and the democratic functioning on a day to day basis, the better democracy is reinforced and the better it works. On the contrary: the less interested citizens are in the democratic processes and in the outcome of the political system, the weaker and the less effective its functioning will be.

Consequently, democracy is a regime of government in which the governors and the governed are inevitably interrelated by means of a reciprocal dependency. The building up of a democratic political culture among the population depends on the action of the former and on their fidelity to the democratic model. Such a political culture nourishes the more or less exemplary action of the governors.

The second postulate of democracy as a way of life and of coexistence is the real and effective participation of the citizens. However, such participation is a form of behavior which, like all behaviors, has its origins in personal values and attitudes which consider participating in a collective enterprise as a demonstration of solidarity which morally enriches and improves the individual. Nevertheless, the values and the attitudes related to participation are desiderata as they depend on the psychic reality. In the reciprocal relationship of interdependency governors-governed, the latter may experience stimulus or disappointments. Not everything depends on their political and moral culture, because this culture is precisely influenced by many cultural, institutional and governing factors. The moral and political culture of any citizen is his own share of the political and moral collective culture which includes the entire system and the functioning of democracy.

The postulates on the theory and practice of these societies politically organized as democracies are evidently, their foundation. However, when a society -as ours- is undergoing an accelerated process of transformation, the crisis of

values, changes in motivation, perplexity of attitudes and alteration of behavior inevitably affect the image, the perception and the personal experience citizens have of political life. And even the very same democratic model may be questioned.

We may say that the image which is being altered most in the present period of change is the image of the State. The efficiency of this historical instrument to organize political societies has been mortally wounded as the complexity of economic and social life and the very same active conscience of citizens have created new sovereign decision-making structures for issues that are very important for the population. On the one hand, the globalization of economy and the international communications network have enormously reduced the scope of real power and autonomy of nation-states. On the other hand, new political powers have emerged in the nation-states, with deeper roots in the various natural and cultural sections of society, demanding self-government and self-administration of their own interests in order to reach a higher representativity and efficiency.

In such an historical context, government becomes more delicate, more necessary and, at the same time, more difficult. Democratic participation, as an expression of values and attitudes negatively unaffected by the phenomena of change may reach a crisis point since, up to now, it has been primarily related to the state functioning as a monopolizing structure in political life.

In any case, such a crisis is polyvalent. On the one hand, it has a negative aspect as it threatens the grounds for democratic coexistence. However, on the other hand, it also has a positive aspect as it expresses, though unconsciously so, such a de-legitimization of the nation-state as an example for the efficient resolution of serious problems related to social upheaval. The crisis of the welfare state, of the affairs related to the treasury, of the national sovereignties, the changing capacity for autonomous decision-making in every government demands new formulae of legitimization and new structures of political action which are represented, in a negative way, by some forms of specific non-participative behavior. To some extent, we could affirm that non-participation is not related to the democratic model in general, but to a specific and contextual expression of it. As we stated previously, the political culture of participation or abstention, or of politicization or non-politicization cannot be separated from the global culture.

There are some structural factors which decisively condition the individual political culture, the subjective basis of concrete democracy. Such factors may be basically classified in three big groups: cultural, institutional and governmental. Specifically concerning the serious problem of anti-participative non-politicization in our country as well as all around the state, these three groups of structural elements negatively and strongly influence the political culture of Catalan and Spanish citizens for various historical reasons which are still important today. In the present report we

will have to find out which of those specific factors are common to Western democratic societies and which add a unique element, that is, only common to our reality. However, as a first approach, we will have to see how such a singularity originates in the accelerated changes which have taken place in the last decade in Western societies which have a peculiar historical background of non-democratic tradition and a recent past that almost completely eradicated participative and democratic values.

It is not by chance that, since 1988, the Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials (ICPS) of Barcelona has started a line of research into electoral abstention. The contributions of Montero and Font in issue number 10 on Electoral Studies, J. Font's PhD dissertation on cultural abstention in the metropolitan areas of Madrid and Barcelona (1993), the analysis of the abstentionists based on the marked lists of the electoral census (Pallarès, Font, Canals, Borge), and the analysis of interviews (Virós) constitute the result of the research carried out.

## **Cultural Factors**

These factors express the present political culture of Spaniards, and, more precisely, of the citizens of Catalonia. As always, such a culture is firstly made up of the historical tradition received, more or less consciously or unconsciously internalized. Secondly, it consists of the participation in the collective inner experiencing of the present political life, basically through "clichés" transmitted by the instruments that create opinion.

### ***1) The Tradition of Political Culture***

The almost absolute lack of democratic tradition and also secular political illiteracy in our country reached their maximum height during the forty years of the Francoist regime. The 17 years of recent democracy don't seem to have brought with them a substantial redressing of such a negative tradition. In this sense, the lack of any educational constitutes one of its most remarkable and significant aspects.

The ignorance of the complexity of the political phenomena (social, political-economic and even of social psychology) explains the mentality and some of the attitudes in relation to civic participation and the understanding of the political system which are, generally speaking, clearly emotional (going from the traditional Messianic idealism of the Hispanics to the complementary defeatist skepticism: "there is nothing to do," "we had better just look out for ourselves"). In this sense, "betrayals" to ideals, instead of being considered as objective complaints based, on an ideological conviction, are looked on as "immoral" behavior or as universal and eternal fatalism: "finally, they all do the same, and it always happens like that".

On the other hand, this chronic disenchantment, as long as it is caused by historical facts which are happening again at present, has an objective basis. Therefore, the persistence of the "disenchantment" expresses a certain degree of good health in the moral and political sensitivity of the abstentionist. Fraud is not possible anymore. At any rate, we may find resignation or indifference, but never integration in a fraudulent system, which, conversely, maintains itself thanks to this attitude, it needs it, and, coherently, provokes it over and over again.

