

## Democracy in Spain

# “A Permanent Victory of Moderation”

By *Juan Diez-Nicolas*

The Spanish political transition from Francisco Franco's authoritarian regime to the present parliamentary democracy has been one of the most widely discussed topics in the analysis of recent world political transformations. Most analysts agree that the transition began when Franco died in 1975; however, there is still great uncertainty as to whether this move to a fully functional democratic system has been completed. For many, the question remains—Has Spain finally made a clean break with its undemocratic past?

Some observers argue that Spain's transition to democracy concluded with the first general elections in 1977. Others believe it ended with the approval of the Constitution by referendum in 1978. And still others place its completion in the victory of the Socialists (PSOE) by absolute majority in 1982. But, since the Socialists have been in power ever since, there are analysts who claim that the transition will not be over until the PSOE loses in a democratic election. This is precisely what may happen in 1995. If it does, everyone may finally agree that the twenty year peaceful political transition has definitely ended, and Spanish democracy will be considered a stable political system.

### Values & the Seeds of Democracy

In analyzing the Spanish political transition to democracy, one should differentiate several phases. First, it is generally forgotten that changes in the political structures were possible only as a result of previous alterations in the value systems of Spaniards. These value shifts, in turn, were mainly a result of rapid economic development during the 1960s and early 1970s (7.1% GNP growth during the period 1960 to 1975). Other factors included greater interaction with citizens from central and northern European countries through massive (but temporary) migration flows, as

well as through the reception of large numbers of tourists, mainly from the western hemisphere.

Thus, when Franco died in November 1975, generational replacement, economic development and changes in value systems had paved the way for political reform. Social research and public opinion polls since the late 60s very clearly demonstrated that Spaniards wanted a democracy similar to those prevailing in Western Europe and the United States.

---

*The Spanish transition has been a permanent victory of moderation against radicalism*

---

Most Spanish surveys during this period showed an absolute majority in favor of “reform,” and two small minorities in favor of “revolution” or “in-revolution.” Not surprisingly for most social scientists, the referendum on the Law for Political Reform was approved in December 1976 by 97% of the voters, thus closing the old constitutional order and opening a new democratic one.

### Elections Begin

The first general elections were held in June 1977, and they confirmed the predominant reformist attitudes of Spaniards. Polls at that time indicated that 57% of voters placed themselves in the “center,” using a seven point self-anchoring scale from “extreme left” (1) to “extreme right” (7). Twenty-two percent placed themselves on any of the three positions in the left and 21% placed themselves on any of the three positions in the right. Results of the 1977 election were consistent with this ideological distribution. The “centrist” party (UCD) obtained 34.5% of the vote (about ten

seats short of an absolute legislative majority), followed by the Socialists (PSOE) with 29.4% of the vote. The Communists (PCE) and other leftist parties obtained 17.7% of the vote, and the conservatives (AP) and other rightist parties obtained 18.4% of the vote (see following page).

With no absolute majority party, the new Constitution was mainly a product of consensus between the UCD and PSOE and the active participation of the PCE and AP. It was approved by 92% of voters in December of 1978. After the approval of the Constitution, new legislative elections were held in 1979, producing results similar to those of 1977.

