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# The 2011 General Election in Spain: The Collapse of the Socialist Party

Irene Martín and Ignacio Urquizu-Sancho

*The 2011 general election in Spain had unprecedented results. The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) got its worst electoral results ever in general elections and the Popular Party (PP) won and obtained its second absolute majority since the establishment of democracy. We sustain that the defeat of PSOE can be considered a more defining feature of the elections than the victory of PP. Minority parties increased their electoral support and three new parties entered Congress. This article analyses the political and economic context that led to these changes with respect to the previous elections of 2008.*

*Keywords:* 2011 Spanish Elections; PSOE; PP; Zapatero; Rajoy; Indignados

The eleventh parliamentary elections which took place on 20 November 2011 in Spain led to the victory of Partido Popular (Popular Party, PP) and put an end to more than seven years of socialist rule. The electoral support of PP (45 per cent of the votes) led to the fifth absolute majority obtained by any party in Spain since 1977 (186 seats out of 350) (Table 1).<sup>1</sup> The Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, PSOE), on its part, obtained its worst result since the inception of democracy in Spain (29 per cent of the votes; 110 seats). In spite of what this panorama conveys at first sight, these elections are better described as PSOE's collapse than PP's victory. One just needs to compare the number of votes and seats that PSOE lost between 2008 and 2011 (4,315,455 votes and 59 seats) and the number of votes and seats that PP won (552,683 votes and 32 seats).

A second feature was the increased support for small parties, both regional and not. The concentration of votes around the two main parties decreased from 84 per cent in 2008 to 73 per cent in 2011 and the concentration of seats from 92 per cent to 85 per cent. This meant a change in the trend followed during the previous 15 years. The number of parties represented in Congress increased from ten to 13. The most remarkable of the new parties entering Congress was Amaiur (the name refers to a place in the region of Navarra that offered great resistance to the conquest by the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries), a coalition of Basque left nationalists that obtained seven seats in Congress.

**Table 1** Spanish General Elections 2011 and 2008

	2011			2008		
	Votes (N and %)		Seats	Votes (N and %)		Seats
PP	10,866,566	44.6	186	10,278,010	39.9	154
PSOE	7,003,511	28.8	110	11,289,335	43.9	169
IU-LV (Los Verdes)	1,685,991	6.9	11	969,946	3.8	2
UPyD	1,143,225	4.7	5	306,079	1.2	1
CiU	1,015,691	4.2	16	779,425	3.0	10
Amaiur	334,498	1.4	7			
EAJ (Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea)- PNV	324,317	1.3	5	306,128	1.2	6
ERC (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya)	256,985	1.1	3	298,139	1.2	3
BNG (Bloque Nacionalista Galego)	184,037	0.8	2	212,543	0.8	2
CC-NC-PNC (Coalición Canaria- Nueva Canarias-Partido Nacionalista Canario)	143,881	0.6	2	174,629	0.7	2
Compromís-Q	125,306	0.5	1			
FAC	99,473	0.4	1			
GBAI <sup>1</sup> (Geroa Bai)	42,415	0.2	1	62,398	0.2	1
Turnout	24,666,392	68.9		25,900,439	73.9	
Abstention	11,113,099	31.1		9,172,740	26.2	
Invalid votes	317,555	1.3		165,576	0.6	
Blank votes	333,461	1.4		286,182	1.1	

Before 2011, Nafarroa Bai.

<sup>1</sup>Source: Ministry of Interior.

These phenomena have been accompanied by other factors such as a decrease in five points in the level of turnout (69 per cent, the third lowest since 1977) and a slight increase in the number of invalid and blank votes.

