

The 2008 Spanish General Elections: “Antagonistic Bipolarization” Geared by Presidential Debates, Partisanship, and Media Interests

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The Spanish general elections of 2008 held attributes familiar to Western democracies: permanent campaigning, negativism, and personalization. The mainstream media played along the strategy of bipartisan polarization encouraged by the Socialists and the conservatives, which resulted in a loss of power for the smaller nationalist parties and the postcommunist left. Candidate debates returned to Spanish television after fifteen years, but the moderating role of journalists was banned by the two big parties, who defined and agreed on the debate topics beforehand. The use of new communication technologies by political parties did not result in an open-source campaign. Spontaneous citizen participation was more feared than desired, and formerly revolutionary Web 2.0 was co-opted and tamed by the parties, integrating it into their political marketing tool kit.

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The 2008 Spanish general elections show the consolidation of several features prevailing in Western democracies. Contemporary electoral campaigns are *permanent* (parties engage in a continuous electoral strategy that goes well beyond the official election period) and increasingly *negative* (focused on the criticism of the adversary, pursuing the mobilization of their own supporters and the demobilization of their opponents). Lastly, electoral rhetoric has gone through a high degree of *personalization*, enhanced in the Spanish case by the resuming of TV debates between the candidates of the two big state parties, which had been absent from Spanish television since 1993.

Permanent, negative, and personalized campaigns defined a media coverage that reproduced what could be deemed an “antagonistic bipolarization” (Sampedro 2008). By this we mean the agonic fight between the government of the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, or PSOE), headed by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, and the opposition, led by Mariano Rajoy, candidate for the conservative People’s Party (PP), unleashed after the March 11 bombings in Madrid, three days before the previous general elections held on March 14, 2004. After that date, the PP responded with a constant mobilization of its supporters and tried to block several institutional initiatives of the new Socialist government. This latter responded by excluding the PP from government pacts, which, in the middle of the legislative term, favored agreements with the postcommunists (Izquierda Unida), and the Catalan Republican nationalists (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya).

Bipolarization has turned into de facto bipartisanship. The election results of March 9, 2008, reveal an increase in votes and parliamentary representation by the two big parties. The “polarized pluralism” model, applied by Hallin and Mancini (2004) to Spain, seems to be evolving toward a bipolarized model (the postcommunists’ and Catalan Republican nationalists’ parliamentary representation have disappeared). The Socialists and the conservatives tried to expel each other from the sphere of legitimate political competence and overshadowed the other political forces.

The two debates between the candidates of PP and PSOE were the subject of tough negotiations between campaign managers and television stations. The results of their bargaining reveal several structural features of the Spanish political and communicative system.

First, the remaining governmental control of public service broadcasting (Radio Televisión Española, or RTVE) and the excessive politicization of private TV stations became clear. Despite the reforms the Zapatero administration introduced to pursue the political independence of public television, the PP refused to consider RTVE for the debates. Implicitly, this was an acknowledgment of the lack of independence of public television, mirrored by the party-media alliances that characterize news media in Spain. No consensus was reached to broadcast the debates on the two main private TV stations either. Eventually, the Academy of Television hosted the debates and an open signal live broadcast by RTVE and three of the five private stations with statewide reach.

Second, the debates showed little independence of Spanish journalism regarding partisanship. This was demonstrated by the harsh negotiations that surrounded the selection of the debate moderators and their final role, which was reduced to managing the time of the candidates’ right to speak, with debate topics agreed to beforehand by both parties. The subordination of