## **2) *The Present Political Culture***

The anti-participative structure of the political life of the present state should be added to this tradition of "lack of political culture"; this structure is characteristic of Western democracies with a democratic tradition. The impact on the political culture -historically transmitted- of the everyday messages of the media (television, radio, press) -not to mention here the institutional and governmental structures- has failed to redress this lack of culture received; in addition, it has also reinforced the attitudes and the mentality fostered by Francoism, grounding itself -with more or less good faith and sincerity- on the claim that Spanish democracy functions inadequately. The "reasons" of the abstentionists appear to be, to a great extent, pure repetitions of what the media say, implicit acts of faith in the correct knowledge and the honesty of the afore-mentioned media, as opposed to the spontaneous lack of confidence in the ruling class and in the parties.

### **Institutional Factors**

To the "pre-state" tradition of the Spanish state ("caudillism", that is, Spanish bossism, favoritism, caciquism, militarism, elitism, etc.) "post-state" novelty has been added, consisting of techno-burocracy, partyocracy, "oligarchization" of the executive bodies of the parties, control of parliaments by the executive powers and, generally speaking, of all the structural and functional elements which characterize a divorce between citizens and Politics. One of the most representative examples of this situation is given by the very same electoral system and, especially, the campaigns of the leaders and of their parties: the gigantic scenery of betrayed promises.

Ultimately, disenchantment as regards to parties has originated in their "incapacity" to govern citizens as they would like to be or say they would like to be governed. The system of institutional communication represented by the parties in a democratic regime seems to fail. Moreover, this is so, regardless of extreme-right or extreme-left ideologies. However, it is also true that parties, as they are conceived, designed and put into practice, are "inefficient" because the state constitutional bodies are not the most adequate to develop the policies that citizens still believe correspond to the state as it is. Neither the "liberal" abstentionists who believe in the free economic and social interplay (conservative anarchists), nor the "authoritarian"

abstentionists who believe in a fair, equal and compulsory order (progressive dictators) can trust in parliamentarism as the place where interests are conciliated nor in the governments as the executors of popular will. The decentralization of political power by means of what has been called the State of the Autonomies does not seem to have reduced this skepticism in Catalan abstentionists. The abstention in the autonomous elections would confirm the belief that the autonomous government is inoperative: a government that, despite being autonomous, is a government as well, and, therefore as "inefficient" as the central one.

### **Factors Related to Government**

Apart from the ideological reasons of the abstentionists, caused by this lack of participative culture or by moral disenchantment, the "possibilist" and "conservative" pragmatism of men and women of all sorts could stop abstentionism (as it sometimes does) if the behavior of governments, their way of putting their policies into practice, or the more or less direct communication with citizens achieved a certain material or psychic efficiency.

Nevertheless, the price paid for the complete incorporation of Spanish society into the world economic system has implied and will continue to imply for a part of the population, an eventual reason for refusal or indifference. Such a phenomenon has its positive side since, as happened with the historical pessimism of Spaniards, it implies a reasonable loss of confidence in the state, the governors, the parties and the professional politicians as the means of solving the main collective and personal problems of the population. However, such a loss of a Messianic and excessive confidence is not balanced by any other kind of confidence, for, who other than the "politicians" can govern society and solve its conflicts and needs?

In this sense, the non-integration in the present system of government of some critical abstentionists could imply a certain hope for a future more influenced by the ecologist movement, by broadening areas of political organization (federal Europe), and even by the glimmer of a world scale government.

The focus of our research must, however, go beyond the above mentioned factors. They must force us to accurately research into how they reflect the subjective image of the abstentionist citizens, who, as we already said, do not always have negative reasons for their refusal to participate in the system. On the other hand, the conformist or simply "ritual" support of many participant citizens can also collaborate to maintain structures without any capacity for self-criticism and, therefore, condemned to an inertia which nourishes its legitimization among the population. We have to bear in mind that another postulate of democracy is that the very same people are the driving force of political life, for the better or for the worse, with or without their participation. If the well-known cliché which says that "any

country has the government it deserves" makes any sense it is because it considers the structural factors of a culture to be the desired or undesired product of the very same citizens.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY AND DETAILS OF THE METHODOLOGY USED**

Generally speaking, the present study tries to look in depth into the motives for electoral abstention among Catalan citizens, paying special attention to youth.

Once we have obtained some interesting details on the evolution and participation in our country based on aggregated data<sup>1</sup> and on the interviews, our aim is to complement and to elaborate on them using the analysis of almost a hundred interviews carried out in Catalonia between 1989 and 1990<sup>2</sup>.

Our main objective is to understand the phenomenon of abstention starting from the analysis of the political culture of a specific group of Catalan citizens.

In the first part of the study that we will now summarize, we undertake political culture to be a descriptive tool, leaving, for a second comparative stage of the study, its use as an explanatory variable of the detected differences in political behavior of citizens of various countries (Elkins and Simeon, 1979).

### **Outline for the Analysis of Abstention**

The fact of voting or abstaining depends on a collection of interrelated factors which intervene in a complex process of mental operations which lead the citizen to decide in one sense or another.

#### **Table1**

The voter is conditioned by two decisive factors: his personal history, inscribed in the collective history (which also includes his previous electoral behavior) and the cultural context of the political community to which he belongs.

The voter also finds himself "placed" in a specific local environment (spatial status) in which he experiences, at the moment of voting, the influence of some of the features of the social environment. Family socialization, which naturally transmits values and a vision of the world, and the networks of professional and personal relationships as well as of associative activities (culture, sport, trade unions...) also influence his decision.

On the other hand (top of the table), the political institutions pretend to integrate the voter in a democratic dynamic through political parties and the leadership of its rulers.

The latter offer their policies put into practice as a legitimization of their government action and, as an offer for the future, their government electoral programs. The link between the parties, the leaders, and the voters is constituted by the media in any form whatsoever.

The personal factors of the voter which contribute to the taking of a decision to vote, are his mental predispositions –*habitus*- (Bourdieu, 1976), partly unconscious, his -more or less coherent- ideology, the opinions and beliefs shared with the social groups to which he belongs and the information provided by the media. The *habitus* -filters for the perception of the reality and lines of behavior- originate in the family environment, while the opinions and beliefs are nourished by the non-family relationship network among which we have to include the educational system. In the constitution of a more or less coherent ideology, all the above mentioned elements intervene, together with the political information directly channeled by the political parties and, especially, by the media.

