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Spain: The New Party System

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An Intelligence Assessment

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*EUR 82-10129
November 1982*

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An Intelligence Assessment

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Key Judgments

*Information available
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was used in this report.*

Besides giving Spain its first Socialist government since the Civil War, the October 1982 election has radically transformed the nation's party system. The old structure was characterized by two dominant parties—the Centrists and the Socialists—that laid claim to the center and the center-left of the political spectrum respectively, flanked by the small rightist Popular Alliance and the somewhat larger Communist party. The election virtually eliminated the Centrists and the Communists as serious political forces, creating a bipolar system dominated by the Socialists on the center-left and the Popular Alliance on the center-right. Basque and Catalan regional parties maintained their strength, but other minor and regional groupings did poorly.

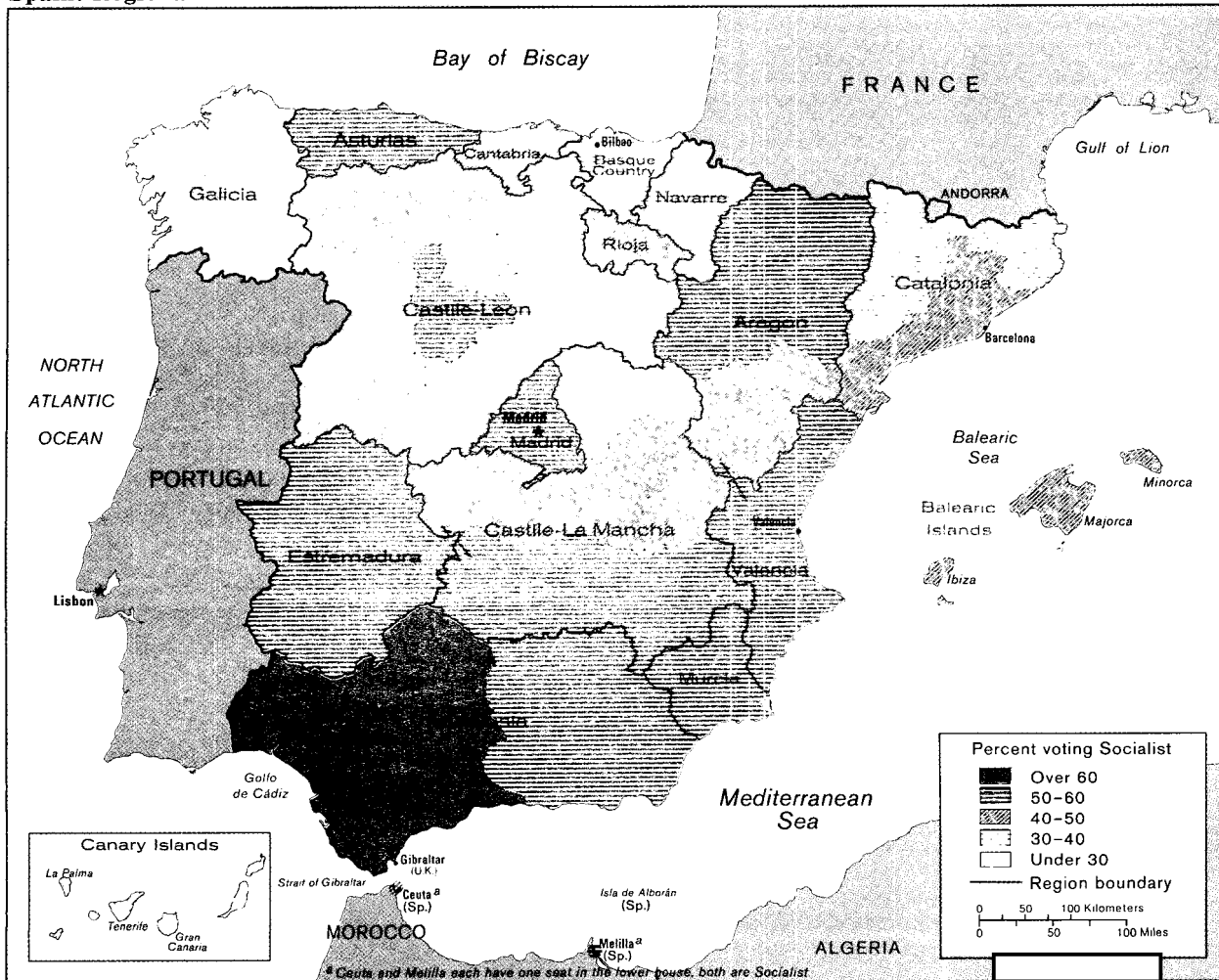
We believe that the election outcome has enhanced the prospects for long-term political stability. The reduction of the abstention rate from nearly 40 to barely 20 percent indicates that Spaniards support democracy and have little nostalgia for their authoritarian past. Spanish voters backed parties of the moderate right and left that were disciplined and prepared to govern, eschewing the extremes and punishing the rampant infighting of Centrists and Communists alike.