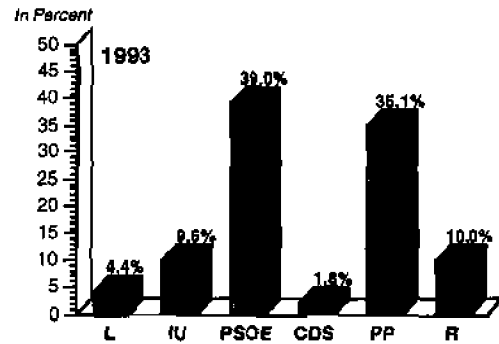
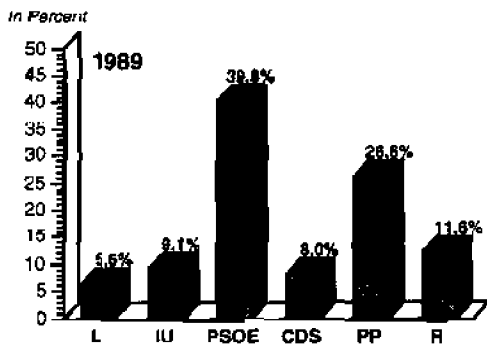
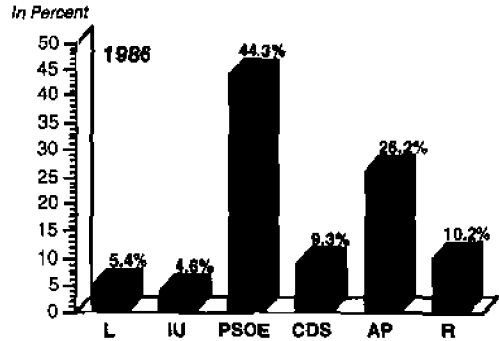
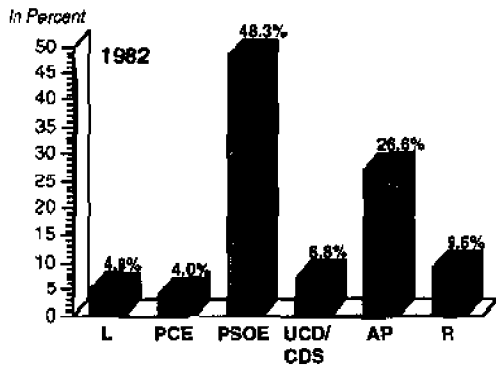
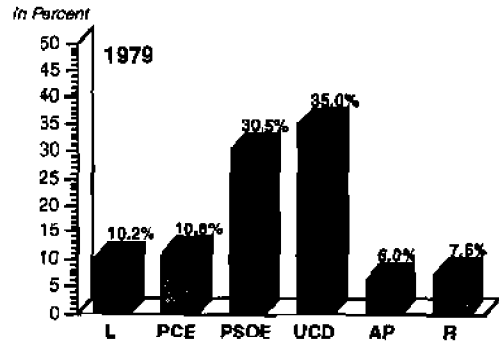
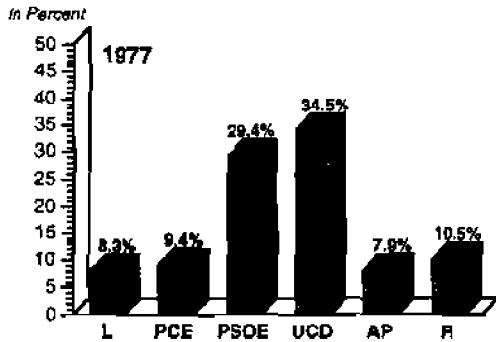
### The Socialist Party in Control

During its tenure, the minority government of the UCD had to face growing social, economic and political unrest, which produced a substantial switch of the electorate to the left. In 1982, the distribution on the left-right scale showed 52% on the left (29% in the more extreme left and 23% in the center-left), 25% in the center, and 23% in the right (12% in the more extreme right and 11% in the center-right). The legislative elections of October 1982 confirmed this significant change of political attitudes, and may be considered the beginning of the second phase of the transition. Only seven years after the death of Franco, “the left” (through the PSOE) won an absolute majority in the legislature with 48.3% of the popular vote, with a wide margin over the AP (26.6%). The centrists, the Communists, and other minor parties in the left or in the right almost disappeared.

The elections of 1986 were nearly a replication of those in 1982, with a small reduction of four percentage points for the PSOE and a limited growth of 2.5 percentage points for the centrists (now represented by CDS). The outcome of

# Spanish General Election Vote, 1977-93

After a long period of ascendancy, the Socialists (PSOE) have recently weakened at the polls. The main center-right party (PP) has increased its electoral strength.



Note: Graphs show popular vote. Parties: PCE-Partido Comunista de Espana, PSOE-Partido Socialista Obrero Espanol, UCD-Union de Centro Democratico, AP-Alianza Popular, CDS-Centro Democratico y Social, IU-Izquierda Unida, PP-Partido Popular, L-Smaller Leftist Parties, R-Smaller Rightist Parties.

Source: Data provided by *Analisis Sociologicos, Economicos y Politicos (ASFP)*.

the 1989 elections were consistent with the earlier two, with the PSOE obtaining for the third time a majority in Congress.

The absolute majority governments of the PSOE in three consecutive legislatures made that party fully responsible for all the political policies adopted during the period 1982-1993, among them the permanence of Spain within NATO and the Western security system, the adoption of liberal economic policies.

and confrontations with labor unions which resulted in nationwide strikes not known since the 30s.

## Socialists Lose Popular Support

The results of the 1989 elections reflected the erosion of support which some of these policies produced for the Socialists. The PSOE lost 4.5 percentage points with respect to its performance in 1986, while the new leftist

party succeeding the Communists (IU) and other leftist parties gained 4.6 points. The results for the PP (formerly AP), the CDS and other center and right parties were very similar to those of 1986, but the relative decline of PSOE seemed to have begun without return.