Through ideology and environmental political information, the voter has some elements which allow him to evaluate whether or not among the political options present in the electoral panorama there exists one which fits his personal and/or collective priorities. It is precisely based on his -more or less unconscious- predispositions and on his opinions and socially shared beliefs that the voter establishes his subjective preferences. From the interaction between his permanent values and his present interests, his convictions and the opinion of the nearby groups, comes a synthesis, the electoral decision.

From all these elements and reflection processes we have mentioned and have tried to describe, we may distinguish two different but complementary lines which converge in the electoral decision and which originate, on the one hand, in the spatial and family status (geographical context) and, on the other, in the socio-economic status and in the networks of external relationships. The first one tends to express the aspects basically related to the personal experience, non-rational and emotional (values, attitudes); the second one usually expresses a higher rationality or adjustment to the practical interests shared by the groups which form the "social nature" of the voter.

The line preferentially related to the "personal experience" leads to identification processes -usually with a strong emotional component- to parties which basically have leaders for whom ideology is more or less relevant. The communication system constituted by the media re-elaborates the process of being



conscious of the *habitus* and of the ideology of the voter who, depending on the situation, will feel more influenced by factors related to ideology or to the parties or by other factors related to emotion and leadership.

The line preferentially "rational" or of interests is strongly related to the observed contrast between the policies put into force and of the proposed governmental programs. Concerning one or the other, the media provide the "objective" information elements which will have to fill the voter's decision with "rationality" and complete and correct the public opinion formed by the whole of the opinions and beliefs emerging from the population in relation to collective or group interests. Such a dimension, usually quite emotional, corresponds to the practical and social interest as it is perceived by the voter and tends to balance the most "instinctive" aspects acquired within the family and in the original cultural environment.

Our scheme helps us to understand how the processes of primary and secondary socialization influence the perception the citizen has of the political system, the institutions, the parties and the leaders, and their critical evaluation; it also allows us to understand the genesis and the interrelation of the elements which are taken into consideration in the classical studies on political culture.

If we wish to look in depth into the factors which have an influence in abstention, we will have to bear in mind that these play different roles depending on the space and time. That is to say that the change in the geographic and social environment may modify the relative influence of the above mentioned elements. Socio-political and personal circumstances have a very strong influence on electoral decision. Hirschman<sup>3</sup> wisely reminds us of the episodes of mobilization-de-mobilization which usually take place in someone's lifetime.

Generally speaking, socio-economic factors and those related to original culture have a usually indirect impact (excepting the extreme cases of social marginality) as factors which condition the perception of the "political game" by the voter as something close to him which affects him and in which he gets involved or, on the contrary, as a series of events he hardly understands and on which he does not believe he can have an influence.

A hypothesis which seems to confirm itself is that the socio-economic factors tend to have less weight because the so called "communication society" stimulates political discourses shared by wide groups despite their individual positions in the social hierarchy.

Adults are the ones who still bear the marks of the historical conflicts that were produced by ideological affiliation. For the young people born in the mid sixties,

it is much more difficult to place themselves on the Right/Left scale. We have to specify that in the short period of the democratic transition (1977-1982) there was a moment of generalized hyper politicization in society which marked the adolescents and young people who were spectators or privileged actors and who have in time maintained a more participative tendency<sup>4</sup>.

The fact that the education level has been increasing in the whole of the population means that, theoretically, the capacity of the population to participate in politics has also increased, not only because of more information being made available, but also because of the greater capacity for political conceptualization and, consequently, to contrast personal preferences -individual and collective- with the different political options on offer. A high level of conceptualization also allows one to grasp the extension of the political options, the differences among the various political programs and to dominate the strategies to reach goals<sup>5</sup>.

If this is so, it is clear that the citizens of Western countries will be the most well-informed and critical judges of the policies of the various governments; however, this does not assure that it will lead them to make use of their vote as a co-responsibility tool in the leadership of society. A quick diagnosis of electoral abstention has led many analysts to say that citizens who do not vote are un-civic, while a more accurate interpretation may show them as silent witnesses of old-fashioned partisan organizations and of political discourses which have, for the large part, lost their signs of ideological identity and in which it is difficult to find a logical or coherent argument for their government programs<sup>6</sup>.

## **Interviews**

The objective of the study, the first results of which are presented here, is a qualitative approximation to the phenomenon of abstention based on long interviews (between 1 and 1:30 hours), recorded and afterwards analyzed by various teams in order to be able to detect eventual deviations in their interpretation and obtain consistent results. It seems to us that the interview is a good methodological approximation tool since our study puts special emphasis on the collective representations of the social groups and on the interaction, reproduction and change in meaning system processes, as well as on their influence in the relations among the various elements playing a role in politics.

Interviews favor the comprehensive analysis of the political discourse of the voters and allow us to confirm the coexistence of various systems of meaning in our Western societies (Geertz, 1988), as well as the possible existence in a very same individual of more than one order of preferences (Hirschman, 1982; Elster, 1983). This would explain, to a great extent, the variability in behavior (politicians included)

in a reduced period of time as well as the stages of implication/un-implication in politics throughout a citizen's lifetime.

It was easy to interview young people: voters and abstentionists; however, we had many more difficulties with adult abstentionists, for more than a half of the people contacted refused to be interviewed<sup>7</sup>. Their arguments for not accepting the interview were diverse and depended on their socio-cultural level.

In the wealthy districts of the city, the most current excuse was related to work (going on a professional or vacation trip). In the peripheral areas or in Ciutat Vella (old quarter of Barcelona), the reasons for refusing were more related to the lack of confidence in strangers and even to less "polite" attitudes: some hung up the telephone, others said that the subject did not interest them and that they did not want to collaborate, or they even agreed to be interviewed and, afterwards, they did not want to open the door. It is interesting to underline the aggressive role of many husbands who were against our interviewing their wives.

Generally speaking, in all districts there are more women who refuse to speak about these issues. Thus, we detected: feelings of control refusal, of a kind of "guilt" for their abstaining -internalization of civic duty-, as well as a feeling of a lack of personal self-confidence and of conceptual confusion in these subjects.