In our view, the longevity of the new party structure will depend largely on the political maturity of the victorious parties. The Socialists face the greatest challenge, having to satisfy both their new centrist supporters and their traditional leftist constituency. If the party's program fails to arrest the decline in Spain's economy, radicals may push for measures that would antagonize rightist power centers and the military. Nevertheless, we believe that the Socialists' discipline and pragmatism will enable them to steer a moderate course in the near future. If the Popular Alliance conducts itself as a responsible opposition party and purges its remaining antidemocratic elements, it has the potential to give Spain a democratic alternative on the right. This would mark the end of the transition to democracy and the appearance in Spain of a party system similar to those of the most stable West European states.

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Figure 1
Spain: Regional Distribution of Socialist Vote



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Spain: The New Party System

In addition to giving Spain its first Socialist government in over 40 years, the elections in October radically transformed the nation's party system. The first legislative elections of the post-Franco era—1977 and 1979—had produced almost identical victories for the center, leading many observers to conclude that the Spanish party system had “jelled” early and would be susceptible to only cosmetic modifications. The 1977-79 pattern was characterized by two dominant parties, the Union of the Democratic Center (UCD) and the Socialists (PSOE), laying claim respectively to the center and center-left, flanked on the right by the small Popular Alliance (AP) and on the left by the somewhat more consequential Communist Party (PCE). Minor and regional parties completed a system that was essentially centrist and appeared to restrict both unabashed rightists and the Marxist left from gaining power.

Little of this structure remains after last month's voting. The AP is now the chief parliamentary opposition, the center and the Communists have been eliminated as serious actors, and the PSOE, with an absolute majority in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, dominates the political scene. How long is this new party system likely to endure? Does it strengthen or weaken Spain's democratic institutions? And will it enhance or diminish Spain's political stability over the near and medium term?

The Left: Socialist Hegemony

The chief element of continuity in the pre- and post-electoral political landscape is the PSOE's dominance on the center-left. The Socialists increased their share of the electorate from 30.5 percent in 1979 to over 46 percent this year. Roughly 1 million former Communist supporters and nearly 2 million ex-UCD voters backed the Socialists in 1982. Equally impressive was the breadth of Socialist support: the party placed first or a close second in every region of Spain except Galicia, a traditional redoubt of the right and of the AP in particular. Even in Catalonia and the Basque

Country—where opposition to Socialist-backed legislation curbing regional autonomy is strong—the Socialists vastly improved their position over 1979. The PSOE also did well in rural north-central Spain, a generally conservative area whose overrepresentation in parliament had previously benefited the Centrists.

We believe that the Socialist victory vindicated party leader Felipe Gonzalez's moderate platform. Throughout the campaign, Gonzalez emphasized that a ballot cast for the PSOE was a vote for democracy and the constitution—not for socialism. He correctly perceived that most socialist growth would come from past abstainers and supporters of the UCD. By shifting his party to the right, Gonzalez in our view mobilized a segment of the electorate that was anxious for moderate change and fresh faces but had been suspicious of the PSOE's past radicalism and Marxist rhetoric. The PSOE, in fact, so effectively filled the center-left of the political spectrum that several social democratic “hinge” parties, designed to govern in coalition with the Socialists, were stillborn.¹

This gain alone probably would have assured the Socialists an electoral plurality. The party's landslide victory and absolute parliamentary majority was in our view made possible by the 1 million Communist votes that the PSOE picked up almost by default. The Socialists did nothing to court these votes—their

¹ The first of these was the Party of Democratic Action of former Francoist functionary and ex-UCD minister Francisco Fernandez Ordonez. Several of this group's leaders were incorporated into the PSOE's electoral lists, but the party itself was all but ignored during the campaign and does not have a bright future. Even smaller and less significant was the Democratic Liberal Party of Antonio Garrigues, which did not contest the elections. Former Prime Minister Suarez's party, which won under 3 percent of the vote, was the most striking example of the futility of trying to create a viable center-left option independent of the Socialists.

