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Continuities and changes in Spanish politics in times of crisis
and austerity**

LUCÍA MEDINA



Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials
Adscrit a la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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INTRODUCTION

The Spanish political system has shown remarkable stability since the advent of democracy in the first legislative elections of June 1977 up until now. The years prior to and following that date (the Spanish Transition) helped to lay the foundations for a system whose basic configuration still remains: a democratic regime, with a remarkable level of political decentralization; and a multi-party system with several relevant and well-established political forces, where party competition mainly develops around both left-right and centre-periphery axes. Likewise, the establishment of a multilevel government structure, as a result of the decentralization process, consolidates the existence of various electoral arenas and party-subsystems, with the national party system alongside.

However, the great economic crisis of 2008 followed by an increasing political discontent, have aroused suspicion on the continuity of some features of this political system as it has been come to be known. Wealth loss, high unemployment rates, and austerity policies adopted to please international partners to a large extent, have spurred dissatisfaction among the citizenry. Furthermore, the more recent outbreak of high-profile corruption cases and other tensions around territorial organisation of the state have contributed to sparking strong feelings of political system decay and Transition model depletion.

In other words, the recession—and above all the policies adopted in conjunction with the growing loss of confidence in parties and institutions—triggered a political crisis, which has been accentuated lately by corruption scandals and an increase of pro-independence feelings in Catalonia. In addition, Podemos, a new left-wing party born in 2014 in the wake of the Indignados and the 15M movements has burst onto the Spanish political scene, achieving quick and substantive popular support. This new organisation, branded as populist, has managed to overshadow traditional parties, mainly accusing them of being a “political caste” more concerned with their own interests than with the common good.

Even though a part of the available evidence, i.e., classical party-system indicators, is not entirely conclusive of significant changes in the current political system, there are other relevant signs that appear to suggest the coming of a new political setting. So, what is new and what is already known in the Spanish political system at present? Which of these changes (if any) have befallen as a result of the economic crisis? Do they seem to be temporary or are they announcing a new phase in the road of Spanish democracy? In following pages I will try to answer these questions.

This article is organized in five sections. The first section analyses possible departures from the pattern of political alternation as a result of the 2008 recession. The second examines variations in some features of the party system. The third looks at the evolution of citizens’ attitudes about the political system, which might be behind the present changes detected and may promote future novelties. The fourth section explores

the changes that have taken place and also potentials, which in both cases stem from social mobilization and protest against the economic and political situation. Finally, in the fifth section, main findings are brought together and prospects of Spanish political transformation are discussed.

ELECTIONS AND GOVERNMENTS: NOT TOO MANY SYMPTOMS OF CHANGE...FOR NOW

The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) lost the general elections of November 20th 2011. Recession, austerity policies, and citizens' discontent swept Zapatero's government away at the polls. This defeat was to a large extent foreseeable, given the constant increase in negative appraisals in the public's opinion regard of the economic and political situation during this, his second term in office (Orriols and Rico 2014: 65).

Negative assessments also apply to the government's performance, which reached high levels of disapproval. According to the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), 20.9% of the people interviewed at the beginning of Zapatero's second mandate (2008 April) evaluated government performance as bad or very bad, while this is percentage grew to 66.3% toward its last stages (2011 October). Therefore, it was widely perceived that the Socialist government was not able to remedy problems arisen from the recession, which would partly explain why the PSOE suffered an unprecedented setback at the polls.

Indeed, when the elections just held before and after the crisis outbreak are compared, the Socialist reverse appears as one of the most striking results (see Table 1): the PSOE lost 4.2 million net voters between 2008 and 2011, obtaining its worst score since the reintroduction of democracy in Spain. The Conservative People's Party (PP) benefited most from the Socialist defeat in absolute terms: in accordance with some estimates, almost 1.7 million votes were transferred from the PSOE to the PP in the 2011 general elections (Medina and Muñoz 2014: 86).

Thus, the PP, led by Mariano Rajoy, won the elections and reached the absolute majority (186 of 350 seats), upon gaining almost 5 percentage points more than in 2008. However, United Left (a federation formed by several communist and left-wing parties) and Union, Progress and Democracy (a progressive party founded in 2007 and strongly characterized by its rejection of the peripheral nationalisms) were the political forces that experienced further growth in relative terms. Both parties increased their strength in Parliament fivefold, thereby fragmenting the left-space occupied comfortably for the most part by the Socialists. Likewise, nationalist parties kept, or even enlarged, their vote score and consequently their seats, while several new small forces entered into the Congress. As we will see later, all this together contributed to a significant increase in the number of relevant parties.

Table 1: Spanish Legislative Elections, 2008-2011

	2011			2008		
	Votes (%)	Seats (N)	Seats (%)	Votes (%)	Seats (N)	Seats (%)
People's Party (PP)	44.6	186	53.1	39.9	154	44.0
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)	28.8	110	31.4	43.9	169	48.3
United Left (IU)	6.9	11	3.1	3.8	2	0.6
Union, Progress and Democracy (UPyD)	4.7	5	1.4	1.2	1	0.3
Convergence and Union (CiU) ¹	4.2	16	4.6	3.0	10	2.9
Amaiur ¹	1.4	7	2.0			
Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) ¹	1.3	5	1.4	1.2	6	1.7
Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) ¹	1.1	3	0.9	1.2	3	0.9
Others ²	2.5	7	2.1	1.7	5	1.5
Turnout	68.9			73.9		

¹ CiU and PNV are right-wing nationalist parties from Catalonia and the Country Basque, respectively, while ERC and Amaiur represent, for their part, left-wing nationalist-separatist parties at these territories.

² "Others" includes nationalist or regionalist parties: Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG), Canarian Coalition (CC), Geroa Bai (Yes to the Future), Citizens' Forum (FAC), and Compromís.