One of the problems, in polls as well as in interviews, is that they put pressure on the citizen to force him to express himself on many issues he might have never thought about before. In order to find out how much the experimental situation of an interview may force one to express opinions (which in fact, aren't "true" opinions, since there is a previous lack of knowledge on the topic of the conversation), we asked a group of young people to write a biography with the same script used as guidance in the interviews. The results were quite interesting. They narrated -often with a great many details- their childhood, school, their relationship with parents, friends, sport, and cultural interests. In most of the cases, there was only very little reference to their opinions on politics and society.

The results made the exact position which politics occupy in the interests of youth very clear<sup>8</sup>.

## **SOME CONCLUSIONS ON YOUTH ABSTENTION**

According to the European Community poll on youth (1982), interest in politics increases with age; they also give more support to post-materialist values (environmental protection, human rights, freedom, equality among sexes...). Compared to adults, an equal percentage (40%) believe that they can do something

to change society. 16% are interested in politics, approximately only 5% belong to parties or civic-political associations. Only 29% identify themselves in some way with a political party.

The poll carried out by the Ministry of Culture (1982) shows that 47% of young people don't take any position on the Left-Right scale and that 40% say that they don't know who to vote for; ideological distribution is similar to that of adults, the center and center-left positions predominating with a minimum presence of extreme positions of any kind. In comparative data, in 1968, 50% of young people were interested in politics, 80% in 1977 (the first democratic elections) and 40% in 1982. Among the 15-17 year old age range, the lack of interest expressed in politics is even stronger; this does not mean that they are not interested in the problems citizens have to face.

The majority show enthusiasm for the Constitution and the King, and only 4% think that Parliament and parties are important (elements of Francoist socialization? Personalization of power and lack of confidence in parties). Only one out of ten young people affirms that he would support a revolutionary action. A very small number of young people are associated and only 3% affirms that they are affiliated to political parties.

Concerning participation in public demonstrations of any sort, only 25% have participated.

In the poll carried out by the City Hall of Barcelona in 1984 (Projecte Jove—Youth Project), 65% had participated in some public demonstration: September 11th, for peace, for or against abortion or against nuclear power stations. 80% identify with any kind of rights movement. Only 2% are affiliated. 40% belong to some civic or sports associations. Although being the most active city in Spain, only 27% of young people from Barcelona don't place themselves on the Right-Left scale. Concerning ideologies, the one that has the most support is socialism followed by nationalism and, further down on the list, anarchism.

More than half of the sample believe that Catalonia is a nation and 32% that it is not. 44% of the young citizens feel more Catalan than Spanish; 34% both and 16% more Spanish than Catalan. 19% would be in favor of independence or of a confederation of states, 15% in favor of a federal state, 29% in favor of the autonomous communities and 9% for a unitarian state. Not even a quarter affirm that they trust political parties, the army, the church, the trade unions or the public administration. The school and the City Council surpass 50% and family, like everywhere in Europe is the institution which deserves most confidence. The youngest follow their parents' ideology more closely. The girls are more abstentionist

than the boys and their vote is less stable. Social class conditions the level of the answers to political questions as well as the orientation of the vote.

According to a post-electoral poll carried out by CIS (Center for Sociological Research) in 1987, 7% of young Catalans give support to the HB candidature and to the EA-ERC-PNG coalition, a number which fits the number of boys that in 1984 defined themselves as exclusively Catalan. Only 26% of boys and girls define themselves as sympathizing or somehow identifying themselves with some specific party. There are no other differences between the young people and the global sample other than that the latter place themselves more in the 1-2 positions -extreme left-. There is no doubt about what seems to be a stronger tendency among youth towards the left, but their behavior is very unstable, without a strong politicization and without partisan socialization.

The convergent vote is more stable, while the one on the left moves more or less depending on the kind of election and the impact of the campaign (the kind of subjects dealt with in the campaign).

We have to point out the need for reflection on the higher degree of relative mobilization of the young concerned elites who are in favor, on the one hand, of a critical approach to the system and remain outside of the electoral race and, on the other hand, show a tendency towards more conservative positions -to a great extent, disguised by a national radicalization.

The CIS post-electoral poll of July 1988 confirms that young people are less keen to refuse questions on the intention to vote. It seems that abstention among youth -18-25 age range, is higher than among the rest of the population. However, such data has to be broken down among the 18-21 and 22-25 age ranges. It clearly appears that young people are more hesitant concerning if they will vote and who they will vote for. Girls tend to abstain more than boys.

From 1984 (Projecte Jove) until 1988 (CIS), we can identify an increase among young people who feel only Catalan. On the contrary, the number of those who feel only Spanish diminishes.

The number of those who don't place themselves on the Left-Right scale also diminishes, although the number among girls is higher. There is no difference between girls and boys in placing themselves on the national identification scale. Such a tendency to identify with a territorial boundary is not, for the majority, a dimension with a political content, and, therefore there are less girls who don't express themselves.

The reasons for the CIS poll of 1988 -post- may be divided into lack of interest and lack of politicization. It is also necessary to clarify concepts. What do we understand by political space and, therefore, by politicization. We also have to establish the difference between political participation and non electoral participation.

From the analysis of the in depth interviews carried out, some conclusions may be drawn. We state them here in a summary form:

### **Ideological Reproduction**

Ideological transmission from parents to children exists in quite a high degree. Most of young people reproduce the mental schemes, the incoherence and the contradictions of their parents. This happens mainly at both extremes of the social scale<sup>9</sup>, especially when there have been no changes in the economic situation of the family. We have also found this to happen in the Left-Right dimension, as well as in that of national identification. Concerning religion, young people tend to feel less involved in relation to dogma and liturgy; thus, the children of practicing parents often declare themselves non-practicing believers, while the children of non-practicing parents declare themselves agnostics.

In the case of nationalism, the opposite is true: the children of moderate Catalan nationalists may be radical nationalists or proponents of an independent Catalonia. In the case of mixed couples, in which parents come from different cultural environments, if there is an explicit conflict within the couple, the children often solve the tensions by not involving themselves in the problem. If the families are not especially sensitive to this subject, it may well be that their children, influenced by the social environment (in a clear process of "re-catalanization") will be, or at least declare themselves, to be more active nationalists.

