

PUBLIC OPINION PROS

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(and Everybody Else)



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Best Form of Government: The Public Image of the Monarchy in Spain

By Juan Díez-Nicolás

Thirty years after the monarchy was reestablished in Spain following the death of dictator Francisco Franco, all available data demonstrate that Spaniards have a great affection and respect for their king, Juan Carlos I. These strongly positive opinions seem to have been transferred gradually to all other members of the royal family, as well as to the institution itself, to the point that [the monarchy](#) has been and is at present undeniably preferred to any kind of republic.

Like that of any other social institution, the public image of the monarchy has more than one dimension. The four indicators most frequently used during the past three decades to measure these different aspects have been self-evaluated monarchist sentiment, evaluation of the Crown as an institution, preference for the monarchy as a political regime, and the personal image of King Juan Carlos himself. What can we say about each of these, and how have the different measurements developed over time?

A measure of self-evaluated monarchist sentiment might take the form of a survey item along the lines of, "Generally speaking, would you consider yourself a monarchist or a republican?" Of the four indicators mentioned, it is the least useful one. At the time of the reestablishment of the monarchy, there were few monarchists in Spain. During the forty years of the Franco regime, the public image of the institution had eroded to the point that large sectors did not hesitate to criticize it publicly, despite legislation adopted by that regime defining Spain as a kingdom. Nevertheless, when Juan Carlos became head of state as King of Spain on November 22, 1975, he was very widely accepted by the Spanish people, by some because they considered him the best guarantor of continuity without shocks, and

by others because they expected him to bring democracy—as he has done. For the majority of Spaniards, then and now, the choice was not between monarchy and republic, but between dictatorship and democracy.

For this reason, few, if any, surveys asked about the public image of the monarchy during the first years of the political transition to democracy; but in 1981 an attempted coup d'état changed that. On February 23 of that year, a group of Civil Guards from the old regime, led by Lieutenant Colonel Tejero, invaded the Congreso de los Diputados (equivalent to the U.S. House of Representatives) and held the deputies hostage while tanks led by Captain General Milans del Bosch occupied the streets of Valencia. The king played a decisive role in defusing the situation.

Since that time, polling questions about the monarchy as a political regime, about the Crown as an institution, and about the king himself have become more and more frequent. Most researchers have continued to avoid asking about monarchist sentiments, however, because in the wake of the loss of tradition under the Franco regime and the advent of a more secular-rational approach to authority, such sentiments are not believed to be important. Considered more vital has been a more pragmatic evaluation of the utility of the monarchy to guarantee the recovery of democracy and political stability. With very different public leaders increasingly and simultaneously proclaiming their republican beliefs and their full support for King Juan Carlos, monarchist sentiments have become a poor indicator of support for either the Crown or the monarchy.

We can confirm a utilitarian interpretation of the public image of the Spanish monarchy, the Crown, and the king himself through an analysis of data from ASEP's monthly survey on Spanish public opinion, going back to October 1986.

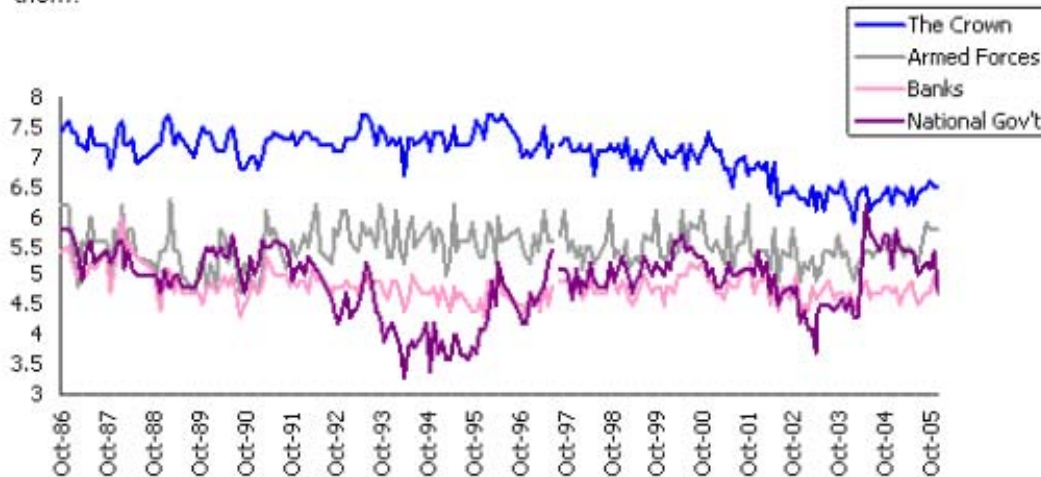
One indicator more useful to this analysis than measures of monarchist sentiment is the rating of the institution of the Crown. For over two hundred months, ASEP has measured the evaluation of the Crown as an institution on a scale of 0 (very bad) to 10 (very good), together with three other institutions also included every month: the national government, the armed forces, and the banks, and around

thirty or forty other institutions and social groups that are included in at least one month's survey every year.

