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Spain: Political Change in the Post-Franco Era



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A Research Paper

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A Research Paper

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, West European Division,
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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 1 July 1983
was used in this report.*

An analysis of election and socioeconomic data for three national elections suggests that Felipe Gonzalez's Socialists are better positioned than the parties of the right to appeal to the Spanish electorate over the next few years. Even the Communist Party seems better placed than the rightist parties to mount the sort of consensus-based, broad-gauged campaign that we think will be a prerequisite to winning a greater share of the vote.

The data indicate that the Socialists have developed a broad socioeconomic base with its center in the moderate left. In the election of November 1982, Gonzalez built on the breadth and basic moderation of his party's core constituency to attract centrist voters looking for a new home after the collapse of the governing Union of the Democratic Center (UCD). Electoral data indicate that about 3 million former UCD voters switched to the Socialists—far more than moved to the parties of the right.

By contrast, the statistics suggest that the parties of the right and center right suffer from being too closely identified with the Church in an era of declining clericalism, and that they are having trouble bridging the gaps among the various sorts of Spanish conservatives. Programs that appeal to well-to-do city dwellers, for example, have little attraction for the small agricultural proprietors of northern Spain, a bulwark of conservatism for most of the past century. As a result, we believe Manuel Fraga's Popular Alliance, by far the largest party on the right, will find it hard to expand beyond the 26 percent of the vote it received both last November and in the municipal elections in May. The parties between the Alliance and the Socialists so far have had even more trouble establishing adequate political bases.

We believe that to compete with the Socialists for the crucial center vote, a party of the right or center right would have to avoid overt ties either to the Church or to powerful economic interests. The ability of Spain's fractious conservative politicians, with their long history of clientelism, to unite behind such a formula probably will be a key to whether a credible alternative to the Socialists will emerge before the elections that must be held by 1986. For the present no such alternative is in sight.

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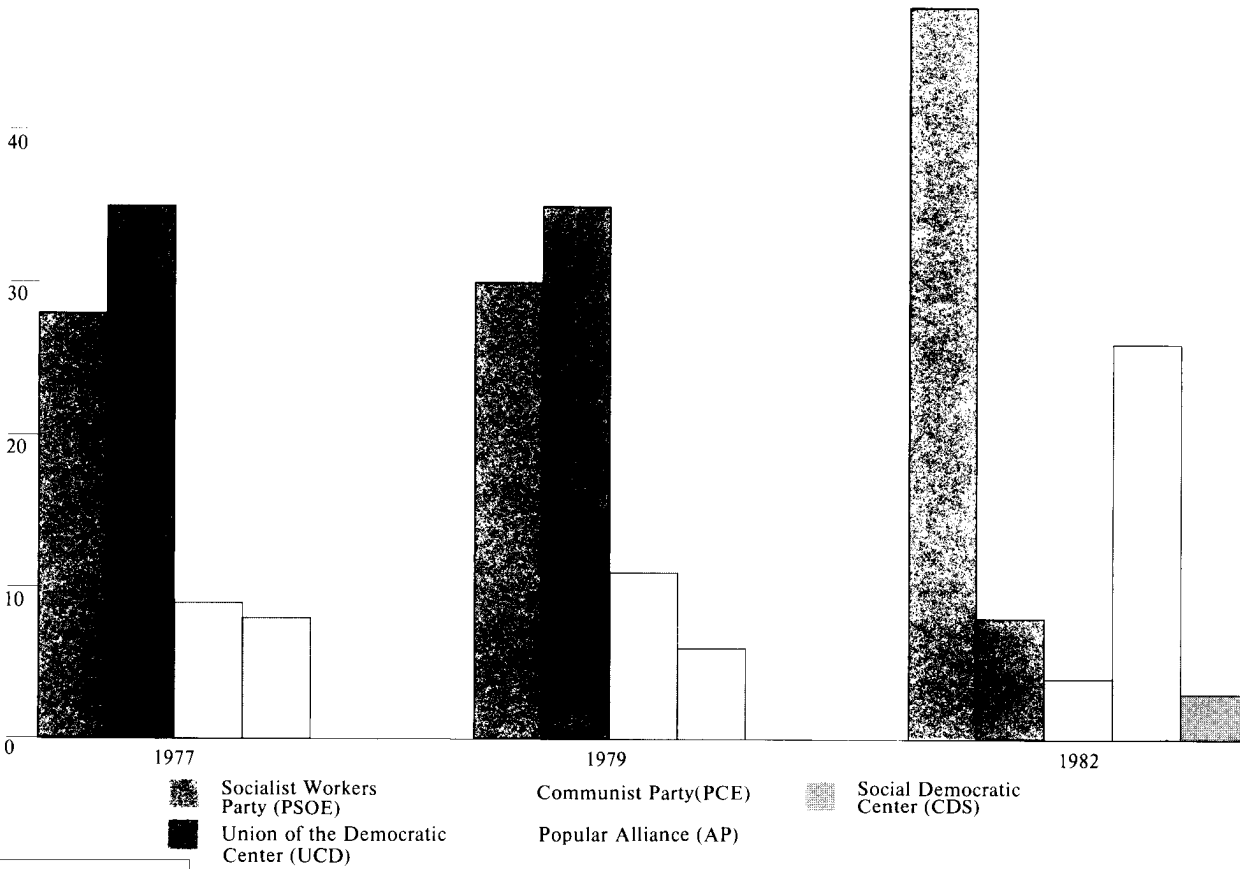
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Spain: Results of Parliamentary Elections