In middle classes (basically in those which have modified their social status), there are more acute differences between parents and children. In some very conservative and religious families we observe young people who admit to be atheist, while in other nationalist families, the young say that for them nationalism is bourgeois, narrow-minded or old-fashioned.

In the families with a leftist tradition, the children also tend to separate from the parties voted for by their parents, since they see deep contradictions in their ideological tradition and the concrete policies they carry out.

It is in conservative families where we may notice more confusion which is the result of the gap between implicit inherited values and new values that rule daily life (conservative boys and girls accept divorce, homosexuality, and euthanasia).

Most of the young people who are not involved in politics come from families who, because of the low level of political information, or the result of precarious education, or because of apolitical conservatism are implicit supporters of the system (any system). Such a conclusion is coherent with the results of previous research. Conservative families often transmit a negative attitude -more or less diffuse- towards politics.

The politicized families of right wing ideology (more or less explicit Francoist parents) have children that, while they often don't identify themselves with the previous regime and accept democracy, they, in fact, share their family's lack of confidence in political parties and partisan politics.

The active critical abstentionists come, for the most part, from families whose children define as being open-minded, leftist or progressive.

### **Other Factors which Condition Abstention**

Despite the fact that inherited predispositions are important, their effect is not determining. Networks of friends and the fact of belonging to an association may have an influence on behavior by reinforcing original attitudes or modifying them temporarily or definitively. Some adults admit that long after adolescent rebellion, the family political traditions impose themselves again.

The age factor is important and we have to take into account the psychological evolution of adolescence and first youth. The ideas of boys and girls under 22 are usually not so categorical. There is a lack of ideological conceptualization as well as identification with the parties.

Around 23-25, the young individual usually integrates into a job and thus starts a process of independence from the family universe, entering into broader networks of relationship and exchange.

Concerning attitudes and political behaviors, the differences among boys and girls is fairly equal. This is a substantial difference in comparison to adults.

All things considered, the influence of gender increases as we go down the social scale.

Girls from the lower-middle class and lower class express more confused opinions about political subjects than boys. This declared lack of interest in the political environment that surrounds them confirms and reproduces the traditional exclusion of women from politics, an area that was considered as belonging to men.

The social class -subjective identification- associated with the family cultural background has a relevant incidence in the various abstentionist groups. It is noticeable that many children from working class families have never thought about many of the questions posed in the interview.

The lack of command of the specific language and the incapacity to understand the concepts involved are insurmountable obstacles for communication and, in our opinion, sufficiently explain the abstention of some individuals.

All things considered, there is no direct and clear relationship between the level of education of youth and conceptual clarity, which demonstrates the lack of any political education that might go beyond a fragmentary reading of the Constitution at school.

Which are the factors that could make the abstentionist evolve towards higher political participation? It is an accepted fact that belonging to an association -be it political or not- may be essential to acquire an interest in collective affairs. We have seen during various interviews that young people who were initially apolitical, are politicized by a specific collective action -as happens with conscientious objectors- changing from lack of interest to critical abstention and, in some cases, to an alternative political participation.

A proof that attitudes tend to constitute a coherent system is the fact that the modification of some of them may modify the whole. It can go from a worried interest in having to go to do the military service, to a change in their opinion of society. From conscientious objection to ecologism, etc.

An emotional involvement in the national question is a clear factor in political mobilization, in accordance with the ecological analysis of the collected data. Thus, most of the people interviewed define themselves as non-nationalists and even the children of originally Catalan families do so as well. The case of the independentist and radical nationalists who usually practice intermittent abstention is an exception.

### **The Difference Between Abstention among Youth and Adults**

At the present stage of the study, the interviews to 23 adult abstentionists<sup>10</sup> (more than 30 years old) intend to be a point of reference in order to roughly find out if there were any important differences between the young boys and girls who do not vote.

It seems clear that, as age increases, the influence of family socialization diminishes and the weight of one's own personal experience becomes more important. Historical events directly experienced -Civil War, Francoism, democratic



transition- modulate the level of proximity/distance and confidence/distrust in political institutions, parties and leaders. However, this influence is not always conscious in the minds of the people interviewed, as is made evident throughout their discourse.

As age increases, we usually find people with a lower level of political conceptualization and, especially, strong differences between women and men in relation to their capacity to express standard opinions type on subjects of a strictly political nature. In fact, we have to bear in mind that a greater number of women than men refused to be interviewed.

Concerning new values, the majority share them and, in some cases, not so much because of a real personal conviction, but because of environmental pressure or practical adaptation to the family reality. Many interviewed adults are "educated" by their children and accept the changes in customs in order to make political coexistence possible.

It is interesting to observe that, concerning the social values which deserve increasing attention in public opinion since the beginning of democracy, divorce is only rejected by one of the interviewees and questioned by another. Homosexuality is almost unanimously accepted, with only one case who has doubts about it. Concerning abortion, the divergences increase, since four of the individuals interviewed oppose it radically and one accepts it on condition. Euthanasia raises many fears; we see 9 individuals who do not know what to think about it and one who is against it.

The main reason for abstaining corresponds with disenchantment in politics, while social marginality becomes irrelevant. The disenchanted individuals of PSOE center their electoral withdrawal on a key date: after the 1982 elections. From this date onwards, and also since another significant event already mentioned, the NATO referendum, a decreasing interest in politics and in elections affect socialists more strongly. However, they are not an exception: it also happens with some former PSUC voters/members or former members of left radical parties.

Among those who were most de-politicized, ecologism appeared to be the only proposal capable of motivating them.

The number of declared nationalists (IX) is greater than the Spanish nationalists (VI); it is interesting to note -although it is in this global section and one has to elaborate again on the statistical value- that within the upper class (VI) we have not found any nationalists. This excludes their voting, if they really do vote, for CiU (Convergence and Union coalition), as their vote is considered to be a way of strengthening the center/right and not nationalism.

