

The Elections of 14-M: 2 Days – a Reflection of a Term of Office

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Very rarely in general elections in a European country does foreign policy attain the relevance which it did in the Spanish elections in March 2004. We would have to travel to the USA or to countries going through very tense situations, or to the cold war to find examples of a call for elections in which factors of foreign policy have been so determining in the result, as in these elections. Also, because of that and although a foreign policy usually has a strong component of state and suffers less fluctuations with alternative governments, on this occasion an important change had already taken place with regard to some of the new executive's foreign strategic aims – withdrawal of troops in Iraq, new priority members in Europe, improvement in the relations with Morocco, etc.

Nevertheless, although the war in Iraq and the brutal terrorist attack on 11th March had a decisive impact, we should admit that it cannot be understood as something happening in a void and we should consider it among the many other elements in the political situation which characterized the term of office from 2000 to 2004. The attack on 11th March, the government's information policy in the days after the attack, the citizens' protests, the connection of this attack with the Spanish foreign policy and the unconditional alignment with the strategy in Washington, were all elements which formed a spectacular cocktail which can only be understood as a end product of a series of processes which had been brewing for four years.

After a first term of office, in which the Popular Party surprised many by their moderation and their ability to negotiate with certain allies, the absolute majority obtained in the year 2000 gave rise to a significant change in policies in many fields: the desire to change all the structure of the educational system, a policy of a growing aggressiveness against and an institutional rupture with the Basque Government, the shift from collaboration to clashes with the unions, or the posture of the Spanish Government, who situated themselves among the maximum promoters of the North American intervention in Iraq. In these and in many other fields, there was a shift from a policy of pacts to one of imposition, from moderate to radical policies, from the will to collaborate with certain allies to an inexistent will for dialogue. All of this was carried out in an aggressive way and style based on the arrogance which was facilitated by the absolute majority. All this had a clear influence in the field of public opinion, where support for the Popular Party Government had been fast deteriorating from the year 2002 onwards (Table 12). After having obtained the maximum support shortly after the general elections in the year 2000, the accumulation of unpopular measures, conflicts in the different sectors and confrontations with different allies, prompt-

ed in the year 2002 a clear and brusque fall both in the appraisal of the President of the Government and in the rating of the work carried out by the Government. Although after the municipal elections in Spring 2003, the Popular Party made a slight recovery, the signs that the honeymoon between the Government and public opinion in the year 2000 had come to an end were by then indisputable and the rejection of the government and its policies was widespread.

Another two pieces of evidence are important in order to understand what happened in those years and why this information was not cause for alarm in the Government. On the one hand, there was no enthusiasm with regard to alternative parties. While the appraisal by the public of the leader of the opposition was always acceptably high and on many occasions higher than that of the President of the Government, the appraisal of the work carried out by the opposition did not generate any enthusiasm at all. That is to say that, on the one hand, a credible alternative was emerging which had not been the case in the previous term of office, but this alternative did not stir up enough enthusiasm to generate any fear in the Government.

On the other hand, it is important to bear in mind the facts in the year 2003. The development of the anti-globalisation

TABLE 12 Half yearly evolution of the appraisal of the President and of his Government

	April 2000	October 2000	April 2001	October 2001	April 2002	October 2002	April 2003	October 2003
Appraisal of José María Aznar	5.8	5.4	5.2	5.1	5.1	4.8	4	4.6
Rating of the work carried out by the Government (very good + good)	49	38	35	36	34	28	25	30

Source: Centre of Sociological Research Surveys.

movement, the strong protests in the years 2002 and 2003 with regard to the war in Iraq and the negative perspectives in the opinion polls predicted difficult municipal elections for the Popular Party. However, although it underwent a slight downfall and the Socialist Party outnumbered it in votes, the result was much better than expected for the Popular Party and gave the impression that if, after everything that had happened, it did not have any effect on the number of votes, nothing else would, as it is reflected in the improvement in the Popular Party's results in the survey of October 2003. If we add all this to the fact that in almost all the pre-election surveys published at the beginning of 2004 the Popular Party had a clear advantage, very few envisaged that there would be a surprise.

However, the tragedy of 11th March struck and evidently, an act of this magnitude caused a remarkable repercussion. The terrorist attack in itself could have generated all kinds of reactions. In fact, in other circumstances it is possible that the main effect might have been that of a civic union of all citizens, with very little impact on the elections or one that, in any case, would have proved beneficial to the Government. But all the events on the days of 12th and 13th March were a condensed reflection of the dynamics of the term of office: a Government that concealed the truth, that tried to obtain a political debate focused solely on the Basque problem at all costs, together with certain critical and mobilised sectors of the public who condemned this reality. If you add to this an already existing opposition which, although without much enthusiasm, was credible as an alternative, the conditions

were appropriate for those citizens who, although being dissatisfied with the Government, could either give it their support once more or stay at home, to finally decide to mobilize against it.

Various studies have clearly demonstrated what impact the days from 11th to 14th March had on the result (Santamaría, 2004; Lago y Montero, 2005; Torcal y Rico, 2004). Without a doubt the results would not have been the same, without any doubt there would have been less participation and there would have been fewer tactical votes from ex voters of IU (United Left Wing) for the Socialist Party and it is impossible to know with any certainty who would have obtained more votes or more seats. However, what these analyses have shown are the following two very clear conclusions. In the first place, that those days were simply the straw that broke the camel's back. If there had not been so many citizens who were dissatisfied with the governmental policies on the whole over the previous 4 years; if there had not been numerous citizens exasperated by the decisions which they perceived as very negative and if there had not been a credible opposition, those facts would not have been enough to alter the results of the elections. Those days convinced some doubtful citizens, that on balance there had been more errors than wise moves and they convinced the fault finding citizens, who had a tendency towards not voting, that they had to get rid of that Government any way they could. In second place, all that was not the result of the terrorist attack, but the result of connecting first the terrorist attack with the Spanish foreign policy in the last term of office and then, the information policy of those days with the style of a high hand-

ed Government who had acted in such a manner throughout their term of office. They were days of an exemplary exercise of everybody's roles in a representative democracy. The Government wanted to continue being loyal to its style of government and coherent with its policies, as it had done throughout its term of office. The main party in the opposition continued its role of acting as a quiet opposition. The most fault finding sectors of the public began to ask questions out loud. The public as a whole assessed the term of office and suddenly it appeared summarized in this brilliant two day video-clip, which reflected with great precision what the four years had been like and they acted in consequence. The tragedy which had devastated Madrid had not been an unpredictable earthquake, but the consequence of political decisions. And the way they chose to explain this tragedy continued to be part of a way of governing to which many Spanish citizens wanted to put an end to.

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