Source: Ministerio del Interior

After all of this the main question is: Did the 2011 general elections, held in the middle of the recession, represent a turning point in the Spanish electoral evolution? If we consider the government composition born from these elections the answer is "No". As already noted, the absolute majority achieved by the PP during the legislature started in 2011 repeated the pattern of political alternation known at that point. The pattern consisted of a change in the ruling party, in which sometimes the PSOE governed and at other times the PP did, and where one and the other were able to form stable and lasting cabinets quite easily (see Table 2).

This alternation model has been largely benefited by the features of the Spanish electoral system (formula D'Hondt), which favours the more sizeable parties and it is often detrimental to the smaller political forces that do not have a homogeneous presence at the national level, such as United Left (UI) and Union, Progress and Democracy (UPyD).

Beyond the distinctive features of the first two legislatures, which paved the way for democracy in Spain¹, the next ones witnessed a series of Socialist or Conservative electoral victories; five out of nine passed by absolute majority and four passed by a simple majority. However, even in these latter cases, both the PP and the PSOE were able to rule and finish their terms of office; their success was in large measure due to parliamentary support usually provided by the nationalist/regional parties, and this backing represented the classical kind of interplay that takes place in the Spanish multilevel government structure with several electoral arenas and party-subsystems

¹ The first legislature served to establish the new regime while the second suffered the gradual disintegration of the governing party, Union of the Democratic Centre (UCD).

(Montero and Torcal 1991). Thus, some of these peripheral forces have helped to sustain national ruling parties when they have been in the minority in Congress. In exchange, when these nationalist/regional parties have found themselves in the minority in their own respective Parliaments, they have received support from PP and PSOE.

Table 2: Spanish Cabinets, 1977-2014

Prime Minister and governing period	Composition	Partisan support (per cent of MPs)	Duration (months)	Reason for Termination
Adolfo Suárez (1977-1979)	UCD	166 (47.4)	25	Constituent Assembly elections
Adolfo Suárez (1979-1981)	UCD	168 (48.0)	22/21	Resignation of prime minister// elections
Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo (1981-1982)				
Felipe González (1982-1986)	PSOE	202 (57.7)	44	Elections
Felipe González (1986-1989)	PSOE	184 (52.6)	40	Elections
Felipe González (1989-1993)	PSOE	175 (50.0)	44	Elections
Felipe González (1993-1996)	PSOE	159 (45.4)	33	Elections
José M. Aznar (1996-2000)	PP	156 (45.6)	48	Elections
José M. Aznar (2000-2004)	PP	183 (52.3)	48	Elections
José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2004-2008)	PSOE	164 (46.9)	48	Elections
José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2008-2011)	PSOE	169 (48.3)	44	Elections
Mariano Rajoy (2011- end unknown yet)	PP	186 (53.1)	-	Elections

Source: Author's own elaboration based on electoral statistics from the Ministerio del Interior

Then, the recession seems to have affected neither the government's composition, nor their classic pattern of alternation in the 2011 general elections, and the absolute majority of the Conservatives suggest a certain political continuity up to a point. However, it is unclear what will happen when PP finishes its term in office (at the end of 2015 at the maximum) and new general elections must be held again. Once in power, PP must have faced up to a strengthening of the economic difficulties that culminated in the need for a bailout aimed to rescue the banking sector. Furthermore, they continued implementing several and hard adjustment measures, in many cases contradicting their own electoral promises.²

² Among these measures appeared the increase of the VAT; budgetary reductions in pensions, education and health; prescription drug copayment; the increase of university fees; and cuts in salary of civil servants and unemployment benefits.

Conservative government unpopularity grew like never before on January 2014, when 70.8% of the people interviewed by the CIS evaluated the government performance as bad or very bad. Neither the much-trumpeted end of the recession, nor the timid recovery of some macroeconomic figures, for instance the GDP growth in 2013, or the continual drop of the premium risk since late 2012, appeared to affect these negative appraisals, insofar as public policies taken by the PP (and before by the PSOE) resulted in greater social inequalities (Martínez 2014).

With all this, the electoral prospects are not so promising for the PP nor for the Socialists. Direct voting intention collected by the CIS monthly shows how the declared electoral supports for both parties have dropped dramatically during the current legislature. At the time of writing, the last CIS survey (October 2014) gave the PP a poor 11.7% of professed votes and to the PSOE a still meagre 14.3%. In parallel, the declared abstention and the undecided surpassed these figures, representing 15.7% and 19.5%, respectively³. On the other hand, the poor results obtained by both Conservatives and Socialists at the European Parliament elections of May 2014 should also be brought to mind (26% of valid votes to the former and 23% to the latter). These and other signs, which will be analysed below, seem to point to a new scenario where the major parties lose their electoral strength, and therefore the continuity of the pattern of political alternation becomes more complex.

EVOLUTION OF PARTY SYSTEMS: SOME TENTATIVE SIGNS OF CHANGE

If we cannot assure that significant changes have occurred in the pattern of political alternation up to now, did the 2011 general elections show other features that could represent a critical moment in the Spanish party system? A way to check for decisive changes in this domain consists of resorting to classical party-system indicators, i.e., indexes of volatility, disproportionality, effective number of parties and vote concentration. Table 3 provides an overview of these indicators, whose progression fits quite well to the electoral cycles or phases identified by Montero and Lago (2010: 20), since the coming to democracy in 1977 until the 2008 general elections.

The first stage includes the first two elections, which were won by the no longer existing Union of the Democratic Centre (UCD). The UCD together with the PSOE (the second party) determined about 65% of valid votes. In addition, a myriad of medium or small political groups, most of them circumscribed to a part of the territory, also were represented in the Congress. This “opening” phase is characterized by a fairly considerable party-system fragmentation. However, the UCD was able to form minority governments without any major difficulties because the left-wing parties were incapable of gathering any comparable support together.