The idea of a federal State, is only radically refused by nationalists, while it is welcomed by the majority. Although in some cases it is not a concept sufficiently meditated, it emerges as an old attractive notion for the autonomists -foreseeing an integration within the Spanish State or within the European Union as well as for the independentists, -always looking towards Europe. Although independentist nationalists are a minority, all the interviewees, including the Spanish nationalists accept Catalan independence as economically feasible. We should underline the fact that a common idea of anti-nationalism is their belief that independentists want to isolate themselves from the international scene.

The integration into Europe arouses enthusiasm as well as mistrust, the latter always being for economic reasons.

There is a trend which although not pertaining to the majority, must be taken into account. It is to consider Francoism as less negative as time goes by. Its policies on secure employment, less drugs and delinquency, and even a better environment as regards social and family discipline are seen as positive. There is even the case of a woman belonging to the upper class who is radically Francoist; however, it is a unique case among interviewees.

The influence of biography, related to childhood and to the family model, does not appear as a clearly decisive factor in choosing political options. Although in some cases the Francoist/Spanish nationalist or the freethinking ideology transmitted through parents has persisted, for the majority of the interviewees their own experiences and the socio-economic context in which they live have marked the direction taken by their thoughts, attitudes and electoral behavior. As for the upper class, -taking into account that the factors of social differentiation can explain electoral behavior and, especially, the arguments which explain this behavior- non-implication, individualism and Spanish nationalism appear to be more evident than in the other cases.

On the other hand, despite the contradictory character that is ascribed to the new middle classes -perhaps it would be more correct to qualify it as accommodating-, the interviewees who belong to this social group appear to be more involved than the ones belonging to upper classes. We also have to highlight their capacity to develop a left and nationalist discourse. We should not forget the almost absolute absence of Spanish nationalists. It is within this social class that we find more people declaring themselves to be Catalanists and supporters of the right.

As for the working class, the majority places itself to the left, while nationalism, although it exists, is not so present as in the middle strata, being surpassed by social class discourse. The implication in social movements, but not in politics, becomes very clear, especially among the residents in Nou Barris, a district

that is traditionally vindictive. This fact clearly shows the weight of environment in social assumptions and behaviors.

There is more confidence in the actions of the community as a tool to change society among the residents in Nou Barris than in any of the other six districts where interviews were carried out. It is a position that often appears to contrast the official work of politicians, especially in the case of the lower class. Among the upper and middle classes the weight of public demonstrations and of popular rights movements is of lesser importance.

## **A TYPOLOGY**

A schematic classification of abstentionists in relation to their level of politicization (Table 2), has to be based on a fundamental division: the distinction between a low and a high level. To define a dividing line, we have taken into account the respective individual levels of knowledge, interest, evaluation capacity and of practice in relation to each person.

### **Table2**

Within the low level of politicization we can identify three groups:

1) The so called "confirmed abstentionists" which constitute structural abstention. In this group politicization is non-existent, since they lack information, interest, capacity to evaluate and practice. Their abstention does not originate in a more or less grounded decision, but in their social marginalization and, therefore, political marginalization, too.

2) Those who abstain because they are only spectators of political life, receive news but don't have enough education or interest to interpret them, making it difficult for them to previously make any kind of evaluation of the political action of voting. They share with the confirmed abstentionists the feeling of remaining outside politics; however, they are somehow conscious that they are within the system and, in situations of electoral hyper-mobilization in their environment, they may vote by mimicry (1977, 1982).

3) Those who abstain because they do not have a defined ideology; they have enough knowledge but suffer from a strong lack of interest and do not have enough capacity to evaluate since frequently they don't have a clear hierarchy of preferences. Therefore, it is difficult for them to decide themselves on one or another option. They are often people brought up within authoritarian or conservative families, generally passive supporters of the previous regime who, at present and

because of environmental pressure, claim to be democrats. Nevertheless, at an unconscious level, they reject political pluralism and are of the opinion that parties create divisions and conflicts.

Within the high level of politicization, we may distinguish two groups:

1) The abstentionists who practice a passive criticism know enough about the political reality. They are interested in it, but also dismayed by the negative evolution of the representative political bodies. In the past, they were involved in politics but they now feel deceived and doubt about their power to influence social reality. They also doubt if parties with governing options could really change their essential problems.

2) Those who abstain because of their high level of politicization take the position of active criticism. To their knowledge and interest they add a whole series of alternative political actions. In this group there are mainly young people, often the children of progressive families who have internalized new values (pacifism, ecologism, feminism) and who are active in alternative political platforms.

Thus, in this general classification the basic axes are the greater or lesser integration within the political system in power and the historical generation to which they belong. In the first two cases, this second factor does not count for much since their lack of integration does not correspond to ideological motivation but to generic social causes, in which political conscience is, by definition, inexistent. On the other hand, the third and fourth group, since they come respectively from sectors favorable or opposing the previous regime, share the same ideological rejection, although they are of opposing political tendencies. Some are marked by what they had, and others by what they expected to obtain. Both groups share the frustration of their ideals although the second group appears to be more conscious of it. The fifth group joins the fourth in its criticism of the system. But, in many cases, they belong to a generation that, not having lived through the democratic change, does not criticize because expectations have not been fulfilled, but because they have new expectations they do not want to see frustrated again. The disenchantment of their parents' generation ratifies their attitude, although, unlike them, they believe in active criticism by participating in other actions alternative to that of voting.

From the point of view of the political system, convinced abstentionists are the consequence of the social marginalization which neither Francoism nor the democratic regime have been able to stop. The second group is a victim of the lack of interest in political education on the part of the present regime. The same happens with the third group in relation to Francoism. The fourth and the fifth express the limits of the present democracy.

If we were to correlate the left wing voters (Table 1) with the various types of abstentionists (Table 2) we would see the incidence in these of the different factors which condition electoral choice.

