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*Political Modernization in Spain Between 1876 and 1923\**

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ABSTRACT

The advent of democracy in most European countries was preceded by a long constitutional tradition that dates back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Spain, the process, that had begun in 1812, was interrupted in 1923 by a military coup. The democracy started eight years later with the advent of the Republic, but with a very unstable political regime in place that eventually led the country into a civil war and four decades of totalitarianism. For many historians though, the constitutional monarchy in Spain, in place since 1876, avoided modernization and democratization. Many critics insure that the mechanisms of political representation; the elections, the political parties, and the election procedure, prevented the constitutional liberalism in Spain to evolve into a full democracy. Along these lines, they claim that every election was the result of the electoral fraud. However, the analysis of the aforementioned factors refutes these assertions and dispels most of the misconceptions that have been accepted until now.

**Key words:** transition to democracy, constitutional liberalism, elections, fraud and corruption

INTRODUCTION

Democracy, as we know it, is one of the most precious achievements of the Spanish People in their recent history. Tested for the first time during the Second Republic (1931–1936), democracy did not solidify in Spain until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a striking thought, that at the time to explain such an important accomplishment, many historians ignore, consciously or unconsciously, the long and rich constitutional

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experience of previous generations. As if the hundred years of parliamentary system in Spain had not contributed to set the grounds for such a decisive regime. Or as if all the learning and legislation passed during that time, had been futile.

Despite it all, it is true that democracy did not appear all of a sudden; it was rather the result of a long and rich previous experience. The final step towards a full democratic regime was slow, difficult and full of obstacles and threats [Ziblat 2006: 312]. Democratization entailed a number of transformations that only the most advanced nations could tackle without jeopardising the constitutional system itself.

The challenge raised was paramount, since it required to combine the future democracy with a political frame that avoided political and social turmoil, and was the responsibility of all the players involved. Only few European countries could bridge the gap without serious consequences. And only those nations with a broad consensus on the political regime in place; such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Sweden or the United Kingdom, were able to gradually put a democratic system in place [Forner 1997: 11]. On the contrary, in those with contrasting views over the political regime; such as Italy, Germany, Portugal, Spain or France, the path to democracy was troublesome and risky. In such a way that some of them shifted towards political crisis or, worse still, social confrontation.

With regard to Spain, there are elements that suggest that, despite the adverse circumstances, the democratization of the political regime of the Constitution of 1876 was possible. The country had had a long constitutional experience that began with the adoption of the first Constitution in 1812. This is considered an advantage because previous constitutional systems promoted the adoption of democratic mechanisms; or in other words, previous constitutional tradition allowed the government to gradually accept demands for democratisation. One of the main benefits of it was to enable going from a society of “notables”, to a parliamentary democracy without sharp reversal that could lead to the renunciation of the Parliament and of the civil rights, as happened in Italy, Germany or Spain. In this last one, the military coup of 1923 interrupted a process that started in 1876, when a new Constitution, the longest lasting in Spain till this date, set the bases for a further political development. The adoption of progressive legislation; such as the association act of 1887, or the introduction of the universal suffrage for men in 1890, proves this. Nevertheless, it is impossible to know whether that path was leading towards democracy or not, because it was disrupted by events in 1923. An analysis of the mechanisms of representation of that regime shed some light on the debate.

#### STATE OF PLAY

Even today, the idea that the regime of the Restoration hindered any chance of political modernization in Spain persists among some historians. For those, the ruling oligarchy would have hardly agreed to modify the mechanism that guaranteed their