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Introduction

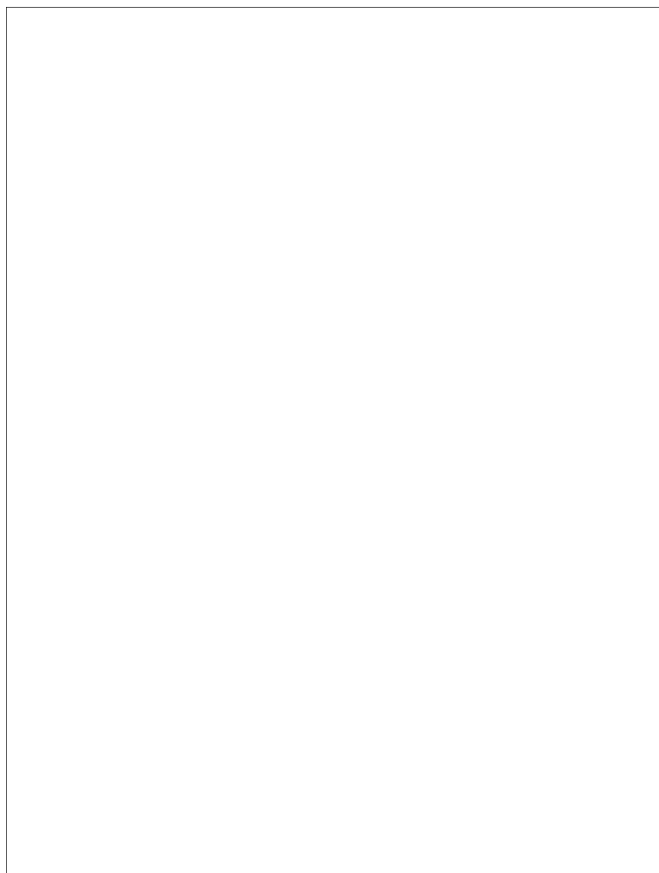
In the eight years since Franco's death, Spain has experienced more fundamental and far-reaching changes, both constitutionally and politically, than any other West European country. A democratic constitution has replaced a nondemocratic one; a center-right political party—Adolfo Suarez's Union of the Democratic Center (UCD)—briefly achieved dominance and then vanished; and a center-left party—Felipe Gonzalez's Socialists (PSOE)—has achieved a stronger position than that of the UCD in its heyday. All these changes, moreover, have taken place peacefully and constitutionally.

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Perhaps the central issue in analyzing the Spanish scene is whether such profound changes are likely to continue. Obviously a host of factors bears on this question: personalities, the economy, the attitudes of the military and the King, the strength of separatism—particularly in the Basque Country, and the mood of the Spanish electorate.

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Focusing on voter attitudes, we have conducted a statistical analysis of trends in the three post-Franco national elections. The results suggest that the PSOE's hold is firmer than the UCD's ever was and that both the PSOE and the Communists are better positioned than the parties of the right to mount the consensus-based, broad-gauged campaigns that are likely to be most appealing to the present electorate.



such as Valladolid and Valencia. Emerging at the same time has been a growing association between a vote for the PSOE and membership in the Socialist trade union, the more responsible and pragmatic of Spain's two labor federations.

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The Socialists

The data indicate that the PSOE, whose share of the vote climbed from 28 percent to 48 percent between 1977 and 1982 (figure), has developed a diverse constituency. The party has consistently attracted significant numbers of poor urban dwellers and Communist trade unionists, but it also has developed a following among voters in the traditionally conservative and poor rural provinces of northern Spain—particularly those with scattered pockets of industry

The picture emerging from these statistics is that of a broadly based party with its center in the moderate left. In 1982 Gonzalez built on the breadth and basic moderation of his party's base to attract centrist voters looking for a new home after the disintegration of the UCD. According to the Spanish press, about

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3 million former UCD voters switched to the PSOE; a far smaller number moved right to support Fraga's Popular Alliance (AP). The Socialists kept most of this constituency in the municipal elections last spring, according to press reports; the modest decline in the party's share of the vote was due to a partial recovery by the Communists. [redacted]