Figure 1

Evaluation of Main Institutions

Question: With respect to the [following] institutions or social groups . . . in case you know them, could you evaluate them on a scale 0 to 10 based on your opinion about each one of them?*



*De las instituciones o grupos sociales que voy a leerle a continuación, ¿querría decirme si los conoce o no? Y en caso afirmativo, ¿podría calificarlas de 0 a 10, según la opinión que tenga Vd. de ellos?

Source: Surveys by Analysis Sociologicos, Economicos, y Politicos (Madrid, Spain).

Every month, without exception, the Crown has received a better rating than the other three permanent institutions, as well as being rated higher than any other political institution in surveys in which they appear (national or regional governments, congress, senate, courts of justice, supreme court, constitutional court, ombudsman, political parties, labor unions, and many others). Its scores have ranged for the most part between 7.5 and 6.5, never going above 8 points nor below 6 points. Most other institutions rarely receive ratings above 5.5. Occasionally, in the annual comparison, some humanitarian or otherwise nonpolitical institution or social group (such as the Red Cross, Caritas, the National Organization for the Blind, Spain's system of public universities, or the constitution) has received ratings a few decimal points higher than the Crown. Generally, however, the Crown has had the most favorable public image of any institution.

Of course, as for any other institution, opinion of the Crown is subject to the prevailing political, economic, and social climate at any given time—that is, the degree to which Spaniards are either satisfied and optimistic or discontented and pessimistic. This can be seen in the results of surveys conducted between the elections of 2000 and those of 2004, when a general fall in the ratings of all institutions was observed.

But a time series based on data for the entire twenty-year period also shows that the Crown's ratings actually improve at certain times of particularly great discontent or fear while those of other institutions decline, suggesting that Spaniards consider the Crown as the last refuge when their trust in all other institutions fails. That happened, for example, in the spring of 1994, when political scandals for more than a year caused a situation of great social alarm and concern. It happened again as a result of the political crisis created after the elections of March 14, 2004—held only three days after the Islamic terrorist bombings in Madrid which killed almost two hundred people—when the center-right PP government lost in favor of the center-left PSOE. Since then, the Crown has been gaining image, as the government has been losing it.

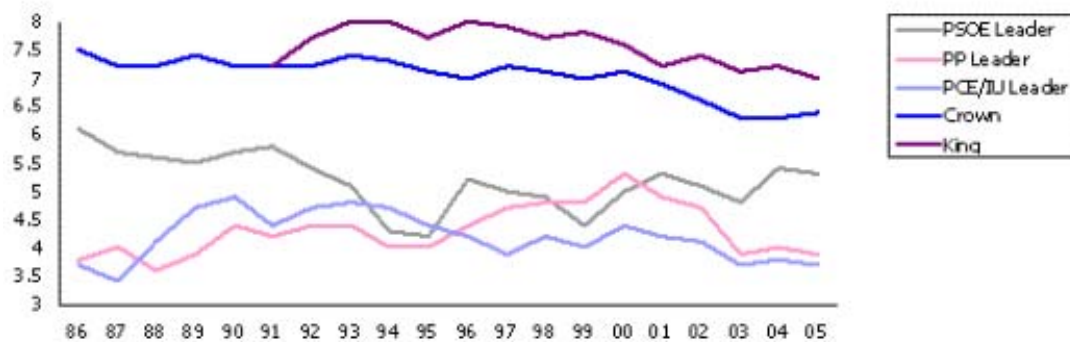
Our next indicator measures the public image of King Juan Carlos himself. Since October 1986, ASEP has, at least once a year, asked respondents to rate the leader of each of the three most important national parties (PSOE, PP, and IU), as well as for the ratings of many other social, economic, and political leaders. In 1991, King Juan Carlos was added to this list.

Figure 2

Evaluation of Party Leaders, Crown, and King

Questions: With respect to the [following] persons . . . if you know them, could you evaluate them on a scale 0 to 10 based on your opinion about each one of them?*

With respect to the [following] institutions or social groups . . . in case you know them, could you evaluate them on a scale 0 to 10 based on your opinion about each one of them? **



*De las personas que voy a mencionarle a continuación, ¿podría decirme si las conoce o no? Y en caso afirmativo, ¿querría calificarlas de 0 a 10, según la opinión que tenga Vd. de ellas?