³ http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/EN/11_barometros/indicadores.html

By contrast, the second stage witnessed a series of Socialist electoral successes headed by Felipe Gonzalez, which give place to a predominant party system (Linz and Montero 2003). The period begins with the Socialist landslide of the 1982 general elections and finishes with a new victory of the PSOE in 1993, but this last time by the simple majority of the seats. Living aside the exceptional electoral results of 1982, in this second phase the total volatility stabilized at around 11%; there were a few less relevant parties, both at the electoral and parliamentary levels; and the vote concentration decreased almost 10 percentage points from 1982 to 1989, all these elements pointing to a tendency of great significance: the progressive electoral growth of the People's Party parallel to the erosion of the Socialist supports. Actually, the 1993 general elections represent a turning point that links party system features from both the second and the third stages. Thereafter, the distance between the two major parties was much shorter and elections became more competitive.

Table 3: Volatility, Disproportionality, Two Major Parties' Vote Share and the Effective Number of Electoral (ENEP) and Parliamentary (ENPP) Parties in the Legislative elections

Legislative elections	1977	1979	1982	1986	1989	1993	1996	2000	2004	2008	2011
Total volatility¹	-	11.1	43.4	12.8	8.9	11.2	5.7	8.8	10.9	4.9	16.4
Inter-bloc volatility¹	-	2.7	5.9	2.2	1.6	2.4	1.0	6.8	8.2	1.1	6.0
Intra-bloc volatility¹	-	8.4	37.5	10.6	7.3	8.8	4.7	2.1	2.6	3.9	10.5
Disproportionality²	10.1	10.6	8.0	7.2	9.4	7.1	5.4	6.1	4.3	4.5	6.9
PP & PSOE Vote per cent³	63.9	65.5	74.8	70.5	65.8	74.1	77.2	79.9	81.6	84.7	74.4
ENEP⁴	4.5	4.3	3.2	3.6	4.1	3.5	3.2	3.0	2.9	2.8	3.3
ENPP⁴	2.9	2.8	2.3	2.7	2.9	2.7	2.7	2.5	2.5	2.3	2.6

Notes: ¹ Volatility indices calculated using the formulas presented in Bartolini and Mair (1990: pp. 17-52 and 313-314). ² Disproportionality: Least Squares Index (Gallagher 1991). ³ Vote for the two major parties - total percentage vote of PP and PSOE (in 1977 and 1979 total percentage vote of UCD and PSOE). ⁴ Effective number of electoral (ENEP) and parliamentary (ENPP) parties - data elaborated using the formula proposed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979: pp. 3-27).

Source: Author's own computations from official electoral statistics

Lastly, a third stage can be detected from 1996 to 2011. This new period began with the Conservative victory in the 1996 general elections, which was the year in which the PP took office for the first time. The party system returned to a moderate pluralism configuration (in fact, it already did in 1993), according with Sartori's terminology, although it actually performed as a two-party system (Montero and Lago 2010). In other words, despite the political relevance of some smaller parties, most of them regionalist/nationalist in nature, the main competition developed between PP and PSOE, who gathered most of the votes and alternated in office. Consequently, during this third period vote concentration returned to increase while party fragmentation diminished, both phenomena being reflected in a reduction of vote-seat disproportionality of the party system. Furthermore, this higher vote concentration seemed to go hand in hand with a greater

political stability regarding electoral volatility at the aggregated level: in 2008 only 5% of voters changed their votes between the 2004 and 2008 general elections. Electoral choices, hence, appeared to be highly tied around the two major parties, which managed to attract most of the support from their ideologically side as the simultaneously competed for the centrist electorate (Torcal and Medina 2002).

However, the political stability arisen from this configuration of the competition appears to have come to an end in the 2011 general elections. Although the pattern of political alternation remained with the victory of the PP, PSOE's defeat struck as being a major setback, which is hard to surmount in the near future. As already mentioned, the PSOE lost 4.2 million of net voters between 2008 and 2011. The socialist disbandment contributed to a remarkable increase in volatility figures, a reduction in vote concentration, and a rise in both relevant electoral and parliamentarian parties. All of these changes in party-system indicators likely announce the arrival of a new phase (the fourth) in Spanish politics.

It could be argued that it is too early to predict a new stage from some variations in party-system indicators, which could not be repeated in a similar way any time soon, coming from a single general election. But there are other signs that could lead us to think the opposite, more specifically the electoral results from the elections to the European Parliament held on May 2014, which were broadly perceived as a breakdown of the bipartisanship.

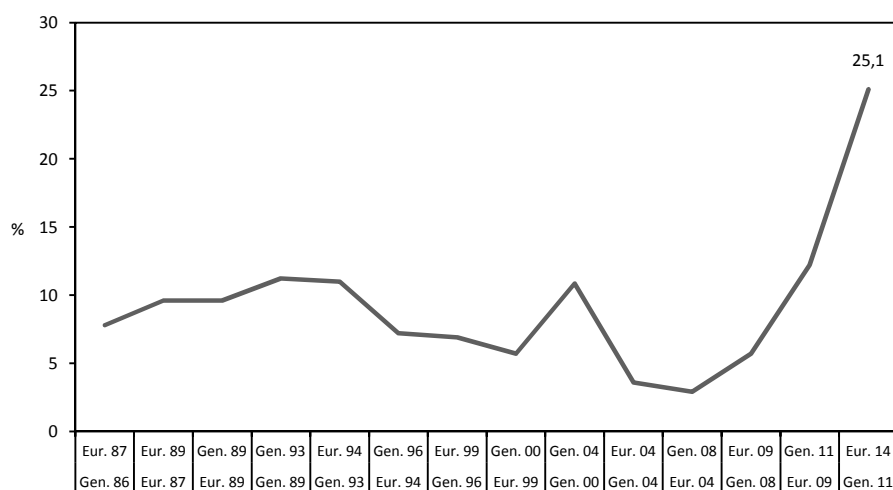
Never before have the two major parties, PP and PSOE, obtained jointly less than 50% of votes, and although the former won European elections, Conservatives returned to their electoral levels from the late eighties and early nineties (about 26%). Both parties ceded a total of 17 seats in favour of small political forces, which increased their presence at the European Parliament in terms of quantity and strength. Nonetheless, vote fragmentation was not ideologically uniform, given that from a total of 10 Spanish parties or coalitions with seats at the Strasbourg Parliament, seven were placed in the left. That is, vote fragmentation was larger in the left than in the right side.