1) The convinced abstentionists of the first group have a personal background and a socioeconomic status which leaves them outside the system. Their family environment and the networks of relationships outside the family either do not exist or are placed within marginalization, which reinforces their marginality from politics even more. On the other hand, the action that institutions exert on them through parties and leaders, through policies and governmental programs and through the transmission role of the media, does almost nothing to alter their situation and, therefore is experienced as something alien which does not affect them. If by any chance they at some point thought about the possibility of voting, their predisposition and habits incline them towards abstention. Their opinions and beliefs are the clear reflection of their mental predisposition and of their experience of marginality. Without any ideology or information, their evaluation of available options is impossible. And, concerning their preferences, they are not even free to have them. In fact, they cannot freely decide in any sense. They are forced into non-participation.

2) The abstentionist spectators of politics, have a historical, cultural, personal and family background as well as a socio-economic status which does not allow them to have enough knowledge to understand politics. Their spatial status and their networks of relationships outside the family correspond coherently to their situation. Everything leads them to be more receptive to the action of the media (their main source of knowledge) and, therefore, to see slightly more close at hand, the protagonists of the political "show." However, their difficulty in understanding "what is happening" reduces their interest and makes any kind of political practice impossible. Without ideology or minimally organized and understandable information, they let themselves be led by their individual predispositions and by the opinions and beliefs which, in their environment, are usually skeptical and pragmatic in the short-term, inheriting a family tradition that is anti-politics. Their capacity to evaluate options being so reduced, only some specific irrational preferences (the sympathy for a leader, for instance), could lead them to vote. This very same irrationality would be at the basis of their mobilization in "spectacular" political circumstances: the end of Francoism and the beginning of "something" new; the promise of a "change", interpreted in a Messianic way; the "exemplar punishment" of a leader who, in the end, appeared to be a selfish opportunist, etc.

3) The abstentionists of the third group with a low level of politicization have a general background which has nurtured anti-democratic predispositions, opinions and beliefs in them. The environmental pressure leads them to passively adapt themselves to the democratic system; however, the information they receive through

the media and the political discourse of the parties appears strongly filtered by predispositions and beliefs, more explicit in adults and often unconscious in youth. Although they almost always show a preference for conservative leaders, their distrust of the system ends up extending to these. Thus, they doubt about either integrating into the system by voting or maintaining a passive attitude -as they always do- within the system. They cannot calculate the preferences precisely because their preferences are too intense and misdirected.

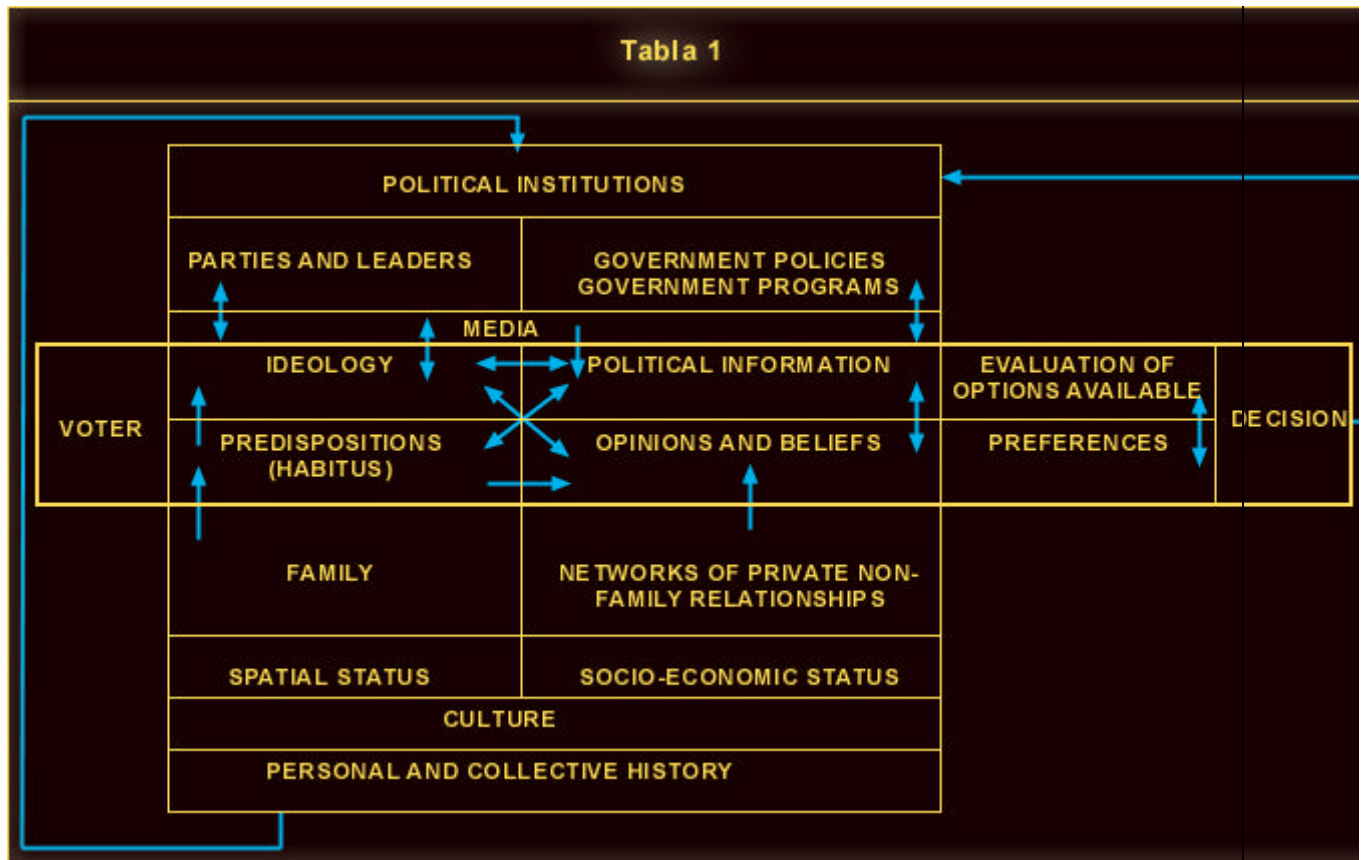
4) The fourth group, the one which practices passive critical abstention has a personal, family and social background which has made its politicization possible and, therefore, is sensitive to institutions' policies and to the information in the media. Nevertheless, their partisan identification is in crisis when it is contrasted with the concrete practice of the parties in which they once believed. They still have confidence in some leaders, but they feel frustrated in their deep beliefs and the generalized discouragement among their closest networks of relationships (including the family) undermines their solidarity dimension. Within these groups we may find many former voters of PSOE who can still be mobilized on specific occasions where a given situation is perceived as being quite an extremely equal electoral confrontation between the Right and the Left.