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Distribution of Popular Vote and Deputies in the Lower House

Party	1979		1982	
	Percent of Vote	Deputies	Percent of Vote	Deputies
Socialists	30.50	121	46.07	202
Popular Alliance ^a	5.70	9	25.35	106
Union of the Democratic Center	34.96	168	7.26	12
Social Democratic Center (Suarez) ^b			2.89	2
Communists	10.81	23	3.87	4
Convergencia i Unio (Catalan moderates)	2.70	8	3.73	12
Basque Nationalist Party (Basque moderates)	1.54	7	1.91	8
Herri Batasuna (Basque leftist extremists)	.96	3	.97	2
Euskadiko Ezkerra (Basque leftists)	.48	1	.47	1
Andalusian Socialist Party	1.80	5	.33	
Minor and regional ^c	10.55	5	7.15	1
Total	100.00	350	100.00	350


^a In 1979 this party ran as the democratic coalition; in 1982 it ran in coalition with the Popular Democratic Party and two small regional parties.

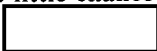
^b This faction contested only the 1982 election.

^c This includes null and blank ballots.



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efforts were primarily aimed at assuaging the right—but the party profited immensely from the Communists' self-destruction. The PCE dropped from 10.8 to 3.8 percent of the popular vote and lost all but four of its 23 deputies. The debacle was due to the internal struggles, expulsions, and splits that have wracked the party over the past two years. We believe that, assailed by both pro-Soviet hardliners and "renovators" demanding internal party democracy, the PCE came to appear as little more than an embattled core of unconditional party loyalists and unprincipled opportunists. Not surprisingly, Communist voters defected en masse, preferring to cast a "useful vote" for the party on the left that appeared strong and united and had a chance to govern. 

the discredited party apparatus; we think it unlikely that Iglesias will initiate the reforms demanded by Carrillo's opponents. The "renovators" have already announced their intention of calling for an early party congress, and more bloodletting appears inevitable. We believe that only a renovated, fully Eurocommunist party would have a fair chance of recuperating some of its lost electorate; even in that case it would have little chance of regaining all the ground it has lost. 

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Perhaps more dangerous for the political system would be a permanently crippled Communist party incapable of mustering more than 4 to 5 percent of the vote. In such circumstances many Communist militants and voters might decide to abandon the party permanently for the Socialists, thus reinforcing the PSOE's radical wing. This would have a much greater destabilizing impact on the political system than if radical leftist sentiment were contained within a

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Recognizing the magnitude of the defeat, Santiago Carrillo has resigned as PCE secretary general. The role of his replacement, Gerardo Iglesias, in purging the party in Asturias, however, makes it clear that he is a faithful Carrillo supporter and representative of

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Figure 2. The new Prime Minister: Felipe Gonzalez Gamma ©

somewhat more healthy—but politically isolated—Communist party. We believe that for the time being, however, the Communist collapse has enhanced Spain's governability by helping to give it a one-party majority government with virtually no competition on the left.

The Center: End of the Transition

The most dramatic aspect of the election was the decimation of the center. No governing party in post-1945 Europe has been so harshly castigated by the voters as the UCD: the centrists tumbled from 35 to 7.3 percent of the popular vote and returned only 12 of 168 deputies. As with the Communists, it is our view that the electorate rejected the UCD because it

had become an ineffective and divided party, hamstrung by personal rivalries and debilitating infighting. Created by Adolfo Suarez in 1977 to represent an already existing government in Spain's first post-Franco election, the UCD flourished largely by distributing the fruits of power. For a brief period this was sufficient to mask the party's lack of internal cohesion or ideological clarity. Now stripped of power, abandoned by its charismatic founder, and overshadowed as an opposition force by the Popular Alliance, the UCD seems unlikely to survive in its current form. Most of its reelected deputies had publicly favored a pact with Manuel Fraga's AP, and we think some will now be tempted to defect to the right. There has already been press speculation about a possible restructuring and renaming of the party, but we suspect that only radical surgery can save the UCD. At best the party may evolve into a small liberal-centrist force, not unlike the West German Free Democrats but without their decisive role in the party system. At worst—and we believe this is more probable—it will disappear.