The loss of votes by the major parties and the growth in vote fragmentation lead, in turn, to an increase in levels of aggregate volatility. More than 25% of voters changed their votes from the 2011 general elections to the 2014 European elections, a figure extremely high in view of the total volatility evolution since 1987, when the first European elections were held in Spain (see Figure 1). It is not just that voters punished the performance of the Spanish government, nor that they made an “expressive” vote in favour of minor parties, as is often experienced at the European elections (Franklin *et al.* 1994; Van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Heath *et al.* 1997), but voters voiced their dissatisfaction with bipartisanship in particular and the current political system as a whole.

Precisely, the inrush of Podemos into the political scene and its great electoral success in the 2014 European elections are explained to a great deal by political discontent. This new left-wing formation ran in the European elections of 2014, four months after its foundation, with a programme that defended policies aimed at poverty

reduction, the settlement of an unconditional basic income for every citizen, the recovery of public control in strategic sectors of the economy or the reorientation of the financial system to fund banking at the service of the public, among other proposals⁴. Podemos won five seats (out of 54) with the 8% of the vote, becoming the fourth most voted list of candidates in Spain. However, one of its main successes consisted of leading the criticism to the current Spanish political system and its politicians, who Podemos accused of constituting a “political caste”.

Figure 1: Total volatility among general and European elections in Spain (1987-1994)



Source: Author's own computations from official electoral statistics

In sum, existing party-system indicators up to date do not allow us to confirm any relevant change in Spanish politics. The indicators in reference to the 2011 general elections do not hint at any unequivocal new defining moment and the classical pattern of alternation in the government continues, so the PP replaced the PSOE as a ruling party. Nevertheless, the electoral results of the 2014 European elections and the political situation depicted by opinion polls, which will be seen shortly, could be announcing the arrival of some significant transformations.

⁴ <http://podemos.info/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Programa-Podemos.pdf>

EVOLUTION OF CITIZENS' ATTITUDES: WHERE CHANGES ARE ACTUALLY BREWING

Right after the beginning of the recession, political surveys started reflecting citizens' concerns for the economic and political situation. Since July 2007, the negative assessments of the economy grew in leaps and bounds to the extent that in February 2013, 92% of the Spanish population affirmed that the economic circumstances were bad or very bad. In parallel, negative perceptions on the political situation and the government performance also increased. Although assessments momentarily got better after Zapatero's re-election in 2008 assessments, they worsened abruptly when the crisis became more than evident. In a similar way, the PP victory in the November 2011 general elections only meant a brief period of breathing room, so negative appraisals continued increasing vis-à-vis both economic and political state and government performance. Concern and discontent about the economy spread to politics quickly (Orriols and Rico 2014, Sánchez Cuenca 2014), because citizens held PSOE and PP responsible for the crisis: According to surveys conducted by the CIS, the average degree of responsibility of the Spanish government on the economic situation (in a scale from 0 to 10) scored 7,35 in April 2009 (with PSOE in office), and 8,19 in May 2014 (with PP).

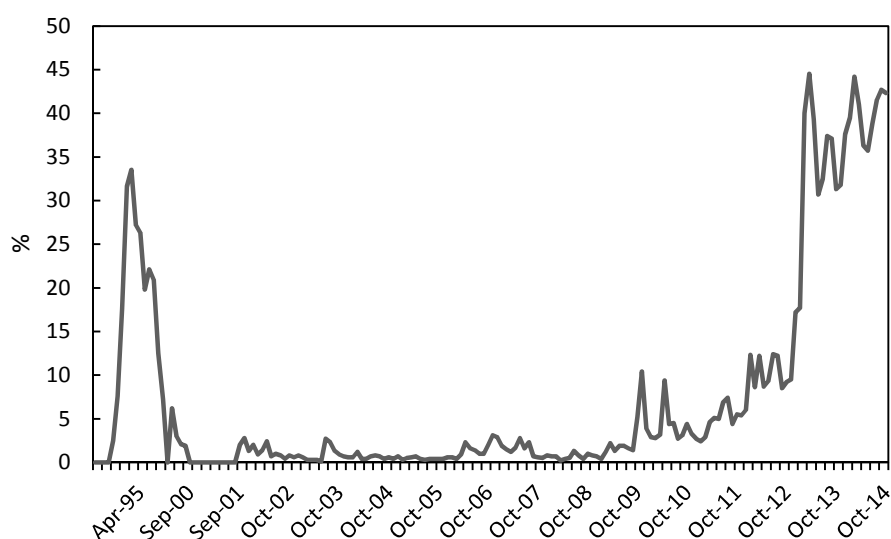
The recession translated into an increase of income poverty and material deprivation (Addabbo *et al.* 2013). And what is more, austerity policies taken in Spain to cut public deficits, unlike other countries with debt crisis, focused more on spending cuts than tax increases, which is more detrimental to the less wealthy because they depend more on the public spending (Martínez 2014). That is, recession and austerity measures enlarged social inequalities, but perhaps the worst was the sense of discriminatory treatment; the feeling that the most vulnerable bore the brunt of depression. In this sense spending cuts contrasted with the bailout to the bank. The granting of a bailout of up to 100,000 million of Euros to the Spanish banks in June 2013, from which the Spanish State was the ultimate loan's guarantor, expanded the image of politicians being more worried about saving the bank than solving people's problems, as the tens of thousands of eviction enforcements carried out since the beginning of the recession seemed to corroborate (Colau and Alemany 2013). The findings show that concern for politics and politicians is correlated with concern for cuttings ($r=0.632$, $p<0.001$) and with concern for evictions ($r=0.707$, $p<0.001$)⁵. It became obvious that parties with responsibilities of government were not just unable to face up to the recession, but they were responsible for the impoverishment of a significant part of the Spanish population.