control over politics, the economy and society. Therefore, by no means they were going to accept any democratic approach. However, these and similar opinions have been heavily influenced by the discredit that the regime of the Restoration had among the public opinion for decades. The first criticism received by that political system was motivated by the loss of the remaining Spanish colonies in 1898 after a humiliating military loss against the United States Army. Joaquin Costa, a very influential intellectual, took the lead of the critics in a very successful manner. He associated the political system with oligarchy and corruption. Costa, in his diagnosis, connected the politicians of the main two parties (conservative and liberal) with the “caciques”. These were local bosses who successfully influenced the electoral process in the favour of the candidates of the government to obtain benefits in return. For Costa, the electoral process was a fraud and the Parliament did not represent the will of the people but rather the interests of the establishment. Not to mention that this author in his analysis proposed a dictator for the nation, or that his opinion was altered by the military collapse of 1898, his influence over a part of the history was enormous. In fact, over the last decades we have seen many authors stating that the military coup of 1923 confirmed that that regime was already discredited and had no legitimacy.

However, the truth is that most of the ruling politicians of the time did not differ with Costa over the main problem: the influence of the *caciques* (or local bosses) on the local population. But as they were fully aware, that was a difficult issue to mend. Notable was also the criticism made to the indifference of electorate, by both the members of the opposition, and the parties of the establishment. The discrediting remarks about the Restoration went on for years. In the 1920s, the new military government blamed the parliamentary systems for most of the country’s problems in a clear attempt to justify the coup. In the following decade, the ruling republican leaders rejected any legacy of the monarchy and preferred to build “his democracy” from scratch. During the Franco years, the opinion about the Restoration was not good either, although this is not surprising as that was a liberal regime, and Franco, a totalitarian dictator. After all those decades, the distorted perception of the political regime of 1876–1923 was so consolidated that it was automatically associated with corruption, local bosses, fraud, oligarchy, and stagnation.

The trend seemed to change in the late 1970s. Historians like Javier Tusell, Raymond Carr, José Varela Ortega or Juan Linz, improved the negative perception of the Restoration and substituted it with another more balanced and fair [Tusell 1976; Linz 1976; Varela Ortega 1977; Carr 1980]. But it was not until the following decades when this notion changed. Professors like Juan P. Fusi, Santos Juliá, Jordi Palafox, Luis Arranz, Mercedes Cabrera, Fernando del Rey Reguillo, Moreno Luzón or Miguel Martorell [Fusi 1990; Martorell 1996; Fusi, Palafox 1997, Rey Reguillo 1998; Cabrera 1998; Arranz 1998 and Juliá 1999] paid attention to aspects previously ignored; such as the endeavour of the parliament, the drive towards modernization, the reformist conduct, and the similarities between the Spanish system and those of the surrounding countries. In their conclusions, they affirmed that the corruption and

the influence of the local bosses upon the elections were not problems exclusive of Spain, but also of most European countries, including the United Kingdom, which is considered a model of Excellency in politics in Europe. This way, these authors deduced that the peculiarities of Spain did not necessarily prevent democratization. This trend has been followed in the last years by authors such as Carlos Dardé, Roberto Villa, Moreno Luzón, Álvarez Tardío or Roberto Villa [Dardé 2008; Moreno Luzón 2015; Villa 2016; Álvarez Tardío 2017].

Consequently, if the Restoration brought a long time of peace and social and economic progress, some degree of mass mobilization, progressive reforms, and a framework for a professional, independent, and merit-based civil service [Varela Ortega 1997: 70], some might wonder why, unlike other European countries, the political system in Spain did not transform into a real democracy. Therefore, the question that remains is whether the political regime was moving forwards or, on the contrary, stuck in a dead end. The answer is impossible to decipher, but an analysis of the mechanisms of representation will certainly give a clearer picture.

#### THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

None of the two political parties that alternated in the Government – the conservatives and the liberals – were, as often portrayed, small organizations unable to mobilize their supporters [García Escudero 1980: 40]. The analysis of the sixteen general elections that took place in region of Valencia between 1890, when the male universal suffrage was adopted, and 1923, proves so. The two establishment parties did not remain still during those years, but on the contrary tried hard to mobilize the electorate through expensive and tiring campaigns. Because of their effort, they got back the control of the capital after years of landslide republican victories. However, the electoral success of the monarchist candidates should come as no surprise as the parties had been trying to persuade the voter ever since the adoption of the universal suffrage in 1890. In the conservative party, the active search for electors began in 1894, four years after the extension of the electorate. That year, Teodoro Llorente, the local leader of the conservatives, redesigned the party's grassroots base to focus more on the campaign. Thus was specified in the new statute that strengthened the propaganda campaign tasks.