The Communists

Fratricidal internal conflict has tarnished the Communist Party's public image, in our view, and contributed to the sharp drop in the party's share of the national vote—from 11 percent in 1979 to 4 percent in 1982. Election data suggest that the party retains the support of an ideological, class-conscious core, but the persistent leakage of votes to the PSOE suggests that if the party is to regain its former strength, it probably will have to compete with the Socialists—that is, move toward the center. It would have trouble retaining its more ideologically committed supporters if it did so, but the election data suggest that it is better positioned to make such a move than at any time in the recent past because resistance to the party among dedicated Catholics seems to be declining. As recently as the 1979 elections, the vote tended to go against the Communists in provinces with high levels of church attendance, but in 1982 such resistance was no longer statistically significant. (The decline in opposition to the left among Catholics, of course, also benefits the Socialists.) The data also suggest to us that the Communists may be handicapped in their competition with the Socialists by their relatively greater identification with older voters. [redacted]

The Popular Alliance

Our conclusions concerning the variables affecting the AP vote are more tenuous than for the other parties, since we can account for less of the variation in the party's electoral showing by our statistical analysis. We think this result may be due partly to the AP's identification with the Francoist era, which would let it feed on a nostalgia cutting across classes and regions. Such an important yet hard-to-measure factor is likely to lose importance with the passage of time, in our opinion. [redacted]

The elections of 1977 and 1979 were disastrous for the AP, mainly, in our view, because of the commanding position on the center right held by Suarez's UCD. With the UCD's decline the AP gained 26 percent of the vote in 1982. It duplicated this showing in the municipal elections last May, confirming its position as Spain's second-largest party. Statistical analysis suggests, however, that the party's centrist rivals may be right when they contend that the AP will never gain much more of the vote than this. [redacted]

One reason for the party's cloudy prospects is the difficulty of bridging the gaps among various kinds of conservatives. Hoping to project a more forward-looking image, Fraga and other AP leaders have largely discarded the authoritarian, interventionist approach of the Franco years and embraced a "new" conservatism, which champions the free market and pledges to cut back public expenditures. This line appeals to relatively well-to-do and politically sophisticated city dwellers, and, indeed, urbanization had emerged by 1979 as a key predictor of the party's vote. But such a program has much less appeal for the small agricultural proprietors of northern Spain, a bulwark of conservatism for most of the past century. [redacted]

The AP's identification with the Church could be another limiting factor. The association between the Popular Alliance's vote and church attendance has become statistically significant over the past six years. Suarez's Social Democratic Center is the only other party showing a similar connection. The AP probably reinforced its clericalist base with recent strong stands against the Socialist government's proposal to liberalize the country's abortion laws, but polls indicate that a majority of Spaniards support this measure. The unpopularity of the AP's stance among non-Alliance voters illustrates, in our view, the danger posed for the party by close identification with the Church. Whereas the Socialists and even the Communists have managed to expand their potential electoral base by shedding much of their past anticlerical image, the Alliance may, we think, be reducing its appeal to secularly minded voters by embracing Church-related

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issues too closely. Well-to-do, big city neighborhoods like the Salamanca district in Madrid do have high rates of church attendance and show strong support for the AP. But they are a narrow base on which to build a national party. [redacted]

Strong identification with the Church, then, has helped the Alliance shore up support from an important constituency, but we believe this identification will make it harder for the party to add significantly to its electoral base in the future. The narrowness of the Alliance's appeal partly explains one of the more striking aspects of the 1982 election—the party's inability to attract a significant number of centrist voters away from the moribund UCD. [redacted]

The Union of the Democratic Center

The Popular Alliance's dilemma becomes clearer when the party's base of support is compared with that of the UCD in 1977 and 1979. (The UCD's share of the vote dropped to only 7 percent in 1982, and the party was dissolved shortly thereafter.) The UCD had managed to develop a broad (albeit shallow) interclass appeal that largely accounted for its dominance in the immediate post-Franco period. The data show a significant association between support for it and relatively low per capita income. The AP enjoys no such association. This impression is reinforced by the election results themselves, which show that the UCD did best in 1979 in the traditional, less developed rural areas of northern Spain. [redacted]

Support for the UCD was not limited to rural areas. Indeed, our data show an insignificant association between the UCD vote and agricultural employment, suggesting to us that the party did especially well among urban nonelites—most likely the older generation of lower middle class shopkeepers, civil servants, and office workers. Many in these groups had advanced under the Franco system about as far in life as they ever would. While welcoming the new democratic order, they probably did not want a government that would move too far or too fast. In addition, although UCD voters—urban and rural—tended not to be rich, there is tenuous statistical evidence of a negative association between the party's vote totals and unemployment. To the extent that this association

is valid, it indicates that UCD voters tended to be relatively secure in their station in life. The election returns themselves suggested in 1979 that most UCD voters lived outside both the larger northern industrial cities and the parts of the rural south where social and political conflict was more salient. [redacted]