Moreover, an accumulation of political corruption scandals fuelled feelings of institutional disaffection, already extended in the Spanish political culture (Montero, Gunther and Torcal 1997; Torcal and Magalhaes 2010). Leaving aside the rise in citizens'

⁵ Both Pearson's correlation coefficients have been calculated from percentages of concern for these topics expressed by respondents of each of the surveys (N=29) conducted monthly by the CIS from November 2012 to October 2014.

concerns for political corruption in 1994 and 1995⁶, there has been an impressive escalation of the consideration of the corruption as one of the main problems of Spain among public opinion since October 2009 (see Figure 2). And this escalation would have encouraged negative political appraisals of everything related to politicians as reflected in opinion polls: when Spanish citizens were asked about the reasons they thought people had distrust in politics, 61% had answers that related to the corruption of politicians (CIS, January 2012).

Figure 2: Corruption as the main problem of Spain (1985-2014)



Percentages corresponding to a multiple choice question: *Which is, in your opinion, the main problem of Spain? And the second? And the third?*

Source: Author's own elaboration from the data provided by the CIS

Previous studies on political corruption in recent years have already underlined that perceived corruption does not correspond to objective data (more corruption is perceived than the real evidence points out) (Villoria and Jiménez 2012), and that this perception is shaped in a great deal by the media with its extensive coverage on corruption scandals (Palau and Davesa 2013). However, what appears certain is that news about corruption reinforces pre-existing attitudes such as political distrust and institutional disaffection (Villoria and Jiménez 2012; Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Bowler and Karp 2004). Likewise, although until very recently knowledge of cases of political

⁶ That increase was due to irregular conducts by some Socialist senior officials, illegal financing practices in which the PSOE had incurred and, finally, the outbreak of the cases "Roldán", and "Rubio", which were intensively used by the opposition, especially by the PP and related media as a part of a strategy to defeat the PSOE in the polls (Caínzos and Jiménez 2000: 96-97).

corruption⁷ has demonstrated limited or null direct impact on the vote in the sense of a powerful motivation for blaming the parties responsible for those cases (Jiménez and Caínzos 2006)⁸. It will be necessary to wait at least until the next general elections to know to what extent several high-profile scandals uncovered of late could result in a greater electoral punishment.

Nevertheless, a major political electoral impact derived from corruption could be expected, given the combination of several factors. First, the constant appearance of new cases of corruption in the last few years—which, unlike in the past, do not affect a single party, but almost all of them—promotes a picture of systemic corruption. Second, the continuous and detailed coverage of these scandals by the media contributes to create a self-reinforcing cycle that explains the development of certain kinds of collective beliefs (*availability cascade*)⁹. In this specific case, the collective beliefs would refer to ideas like “all politicians are corrupt”. Third, discontent with the state of the economy or with the political situation could lead to citizens judging corruption more severely (Jiménez and Caínzos 2006). And fourth and last, the presence of Podemos who levels fierce criticisms at the main parties, making them responsible for corruption, appears as a plausible new political alternative to support in the next general elections (*availability entrepreneur*)¹⁰. The confluence of all these circumstances may well result in the electoral punishment of corruption.

Finally, the political tension around the so-called “Catalan question” also would have helped to make the political scene more complicated. Pro-independence feelings in Catalonia have increased greatly during recent years, as is noted in surveys conducted by the Institute of Social and Political Sciences (ICPS) since the 1990s¹¹, to the extent that 42% of Catalan citizens’ interviewed in 2013 by this institution considered that Catalonia must have been an independent state. Although the secessionism roots are deep and go back to the conflicting relationship between both national and Catalan regional governments, it seems that the recession has contributed to enlarging the desire for independence. Just as Tormos and Muñoz argue, “the perception that an independent

⁷ See Villoria and Jiménez (2012), and Palau and Davesa (2013) for a brief summary of several of these corruption cases, many of which developed at the local level and were linked to the real estate boom (Jimenez 2009).

⁸ The study by Jiménez and Caínzos (2006) indicates that the effect of corruption on voting is not direct, but conditional upon other factors, such as the characteristics of the scandal, the identity of the agent(s) involved, the nature of the media coverage of the event, the context in which the scandal emerges, and voters’ attitudes. Among these attitudes the authors pin down voters’ moral principles, “their partisan identities, their preferred policies, their support for or dislike of the agent involved along with their assessment of the likelihood of his electoral defeat or their evaluation of the political and economic situation” (2006: 207).

