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Agenda Dynamics in Spain

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17.1 The Spanish Political System

The Spanish Constitution of 1978 defines Spain as a parliamentary monarchy, in which the *Presidente del Gobierno* (prime minister) leads the executive and the monarch is the head of state. Spain's political system is a multi-party system, but since the early 1980s two parties have been predominant in politics: the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the People's Party (PP). The majoritarian character of Spanish democracy generates a bias towards the formation of stable, single-party governments and the domination of the legislative process by the executive. Spain has been governed by majority governments for long periods of time (see Table 17.1 for a description). In this context, the governing party does not need to cooperate with opposition parties in order to legislate. However, minority governments have occurred several times (Table 17.1), increasing the chances for opposition parties to veto the introduction of particular issues onto the agenda, and/or to translate some of their policy priorities into final decisions. This was the case through the 1990s and late 2000s, when Spanish government formation depended on regional political parties. Under these circumstances, some regional governments (mainly Catalonia and the Basque Country) increased their capacity to generate shifts in political authority and to modify the Spanish polity towards increasing political decentralization (Chaqués-Bonafont and Palau, 2011a). From the late 2000s, there was a transformation in the Spanish party system with the emergence of Ciudadanos and Podemos as political parties that gained representation in the Spanish parliament in 2015. The increasing fragmentation of the party system is linked to the economic recession, and the crisis of legitimacy among political institutions

Table 17.1. Parliamentary legislatures, 1982–2017

Prime minister	Time in office	Duration in office (months)	Government vote	Votes (%)	Parliamentary seats (%)	Seats of the two main parties (%)	Investiture vote: support of parties**
González I	1982–6	43	PSOE	48	58	88	PCE, CDS, EE
González II	1986–9	40	PSOE	45	53	83	none
González III	1989–93	43	PSOE	40	50	81	none
González IV	1993–6	33	PSOE	39	45	86	CIU, PNV
Aznar I	1996–2000	45	PP	39	45	85	CIU, PNV, CC
Aznar II	2000–4	47	PP	45	52	88	none
Zapatero I	2004–8	47	PSOE	43	47	89	ERC, IU, BNG, CHA, CC
Zapatero II	2008–11	43	PSOE	44	48	92	none
Rajoy	2011–15	46	PP	45	53	85	UPN
Rajoy	2015–16	11	PP	27	32	54	UPN
Rajoy	2016–18	20	PP	31	36	58	Ciudadanos, CC

Note: PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español), PP (Partido Popular), PCE (Partido Comunista de España), CDS (Centro Democrático y Social), EE (Euskadiko Esquerra), CiU (Convergència i Unió), PNV (Partido Nacionalista Vasco), CC (Coalición Canaria), CHA (Chunta Aragonesa), ERC (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya), IU (Izquierda Unida), BNG (Bloque Nacionalista Gallego).

Source: Own elaboration from electoral data available at *Ministerio del Interior* (www.infoelectoral.mir.es/min/); see also Chaqués-Bonafont, Palau, and Baumgartner (2015: 25)

in Spain. Despite this, in November 2016, the PP leader, Mariano Rajoy was, again, elected as prime minister of Spain with the support of Ciudadanos, and the abstention of the PSOE.

Another major feature of the Spanish political system is its “quasi-federal system” of distribution of territorial power, called the *Estado de las Autonomías*. After forty years of dictatorship, characterized by the centralization of power in a single level of governance, Spain gradually became a highly decentralized political system in which the *Comunidades Autónomas* have jurisdiction over a large range of issues. This process of devolution occurred gradually, as a result of intense negotiations, illustrating the ability of regional governments to influence Spanish policy through forceful, politicized bargaining, in which party preferences and the type of government play major roles (Chaqués-Bonafont and Palau, 2011b). The politics of decentralization have changed dramatically in recent decades, towards increasing radicalization and confrontation in and out of the parliamentary arena, as the secessionist movement in Catalonia illustrates. In contrast to previous decades, the debate is no longer led by minority governments of the PP or the PSOE allying with conservative regional parties, either CiU or the PNV, but rather by large social movements in alliance with political elites. By the same token, the debate has moved from one centered on the distribution of issue jurisdiction, to a debate centered on highly symbolic issues, such as the concept of nationhood (Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015). There is no other issue in Spanish politics today that

so clearly shows the increasing polarization and lack of consensus that has characterized Spanish politics for the last decade.