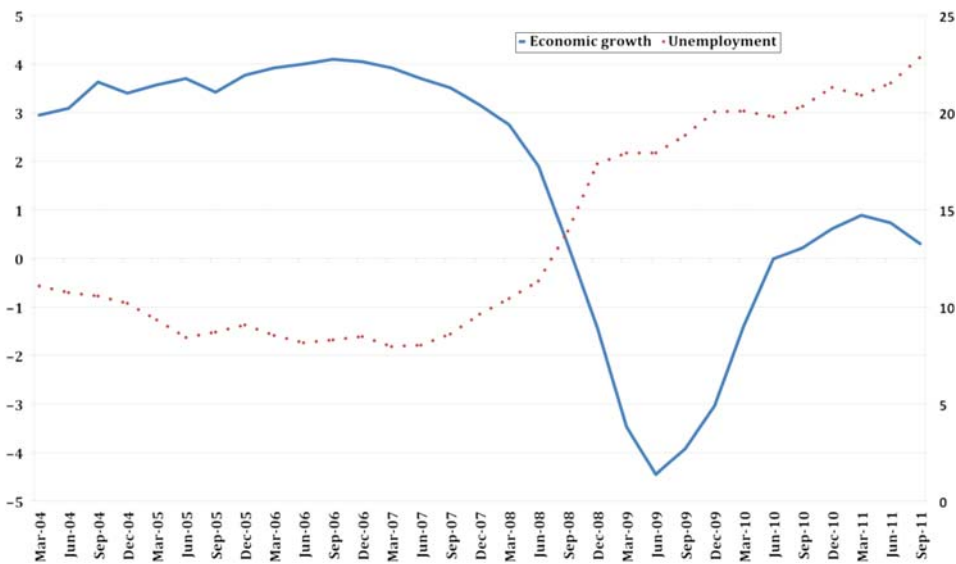
Below we analyse the background and context of these elections, paying special attention to the economic crisis that preceded them and analysing to what extent they had an impact on the result. We then go on to explore the circumstances under which the rise of the small parties took place and identify which of them benefited most from the Socialist defeat. It should come as no surprise that the economy has played a crucial role. But other phenomena such as the appearance of an unprecedented protest movement against the political and economic situation one week before the local elections of May 2011 (the 15-M movement), the legalisation of Basque independence formations in the context of historical steps towards the end of terrorism, the characteristics of the main party leaders and the peculiarities of the electoral campaign should not be ignored when trying to make sense of the electoral results.

### The Delayed Impact of the Economic Crisis

In March 2008, PSOE had won a second consecutive election with José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero as its leader. The main issue during the electoral campaign that year had been

the fight against terrorism. Economic issues, however, had been sufficiently present during the campaign. In the pre-electoral debate held on television on 21 February 2008 between the main PSOE and PP spokesmen on the economy—Pedro Solbes and Manuel Pizarro<sup>2</sup>, respectively—Pizarro, stressed that the Spanish economy was characterised by high levels of inflation, unemployment, deficit and private debt. Solbes, on his part, insisted on the need for social expenses, as well as on the larger number of people in employment and the higher growth rate compared with 2003, when PP was in government. According to the different surveys carried out, Solbes won that debate. In any case, according to the electoral promises, one could say that none of the main Spanish parties foresaw correctly the development of the economy in the coming months: Zapatero had promised a rise in the minimum salary and pensions and Mariano Rajoy, the leader of PP, had promised to lower the taxes and raise minimum pensions. At that time the economy was still growing. During 2007 the Spanish economy had grown at a rate of 3.7 per cent (Figure 1, left axis). At the end of that year, even the International Monetary Fund shared the relative optimism of the Spanish government, predicting an economic growth rate of 2.7 per cent in gross domestic product (GDP) for 2008.

The truth is that, even if the Spanish economy was still growing, the rate of growth had started to decline in 2007 (Figure 1). The so-called ‘real-estate bubble’—with the price of housing going up by more than ten per cent annually since 1997—exploded at the end of that year. Both external (subprime loans crisis in the United States [US]) and internal economic factors played a role in the rapid decrease in the demand for housing. This situation led to a dramatic and sudden decrease in prices in the sector,