The propaganda of the two major parties during the campaigns reached every single village in the province of Valencia. A good example is the creation of a network of offices and party centres that covered most of the territory (and practically every city with more than 6,000 inhabitants). The conservatives and liberals were also the most active candidates in the final years before the military coup. In fact, between 1916 and 1923, the monarchist candidates – which at that time were divided in *albistas*, *datistas*, *romanonistas*, *demócratas*, *mauristas*, and *ciervistas* – opened more party centers in the Valencia region, than the opposition groups – republicans, socialists and *carlists* – altogether.

The effort made by the monarchist parties in the campaign was remarkable. The propaganda campaigns carried out between 1890 and 1923 already showed aspects that were later seen during the Second Republic when the mass mobilization hit its highest point. However, it would not be fair to compare the campaigns in the Restoration with those in the 1930s for two reasons. In the first place, the candidates before 1931 addressed an electorate of 15,000–20,000 electors on average, while in the Second Republic, once the electoral districts had been changed, a candidate had to address an electorate of more than 300,000 electors. The second reason had to do with the propaganda tools, since those used in the Restoration little had to do with the ones used in the thirties, especially after innovations in transportation and broadcast. Still, the campaigns prior to 1923 showed modern aspects. The candidates tried their best to reach the highest possible number of suffragists. In the Valencia region, for instance, the candidates spent days visiting the districts. And in those areas with a poor road network, they had to stay overnight in faraway towns; usually in some other party member's houses. Once there, they usually offered a speech before the meal, or if the crowd was too big, a rally. Also, during this time the national leaders travelled long distances in support of their candidates for the first time. For example, popular rallies in Valencia were held in 1901 by José Canalejas, the leader of the democrat; in 1910 by Pablo Iglesias, the leader of the socialists; or in 1920 by Conde de Romanones, the leader of the liberals. By the beginning of the new century, the audiences had grown bigger, thus, new and larger venues had to be used to hold the rallies. In the city of Valencia, the places chosen were normally big enough to hold between 1,000 and 10,000 people, depending on the speakers. In 1908, for instance, a rally against the reactionary policy of Antonio Maura, which had an attendance of more than 15,000, was held in the bullring stadium. The same venue was chosen in the city of Gandia by the local democrat candidate, Gutierrez Mas, in his campaign of 1901.

This was also the time when the use of the media during the campaigns became popular among the candidates. In fact, most candidates tried to have at least the backing of one local newspaper. Anyone wanting to win the elections needed to make his manifesto public, and the only way to do so was either by word of mouth or on paper. In addition, the electoral competence forced the candidates to strive to get the support of the electors through a programme focused on the needs of the district. Probably the most common approach was the manifesto: a brief summary of the programme. These manifestos, barely used previously, gained notoriety at the beginning of the century when most candidates realized its relevance and importance. These manifestos became necessary in election campaigns in Spain during the Restoration. The analysis of the propaganda demonstrates so. Every candidate tried to obtain the support of the electorate with a programme focussed on the needs of the district. This was obvious in districts of monoculture farming. Hence, in rice-growing districts, such as Sueca, regardless of the political party they belonged to, all candidates promoted protectionism, while in wine-producing areas it was free trade.