This effect is the opposite of the pattern of Europeanization in Spanish politics. In 1986 Spain became a member state of the EEC (later European Union) and, in contrast to political decentralization, delegation to the European Union has generated a general agreement among political forces. This is so despite the fact that the European Union has imposed severe economic structural adjustments that have altered citizens' lives dramatically, and despite the fact that the European Union has forced Spanish leaders to amend the constitution in order to meet new goals relating to economic stabilization (Palau, 2018; Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015).

Finally, since the 1980s, the PSOE governments have committed to developing a Mediterranean corporatist welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1999). Actually, Spanish public expenditure grew from 20 percent of GDP in the mid-1970s to about 50 percent by 1993, almost reaching the average public expenditure in social services of EU countries (Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015). Since the economic crisis, the Spanish governments of both the PSOE and PP have implemented policies oriented to curb spending and to control the public deficit, following the policy guidelines defined by EU institutions, with important consequences for the system of social provision. As Figure 17.1 illustrates, the crisis has resulted in a focus on macroeconomic issues in the symbolic agenda of the executive (speeches) reaching unprecedented levels. The economy is always a key issue in the agenda of the executive but attention



Figure 17.1. Attention on macroeconomic issues in Spain

Source: Chaqués-Bonafont, Palau, and Baumgartner (2015: 57)

declines when the economic situation is positive. Rodríguez Zapatero devoted less than 4 percent of his first speech in 2004 to talking about macroeconomics, and only 10 percent in his first speech of 2008. However, since 2009, Spanish presidents have devoted more than half of their total speech duration to talking about the topic, leaving other issues, such as rights and the environment, off the agenda (Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015: 59).

17.2 Databases

The Policy Agendas Project in Spain has developed comprehensive, reliable, and comparable datasets for analyzing the agendas of government and parliament, the electoral promises of political parties, the media, and public opinion. These databases cover the period 1982–2015, with the exceptions of the media and public opinion, which start in 1996 and 1993, respectively. In this section, we provide a description of these databases and details of the coding procedure (for further information see Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015).

The symbolic agenda of the executive is measured in our databases through information on two types of prime ministerial speeches: investiture speeches (*Discurso de Investidura*) and annual speeches (*Debate sobre Política General en torno al Estado de la Nación*). The substantive agenda of the executive is measured through records of executive bills and decree-laws. The supremacy of the executive in the Spanish political system is illustrated by the high percentage of decree-laws and by the pre-eminence of executive bills compared to parliamentary bills (Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015: 75). Decree-laws are provisional regulatory acts passed by the executive in cases of extraordinary and urgent need, when exceptional circumstances make it impossible to follow ordinary legislative procedure. However, the Spanish government is increasingly using this legislative instrument to take decisions about issues that have nothing to do with urgent necessities (Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015). Decree-laws represent 21 percent of total laws passed from 1982 to 2011, and more than 50 percent of those passed from 2011 to 2014. With regard to executive bills, these are the main source of legislative decisions in Spain, which means that the governing party has promoted more than 90 percent of the laws passed in Spain.

For analysis of the parliamentary agenda, we created a database including all the bills introduced by parliamentary groups. Because these are rarely acts oriented to generate legislation, parliamentary bills work mainly as an indicator of the symbolic agenda of parties in the parliamentary arena. We have also collected data about the scrutiny activity of parliamentary groups, including oral questions introduced in plenary meetings and in committees. Oral questions

are presented by individual MPs, not parliamentary groups, at a fixed question time. The rules governing the introduction of questions have been subjected to different reforms over time (see Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015: 93) but generally the distribution of questions among parliamentary groups depends on the number of seats each group has in the chamber. The parliamentary databases also include data about organic and ordinary laws and legislative-decrees passed in the Spanish parliament, and laws passed in regional parliaments (Andalucía, the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Galicia).

