



Agenda dynamics in Spain

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At the end of the book, Field discusses the new situation at the national level, where we find the two traditional large parties (PP and PSOE) are being challenged in parliament by two newcomers, *Podemos*, generally considered to be on the left, and *Ciudadanos* on the right. At the national level, when four relatively large parties now compete for power and discuss possible government coalitions, the direct influence of the regionally based political parties might become less obvious. In any case, we already know that the government formation process immediately became more complex. The large-scale changes in the party systems in Europe and elsewhere that we are currently witnessing are impacting on coalition politics – in Spain, in Europe and beyond. Regardless of this, I very much recommend the book. It shows how in-depth analyses of country politics can inform cross-national studies and vice versa. It also demonstrates one of the core insights of non-cooperative game theory, namely, that actors do not have to share the same preferences to find cooperation useful. In that respect, the historical record of Spanish minority governments to date provides a lesson for both analysts of and politicians involved in the politics of compromise.

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Agenda dynamics in Spain, by Laura Chaqués Bonafont,
 Frank R. Baumgartner and Anna Palau, New York, Palgrave Macmillan,
 2015, 292 pp., \$105.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-137-32878-6

Agenda Dynamics in Spain is a systematic scrutiny of the issues that have drawn governmental attention between 1980 and 2013 and an explanation of these priorities in relation to party and media preferences and institutional factors.

Considering the time frame, the first thought could be that at most the book is an account of a foregone time in Spanish politics, since the general election of 2015 has created a new and more fragmented party scenario, whose consequence

would be a reorientation towards less majoritarian practices, thus radically transforming agenda dynamics. The significance of these transformations is reflected in the emergence of two new parties and unparalleled levels of distrust towards the political elite and EU policies. And yet the book remains a significant contribution to the study of Spanish and comparative politics in European multilevel systems because it points to a number of structural factors that affect agenda capacity and are not likely to be transformed in the current scenario.

The book is part of the Compared Agendas Project based on a quantitative analysis of a large database of prime ministers' speeches, government question time, party manifestos and newspaper front news codified into 19 policy issues. The main argument and finding of the book is that despite growing partisanship and confrontation along the time period – in particular since the mid-2000s – party preferences do not predict well which issues will get attention from government and opposition. Instead, the authors point out that there are three key external factors, namely the state of the economy, crises and intergovernmental relations in a multilevel system. As a result, the authors find that mandate responsiveness has declined as governments' attention to their election manifesto decreases and prime ministers' speeches and government party parliamentary questions adapt to economic pressures and sudden public opinion changes related to external crises. This is particularly problematic for a system with strong majoritarian characteristics in the government–opposition dynamic, and is strongly related to consistent findings on the declining quality of Spanish democracy related to an increasing usage of decrees (decreasing parliamentary scrutiny and ownership of legislation), weak scrutiny of government in Parliament and weak public debate because of the tendency of the media to focus on the government agenda and declining media pluralism because of the economic crisis. All of this contributes to an agenda focus on a few divisive issues in recent years – individual rights, the public role of religion and the politics of decentralisation – leaving most areas of public policy without opposition, intra-institutional or media oversight.

The findings of the book are very significant in a European context. Firstly the authors find that even though issue attention has become more polarised, party preferences are very close on a vast majority of issues. Secondly they find that European issues and multilevel governance are increasingly important in determining the government agenda capacity. That said, the book would not support the argument that the Spanish political system is evolving towards the consociative characteristics of other European polities since parties still develop polarisation strategies despite the context of increased party fragmentation – causing difficulties in achieving compromises for government formation – and because the Europeanisation of agenda-setting remains limited as parties still have strong incentives to place European affairs in a traditional government–opposition frame.

Obviously the book has some limits in relation to available data – e.g. the focus on newspapers disregards the role that new political infotainment TV outlets has acquired – and does not answer some significant questions, as the fact that civil society and protest politics have acquired a prominent role in setting the agenda since 2011 is not considered. That said, the book provides a large amount of information

and data and points towards structural issues that are likely to remain significant in the study of Spanish and European politics after the euro crisis.

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How parties win: shaping the Irish political arena, by Sean D. McGraw, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2015, 304 pp., \$30.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-472-12081-9

Sean McGraw has produced an engaging and comprehensive study of political parties in the Republic of Ireland. He persuasively explains how two parties have captured over two-thirds of the vote at successive elections between 1932 and 2007. These are Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and they have remained what the author describes as major parties throughout this period. A major party is defined as one that receives at least 15 per cent of the vote at successive elections and is a viable coalition partner for government formation. McGraw suggests that retaining major party status is not inevitable and in a useful comparative section highlights cases where continuity has been maintained and others where parties have lost their majority status. The most important insight here is that political parties are agents in their success; the political party is an independent variable rather than a dependent one. As dynamic agents in the face of change and insurgency, political parties and their leaders actively respond to threats to their dominance and creatively remake the political system to assure that dominance.

The Irish political system may no longer be considered *sui generis* as it once was, but there remain some intriguing puzzles that require explanation. It provides a significant case study for McGraw to test his hypothesis. He identifies three domains within which major parties have been able to secure their dominance: ideological, institutional and organisational. Drawing on two parliamentary surveys and opinion poll data, the author explores these issues in considerable depth. His findings show that while the public is often divided on controversial issues, the major political parties have successfully avoided confronting them at general elections. Indeed, there is a strong tendency to converge at the centre of the ideological spectrum and the public perceive virtually all the parties as converging in this way. This is of particular importance for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which have a vested interest in avoiding more controversial policies. This is because both parties attract voters from every part of the country and from every social group. Moreover, they also compete in every constituency and normally win at least one seat in every constituency. The nationalist ideology of both parties may also contribute to consensus but also to the avoidance of more ideological issues. This has not prevented minor