

# The Transition to Democracy in Spain and Portugal

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### Introduction

During the 1970's, Spain and Portugal made the political transition from corporatism to democracy. Spain is often viewed as the paradigm case for the transition to democracy model. If Spain's experience was the generalizable case for the transition to democracy, wouldn't Portugal's path to democracy be similar because of the two nations' similarities? Both countries shared a common geographical setting, history, religion, and corporatist dictatorships. However, markedly different factors caused the political changes, producing different government and social structures in each society. Spain and Portugal may have similarities, but these factors cloud the very different processes that occurred in each country's transition to democracy, bringing the appearance of correlation when in fact there is little. Can a meaningful model be developed around Spain's experience if the country it had the most in common with followed a very different path? If Spain's transition was vastly different to Portugal, how can its experience be applied to countries it has even less in common with? Or is it best to just compare two or more case studies without attempting to devise some kind of forced cursory commonality using a model?

### The Spanish Transition to Democracy

The Spanish transition to democracy was a slow evolutionary process from Franco's corporatist republic to King Juan Carlos I's democratic monarchy. General Francisco Franco gained power in Spain after winning the Spanish Civil War in the 1930's. He established an authoritarian, corporatist, centralized state ruled by his National Movement, a neo-one party apparatus. The Law of Succession, passed in 1947, established Spain as a traditional Catholic monarchy with Franco as Spain's regent for life and gave him the power to name the next king. During the 1960's, Spain developed economically, resulting in a larger educated middle class and a new urban working class. Catholic priests began to attack the Franco regime as undemocratic and against civil liberties. These factors, along with regional oppression of the Basque and Catalan groups, brought rise to organized opposition to Franco's National Movement (Rinehart and Browning Seeley 40-47). The theory that economic development brings

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democracy would apply here to Spain, and may have helped the smooth evolution to democracy that occurred in the 1970's.

Despite new opposition to his power, Franco felt secure enough to name a successor, Prince Juan Carlos, grandson of the deposed Alfonso XIII. He skipped over Juan Carlos's father, Don Juan, who had called for the overthrow of Franco and the establishment of Spanish democracy after World War II (Gunther 202). Juan Carlos had sworn allegiance to the National Movement, and Franco had personally supervised his successor's education (Rinehart and Browning Steeley 55). Tension with Spain began to mount with the anticipation of Franco's death in 1969. An economic slowdown brought general strikes, freedom of speech was again curtailed, and Spain returned to the level of oppression present in the 1940's. In 1973, ETA, the Basque separatist group, successfully assassinated Franco's Prime Minister, Luis Carrero Blanco. This state of uncertainty essentially dictated that Francoism would not survive Franco's death, and some reforms would be required to prevent anarchy. Franco's new Prime Minister Carlos Arias Navarro promised cautious reforms but was attacked by die-hard Francoists and reformers. When Franco finally died in November of 1975, Spain was ready for political change (48-49).

When Juan Carlos came to power, there was no reason to expect that he would be the one to bring democracy to Spain. He dismissed Prime Minister Navarro in July 1976 after six months, but replaced him with another Francoist, Adolfo Suarez. Suarez's links with the National Movement and the military's allegiance to Juan Carlos allowed them to begin slow political reforms, like releasing some political prisoners. Later that year Suarez persuaded the corporatist Cortes to pass a political reform bill that would replace it with a bicameral, democratically elected body. This bill was then sent to the people of Spain for approval, using Franco's 1945 Law on Referenda. It was approved by 98% of voters, giving Suarez and Juan Carlos a mandate for reform, not revolution. In February 1977 political parties were legalized, and the Communist Party was unbanned in April after Juan Carlos was able to gain military support for the action. In June, one and a half years after the death of Franco, democratic elections were held for the Cortes and a centrist coalition headed by Suarez, the UCD, formed the government. "The election results were a victory for both moderation and the desire for change. This boded well for the development for democracy in Spain... The political skill of Suarez, the courage and determination of Juan Carlos, and the willingness of opposition leaders to sacrifice their hopes for more radical social change to the more immediate goal of securing political democracy helped to end the polarization." Autonomy, taken away by Franco, was returned to the Basque and Catalonia regions, and the task of drafting a new constitution to formally replace Franco's state began (Rinehart and Browning Steeley 56-58).

Suarez pursued a program of politics of consensus, and was able to gain support from all groups for a new

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constitution except from the Basque regional party and far right parties (Gunther 207). The Cortes passed the new Constitution in October 1978, and was approved by popular vote in December of that year. The Cortes was dissolved, and new elections were held in 1979, bringing the UCD to power again (Rinehart and Browning Steeley 60). The Franco era had officially come to an end. The Franquist state was able to utilize Franco's policies to slowly democratize, prevent revolution, mass unrest, and opposition from the government itself to change. Spain's transition to democracy was proven in 1981 when a Franquist general attempted a military coup and took the parliament hostage. General Tejero believed King Juan Carlos would support the coup, but instead used his popularity among the military to oppose Tejero and defend democracy (Graham 2-4).

Scholars have lauded the Spanish transition to democracy. "Never before had a dictatorial regime been transformed into a pluralistic, parliamentary democracy without civil war, revolutionary overthrow, or defeat by a foreign power. The transition is all the more remarkable because the institutional mechanisms designed to maintain Franco's authoritarian system made it possible to legislate a democratic constitutional monarchy into existence," (Rinehart and Browning Steeley 55). The willingness of Spain's political leaders to compromise, plus a growing level of economic development, allowed Spain to near-seamlessly evolve from Franco's dictatorial state to a democratic monarchy. Unfortunately for Portugal, it lacked Spain's evolutionary fortune.