Throughout this period, the public image of the Socialist President Felipe Gonzalez was the greatest asset to guarantee the support of the electorate for a  
(Continued, please see page 49)

## *Spain—continued)*

government whose policies were often criticized for being too "conservative." Using a scale of 0 to 10 points, Gonzalez's public image generally varied between 6.5 and 7.5 until the NATO referendum in 1986. Since that date it has only seldom been over 6 points, and after the 1993 elections it has always been below 5 points, a level similar to his principal opponents. In addition, the new leadership of the left (Julio Anguita, since early 1988) and the right (Jose M. Aznar, since the fall of 1989) have been more popular than their predecessors.

The 1993 elections were held after one year of economic crisis, aggravated by many accusations of corruption involving government officials and Socialist leaders. Further, for the first time since 1982, the PSOE lost its majority in Congress. While the PSOE kept 39% of the vote, Aznar's PP obtained 35.1%. The center (CDS) lost its representation in Congress and the vote for IU, and other leftist parties, as well as the vote for other parties on the right, diminished slightly.

These elections heralded a new phase in the democratic transition, because the PSOE had to search for parliamentary support to create a stable majority. It found that support in two national minority parties, the Catalans (CIU) and the Basques (PNV), both of which are considered center-right parties. Though a formal coalition government has not been formed, the historical and political significance of the two more important nationalist parties being involved, even if not formally, in the Government of Spain certainly must be underlined.

Monthly national opinion polls taken by ASEP (*Social, Economic and Political Analysis*) since 1986 show levels of support among the electorate for the PSOE and PP. The estimates for 1986, 1989 and 1993 compare extremely well with the actual vote. Before the 1993 elections, most polls, including ASEP's, predicted a very close outcome,

about three percentage points favorable to the PP if abstention was high (as polls suggested).

After a very hot campaign, in which two TV debates between Gonzalez and Aznar took place, participation grew considerably, and the abstention rate was the second lowest since 1977 (the lowest being that of 1982). The post-election analysis seemed to demonstrate that preferences for the PP did not vary significantly, but the increased voter turnout benefited the PSOE, as pre-election polls had predicted. One year later, however, the PP finally defeated the PSOE in a national election, though for the European and not the Spanish Parliament. Again, most polls made very accurate predictions.

### **Current Public Sentiment**

Through a set of "significant indicators" regularly used by ASEP, it may be observed that public opinion regarding the general state of affairs in Spain varied slightly until the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991 (see following page). Satisfaction with the government reached its peak when the Gulf War ended, but it has diminished ever since, as have most of the other indicators, in particular those concerned with one's personal and the national economic situation.

The explanation for this significant change in attitudes and expectations can be found in the growing rates of inflation and, especially, unemployment, combined with increasing evidence of corruption in which government officials were implicated. Moreover, labor unions and major segments of the PSOE claimed the government was supporting conservative economic policies very much opposed to traditional leftist principles. The wave of economic discontent, and the lack of credibility in government seems to have finally affected the public image of Gonzalez. His approval ratings have fallen almost continuously since mid-1991, apart from temporary recoveries at election times.

Since the European elections of June 1994, the PP and IU have been requesting Gonzalez to resign or to call for new general elections, mainly on the basis of what they consider failed economic policies and political corruption. The political climate at the end of 1994 was so tense that many analysts expected Gonzalez would finally decide to resign or, most likely, call for new elections to be held in May 1995, coinciding with local and regional elections.

If this proves to be the case, current polls predict a defeat of the Socialists, similar to that suffered in three other regional elections held during 1994. For example, ASEP's latest poll in January 1995 found 28% of Spanish voters saying they would vote for the PP in the next election, while only 20% said they would support the PSOE. In fact, the PP has regularly "won" such trial heats since late 1992.

