

JULY 2004

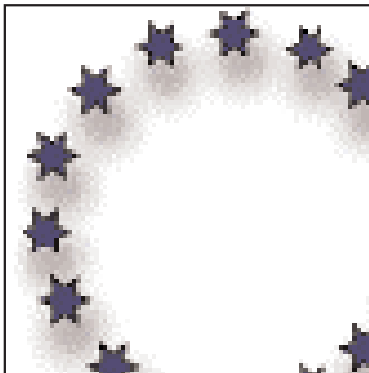
THE 2004 SPANISH GENERAL ELECTIONS OF 14 MARCH 2004

Luis Ramiro

Department of Political Science

University of Murcia

Email: lramiro@um.es



Key points:

- Dramatic and exceptional elections were held in Spain on 14 March 2004, marked by the terrorist attacks of 11 March in Madrid in which 191 people lost their lives.
 - The Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) experienced a spectacular increase in its share of the vote and number of seats which gave it a relative majority in parliament, allowing it to form a minority government.
 - The conservative People's Party (PP) went from holding power with an absolute majority during the 2000–04 period to unexpectedly losing the elections.
 - The left-wing United Left (IU), the third political party at the national level, suffered another defeat and a serious reduction in its parliamentary leverage.
 - Catalonia's Republican Left (ERC), a left-wing Catalan separatist party, grew spectacularly and is one of the winners of the elections.
 - The moderate Catalan nationalists Convergence and Union (CiU) lost support.
 - The Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) and Basque Solidarity (EA) have maintained their positions.
 - Spanish foreign and EU policy, although not the main issues, had a certain relevance in the campaign.
-

The context

After eight years of government by the PP, the last four with an absolute majority in parliament, the legislative elections of 2004 did not appear initially to be specially contested. Prime Minister Aznar, who voluntarily declined to run for re-election, could present a balance sheet for his government which included notable economic growth, a remarkable fall in unemployment and a balanced budget. Along with economic success, the PP seemed to be efficient in combating terrorism, as during its years in government ETA had suffered a serious decline in its capacity to act and the political organizations surrounding the terrorist group had faced a serious crisis owing to legal actions taken against them. In addition, the PP government frequently linked the fight against terrorism with the defence of the unity of Spain in its political statements and contrasted this with the threats posed by peripheral nationalism, especially Basque nationalism. In this way, during the legislature of 2000–04 the PP could present undisputable successes and political and economic merits.

Perhaps for this reason the polls carried out by several of the mass media during the period prior to the elections showed a victory margin between the PP and the PSOE that varied between 4 and 10 percentage points. Thus everything seemed to indicate that the final result of the 2004 election was not in doubt, since everyone expected a victory for the PP; only the size of the victory was in question. In this sense, the behaviour of the undecided voters and of non-voters (mainly left-wing, as the legislative elections in 2000 had shown) and the performance of two new prime ministerial candidates (M. Rajoy for the PP and J. L. Zapatero for the PSOE) were the only factors that brought some uncertainty to the final distribution of support.

Paradoxically, this situation placed the Socialist leader in a somewhat more comfortable position than that of the leader of the PP. In order to consolidate his leadership in the PSOE, Zapatero only had to improve on the result obtained by the Socialists in 2000, something that the polls seemed to point to. On the other hand, Rajoy, though he was the favourite to win, had to overcome certain difficulties. First, he had to establish his leadership despite Aznar's still notable presence (though the latter chose to play a secondary role during the campaign) and to try to distance himself from the negative aspects of the PP government's management of the country. This was especially necessary since the polls showed a decrease in the positive evaluation of its management during the months before the elections (in January 2004 only 27 per cent of the citizens thought that it was good or very good).¹ Secondly, it was hoped that Rajoy could repeat Aznar's absolute majority; any result below this mark might debilitate (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the magnitude of his victory) his position in the party.