**De las instituciones o grupos sociales que voy a leerle a continuación, ¿querría decirme si los conoce o no? Y en caso afirmativo, ¿podría calificarlas de 0 a 10, según la opinión que tenga Vd. de ellos?

Source: Surveys by Analysis Sociologicos, Economicos, y Politicos (Madrid, Spain).

As Figure 2 shows, the rating of the king has, without any exception, been significantly higher than that of any other leader throughout the past twenty years. The rating of Juan Carlos himself has also been higher than that of the Crown, and, consequently, higher than that of any of the other institutions.

In other consolidated constitutional monarchies in Europe where the monarchist tradition has not been interrupted, the prestige of the institution of the Crown is transferred to the king or queen at any particular time, providing them with its legitimacy. In Spain, it has been the king who has transferred his prestige to the Crown, providing it with his legitimacy. Juan Carlos's rating has always been above 7 points on the 0 to 10 point scale, and always very near 8 points. His good public image has projected itself not only to the Crown, but also to the other members of the royal family—Queen Sofía, Prince Felipe, Infantas Elena and Cristina, and, more recently, Princess Letizia, Prince Felipe's wife—all of whom are rated above any other public leader in annual summary rankings. (Only Pope John Paul II has been among them for the past two years, though always below King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofía.)

The final, and perhaps most important, indicator in our analysis asks Spaniards to what degree they accept the parliamentary monarchy as the best form of political regime for Spain. Since 1991, ASEP has been asking Spaniards, at least once a year, to choose among a presidential republic as in the United States, a parliamentary monarchy as in Spain, or a parliamentary republic as in Germany as the form of government they consider best for Spain.

Data for more than twelve years demonstrate that a great majority of Spaniards prefer a parliamentary monarchy to any of the two alternatives of republic, separately or jointly. More than two out of every three Spaniards have consistently held that a parliamentary monarchy is the best political regime for Spain, with less than 20 percent declaring their preference for a republic (mainly parliamentary). It seems fair to assume that many wholehearted republicans accept parliamentary monarchy as the best political regime for Spain.

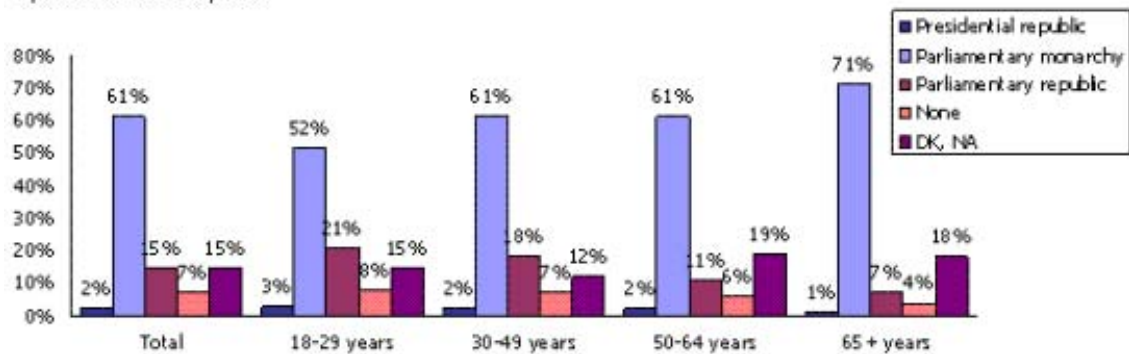
This is the indicator that really matters, because it very directly shows to what degree the present monarchy is preferred to a republic, regardless of one's deep sentiments about the monarchy or the republic as abstract hypothetical political regimes. Thus, there is no incoherence between a republican sentiment and the preference for parliamentary monarchy, probably as a consequence of King Juan Carlos's performance and his success in restoring prestige to the monarchy.

We see no significant changes during the past fifteen years in this preference of the great majority of Spaniards, whether republican or monarchist in sentiment, for a parliamentary monarchy over any kind of republic, even when we examine the results by age of respondents. In Figure 3, the data for 2005—the last year for which data are available—are presented by age group.

Figure 3

All Ages Say Parliamentary Monarchy is Best for Spain

Question: As you know, there are very different democratic political systems. Some democracies are presidential republics, as the United States. Many European democracies have parliamentary monarchies, as is the case in Spain. And other democracies are parliamentary republics, as Germany. Which of these three systems do you think is best in the specific case of Spain?*



*Como Vd. sabe, existen muy diferentes sistemas políticos democráticos. Algunas democracias son repúblicas presidencialistas, como los Estados Unidos. Muchas democracias europeas tienen monarquías parlamentarias, como es el caso de España. Y otras democracias son repúblicas parlamentarias, como en Alemania. ¿Cuál de estos tres sistemas le parece mejor en el caso concreto de España?
Source: Survey by Analysis Sociológicos, Económicos, y Políticos (Madrid, Spain), 2005.