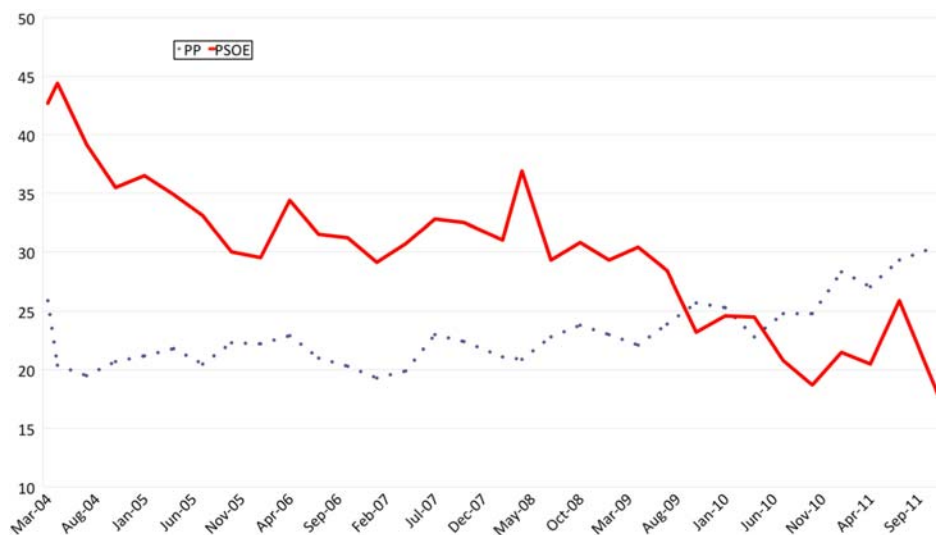
**Figure 1** Economic Growth and Unemployment in Spain (2004–11).

Source: Bank of Spain and National Statistical Institute.

a huge increase in the number of empty houses available, a rise in unemployment (mainly in the building sector, on which the Spanish economy relies heavily)<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1, right axis) and a rise in personal debt.

In spite of this evidence, the government for months denied that Spain was going through an economic crisis. This may have proved a successful electoral strategy. The deterioration of the economy did not seem to have any impact on voting intention prior to the March 2008 elections (Figure 2) and PSOE won with 44 per cent of the votes. However, after the elections the trend of economic deterioration grew even faster. In July 2008 Zapatero finally admitted that Spain was going through an economic crisis following the same trend already observed inside and outside the Eurozone. A few months later the Spanish economy officially entered recession. Spanish citizens traditionally perceive PP as more competent than PSOE in handling economic issues (Urquizu-Sancho 2011b) and Zapatero's resistance to admitting there was an economic crisis reinforced this belief. During the crisis, 35 per cent of Spaniards believed that PP was the most qualified party to manage the economy, whereas only 20 per cent chose PSOE.<sup>4</sup>

The first attempt to fight the crisis was the Plan for the Encouragement of the Economy and Employment (called 'Plan E' because of the E in all three words), announced by Prime Minister Zapatero at the beginning of 2009. The plan followed the Keynesian idea of stimulating the economy through public investment. This resulted in a prospect of increasing public deficit and, in spite of the fact that public debt in Spain was lower than that of other countries,<sup>5</sup> the rating agency Standard & Poor downgraded the long-term debt of Spain to the AA+ category. In April 2009 the Minister of Economy, Pedro Solbes, who disagreed with the Plan E strategy, was replaced by Elena Salgado. Soon after assuming her new position, the new minister announced some signs



**Figure 2** Vote Intention for PSOE and PP (2004–2011).

Source: CIS, several surveys, [www.cis.es](http://www.cis.es)

of economic recovery (which she referred to as ‘green sprouts’, *brotos verdes*), which were met with general scepticism. In fact, by mid-2009 GDP growth had reached—4.5 per cent, unemployment was fast approaching the psychological barrier of 20 per cent and the first bailouts and reunification of banks were being discussed. Following the literature on economic voting (Ferejohn 1986; Lewis-Beck 1988), one could easily anticipate that this context significantly reduced the possibilities of electoral success for PSOE. And, in fact, it did.