During the weeks before the elections the political climate in Spain became increasingly tense and more conflictual. This tension was focused precisely around issues which could be termed as basic to the political position of the PP: the territorial organization of Spain, once again. The PP government, with Prime Minister Aznar at its head, claimed that the PP should win the elections with an absolute majority to prevent the

'breaking-up of Spain', whose unity would be in danger if the Socialists won and made a coalition with the peripheral nationalist parties (as they had done some months earlier in the regional government of Catalonia). This line of argument was unexpectedly reinforced after the news broke that, in the middle of the election pre-campaign,² the leader of the ERC (a left-wing Catalan separatist party) had held a secret meeting with the terrorist group ETA in France. This news was also used by the PP against the PSOE, given that this party was in a coalition government with the ERC which allowed a Socialist to lead the regional government of Catalonia. Once again, ETA terrorism, peripheral nationalism and the territorial organization of Spain monopolized most of the debate and the messages which were aimed at the voters, especially from the government side. Moreover, these issues were used, once again, to question the constitutional loyalty of the Socialists.

The campaign

The election campaign therefore developed in circumstances which were not very favourable to the Socialists, who were attacked for their coalition with nationalist parties and who had to work with a political agenda dominated by the PP and its own issues. This situation only seemed to reinforce the accuracy of predictions that pointed to a clear PP victory.

One of the main strategic aims of the PSOE in the campaign was to mobilize those progressive voters who had abstained in the previous legislative elections in 2000. Thus the Socialist campaign centred on increasing voter participation, counting on the fact that those who abstained were mainly left-wing voters. Hence, opportunities for a victory for the PSOE rested on increasing voter participation. If the PSOE could persuade a significant number of progressive voters who had not turned out to vote in 2000 to vote Socialist in 2004, this would prevent the PP from gaining an absolute majority again.

Nevertheless, the main call of the PSOE to those voters it could consider its 'own' was accompanied, as is obvious, by a discourse that could also attract more centrist voters. The PSOE emphasized that it was not only focusing on the left, but that, should it be elected to government, its policies would also see a shift towards the centre. This was highlighted by Zapatero's announcement that he would not enter into any coalition and that if he won the elections he would govern alone (excluding, therefore, any left-wing pact with IU and possible stable alliances with the peripheral nationalists). Although the PSOE's electoral programme included a striking concern for aspects of social policy (for example housing and education), it also committed itself to keeping within economic orthodoxy, austerity and a balanced budget.

Moreover, the PSOE's campaign was remarkable for its emphasis on its leader and candidate, J. L. Zapatero. Certainly, virtually all election campaigns are now characterized by a high degree of personalization and 'presidentialization', even in parliamentary systems, and so the question is whether the concentration of the campaign on the leader is a dominant or simply just a relevant but secondary aspect. In this case, the PSOE 'presidentialized' its campaign very significantly,

drawing attention to the choice between the Socialist leader (Zapatero) – who occupied a position of absolute predominance in the Socialist propaganda and in electoral communication – and the PP candidate (M. Rajoy). Thus the Socialists tried to get the voters to choose more between the personalities and careers of the candidates than between the PP and the PSOE as parties. This was one way of detracting attention from the arguments of the PP candidates, who presented their government as an effective and experienced team.

For their part, the PP campaign tried to prove that the PSOE was a radical party, criticizing its left-wing policies and its stance in favour of reform of the Constitution to satisfy peripheral nationalism. For this purpose, the PP campaign concentrated much of its efforts on limiting the electoral support of the PSOE to its more loyal voters, trying to prevent it from obtaining votes among the most moderate voters. Thus they used the case of the Socialist-led coalition government in Catalonia (with the left-wing nationalists ERC and with the ICV Eco-Socialists) to attack the PSOE, and the possibility that the PSOE could form a coalition government with IU (in spite of the fact that this was flatly denied from the beginning of the campaign by Zapatero) as an electoral weapon against the Socialists.