Our databases also include information about the agendas of political parties in the electoral arena. We have created a database including information about the electoral promises of the governing party. This means having information about the issue priorities expressed in the party manifestos of the PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) and the PP (Partido Popular) for those elections prior to their incumbencies. Party manifestos, like speeches, have been coded at the quasi-sentence level.

For the study of the media agenda we created a database of the stories covered on the front pages of the two most-read Spanish newspapers in Spain (*El País* and *El Mundo*). As with the rest of the databases, this is a comprehensive dataset, not a sample, including information about all the stories published on the front pages of these two newspapers. We focused on front-page stories because they are important indicators of the prioritization of issues by media outlets, a quantifiable indicator of the relevance and newsworthiness of issues according to editors and journalists.

All the databases have been coded twice, by coders trained to obtain an in-depth understanding of the Spanish codebook. The first task we undertook, before starting the coding procedure, was to adapt the codebook to the peculiarities of the Spanish political system, to capture aspects that have no equivalent in other countries.

We have also adapted the codebook to the CAP Master Codebook, so that our databases are comparable with those created by other CAP teams. To control for the quality of databases we calculated reliability scores, counting as errors those cases where both coders disagreed. The result is a set of high-quality data sources that allow us to conduct longitudinal, cross-sectional and cross-country analyses of agenda dynamics.

17.3 Specificities: Multilevel Governance

From the transition to democracy to the present day, Spain has gradually been transformed into a multilevel system of governance, which implies an increasing delegation of political autonomy upwards to the European Union and downwards to the Comunidades Autonomas (CCAA). These two processes

have taken place in parallel, following a gradual pattern, and neither has yet reached an end. First, in order to capture the importance of the process of political decentralization, we adopted the following criterion: all laws, bills, speeches, oral questions, party manifestos (sentences), and media stories dealing with the delegation of political autonomy to the regions in general terms, are coded as subtopic 2001. Further, we created a dummy variable to identify whether a law, bill, oral question, or media story dealing with a specific issue—from macroeconomics to family issues—was also related to the process of political decentralization. For example, a law transforming the fiscal autonomy of regional governments is coded as 1 (macroeconomics), subtopic 107 (taxes, tax policy, and tax reform), and a dummy variable (value 1), which identifies this law is related to political decentralization. Second, for the process of Europeanization we followed the same criterion. Any law, bill, oral question, speech, party manifesto (sentence), or media story related to the European Union, as a political and geographical unity, is coded as 1910 (Western Europe and Common Market issues). However, a law transposing an EU directive on recycling is coded as 707 (environmental issues: recycling), and a dummy variable (value 1) identifies its EU character.

17.4 Conclusions

Our research so far demonstrates that political responsiveness is declining over time. There is an increasing distance between the issues that are identified as most important by Spanish citizens and the issues that capture most of the attention of policymakers. Also, policymakers' capacity (and/or willingness) to fulfill policy promises, as defined during electoral campaigns, is declining over time, especially when parties are governing under a minority, in a context of economic crisis, and for those issues with shared jurisdiction. Regarding the consolidation of Spain into a multilevel system of governance, results illustrate that the Spanish legislative agenda is one of the most Europeanized within the European Union (Palau, 2018; Palau and Chaqués-Bonafont, 2012; Palau et al., 2015), with important differences across issues and time. Regarding the link between the media and political agendas, our results demonstrate that the media has a direct impact on citizens' perception of issues as political problems (Chaqués-Bonafont and Palau, 2009, 2012; Baumgartner and Chaqués-Bonafont 2013; Palau and Davesa, 2013; Chaqués-Bonafont and Muñoz, 2016; Guinaudeau and Palau 2016), and on policymakers' agendas, especially when they are in opposition (Chaqués-Bonafont and Baumgartner, 2015). One of our main goals in the future is to further analyze the extent to which the delegation of issue jurisdiction towards the European Union and regional governments affects the capacity and/or

willingness of policymakers to respond to citizens' priorities, from a comparative perspective; and thus, to contribute to an intense theoretical debate about whether European integration and increasing regionalization have created a new political scenario in which governments are less responsive to the public.

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