The PSOE based its electoral campaign for the June 2009 European elections on blaming the previous PP government for developing an economic model too heavily based on housing and for having reduced workers’ rights at a time when the economy was booming. They also emphasised the commitment of PSOE to social rights, education scholarships and support for the weaker social sectors and renewable energies. But both the optimism with regard to the economy and the emphasis on social rights did not seem credible any more. The PP won and PSOE lost more than four points with respect to the previous 2004 European elections (Table 2). In September the value-added tax (VAT) was increased and the government’s popularity kept decreasing. Voting intention for PSOE went down to 23 per cent in October 2009 and, for the first time since March 2008, PP’s electoral prospects looked better than those of PSOE (Figure 2).

At the beginning of 2010 the government announced an austerity plan that mainly affected public employment. Out of every ten public employees who retired, just one would be replaced. Soon after, the European sovereign debt crisis exploded when the new Greek prime minister George Papandreou declared that the public deficit in Greece in 2009 was considerably higher than had been estimated: more than 13 per cent—later announced to be, in fact, 15.4 per cent—instead of the estimated five per cent. With the bailout of Greece in the background, Spain’s economy kept attracting international attention due to its increasing budget deficit (11 per cent in 2009). In fact, the rating agency Standard & Poor downgraded the long-term debt of Spain to the AA category on 28 April, just one day after that of Greece.

The second important blow to PSOE’s popularity came in May 2010. Further adjustment measures were adopted, marking a final turn away from the previous emphasis on social policies. As a result of pressures by other European governments during the Eurogroup and the Ecofin meetings held in early May 2010 the Socialist government was forced to change its economic policy and to reduce the budget deficit. The government approved a cut of five per cent on average in the salaries of public

**Table 2** Electoral Gains and Losses in the Spanish Elections 2008–2011 (%)

	European elections (2009 vs. 2004)	Catalonian elections (2010 vs. 2006)	Local and regional elections (2011 vs. 2007)	Parliamentary elections (2011 vs. 2008)
PSOE	– 4.39	– 8.45	– 7.07	– 15.2
PP	1.25	1.87	2.72	4.86

employees, a freeze on pensions (excluding the minimum ones), the end of the so called *cheque-bebé* (economic aid given to families for every new baby who was born) and cuts in public investment, in transfers to regions and local governments, pharmaceutical public expenses and in development cooperation. One month later, a reform of labour legislation which introduced greater flexibility in working conditions was approved by the government. This reform was contested in the streets with a general strike on 29 September called by the major trade unions. Even though there is disagreement as to the extent of the public response,<sup>6</sup> many citizens perceived that the incumbent party had betrayed their leftist values. Compared with March 2008, in October 2010 voting intention for PSOE fell by 37 points (from 57 to 20 per cent) amongst the more left-wing citizens, and by 23 points (from 65 to 42 per cent) amongst the moderate leftists.<sup>7</sup>

The impact of these measures was clearly felt in the Catalanian elections that took place in November 2010. After seven years of rule by a three-party leftist coalition (known as *tripartito*<sup>8</sup>), where PSOE was the main incumbent member, the centre-right nationalist party *Convergència i Unió* (Convergence and Union, CiU) won the elections and PSOE lost more than eight points compared with the previous contest (Table 2). The economic crisis and the performance of the central government played a more important role in these elections than in previous ones (Rico 2012).

In April 2011 Zapatero, realising that his deteriorating image was contributing to the constant decline in political support for PSOE, announced that he would not be a candidate in the next elections. Soon after, in a quite unexpected way, a huge protest movement that would become internationally known as the ‘Indignados’ (Outraged), was born in Madrid on 15 May after a demonstration organised by several citizen groups with the help of social networks to protest against the bleak future that awaited the most educated generation in the history of Spain. The demonstration was spontaneously prolonged by a gradually growing encampment in the *Puerta Sol*—a central square in Madrid—and their demands found such a wide echo in Spanish society that, in less than a week, similar encampments were created all over Spain. The initiative was probably facilitated by the pre-electoral climate but the resulting mobilisation, in turn, contributed to intensifying the final leg of the local and regional elections of 22 May.<sup>9</sup> The PSOE obtained its worst electoral results in elections of this kind since the establishment of democracy. It lost more than seven percentage points of support compared with the local elections in 2007 (Table 2). Moreover, the difference between the PSOE and the PP was close to ten points. The defeat was dramatic in the big cities and in most of the regions (Barreiro & Sánchez-Cuenca 2012). The economic crisis seemed to explain a big part of it (Urquizu-Sancho 2011c).