Hence the PP started the campaign with the idea that a low turnout would favour its interests, and would prevent the PSOE from recovering those progressive voters who had previously abstained. This premise imprinted the PP's electoral campaign with a low profile from the very beginning, which did not particularly help to promote the public image of its new leader and candidate. Rajoy was presented as a model of moderation, contrasted at times with the more aggressive tone of Aznar and other party colleagues. The refusal of the PP to undertake television debates between Rajoy and Zapatero only reinforced the low-profile campaign adopted by the PP at the outset – it trusted in its advantage in the pre-campaign polls. Nevertheless, as the campaign got under way, signs of a narrowing of the gap between the two parties began to appear. A few days before the election it became apparent that the PP might not achieve an absolute majority, and there were even forecasts that the Socialists' share of the vote was coming close to that of the PP. Either because of this or because the campaign was drawing to a close, Rajoy and the PP intensified their attacks on the PSOE at this point.

However, the electoral campaign was dramatically interrupted on 11 March by the attacks carried out by a radical Islamic terrorist group on several commuter trains in Madrid. This terrorist attack caused 191 deaths, with more than 1,000 injured. Immediately, all political parties suspended their electoral activities.

Between 11 and 13 March the information provided by the government about who was behind the attacks became a political issue of great relevance. The government's initial thesis was that the terrorist attack had been carried out by ETA. Later, signs began to point to radical Islamic groups, but, in spite of this, the government seemed reluctant to rule out the possibility that ETA was actually to blame. During the two days after the attack opposition parties and some of the mass media began first to insinuate and later to claim that the government was not acting transparently and was not giving out all the information it had about who was

behind the attacks. These accusations increased in intensity as the 14 March polling day drew closer. According to the opposition parties the government was trying to spread the idea – despite all the indications to the contrary – that ETA was responsible for the attack, in order to obtain an electoral advantage. Given that the fight against ETA terrorism and the conflict with the peripheral nationalists had been one of the government's priorities, if the attacks had been an ETA action, the PP would presumably appear to voters to be the most suitable party to carry on with the fight against terrorism. On the other hand, if the attacks were by Islamic terrorists this would be detrimental to the government by throwing the controversial Spanish contribution to the war in Iraq into the political limelight once more – very dangerous for the PP given that Spaniards had been overwhelmingly against the war.

On the evening of 12 March, massive demonstrations against the attacks took place in cities all over the country. But it was even more remarkable that on the following day demonstrations took place in front of PP headquarters in many of the country's main cities, demanding that the government provide all the information it had about who was behind the attacks, and accusing it of withholding relevant information on the issue. At that time, all the opposition parties began accusing the government, more or less explicitly, of lying and hiding information from the public for electoral reasons. The highly charged emotional situation caused by the attacks, the demonstrations against the attacks, the uncertainty about who was behind them, the accusations coming from all parties and, lastly, the demonstrations against the government's handling of the situation created a remarkably tense situation on the very eve of the elections.

The results

Spaniards, therefore, went to the polls not only in a state of shock caused by the attacks but also in a rarefied and tense political atmosphere resulting from the accusations flying between the government and the opposition. Certainly, the most important feature of the results of the 2004 elections was the increase in turnout. This reaches the high level of 77 per cent, an increase of 8.5 per cent over 2000. This means that the turnout in 2004 was slightly higher than the average in the current democratic period, though it did not reach really exceptional levels (the turnout was higher in the elections of 1977 and 1982 and similar in those of 1993 and 1996).

The PSOE obtained a historic result of almost 11 million votes, an increase of more than 8 per cent in its share of the vote, and won 39 more deputies (though it is true that the previous elections, in 2000, were particularly disappointing for the Socialists). In contrast to this success, the PP passed directly from governing with an absolute majority in parliament to the opposition (a shift not seen before in Spain's brief democratic experience). The PP obtained more than 9.5 million votes, approximately 700,000 fewer than in 2000, and saw its number of deputies fall by several dozen. Thus, it is important to emphasize that the PP lost the elections but did not experience a loss of votes that would have marked a catastrophic electoral defeat for the Spanish right.