We see the center's demise as symbolizing the end of the transition to democracy in Spain. Elsewhere in Europe the UCD would have been classified as a rightwing party. Only the peculiarity of Spanish political culture, with its still-influential Francoist authoritarian right, enabled the UCD to lay plausible claim to the center. We believe that with the acceptance of liberal democracy by the Popular Alliance and the isolation of the neo-Francoist nostalgics, a bipolar party structure has come into being. The *raison d'être* of the UCD no longer exists, since the anti-Socialist vote is now articulated by an avowedly rightist party that also is avowedly democratic. In our view the party was a victim of its successful first phase in power, when it shepherded Spain from dictatorship to democracy: by exorcising the ghost of Francoism from the political system, it dispelled the equation of rightism with authoritarianism—and freed a quarter of the electorate to vote for the Popular Alliance.

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Figure 3. Leader of the opposition: Manuel Fraga [redacted]

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The Right: Hail the Phoenix

After his party's modest showing in 1977 and near collapse two years later, Spanish pundits dismissed Manuel Fraga as a leftover from the Franco regime, destined to fade into insignificance as the transition to democracy was completed. Now Fraga's AP—in tandem with the small Popular Democratic Party—is the official opposition and Prime Minister-designate Gonzalez has proposed that Fraga receive a state salary as opposition leader just one peseta lower than his own. We believe that this remarkable comeback—from 9 to 106 deputies—was due almost entirely to Fraga's determination and firm leadership. Spanish politics has always been plagued by "personalism," or the clash of inflated individual egos. Only forceful

personalities such as Fraga and Gonzalez have been able to supply the needed respect and discipline to control party infighting and personal rivalries. [redacted]

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But strong leadership alone—as the case of Santiago Carrillo demonstrated—is not sufficient to assure success. In our view, Fraga's authoritarian style has been his greatest asset but also his chief liability, since it reinforced suspicion that his allegiance to democracy was only skin deep. Before the latest election, Spanish political observers had maintained that the AP leader's volatility and Francoist past would prevent him from winning more than 15 to 20 percent of the vote. Fraga surpassed that easily, and if UCD

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deputies defect to the AP in any numbers, its parliamentary strength will roughly equal that of the PSOE when that party was in opposition. The adherence of former UCD deputies and members would in our view reinforce Fraga's contention that he represents a modern, democratic, center-right alternative to the Socialists, not the authoritarian rightist fringe. Dubiously democratic sectors are still present in the AP, but harvesting over 2 million ex-Centrist votes—far outweighing the input of the unreconstructed right—gives Fraga a powerful tool with which to fulfill his publicly stated goal of converting the Alliance into a Spanish equivalent of the British Conservative Party.

Minor and Regional Parties

We believe that the decline registered by most minor and regional parties in the 1982 election augurs increased political stability. The dozen or so Marxist-Leninist miniparties to the left of the PCE and the several fascist groupings to the right of the AP together garnered under 3 percent of the vote. The only regional parties outside of the Basque provinces and Catalonia represented in the new parliament ran in coalition with the AP.² Elsewhere regional parties of all political hues were obliterated. The Socialist Party of Andalusia, for example, which in 1979 polled over 325,000 votes and elected five deputies, has been reduced to extraparliamentary status. We think this development dissipates one of the gravest potential dangers to Spanish democracy: that regional devolution would spur the proliferation of regional parties and seriously weaken national political associations. We believe that strong national parties are needed to hold in check the centrifugal forces unleashed by the regional autonomy process. Voters will probably be more generous to regional parties in local and regional contests, but their threat to the national party system has in our view been effectively halted.³

² The Aragonese Regionalist Party and the Union of the Navarrese People each elected one deputy in this fashion.