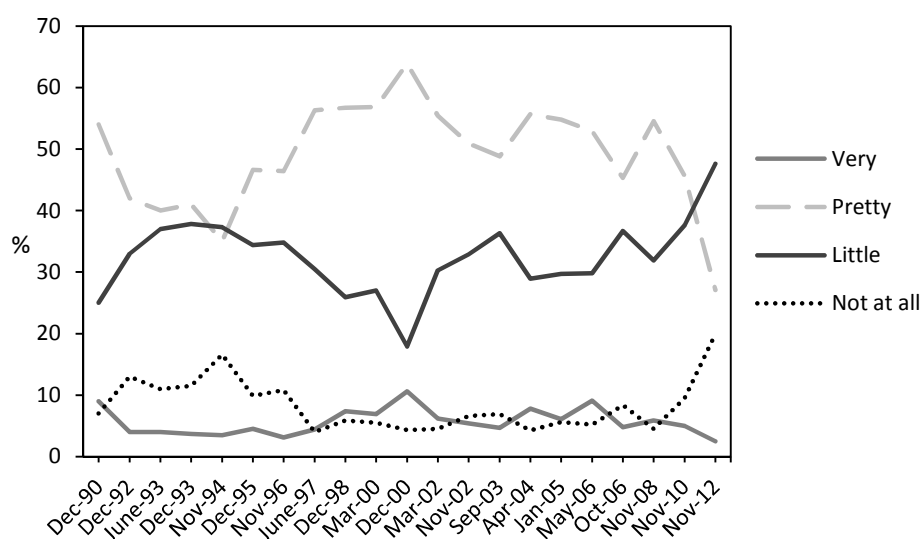
⁹ The idea of the “availability cascade” was first developed by Kuran and Sunstein (1999) who defined it as a self-reinforcing process of collective belief formation by which an expressed perception triggers a chain reaction that gives the perception increasing plausibility through its rising availability in public discourse.

¹⁰ Kuran and Sunstein (1999) emphasize the role of “availability entrepreneurs”, agents willing to invest resources into promoting a belief in order to derive some personal benefit. Availability entrepreneurs make use of political institutions and the media to trigger cascades.

¹¹ <http://www.icps.cat/>

Catalonia would perform better economically, based on the idea that the current fiscal relationship is detrimental to Catalonia's interests, partly explains current support for independence" (Tormos and Muñoz 2014: 2). The mood that Catalonia does not find a suitable fitting within Spain would have promoted political discontent among a broad range of social sectors in this region but especially among those who feel only Catalan, an identity group that has grown in recent years to represent 22% of Catalan people aged 18 and older in 2013 (Medina 2013).

Figure 3: Satisfaction with democracy (1990-2012)



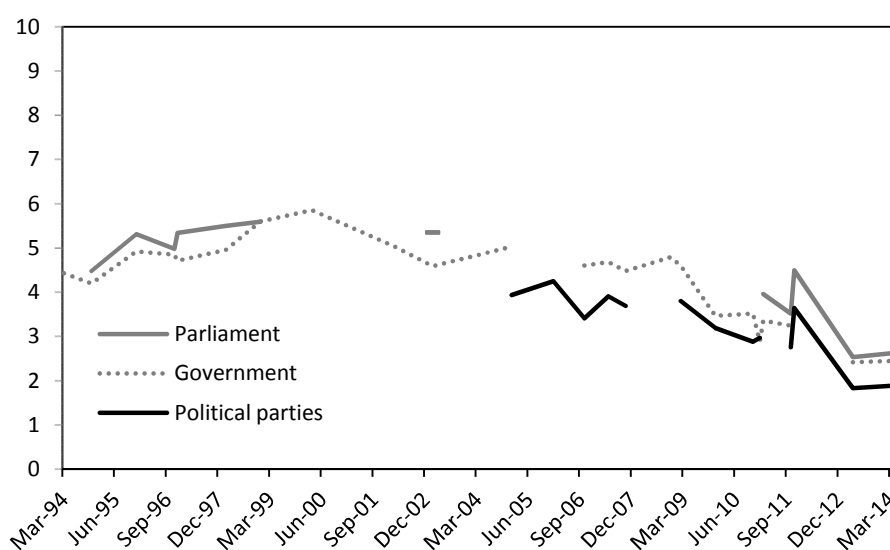
Source: Author's own elaboration based on data from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS)

However, the case of Catalonia is only the most conspicuous instance of a more general phenomenon, i.e., the increase of attitudes contrary to the current Spanish model of decentralized organization of the state. This has evolved in two opposite directions: demands for independency in some regions and demands for re-centralization of the state in others. And although the development of these conflicting attitudes goes back, they have intensified in parallel with the need for national and regional debt reduction (Pérez-Nievas *et al.* 2013).

In short, the recession has developed into a political crisis attributable to the accumulation and feedback of factors such a negative consequences from austerity policies, political corruptions, scandals, and conflicting relations around the state structure. In parallel, satisfaction with democracy performance has decreased and distrust of institutions, especially of political parties has extended among citizenry even further (see Figures 3 and 4). And what is more, some evidence points that recession would have

stimulated the emergence of more critical citizens, people more interested in politics and, at the same time, very critical to the functioning of democratic institutions (Pérez-Nievas *et al.* 2013). All these elements combined might well end up in substantial changes in voting, which could have a significant impact on the party system, as it will be discussed later.

Figure 4: Trust in Parliament, Government and Political Parties (1994-2014)



Average level of trust on a 0-10 scale

Source: Author's own elaboration based on data from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS)

SOCIAL PROTEST AND MOBILIZATIONS: FROM 15M MOVEMENT TO PODEMOS

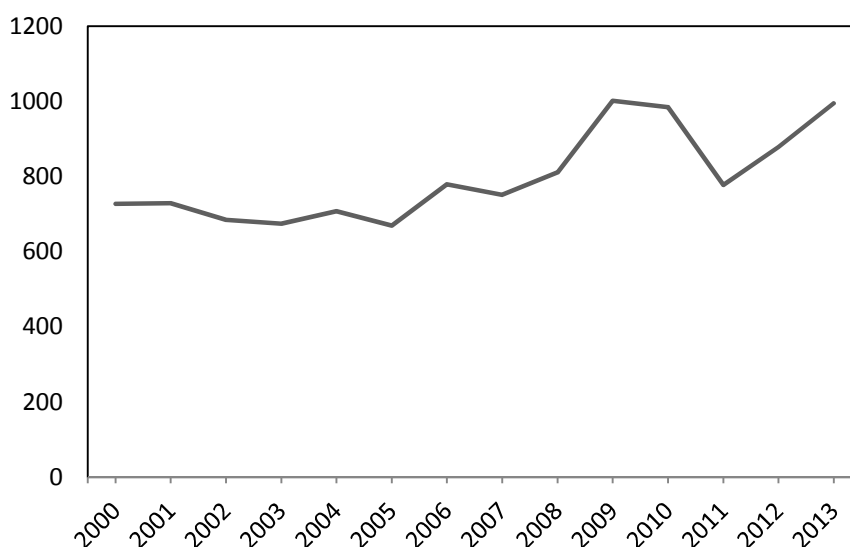
Citizens' discontent was not only reflected in opinion polls but also in an increase in social and political protest. Despite difficulties to compile complete and reliable data on such activities, official records yield a rise in both strikes and demonstrations.