TABLE 1: RESULTS OF THE ELECTIONS IN 2000 AND 2004

	Elections 2004		Elections 2000	
	% vote	Seats	% vote	Seats
Partido Socialista (PSOE) (Socialist Party)	42.6	164	34.2	125
Partido Popular (PP) (Popular Party)	37.6	148	44.5	183
Izquierda Unida (IU) + Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds (ICV) (United Left and Catalan Green Party)	5.0	5	5.5	8
Convergència i Unió (CiU) (Centre-Right Catalan Nationalists)	3.2	10	4.2	15
Ezquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) (Left-wing Catalan Nationalists)	2.5	8	0.8	1
Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV) (Centre-Right Basque Nationalists)	1.6	7	1.5	7
Coalición Canaria (CC) (Centre-Right Canarian Nationalists)	0.9	3	1.1	4
Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG) (Left-wing Galician Nationalists)	0.8	2	1.3	3
Chunta Aragonesista (ChA) (Left-wing Aragonese Nationalists)	0.4	1	0.3	1
Eusko Alkartasuna (EA) (Centre-Left Basque Nationalists)	0.3	1	0.4	1
Nafarroa Bai (NaB) (Coalition of Basque Nationalists of Navarre)	0.2	1	–	–
Partido Andalucista (PA) (Centre-Right Andalusian Nationalists)	0.7	–	0.9	1
Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds (ICV) (Catalan Green Party)	–	–	0.5	1
Others	4.2	–	4.8	–
Total	100	350	100	350

The significant leverage of sub-national parties – i.e., peripheral nationalist parties – that is so characteristic of the Spanish party system was reflected once again in the 2004 elections (35 deputies, compared with 34 in 2000). Among the peripheral nationalist parties, the left-wing Catalan separatists of the ERC were the most successful: they tripled their share of the vote and increased their number of seats from only one to eight. The moderate Catalan nationalists of the CiU, on the other hand, lost ground as much in their share of the vote as in their number of seats, though they are still the third largest parliamentary group in the Lower House. Basque nationalists (the PNV, ideologically centre-right, and EA, which is centre-left) basically maintained their position, but the coalition Nafarroa Bai (which includes the PNV and EA and two small left-wing parties in the Autonomous Community of Navarre) gained an additional MP. Whereas the left-wing nationalists in Aragon (ChA) managed to keep their representative, the Canary nationalists (CC), the Galician nationalists (BNG) and the Andalusian nationalists (PA) suffered setbacks of varying degrees.

Undoubtedly, one of the biggest losers of the 2004 elections was the left-wing grouping, IU. The third party at the national level lost a substantial number of votes and seats. This result is especially poor for IU because it constitutes a further setback after its poor result in 2000. Though it is true that IU is at a disadvantage because of the Spanish electoral system (formally proportional but with important majority effects), this circumstance does not diminish the scale of its losses in 2004. Its defeat was only lessened by its alliance with the Catalan Eco-Socialist party ICV, which provided two extra deputies to the common parliamentary group IU-ICV.

The PSOE managed to improve its electoral results in all Spanish provinces. On the other hand, the PP saw its support decline in almost all constituencies. Nevertheless, it is notable that among the areas in which the conservative party's share fell most were the Basque

Country and Catalonia, two of the autonomous communities where peripheral nationalism is more important. Given that during the period 2000–04 the clash between the PP and peripheral nationalism (especially with Basque nationalists) had been very prominent and constant, and that appeals to defend Spain's unity were frequent during the electoral campaign, it seems that this strategy did not have any positive results, but rather the contrary effects in two of the regions in which the nationalist cleavage is very marked.