The Social Democratic Center

The UCD's collapse and the inability of the AP to pick up the pieces have focused political speculation in Spain on the possible emergence of a new center-right party. Suarez himself was trying to create such an organization in 1982 when he launched the Social Democratic Center Party (CDS). The CDS, however, won less than 3 percent of the national vote. Suarez publicly blamed this largely on his late start. [redacted]

Suarez did manage to attract some rural support, as was evident in the significant association between employment in agriculture and the CDS vote. In much of the countryside, and particularly among older voters, issues count for less than personalities. Moreover, Suarez had—according to opinion polls—name recognition and acceptance unmatched by any politician except Socialist leader Felipe Gonzalez. The explanatory value of agricultural employment for the CDS vote, however, also probably reflects the party's strong showing in rural Avila—Suarez's home province and one of only two to return a CDS deputy to parliament. [redacted]

The party's reliance on well-to-do voters was, in our view, more important. We regard it as a main cause of the party's poor performance; it stands in marked contrast to the appeal of the UCD in its prime. In fact, the CDS in 1982 was the only party to register a statistically significant positive association with relatively high provincial per capita income.¹ [redacted]

¹ Although the Popular Alliance also appeared to draw support from well-to-do voters, the relationship was less significant statistically (see table 3). [redacted]

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Further narrowing the CDS's base was a close association between the party's vote and church attendance, a linkage it shared only with the Popular Alliance. This association is especially striking because Suarez had not been a champion of Church interests in the past and ran a secular campaign in 1982. The strong association between church attendance and support for the CDS is probably in large part a function of the narrowness of the group from which the party drew its support. This group apparently believed in the need for greater reform than was likely under either the AP or the UCD, but it was still reluctant—as a result either of religious conviction or of personal political tradition—to trust either of the leftist parties. [redacted]

With such a narrow base of support, it is not surprising that the CDS did poorly in 1982. We think Suarez could have trouble holding on even to the minimal backing he received in 1982 if Gonzalez manages both to stay on a middle-of-the-road course and to achieve an understanding with the Church. [redacted]

Summary and Outlook

In sum, our regression analyses suggest that both the Socialists and the Communists have developed increasingly diversified bases of support in recent years. As late as 1979, class consciousness and religious self-identification still fostered political cleavages that reinforced the minority status of both parties. We think the Socialists' ability to transcend those divisions was an important factor in the party's victory in 1982 and that the interest of party leaders in maintaining that support will be a continuing force for moderate policies. Their drift toward the center, moreover, creates an opportunity for the Communists to reach out to their right to attract Socialist leftwingers dissatisfied with the shift in their party's direction. [redacted]

To date, leadership problems and intense factionalism have prevented the Communists from taking advantage of this opportunity. In our view, the party's modest recovery in the local elections earlier this year probably represented an inevitable flowing back to the party of some committed Communists who voted Socialist last fall out of a sense of frustration with their own party and a desire to see a leftwing

government in power. Similarly, the party may experience further gains down the line that would bring it closer to the 10 to 11 percent of the vote it has commanded since the return of democracy. We doubt, though, that present or potential Communist leaders have the imagination or the flexibility to attract electorally significant numbers of disgruntled Socialists. [redacted]

Our analyses suggest that the center and right-of-center parties are in no better position to cut into the Socialist electorate:

- For a time the UCD maintained broad geographic and interclass support, but the party had largely disintegrated by 1982.
- The AP had trouble attracting the UCD's supporters; our data suggest this was because its brand of conservatism appealed to a narrower segment of the electorate.
- Suarez's new CDS, for its part, failed to develop enough appeal to the urban middle and lower classes to fill the gap between left and right. [redacted]

Most of these trends carried over into the local government elections of 8 May, when the AP failed to expand further toward the center and the CDS lost nearly half of the modest vote it had attracted in the fall. According to the press, the difficulties of both the AP and the CDS have set off a scramble among moderate center-right politicians to create a party that will allow them to compete with the Socialists for the crucial center vote. [redacted]

Our data indicate that to gain a following among the nonelites—whose support is essential to electoral success, a party should avoid overt ties either to the Church or to powerful economic interests. The ability of Spain's fractious right-of-center politicians, with their long history of clientelism, to unite behind such a formula probably will be a key factor in deciding whether the country will have a credible electoral alternative to the Socialists in the parliamentary election that must be held by 1986. For the present such an alternative to Socialist rule is nowhere in sight. [redacted]

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