In addition, the candidates also tried to gain the backing of the local professional associations such as chambers of agriculture, chambers of commerce, and agricultural trade unions. The districts of Albaida and Requena, where the economy depended on the wine industry, can be seen the best examples. In Albaida, the candidate Manuel Iranzo based his programme on the demands of the local wine producers for a new alcohol law [“Las Provincias” 1905]. While in neighbouring Requena, Fidel García Berlanga, and his son after him, won almost every election between 1901 and 1923 because of backing by the Wine-Growers Trade Union, chaired by García Berlanga himself. The two examples mentioned above are representative of the elections, and also of the capability of the local politicians to impose their own criteria (even against their party instructions).

The electoral competition has been another of the aspects analysed. In the Restoration, a candidate could find himself running in a district with no competitors. Unfortunately, there is no information of the levels of electoral competition in Spain. Despite this fact, some historians have taken for granted that during the Restoration most candidates ran for deputy against no other contenders. This is nothing further from the truth. The analysis of the elections in the Valencia region between 1891 and 1923, shows that the percentage of electoral competition reached 76%. In other words, three out of four elections. Therefore, the electoral competition was the norm during the elections of this period. Out of the twelve Valencia districts, only in two, in Albaida and Enguera, the percentage of contenders did not reach 50%.

As per the affiliation of contenders, they were not, as suggested, *carlists* (followers of Don Carlos) and republicans, but mostly conservative and liberal candidates who did not follow the guidelines of their parties. In fact, three out of four contenders belonged to the two monarchist parties. The *carlists* never really had enough influence in the region outside the capital. And the republicans could only compete in the districts of Valencia, Sueca, Torrente, Chiva, Játiva, Sagunto and Alcira, although only they could offer a serious opposition in the first two.

The legislation related to the election process passed during the period tried to spur both the contenders and the electors [Villa 2011: 124]. For instance, in 1907 the vote became mandatory and violation of the rules carried a penalty. However, to penalize those who did not vote on an uncontested election was counter-productive. Thus, another bill was passed to avoid elections in those districts with only one candidate running. The measure, included in article 29 of the new electoral legislation, has been heavily criticized by some historians due to its adverse impact on the competition. However, it did not have any fallout on the electoral competition: in the elections of 1907, right before the new legal regulations were approved, only 40% of the Valencia districts had more than one candidate, in 1910 there were 50%, and in 1914, 75%. Therefore, article 29 of the new law did not influence the levels of competition.

The conservative candidates in the region rarely followed the instructions from Madrid, and, on many occasions, they ran in the elections against the candidates of the government, even if these belonged to their own party. They could do this

because the monarchist candidates running as opposition were normally renowned notables with the capability to mobilize a great number of voters in the district. But the dissent was not the only reason for candidates running against each other. It was also the lack of agreement among the conservatives and liberals. This happened in 1920 when the regional leaders of the monarchist parties did not agree on the official candidates, and three of them (one *romanonista*, one *maurista*, and one *ciervista*) put candidates forward in most Valencian districts to compete from the opposition.

The percentage of government candidates defeated was always kept parallel with the number of contested elections: the more candidates running, the more government candidates got defeated. In fact, it was in 1920 when the government got the worst results in the Valencia region. In total, between 1890 and 1923, the government candidates got defeated in the region in almost 15% of the elections. This, considering the fact that the main parties tried to agree on the candidates not to compete against each other, and also that the government usually chose the most popular candidates in the district to run by their side, is a high level.

The anti-establishment parties (republicans, *carlists*, socialists, regionalists and independents) ran as opposition in every occasion that they had the strength for. Especially vigorous were the republicans in the districts of Valencia (capital) and Sueca, where they won the elections consecutively between 1899 and 1918. It took some time before the monarchist candidates defeated their rivals again. Not until 1919 when they surpassed the republicans in the city vote.

#### VOTE-RIGGING AND CORRUPTION

Many historians might claim that the scale of the fraud and corruption in the elections during the Restoration was incredible. It is true that both aspects had some influence on the results for some time, actually until the passing of the new electoral law in 1907. After the passing of this law, this resulted in altering the corruption of candidates to very low levels.