Before the recession broke, the number of strikes never exceeded 800 but with its onset the figure stood at 1,000 in 2009 (see Figure 5). The call for general election in 2011 meant a certain respite in labour disputes; however strikes went up in the next two years. All in all, the most significant was the amount of general strikes that took place in a relatively short period of time comparing with those held along the whole democratic time: 4 out of 11. Two of these four general strikes were called under Socialist government (29 September 2010 and 27 January 2011), and the two remaining under the Conservative government (29 March 2012 and 14 November 2012).

From those four general strikes, the first one was headed by the two major

Spanish trade unions, CCOO and UGT, and it was convened against labour reform, wage cuts in the public sector, and the freezing of pensions. The second was just called in Catalonia, Galicia, Basque Country and Navarre by the main regionalist trade union of these Autonomous Communities. In contrast, the third general strike not only brought together most of the trade unions in protest against the labour reform passed by the government of the PP, but the 15M movement also joined it. Finally, the fourth general strike was originally called by several Spanish trade unions, but the initiative expanded later among other European trade unions and different groups, resulting in the first general strike conducted simultaneously in Spain and Portugal in rejection to austerity policies advocated by the European authorities, at the same time that partial strikes, demonstrations and other protest actions took place in other countries from the EU.

Figure 5: Number of strikes (2000-2013)



Source: Author's own elaboration from data provided by Ministerio de Empleo y Seguridad Social.

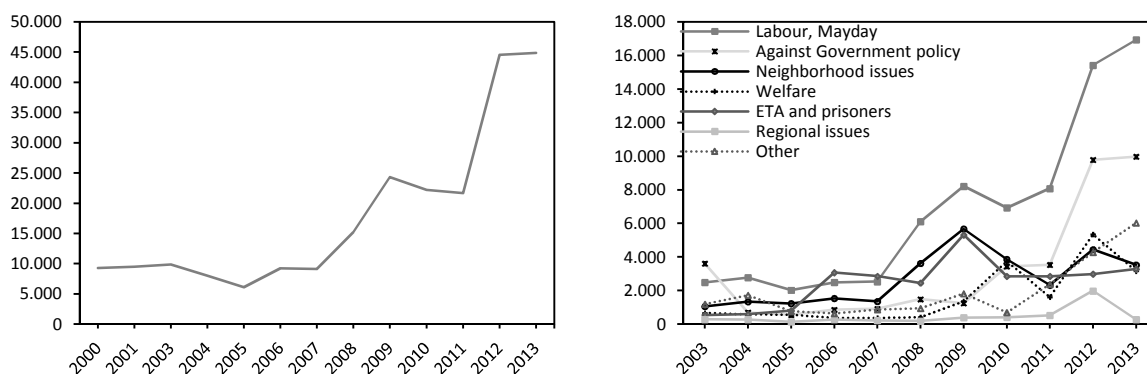
Several studies assert that Spanish citizens' involvement in most kinds of non-electoral political participation is rather low (Torcal *et al.* 2006). However, this pattern does not apply to participation in demonstrations, where surveys repeatedly put Spain in the lead (Jiménez 2011a). Moreover such type of protest also experienced an increase since the recession began, as official statistics show (see Figure 6). With the exception of 2010 and 2011, demonstrations did not stop rising to reach a total of about 44,800 actions of this sort communicated to and registered by the Ministry of the Interior.

Although most of the demonstrations referred to workers' demands, those against government policies increased most in relative terms, insofar as they represented 5% of

total demonstrations in 2009 and this figure increased to 23% in 2013. Moreover, demonstrations related to welfare also increased in 2010 (17%) and 2012 (12%).

The most fruitful demonstrations, regarding their consequences, took place on May 15, 2011. By that date, a call for demonstrations in 58 Spanish cities was made by *Democracia Real Ya* (a grassroots citizens' organization) and other groups, to protest against austerity policies and to demand changes in Spanish politics and society. However, demonstration did not break up entirely and the occupation of several public spaces/places and many protest rallies occurred right after. This is how the 15M movement, also called “los indignados”, came into being, arousing a great deal of interest abroad.

Figures 6 and 7: Total number of demonstrations and demonstrations by issue (2000-2013)



Source: Author's own elaboration from data provided by Ministerio del Interior.

The 15M achieved great mobilization and broad public support: almost 80% of the Spanish citizens interviewed considered the movement to be right in its claims (Calvo *et al.* 2011), the demands being addressed to achieve a more participatory democracy, and a transformation of the social and economic model. The movement was also very critical with established parties and in particular with the two major ones, PP and PSOE, accused of allowing, and even promoting, the current state of affairs: unemployment, social deprivation, basic and fundamental rights neglect, and political corruption in contrast to their support for business, banking, and financial markets.