The Prime Minister took good note and opened the process that would lead to the election of his successor. The person elected by the party was the Minister of the Interior, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba. His nomination in July 2011 provoked the so-called ‘Rubalcaba effect’: the distance between PSOE and PP was reduced to less than four points (Figure 2). But the good news did not last long: as the economic situation in Greece and Italy deteriorated, Spain risked ‘contagion’. Spain’s bond

spread—a measure of the risk of default of a country's public debt—reached a historical high exceeding 330 points. At the end of July, Zapatero called early elections for 20 November.<sup>10</sup>

The downward trend in popularity suffered by PSOE was so consolidated that not even the historical statement made by the terrorist organisation ETA (Basque Homeland and Liberty) in October 2011 announcing the permanent cessation of violence could stop it. One would have expected an important and positive impact of this event on intentions to vote for PSOE. Zapatero's efforts to put an end to ETA's violence had been by no means negligible<sup>11</sup> and the announcement was seen by many as the result of the successful antiterrorist policy of the Minister of the Interior since 2006 and new PSOE leader, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba. But, as vote intentions in October 2011 indicate (Figure 2), not even under these circumstances could the PSOE candidate recover ground. In all of the above, we can see a gradual decline in PSOE's popularity, related to the economic events, briefly interrupted in July 2011 by the nomination of Rubalcaba as the prime-ministerial candidate of PSOE.

### The Rise of the Small

One of the most interesting issues to be analysed is where those more than four million votes that PSOE lost went. There are different possible scenarios. They could have gone to PP, in accordance with the widespread perception amongst citizens that this party is a competent economic manager. They could also have gone to smaller parties. Although the 15-M movement did not ask people to vote for any party in particular, the protests were clearly against the two biggest parties. The PSOE kept only half of its 2008 voters (Table 3). The rest moved to other parties or abstained from voting. The party that benefited most from the collapse of PSOE was PP, as 16 per cent of the 2008 PSOE voters decided in November 2011 to cross the ideological line that separates the two biggest parties. The second most important destination of 2008 Socialist voters was abstention (ten per cent). But smaller parties, such as Izquierda

**Table 3** How Did the 2008 PSOE Electorate Vote in 2011?

Party	%
PSOE	49
PP	16
IU	7
UPyD	4
CiU	2
Others	4
Abstention	10

*Note:* The percentages indicate the proportion of citizens who said in the pre-electoral survey that they had voted in 2008 for PSOE and declared in the post-electoral survey that they had voted in 2011 for one of the parties in the first column.

*Source:* CIS survey no. 7711 (panel from October 2011 to January 2012).

Unida (United Left, IU) and Unión Progreso y Democracia (Union Progress and Democracy, UPyD), also received the support of seven and four per cent of prior PSOE voters, respectively. In the case of these two last parties, the additional number of voters compared with 2008 had a big impact on their electoral performance. The IU obtained 700,000 votes more than in the previous election and increased its representation from two to 11 seats in Congress. The UPyD lost an important number of votes to PP (18 per cent of those who had voted for it in previous elections, results not shown here) but, in total, it gained more than 800,000 votes and its representation rose from one to five seats.

The IU, a coalition of leftist and green organisations, built around the Spanish Communist Party, has been gradually losing electoral support in general elections since 1996. After its poor results in the 2008 general elections the internal disputes within the coalition became evident and the leader since 1999, Gaspar Llamazares, gave up his position as general coordinator. A new leader, Cayo Lara, was elected, but internal divisions did not disappear and some well-known members ended up leaving the party. In spite of the internal divisions, in the local elections of May 2011 the downward trend was reversed and the party obtained its best result since 1999. This was confirmed in the general elections. The IU focused its electoral campaign in the November parliamentary elections on the need for social policies to fight against unemployment, and the need to fight against fiscal fraud and corruption and to reform the electoral system to make it more proportional.