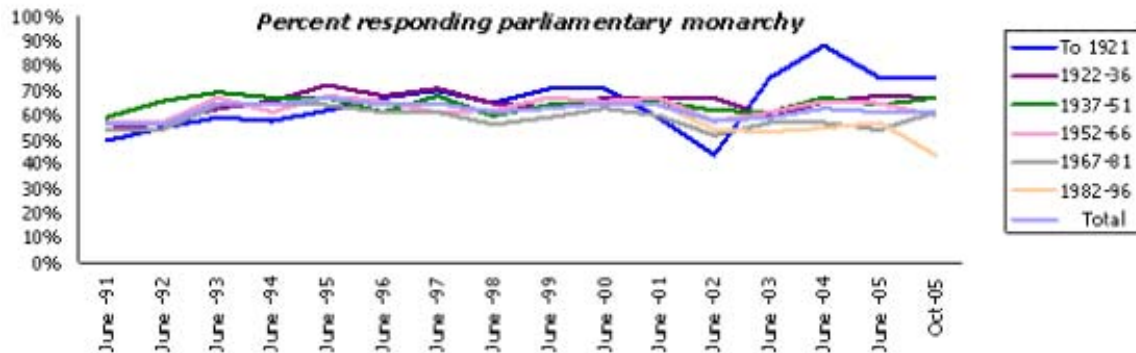
More than 50 percent of respondents in any age group and in any year since 1991 make this choice. And, while it is true that preference for a parliamentary monarchy is positively related to age, it cannot be ignored that more than 50 percent of respondents between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine prefer a parliamentary monarchy—more than double the proportion that prefers a parliamentary republic, and many times those choosing a presidential republic.

To explore the potential cohort effect on these preferences, we performed an analysis of preferences for different cohorts (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Preference for Monarchy Stable

Question: As you know, there are very different democratic political systems. Some democracies are presidential republics, as the United States. Many European democracies have parliamentary monarchies, as is the case in Spain. And other democracies are parliamentary republics, as Germany. Which of these three systems do you think is best in the specific case of Spain?*



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Source: Survey by Analysis Sociológicos, Económicos, y Políticos (Madrid, Spain).

Following previous work on generations in Spain, six generations were identified, each comprising fifteen cohorts presently coexisting in Spanish society. The oldest generation included those born before 1921 (its members now eighty-five years of age or older), while the youngest included those born between 1982 and 1996 (twenty-four years old or less at present).

Results indicated that a large majority of respondents in any generation preferred a parliamentary monarchy to a republic, even among the oldest and the youngest generations, despite a decline in the number of respondents in the oldest generation from a total of 129 in 1991 to only 8 in 2005, and an increase in the number in the youngest generation from 36 in 2000 to 138 in 2005—a finding that probably explains the greater variation in the data pertaining to those two generations. The number of respondents in the other four generations was relatively stable—generally over 150 in each one of the sixteen surveys—and also stable was the proportion who preferred parliamentary monarchy to any type of republic as the best political regime for Spain.

In summary, data seem to demonstrate that while preference for a republic varies from an average of 12 percent in the oldest generation to an average of 21 percent in the second-youngest generation (the youngest has really not been taken into account given the small size of the sample), preference for parliamentary monarchy varies only from 61 percent to 59 percent, respectively.

We might say on the basis of these findings that the future of parliamentary monarchy in Spain is well-assured. This conclusion seems to be confirmed by the results of another survey question that has been repeated since 1991 about the succession to King Juan Carlos. More than 80 percent of respondents every year since then have been answering that succession to King Juan Carlos by Prince Felipe will be achieved without problems, while less than 10 percent feel the monarchy will only last as long as King Juan Carlos lasts.

We must bear in mind, however, the rest of our findings, which seem to indicate that the Crown has been legitimized more and more by the performance of King Juan Carlos, rather than because of traditional monarchist legitimacy, or because of Franco's designation as his heir. Therefore, the answer regarding succession is probably also influenced by the public image of Prince Felipe himself, and, most likely, by the cover provided by the image of his father, King Juan Carlos, and his mother, Queen Sofia.

If one is to make an assumption based on our analysis, it would seem that Spaniards are ready to give Prince Felipe, and therefore parliamentary monarchy, the credit accumulated by King Juan Carlos. But their future response will depend on the future performance of Prince Felipe when he becomes king, more than on the prestige or image of the Crown itself.

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