³ There is indirect evidence that the voters at least subconsciously recognize the need for strong national parties by adjusting their vote in regional versus national elections. When issues are restricted to the regional level, Spaniards have been kinder to regional parties. The moderate Basque and Catalan regionalists handily beat the Socialists in recent regional elections, but their showing this year—while an improvement over their results in the last national elections—was much poorer. Many voters apparently want to be ruled at home by a regional party but represented in Madrid by a national force.

Only in the Basque country and Catalonia—where regional consciousness is deeply rooted—have regional parties maintained their vitality. The moderate Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) increased its absolute vote, but was nearly overtaken by the Socialists due to a record turnout of non-Basque workers. In Catalonia the centrist Convergence and Union coalition improved both its absolute and its relative standing compared to 1979 but was swamped by the PSOE, which attracted most of the constituents of the once-powerful Catalan branch of the Communist Party. We think that, by splitting their support among regional and national parties, the Basques and Catalans have assured that their special interests will be defended in Madrid without divorcing the regions from the national party system. In our view another factor for stability is the mediocre showing of the radical leftist Basque groups close to the various factions of the ETA terrorist organization, which confirms the hegemony of the moderate PNV among Basque regional parties.

Outlook

Both the winners and the losers of last month's election promptly announced that the outcome was a triumph for democracy. We view this as not just self-congratulatory rhetoric: the disturbing trend towards abstention was decisively reversed and electoral participation reached nearly 80 percent—greater even than for the first post-Franco elections five years ago. In addition, Spain has achieved peaceful rotation between the right and the left—an achievement that still eludes Italy's far more mature democracy. Spanish voters backed parties of the moderate right and left that were disciplined and prepared to govern, eschewing the extremes and punishing the rampant infighting of Centrists and Communists alike. Although some aspects of the balloting are likely to increase short-term tensions, we think that Spanish democracy, by changing its leaders without provoking an extraconstitutional military response, has at last come of age.

It is less certain, however, that the PSOE and the AP, to quote one of Fraga's lieutenants, "will rotate in power until the year 2000." We believe that the longevity of the new party structure will depend

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Figure 4
Abstention Rates in Referenda, Legislative
and Municipal Elections, 1976-82

Percent

Political reform referendum	(1976)	22.6
Legislative election	(1977)	22.8
Constitutional referendum	(1978)	32.8
Legislative election	(1979)	31.9
Municipal election	(1979)	40.0
Legislative election	(1982)	21.3

[Redacted]

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largely on the political maturity of the AP and the PSOE. The Socialists in particular face a difficult challenge. The party must hold to its moderate course to retain the allegiance of its new supporters—many of whom are centrists—and avoid alienating rightist power centers and the military. At the same time, it must provide enough reform to satisfy its traditional constituency. The biggest hurdle is likely to be the economy: with both inflation and unemployment at 15 percent and rising, the PSOE will be hard pressed to brake current trends, much less reverse them. If the Socialist program fails to halt Spain's economic decline, we believe that sectors of the party—along with the trade unions and the Communists—may press for radical measures that would push the party to the left and resurrect rightist and military fears of "Marxist" government and social disorder. [Redacted]

In our view, Gonzalez's firm control of the party, while on balance positive, will have to be partially loosened in the future if moderate PSOE leaders are to emerge from his shadow. As in all Spanish parties, this may be accompanied by debilitating infighting. Nevertheless, we believe that the PSOE's discipline, ideological moderation, and history of pragmatism give the party a good chance of holding together over the next four years. If Gonzalez provides strong leadership and if the PSOE demonstrates that the left can govern Spain without dividing the country against itself, this alone will be an immense accomplishment.

[Redacted]

The AP faces an only slightly less formidable challenge in our view. Fraga has always been an unpredictable politician, and although he exercised great control during the campaign, his penchant for confrontation and verbal aggression remains intact. The AP must resist the easy option of constantly invoking the specter of Socialist extremism if it is to conduct a responsible opposition to the government. But provided it absorbs the least compromised of former Centrist leaders and purges itself of authoritarian elements, the Alliance has the potential to give Spain a democratic alternative on the right. The choice between social democracy and conservative liberalism is the norm in most of Europe, and its emergence in Spain would be a final confirmation that Africa starts at the Strait of Gibraltar—not at the Pyrenees. [Redacted]

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