5) The last group, the group of active critical abstention shares along with the previous one the same background. As the majority of them are young, the family environment may strengthen their abstentionism, this being so either because they belong to the frustrated group, or because they belong to the "conformist" electorate, thus representing a situation from which the children would like to distance themselves.

Their networks of relationships reinforce this attitude. The political information, instead of being a tool for persuasion, may have, in this case, a revulsive reaction. The idealist and radical predispositions lead them to make such demanding preferences that they cannot find any political option with governing options which could answer to such a level of demands. In some cases, and with a testimonial attitude, they vote for an extra-parliamentarian party. Their high level of politicization and their capacity for grasping some specific critical situations which, they believe, may question the very same existence of democracy, makes them sometimes vote for a lesser evil. Nevertheless, their usual action in politics is through other extra-electoral channels which are focused on questions such as peace, human rights, environment, minorities, etc...

Very few take the traditional revolutionary path. At present, their "utopia" is that of a different society.

**Table 1**



**Table 2**

<b>Table 2 Politicization and electoral absenteeism in Catalonia</b>					
	<b>Politicization</b>				
	<b>Inexistent</b>	<b>Average</b>			<b>High</b>
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Knowledge</b>	-	-	+	+	+
<b>Interest</b>	-	+	+	+	+
<b>Evaluation</b>	-	-	-	+	+
<b>Practice</b>	-	-	-	-	+

Source: in-depth interviews 1989-1990

- 1.- Structural abstention
- 2.- Abstention caused by lack of information and enough interest
- 3.- Abstention caused by ideological indefinición
- 4.- Passive critical abstention
- 5.- Active critical abstention with alternative political practices.



## NOTES

(1) See Col· lecció Estudis Electorals ed. by the Equip de Sociologia Electoral (UAB) and the Fundació Jaume Bofill.

(2) Sixty to young abstentionists, twenty-four to young people who have always voted, and twenty-three to adults who have not participated in more than one election.

(3) BECK, P.A. and JENNINGS, M.K.: "Pathways to participation", American Political Science Review, 76, 1982.

(4) VIRÓS, PARÉS, ALBAIGÉS and al.: Socialització política dels adolescents de les comarques del Vallès, Caixa de Sabadell, 1978. VIRÓS, R. and TRESSERRA, M.: "Procesos de socialización política en Cataluña", Universidad y Sociedad, 4.

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(6) DALTON, R.J. et al.: The Changing Structure of Political Cleavages in Western Society. Princeton N.J., Princeton U. Press, 1984. LANE, J.E. et al.: Political Data Handbook: OECD Countries. New York, Oxford U. Press, 1991. SMILDER, Ann: "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies", American Sociological Review, 51, 1986. INGLEHART, R.: El cambio cultural en las sociedades industriales avanzadas. Madrid, CIS, Siglo XXI, 1991.

(7) The Institut Municipal d'Estadística, with whom we had previously made a compromise of confidentiality, provided a list of voters who had not voted in at least one election. When we had agreed by phone on a date for the interview we did not say that the subject was abstention but "attitudes in relation to society and politics."

(8) See in the appendix the outline of the interviews.

(9) The persons interviewed place themselves without any difficulty, which clearly confirms a clear internalization of a hierarchical society.

(10) The analysis of this interview has been carried out by Eulàlia Solé.

## ORIENTATIONAL SCHEME FOR THE INTERVIEWS

### 1. Biography

I.- Family Model. Origins of the father, mother and grandparents. Educational level of the parents and profession. Religious and political ideology. Interest in politics. Authoritarian or participative family model. Relationship with the father, mother and siblings. Conflict/dialogue. Is there diversification in the male/female roles? Global satisfaction in family life.

II.- Educational Training. Type of school. Level of satisfaction with school and studies. Professional and future projects.

III.- Work/Unemployment. Professional career (if required).

IV.- Social Relationships and Cultural Life. Most usual hobbies, last book, last movie, last play. Preferred music. Civic and sports associations. Friends.

V.- Value System. Values transmitted through the family. Values transmitted by the school. Which are the values that you would like to transmit to your children (obedience, politeness, solidarity, freedom, equality, saving, tolerance, etc.)? Meaning of life. Transcendence. Conservatism-Progressiveness. Attitude towards divorce, abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia...

## 2. Political Culture

VI.- Attitudes Towards Society. Implication/distance. Most important problems. Ability to influence. Participative or spectator attitude. Degree of satisfaction with the present society.

VII.- Identification with Catalonia. Nationalist feelings of the interviewee. Opinions on nationalism and independentism. Opinion about La Crida, Terra Lliure, Moviment de Defensa de la Terra.

VIII.- Interest in Politics. Relation with parties, trade unions, or any alternative group -ecologist, for peace, feminist, anarchist-. Regular information channels (newspaper, radio, TV (channels 1, 2, 3)). Knowledge about the Constitution and the State.

IX.- Agents for Political Socialization. Family, school, friends, associations, parties, trade unions, media...

X.- Political Transition. Evaluation of Francoism. Evaluation of democracy. Evaluation of the State of the Autonomies.

XI.- Institutions. Knowledge and evaluation of Trade Unions, Management Associations, Parties, Central Government, Generalitat, Town Councils, Catalan Parliament, Chamber of Deputies, Senate, the Army, and the Church.

XII.- Political Ideology. Right-Left concepts. Self-placement on the Right-Left axis.

XIII.- Electoral Participation. Electoral trajectory. Intermittent participation or constant abstention. Motivations.

XIV.- Europe. Level of identification. Advantages and disadvantages of a united Europe.

XV.- The Ideal Catalonia. Political system. Party systems. State model (Autonomies, Federal State, Unitarian State, Independence ...)

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