## **The Iberian Counterexample: The Portuguese Transition to Democracy**

Unlike Spain's evolutionary path to democracy, Portugal followed a path of revolutionary upheaval. In 1910, a revolution displaced Portugal's monarchy and established the First Republic. This period was marked by chaos and turbulence as 45 cabinets were in power, four of which were deposed by military coups. In 1928, Portugal's military government appointed economist Dr. Antonio Salazar as Minister of Finance. Along with being a devout Catholic, Salazar had observed the perils of democratic government during the First Republic and feared the collapse of law and order to democratic principles. After successfully eliminating Portugal's budget defect, Salazar was promoted to Prime Minister. Salazar formed the corporatist New State, and headed the sole political party, the National Union. He was able to rule by decree, answerable only to Portugal's narrow elite of businessmen, generals, and church officials. Elections for the National Assembly and the President (who appointed the Prime Minister) occurred, but a secret police force and general repression kept Salazar's support bodies in power. With the resources of Portugal's overseas colonies, the country had no pressure to modernize like the rest of Western Europe (Schneidman 6-8). Portugal viewed its colonies as integral parts of the Portuguese state as overseas provinces, not subject to decolonization. Wars for independence broke out in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea in the 1960's, and Portugal committed eighty percent of its troops to suppressing the insurgents. Salazar suffered a stroke in 1968, fell into a

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coma, and died the next year (Portugal: The New State).

Marcello Caetano was appointed Salazar's successor by President Americo Tomas. Caetano attempted to implement cautious reforms, but they were met with opposition from Tomas, who was able to utilize his power as president after Salazar's departure from the political scene. The ongoing conflict in Portugal's colonial possessions also threatened Caetano's regime. In 1971, 41% of the state budget was devoted to military spending. Thousands fled conscription, and the military was forced to commission officers from outside the military academies. This made the military more prone to factionalism as the new officers were not committed to defending Portugal's overseas possessions and reflected leftist ideologies. They formed the Armed Forces Movement, and in April of 1974 staged a coup that toppled Caetano and Tomas from power (Gunther 196-197).

Portugal's colonies soon gained independence, but Portugal itself faced years of coups, revolutionary turmoil, and interest group conflict before it completed its transition to democracy. Although the exact details of Portugal's revolution and transition to democracy are beyond the scope of this paper, Portugal's experience will be used as a counterexample to Spain. Portugal lacked the continuity in government present in Spain as different interim governments were formed, while the leaders of the former corporatist government were exiled and unable to provide the continuity necessary for a stable transition of power. The MFA moved to the left and purged its more moderate members. Agricultural lands were seized and banks nationalized, sending Portugal's already weak economy into a tailspin. Multiple post-revolution coups were staged until a moderate gained power. This group then drafted a new constitution that favored a socialist ideology, unlike Spain's neutral one that favored compromise and unity (Gunther 198-200). Although Spain was culturally heterogeneous compared to Portugal, that country's rulers chose unity and democracy over personal gains. Spain's primary interest groups stood to benefit from the shift away from Francoism. King Juan Carlos was able to unite the military, whereas in Portugal the military was fragmented and its members joined competing interest groups. Spain's economy was developing, but Portugal's was stuck in nineteenth century mercantilism with its colonies. Finally, Portugal's different parties sought to impose their political will onto the county, creating chaos in the process. All of these factors kept Portugal from following Spain's textbook transition to democracy.

## **Future Research Applications**

The Spanish transition to democracy, followed by many others in the 1970's, became a major source of study for scholars of comparative politics. Howard Wiarda, in the Introduction to Comparative Politics textbook, comments: "The vast spread of democracy, which was not predicted by most political scientists and was not foreseen [by earlier

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models], has meant the decline and discrediting of democracy's primary alternatives." Marxist-Leninism, authoritarianism, corporatism, and other regime styles have ended, and scholars like Francis Fukuyama feel democracy has triumphed. Wiarda warns that there are "different kinds, levels, and degrees" of democracy (100-101). This requires special attention when researching countries that claim democracy, as well as countries that have transitioned to democracy.

In a 2002 article in *World Affairs*, Wiarda offers that the transition to democracy theory is so flawed that not only can it not be applied to Greece, Portugal, and Eastern Europe, but Spain itself, and thus new theories are needed. He feels scholars are taking the theories about Southern Europe at face value while deciding whether or not to use them in comparative research of Eastern Europe. Wiarda argues that the literature on Southern Europe failed to take into account political culture, and instead focused on institutional change. Changes under the authoritarian regimes, like economic reform and social change are often overlooked. Eastern Europe, unlike Portugal and Spain, had to make political, social, and economic change all at the same time. Spain's transition was so different from its Southern and Eastern European counterparts that it is extremely difficult to formulate. He also discusses how international influences are often overlooked, as both Spain and Portugal had outside assistance in their transitions. Wiarda's article concludes by arguing theories should be revised to reflect new facts. Models may only have cursory correlation between the Southern and Eastern European experiences, and instead researchers should examine the transition to democracy itself and its sources (Wiarda).

Spain's unique transition to democracy prevents it from serving as a comparative model with Portugal and other nations. Spain can serve as a *role* model for nations attempting a continual transition to democracy, but most changes to democracy seem to follow the rupture/revolutionary route. Today, Spain's experience could be applied to another heterogeneous country: Iraq. Although the Saddam Hussein government was ruptured by outside intervention by the United States, Spain's attempt at political consensus was able to prevent the internal fragmentation of the Spanish state. If the US is indeed willing to impose lasting democracy on Iraq, it should see to the stability of the country by promoting internal consensus among Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. It may be impossible to develop a catch-all model for a transition to democracy, but past success stories like Spain can help newly democratizing countries avoid the problems Portugal faced which nearly derailed that country's path to democracy.

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*Date written: 2004*