The UPyD, on its part, was born in September 2007 as a 'progressive' party, avoiding placing itself explicitly on the left or the right. Since the beginning, the leader of the party has been Rosa Díaz, previously a PSOE member and MP. The party programme demands a regeneration of democracy (including reform of the electoral system to make it more proportional), a more decisive fight against terrorism and a stand against decentralisation and regionalist parties. In 2008 the party's electoral support was very much concentrated in Madrid but in 2011 it managed to obtain support across Spain, with the exception of Catalonia and the Basque Country.

A third small non-regional party that is worth mentioning is Equo and the coalition in which it is integrated, Compromís-Q (Commitment-Q; the Q in the name of the coalition stands for 'Equo'). Compromís is a coalition formed by Valencian nationalists, leftists and ecologists which obtained one seat in Congress. Equo had joined the coalition in this region. This is a newly created party, led by the previous director of Greenpeace in Spain, Juan López de Uralde.<sup>12</sup> Its origin dates back to September 2010 when it was created as a sociopolitical movement to promote political ecology and social equity. However, it did not become a party until October 2011, as a result of a participatory process during which this decision was taken by the different assemblies that formed the movement. Some of the well-known members of IU who had abandoned the party joined Equo in 2011.

Regional and nationalist parties also increased their representation in Parliament (Table 1). This was clearly the case for CiU in Catalonia and Amair in the Basque Country. Even if regionalist parties are small when viewed from a country-wide

perspective, some of them are the most popular parties in their electoral districts.<sup>13</sup> This has often been the case for CiU, and the 2011 general elections provided another example of this. The CiU had won the Catalan regional elections in November 2010. A few months later, the Catalan government adopted far-reaching adjustment measures that were met with discontent and protests from the citizens. In spite of this, CiU was the most voted-for party in the local elections of May 2011, and again in the general elections of November that same year. An important aspect of the electoral strategy of CiU has been mobilisation around the demand for more fiscal sovereignty (*pacto fiscal*) from the central government. This has proven successful enough to compensate for the cost of the cutbacks.

In the Basque Country it has also often been the case that a regionalist party is the one most voted for. In almost every general election this has been the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (Basque Nationalist Party, PNV); PSOE has usually come second. The 2011 general elections meant an important change in this share. The PNV was still the most voted-for party but it lost one seat. The real novelty, though, was that the second position was occupied by the new coalition of Amaiur, formed by various parties in favour of Basque self-determination.<sup>14</sup> The good results achieved by Amaiur were preceded by those of a similar coalition called Bildu in the local elections of May 2011. Bildu ('Meeting' in Basque) was formed in mid June 2010 and soon became the object of severe criticism and accusations of being the inheritors of Batasuna,<sup>15</sup> the independence party considered illegal since 2003 for supporting ETA. In April 2011, a police report concluded that Bildu had been promoted by Batasuna and by ETA itself. The party's lists were contested by the Attorney General and the State Attorney, and the Supreme Court considered that the party was, in fact, related to ETA. The government assumed this to be the right decision but many formations on the left, and even some members of PSOE, expressed their discontent with the Court's decision. Bildu appealed to the Constitutional Court and on 5 May, two weeks before the elections, the decision was announced that there was no proof of the party's relationship to ETA and, therefore, it could run in the local elections. The formation did astonishingly well, winning the second-highest vote (25 per cent) in the Basque Country. One month before the general elections, ETA for the first time declared a permanent, general and verifiable end to its terrorist attacks, after having killed about 1,000 people during the previous 40 years. Under these circumstances Amaiur, a new extended version of Bildu, got more than 300,000 votes and seven MPs in the November general elections.