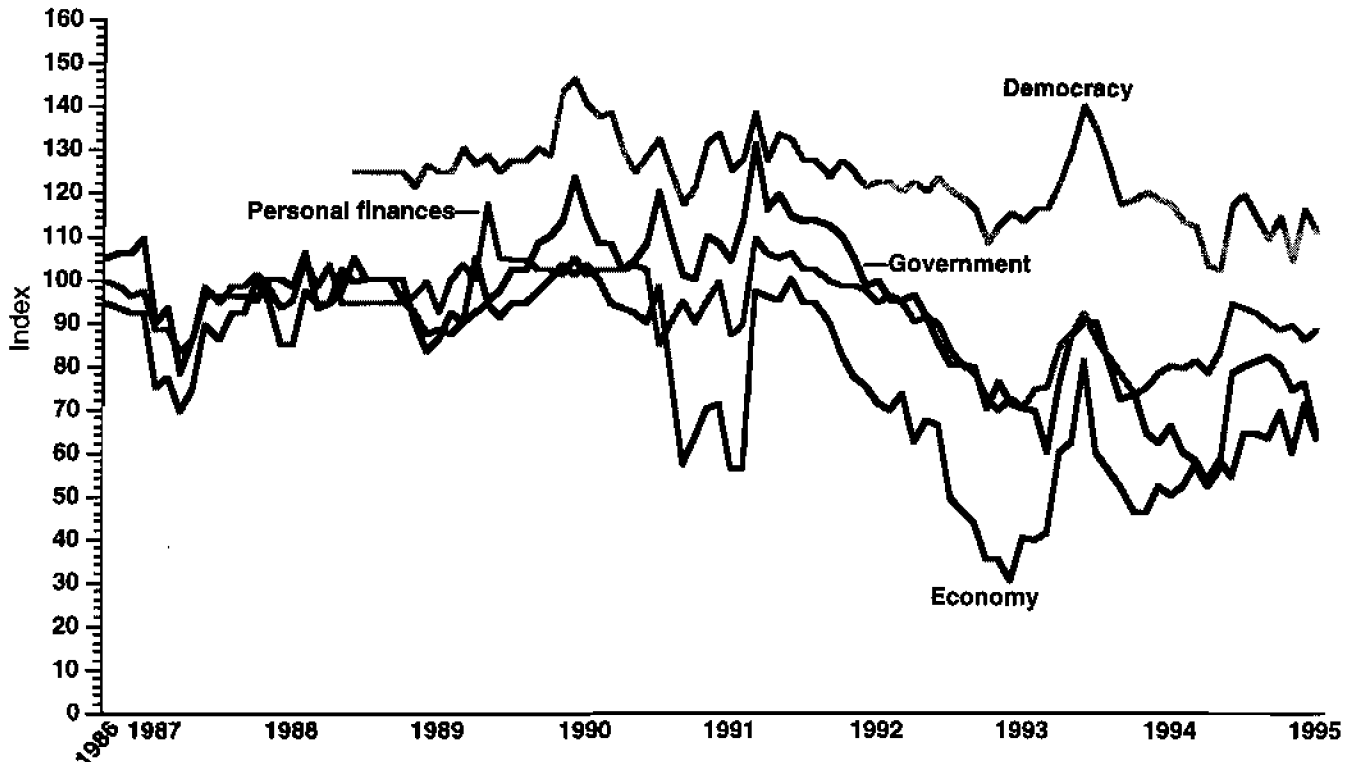
It seems, however, that Gonzalez intends to resist, with the parliamentary support of the Catalan and Basque minorities, until the end of 1995. With this the case, he can again be President of the European Commission during the second half of the year, which implies that elections would be held in the spring of 1996.

The Spanish economic recovery may suffer the consequences of political uncertainty, due to a lack of confidence on the part of national and foreign investors. On the other hand, the emergence of new scandals, or the development of judiciary actions on some of the old ones, might force Gonzalez to call elections during 1995. If this is the case, it seems almost inevitable that the PP will be in a position to form the new government.

One could conclude that the Spanish transition has been a permanent victory of moderation against radicalism, which is consistent with the value system disclosed by social research since the late 60s and early 70s. The parlia-

# Assessing the Mood in Spain, 1986-95

**Question:** At present, do you feel very satisfied, satisfied, indifferent, unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with the way in which democracy is working in Spain? (democracy); Considering your personal economic situation, would you say that it is much better, a little better, the same, a little worse, or much worse than six months ago? And six months from now, do you think it will be better, the same or worse than now? (personal finances); With respect to the economic situation of the country, do you think that at present it is much better, a little better, the same, a little worse or much worse than six months ago? And six months from now, do you think that it will be better, the same or worse than now? (the economy); In general, and taking into account the global performance of the government, are you very satisfied, rather satisfied, indifferent, rather unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with respect to how the government is performing? (the government)



**Note:** Measurements are calculated by combining the two positive response categories, subtracting the two negative response categories, and adding 100 to the total to avoid negative figures. The scale runs theoretically from 0 to 200, with 100 being the center point.

**Source:** Data provided by ASEP.

**Editor's Note:** As this graph shows, these satisfaction indicators—although measuring seemingly independent issues—move in tandem over time. Clearly, these measures are related—tapping the overall national mood. For more on this phenomenon as measured in other nations, see *Public Perspective*, Vol. 4, #5, p. 95; also Vol. 5, #6, p. 112.

mentary disappearance of the "political center" (UCD and CDS) is the best proof of its success, for it has forced other political parties to moderate their programs. Spain has not had an extreme right party similar to those found and

represented in some European parliaments, and the extreme left parties that existed during the first years of the transition have been absorbed mainly by the PSOE or merged within the IU. Just as

the Socialists have modified their political agenda when they reached power, it may be expected that if the PP wins the next election they will have little in common with the old AP, not to speak of the Francoists.

---

*Juan Diez-Nicolas is president of Analisis Sociologicos, Economicos y Politicos (Social, Economic and Political Analysis) in Madrid, Spain*