The two corrupt practices often held up as an example of the corruption in the Spanish elections prior to 1931 are two: the forgery of the election results, and the cast of fake ballot papers in the box (a practice known in Spain as *pucherazo*). However, none had a real impact in the results. In fact, to carry them out successfully was very difficult, and after 1907 almost impossible. The scrutineers, or monitors, that the candidates assigned in every polling station, would not sign the official results (known as *actas*) if these did not match with their scrutineer sheets. If any scrutineer did not agree with the result, he would note it, and his objection would be investigated by a local court. In the case that the accusation persisted, it would be taken to the Provincial Court; and if that was not enough, then to the Supreme Court. The chances of success of the *pucherazo* were so small, that only a couple of them reached the highest court. Similar impacts on the results were the forgery

of the election results. Only on three occasions an objection of fake results reached the Supreme Court: the results of the district of Requena in 1901, and the capital in 1896 and 1920. In all three, the results were revoked because they did not mirror the scrutineer sheets. So, by 1910, the corrupt practices in the elections had scarcely any impact. In fact, even an independent newspapers acknowledged that the common tricks of the past had almost disappeared [“Las Provincias” 1910].

Fraud, together with corruption, was the other aspect that could have undermined the elections. Until 1907, it happened quite regularly, but after the changes made in the new election law about the procedure of the polling stations and specifically on the making of the electoral register, it practically disappeared. Before that year, it was the local authorities that made the electoral roll. That is why it was relatively common to see deceased voters on the lists, or significant members of the opposition party missing from them. But it all changed once the Institute of Geography and Statistics, an independent body, took over its production. Within months, the tampered lists disappeared.

#### CONCLUSIONS

To summarise, the conservatives and the liberals, the two establishment parties that alternated in the Government, were not mere organizations of notables ruling with the assistance of the local bosses. Instead, they were powerful structures with the capability to run modern political campaigns. The analysis of the conservative’s party’s grassroots base, the numbers of party scrutineers in each district, and the efforts made by the candidates during the campaigns, proves so. It also does the fact that the conservative and liberal parties surpassed the republican candidates in the city vote after years of landslide republican victories. And on the other hand, the opposition parties (both right- and left-wing) were never big enough to compete against the two monarchist parties. The republicans only could gain significance in the industrialized cities. And the *carlists* could not extend their influence out of their traditional strongholds.

In regard to the contested elections, it has been said that they practically did not exist, if so, in some big cities. But a research on the matter shows that they reached 61% in the Valencia rural districts and 100% in the capital. Therefore, they were not uncommon, but on the contrary, they were ordinary. And as per the contenders, the vast majority of them were either conservatives or liberals. The only opposition party that forced the conservatives and liberals to make a big effort in the campaign were the republicans. The others, *carlists* and socialists, hardly ever became a threat.

As per the fraud and corruption in the elections, both influenced the results until 1907, until the Parliament passed a new electoral law. From that moment on, only the corruption of the candidates could have altered the results, but it was really difficult to go away with it if there was a monitor from the rival party inside the polling station. In fact, in the Valencia region only three elections complaints after the election



reached the Supreme Court, and in none of them the accusations were strong enough to be proved right. In conclusion, neither the corruption of the candidates nor the fraud of the authorities had a real impact on the final results. The key point of the Spanish elections was undoubtedly the agreement between the ruling parties, known as *encasillado*. And neither corruption, nor vote-rigging, nor the pressure put on by the Minister during the campaigns, prevented the elections being representative.

Therefore, arguably, the legislation and the election practise of the political system in Spain from 1876 to 1923 did not prevent political modernization. Moreover, they facilitated it. The analysis of the political parties and their candidates, the election procedure, and the election campaigns held in the Valencia region between 1890 and 1923, reflect so. In other words, there was nothing in the legal or institutional structure of that regime that prevented its reformulation in a liberal democracy, which was a transition that other European countries with similar constitutional tradition achieved during this period of time.

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