Finally, two other small regional parties entered parliament. The first, Foro Asturias Ciudadano (FAC, Asturias Citizen Forum), is a splinter from PP led by a onetime minister, Francisco Álvarez Cascos (whose initials are the same as those of the party). He formed the party in reaction to the refusal of the PP to designate him as a candidate for the 2011 regional elections in Asturias. The other party, Geroa Bai ('Yes to the Future' in Basque), is a new version of Nafarroa Bai ('Navarra, Yes' in Basque), a coalition formed by Basque left nationalists of the Navarra region which had been represented in parliament with one seat since 2004. The change of name occurred after some of its members decided to join Amaiur.

## **Beyond the Economy**

Besides the economy and the developments around the regionalist parties, other factors that played a lesser role are worth mentioning. These include the Indignados movement, the party leaders and the party campaigns.

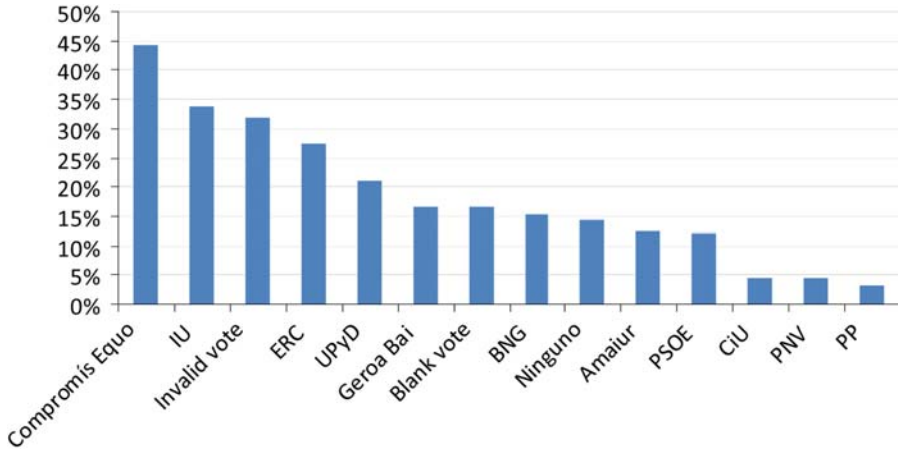
### *The Indignados*

As mentioned earlier, on 15 May 2011 the Indignados movement was born. Even if the pre-electoral context helped the mobilisation, the 15-M movement (as it is often referred to in Spain) continued being rather active. The encampment in Puerta del Sol was cleared in June but by that time hundreds of assemblies had been created in different neighbourhoods in Madrid and elsewhere in Spain. They were connected through a very sophisticated network based on the internet and assemblies that coordinated the work and decisions of the different groups in a region. Even if the reasons that led the young to mobilise were, to a large extent, economic (unemployment, high prices of housing, the disproportional influence of economic interests on political decisions), there has always been a strong political component in the demands of the Indignados. In fact, consensus amongst the different assemblies in Madrid was reached on four strictly political objectives: a change in the electoral system to make it more proportional and to facilitate citizens' participation; a determined fight against corruption;<sup>16</sup> a more effective separation of powers; and the creation of mechanisms for real accountability. The first of these objectives coincided with the demands of some of the small parties (not of the regional parties that are the most voted-for ones in their electoral districts; see note 13).

Three factors indicate that the 15-M movement could have had some impact on the electoral results. First, two of the parties that increased their electoral representation, Compromís-Q and IU, had the highest percentage of voters who had participated in activities related to the movement since May (Figure 3). Second, young people constituted an important proportion of participants in the movement, of the voters for IU and UPyD and of the voters who abandoned PSOE (Calvo, Gómez-Pastrana & Mena 2011; Likki 2012; Urquizu-Sancho 2011a; 2011c).<sup>17</sup> And, thirdly, invalid votes—an option widely discussed in assemblies as a possible way to express 'indignation'—almost doubled between 2008 and 2011 (Table 1 and Figure 3).<sup>18</sup>