The configuration of the Spanish parliament after the 2004 elections has led to a situation of relative majority for the PSOE; it gained a sufficient number of seats to lead the new legislature with a minority government. Nearly one month after the elections, its leader Zapatero was invested as prime minister with the support of the left-wing parties and of several peripheral nationalist parties. The PSOE has, in any case, various options of parliamentary alliances that could allow it to see through the legislature with certain guarantees of stability.

What can explain this result? What reasons can we find behind the success of the PSOE and the failure of the PP? On election night and in the days that followed, both the PP and various mass media blamed the attacks of 11 March for generating an electoral turnaround and for causing the unexpected victory of the Socialists. The analysis of the real effects of these terrorist acts on electoral behaviour will probably turn out to be more complex than this but will have to wait for the availability of appropriate post-electoral surveys. At the moment, it is difficult to distinguish the precise causes, although it is very reasonable to assume that the attacks had an impact on Spanish voters and that this impact favoured the PSOE.

In any analysis of the electoral results it is essential to bear in mind that the 2000–04 legislature in which the PP governed with an absolute majority was a period which, along with the undeniable successes of the

government, also included an intensification of certain problems and the emergence of several critical situations. Among these negative and troubling aspects that led people to question the actions of the government we can see, first, employment policies which provoked a general strike in June 2002. The general strike was a success for the unions and forced the government to withdraw a substantial part of its proposals. Secondly, the government had to face the wreck of an oil tanker (the *Prestige*) on the coast of Galicia in November 2002 and the serious pollution that was caused along the whole northern coast of the country. Its management of this crisis led to intense social mobilization in the zones affected against government policy. Thus 2002 was not at all placid for the PP. In 2003, the mobilization against the *Prestige* catastrophe was overshadowed by the huge demonstrations against the war in Iraq and Aznar's policies in relation to this conflict. Besides these crises, the government had to face several problems that achieved special prominence during these years, such as the clash with peripheral nationalism, and others which were to a certain extent new to the Spanish political scene. Among these was the problem of the scarcity of housing, which became a frontline political issue for the first time.

In the light of all these difficulties, it is not surprising that positive evaluations of the government's management of the country fell almost steadily from 2000 to 2004, according to the results of opinion polls. Nor is it a surprise that voter support for the PP was declining at the same rate as it was growing for the PSOE, or that most citizens said that they would prefer the PSOE to win the elections, or the Socialist leader Zapatero over Rajoy, the PP candidate, as prime minister.³ Thus at the start of the campaign polling indicated that it would be very difficult for the PP to gain an absolute majority again, especially since the electoral gap with the PSOE seemed to have been closing throughout its term of office.

Nevertheless, there are undeniably also good reasons to assume that the attacks of 11 March contributed to the Socialist victory. First, the final discovery on the eve of the elections that the authors of the attacks had been a radical Islamic group brought the war in Iraq back onto the political agenda. This was an issue on which the policies of the PP had been massively rejected by public opinion. Some voters may have blamed the PP's policies for this new factor of insecurity and may have voted accordingly. Moreover, the commotion generated by the attacks may have stimulated some non-voters or undecided voters (for the most part left-wing) to come to the polls as a democratic reaction to such barbarism, thus favouring the PSOE. Voters who otherwise would not have voted at all voted for the Socialists.⁴ Finally, certain voters may have been mobilized by the doubts generated in some sectors of public opinion by the PP's information policy and the behaviour of the government during the crucial hours after the attacks. This electoral mobilization in favour of the PSOE was probably relevant in leading to a result that very few had imagined, in spite of the narrowing of the gap between the PSOE and the PP in recent years.

The 2004 elections and Europe

An analysis of the 2004 elections leads us almost inevitably to consider the foreign and European policies of

Aznar's government as well, since questions in these areas may have affected its outcome. In the last year such policies have enjoyed a certain saliency in Spanish political debate, largely as a result of the position adopted by Aznar's government on the Bush administration's security policy and on a preventive war in Iraq. These policies are related to Spain's European strategy, which thus acquired, although perhaps in a subsidiary rather than direct way, a certain prominence in the political debate.