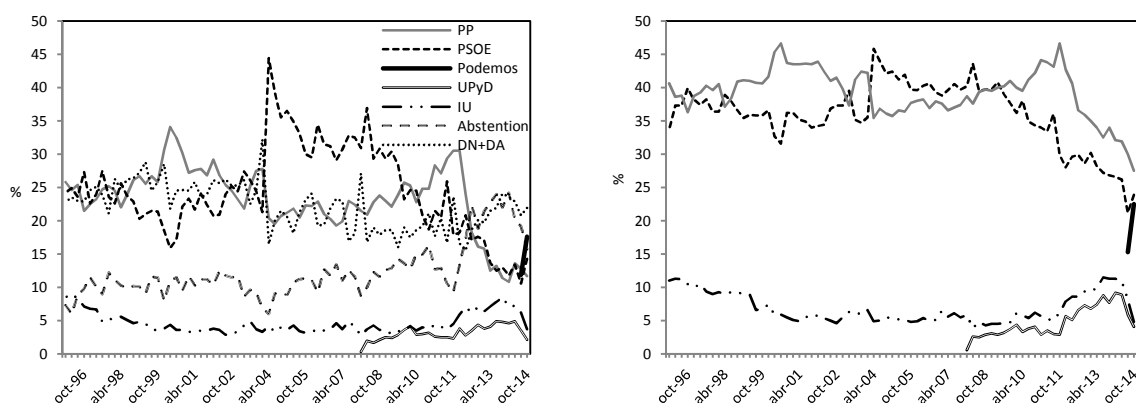
The 15M staging organizations were newly created, characterized by the intensive use of new technologies (online social networks) to communicate and organize themselves without formal ties or commitment to organizations or other forms of group membership. Their participants were also younger, more educated, and less politically involved, organizationally embedded, and politically experienced, compared to members of traditional organizations like parties and trade unions (Anduiza *et al.* 2014a).

Although it is difficult to measure the real impact of 15M on Spanish politics, some studies have been able to reach several conclusions. For instance, Jiménez (2011b) shows that, in the 2011 local elections held on May 22, voter protest increased more in municipalities where there were demonstrations and occupations during the election campaign. And, Anduiza *et al.* (2014b) verify that participating in or sympathizing with the 15M reduced the likelihood of voting for a major party in the November 20th general elections.

Everything considered, perhaps one of the most relevant consequences of the 15M is the appearance of Podemos. Although both phenomena are not the same and the leaders of Podemos do not even recognize themselves as inheritors to the 15M, what is certain is that the latter served as the propitious breeding ground for the appearing of the former. Podemos captured criticisms, already made by the 15M, against the current political class, which were blamed for ruling in their own benefit and in that of the banking and the big corporations. With these criticisms, Podemos achieved in putting a dent in the political agenda and to gain remarkable support among public opinion as evidenced in 2014 European elections¹².

Since its first public appearance in early 2014, the Podemos phenomenon has not stopped growing, and is at this time in a period of programmatic definition and organizational building. In parallel, opinion polls have reported the promising electoral prospects of this new party: for illustration only, direct intention vote and estimated intention vote for general elections provided by the surveys of the CIS show the amazing inrush of Podemos into the Spanish party system to the point of becoming the third political force in the next Congress of Deputies (see Figures 8 and 9). On the other hand, according to these estimates PP and PSOE would suffer a harsh electoral setback.

Figures 8 and 9: Direct intention vote and estimated intention vote in general elections



Source: Author's own elaboration based on data from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS)

¹² To learn a little more about Podemos see Müller *et al.* (2014).

If these electoral predictions come true, it would inevitably have important consequences for the political system. Firstly, it will lead to a greater party-system fragmentation that will be larger in the left than in the right, as far as the current electoral support to Podemos seems to come mainly from PSOE and IU and only marginally from PP (Fernández-Albertos 2014). Secondly, the increase of the number of relevant parties, both at the electoral and at the parliamentary levels, would mean the end of bipartisanship, i.e., an attenuation of the prominence of the two main parties to the benefit of the smaller ones. And thirdly and finally, the growth in fragmentation and the polarization of party discourses on both the left-right and the centre-periphery axes, along with the emergence of a new division setting the parties of the political caste apart from the rest, will make more difficult not only to form majority governments but also to get parliamentary support for minority governments.

CONCLUSIONS

In Spain, the political effects of the Great Recession were not immediate. Although political discontent spread quickly, the height of social mobilizations and protests did not come until almost two year later and, even then, these public actions did not affect the stability of government, guaranteed by the absolute majority of the People's Party. Nevertheless, some relevant changes can be glimpsed when examining the state of public opinion. Negative feelings against the political establishment are widespread and they can result in a remarkable drop of the electoral support of the main parties and the rise of protest vote capitalized by Podemos. The past May 2014 European elections might well have represented a foretaste.

Political discontent fuelled by economic concerns, corruption scandals and conflict regarding the state territorial structure could lead to significant changes in the political system, such as a new pattern of political alternation, the formation of a more fragmented and polarized multi-party system, and a higher degree of political instability. But this is something that will be settled in future elections.

However, one might wonder about some specificities of the Spanish case. Would erosion of bipartisanship have been so strong if economic recession had not coincided with disclosure of many corruption scandals and the outburst of radical nationalist demands in Catalonia? Because although the origin of these scandals is independent from recession, their public knowledge has reinforced political discontent derived from the economic situation. In a similar way, the conflicting state of affairs in Catalonia exacerbates tensions among parties and pressures towards the reform of the Constitution. Further research is needed to disentangle connections among all these aspects.

On the other hand, one might also wonder about the persistence of the political changes. Are they irreversible? Would an improvement of economic and social conditions be able to reduce dissatisfaction with politics? And given this more favourable situation, would

bipartisanship be able to recover? Are the ties that bound voters with the main parties strong enough to resist or have they vanished giving way to partisan dealignment? Is a new partisan realignment occurring or the economic and political crisis has brought about a new era of high volatility due to the breakup of traditional partisan loyalties? Upcoming elections and more research may provide answers to these and other related questions.

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