During the months before the elections and throughout the election campaign itself a very profound difference remained between both of the bigger parties (PP and PSOE) on Spanish-US policy and on policy towards the EU. On the first issue, the differences came from the Aznar government's support for the war in Iraq, in spite of the opposition of the vast majority of the Spanish population and the overwhelming rejection of the war by the other parties. Hence the PSOE constantly accused the PP of having broken the consensus on foreign policy. This accusation was linked to the second issue.

The PP's European policy during its term in office can be defined as intergovernmental and was concerned mainly with economic and security questions.⁵ The PP has proved to be clearly anti-federalist and has emphasized the defence of the Nice Treaty as a means of supporting Spain's institutional leverage within the EU. The PSOE, though it endorsed the attempts of the Aznar government to protect Spain's institutional position inside the European balance of power, also defended a federalist view of the EU. But, without a doubt, the main difference between the PP and the PSOE has been over the Franco-German axis. The PP considers France and Germany as models which have failed in socio-economic terms and proposed a withdrawal from the traditional Spanish alliance with their positions. The stance taken by France and Germany in the Iraq crisis intensified the PP's arguments in favour of Spain's distancing itself from these two countries (and in defence of an alternative Atlantic axis). For its part, the PSOE has always considered this distancing from France and Germany to be negative in terms of defending certain policies within the EU that were especially important for Spain (EU regional aid policies, for example).

Given these important differences both in European policies and over relations with the United States, we can expect a substantive change in Spanish foreign policy after the Socialist victory of 14 March.⁶ This turnaround will be particularly visible in bilateral relations with the United States and Spain's position on the conflict in Iraq. It has already been clearly illustrated by Zapatero's rapid decision to withdraw Spanish troops from that country. In the European area, we should expect that the new government will help to unblock the constitutional negotiations in the EU. Nevertheless, some uncertainties exist on the exact position of the Spanish government in the debates on the allocation of power in the new EU and in the Council of Ministers. The PP government strongly defended the Nice Treaty and rejected the principle of 'double majority' voting proposed by the Convention on the Future of Europe. The new Socialist government can be expected to finally accept the principle of double majority and give up the defence of Nice. Thus the principal remaining question is what voting thresholds and percentages the new government will claim are more beneficial for the country.

Endnotes

¹ See January 2004 Barometer, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas.

² Formally and legally, the election campaign in Spain takes place during the two weeks prior to voting day. In the period before then, known as the 'pre-campaign' period, parties may conduct campaigning activities but within certain legal limitations.

³ See data in B. Barreiro, '14-M: elecciones a la sombra del terrorismo', *CLAVES* No. 141, 2004, pp. 14–22.

⁴ The Socialists would also benefit from the strategic vote of previous or potential voters of other left-wing parties (such as IU and the BNG).

⁵ See J.I. Torreblanca, 'La política exterior en las elecciones generales del 2004: entre el divorcio de la opinión pública y la falta de consenso entre los partidos', Real Instituto Elcano ARI No. 33/2004.

⁶ J. I. Torreblanca, 'Las prioridades del nuevo gobierno Socialista en materia de política exterior: gestionar el legado de la guerra de Irak y cortar el nudo gordiano de la Constitución', Real Instituto Elcano ARI No. 47/2004.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>.

EPERN

European Parties Elections
And Referendums Network

The Royal Institute of International Affairs is an independent body which promotes the rigorous study of international questions and does not express opinions of its own.

The opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author.

© Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2004. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any other means without the prior permission of the copyright holder.



THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Chatham House 10 St James's Square London SW1Y 4LE
Tel 020 7957 5700 E-mail contact@riia.org
Fax 020 7957 5710 Website www.riia.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223