### *The Leaders*

When PSOE won the 2004 elections, Zapatero had a rather low profile. During his first term in office, though, he achieved international fame due to some of his most popular decisions: the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, his attempt to increase the role of women in politics (symbolised by the image of the pregnant Minister of Defence saluting the troops in Iraq), the change in the law allowing homosexuals to get married, and the attempt to recover the historical memory of the Republican side during the Civil War. Given the great personalisation of his government, these policies



**Figure 3** Participation in Indignados Activities and Vote in Spanish General Election (2011).

*Note:* Percentage of people saying that they had participated in an activity related to the 15-M/*Indignados* movement since May 2011 such as demonstrations, encampments, marches or protests.

*Source:* CIS survey no. 7711 (from October 2011 to January 2012).

were to a great extent associated with him. But this period of achievements in terms of civil and political rights came to an end as soon as the ‘Great Recession’ emerged, and the popularity that the Prime Minister had achieved quickly deteriorated.

The key economic decisions and results during the hard times were also identified with him personally, and so was the electoral fate of PSOE. As mentioned earlier, this was the reason why, after the defeat in the local and regional elections, Zapatero announced the holding of primary elections to find his successor. This declaration opened an internal debate in the party about the convenience of, alternatively, celebrating an extraordinary congress. This option in fact concealed a preference for one of the possible candidates—the Minister of the Interior, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba—against the other, the Minister of Defence, Carme Chacón. The former was a very experienced politician who had held the positions of minister of education and minister of the presidency during the 1990s in the governments headed by Felipe González. Under Zapatero, Rubalcaba became ‘first vice-president’, minister of the interior and government spokesperson. On the other hand, Carme Chacón belonged to the new generation that assumed the leadership of the party with Zapatero in 2000. She was vice-president of the Congress, minister of housing and minister of defence in his governments. Primary elections were not celebrated, as the pressure exerted by the proponents of holding a party congress undermined the will of Carme Chacón to present her candidacy. This freed the way for the Federal Committee to nominate Rubalcaba as candidate for the next general election. In spite of having been the minister with the highest popularity, his designation as the new leader was not enough to prevent

the ‘Socialist collapse’. In fact, the influence worked the other way around and the party’s inevitable fate ended up damaging Rubalcaba’s image.

Mariano Rajoy, the leader of PP, was nominated as candidate for the party leadership in 2003 by the then incumbent prime minister, José María Aznar. After Rajoy’s loss of two elections (March 2004 and March 2008) his leadership started to be questioned by a section of his party, but, with the help of some regional leaders, he renewed his mandate at the National Congress in June 2008. The good results obtained by PP in the 2009 European elections and the 2011 regional and local elections strengthened his leadership of the party. But he has never been perceived as a strong leader. In fact, he won the elections in spite of having rather low personal popularity scores. Mariano Rajoy’s levels of support were the lowest of any leader of the opposition since the 1980s. On a ten-point scale, he has never reached five. According to Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) surveys, in October 2011, right before the election, his evaluation (4.43) was lower than Rubalcaba’s (4.54).

### *The Campaign*

The 2011 election was preceded by a low-intensity campaign. Because of PSOE’s large erosion in electoral popularity, PP’s strategy consisted in taking as few risks as possible in order to arrive at the election without any mishaps. The main aim was to present the party and its leader as the alternative, to cast doubts on PSOE’s capacity to manage the economy and to point at the contradiction between PSOE’s ideology and policies. One of the criticisms most often heard about the PP campaign was the lack of specific proposals on offer. This can explain why PP did not get much additional electoral support compared with 2008.

The Socialist victory in 2008 had been due, to a considerable extent, to the mobilisation of left-wing voters who strongly rejected PP (Santamaría & Criado 2008; Urquizu-Sancho 2008). This was the reaction to the strategy of strong political confrontation followed by PP during the period 2004–08 (Fundación Alternativas 2008). In 2011, Mariano Rajoy abandoned the policy of confrontation and began a new phase of moderation. But this did not imply cooperation with the Socialist government. In fact, the main opposition party voted against the budgetary cuts and the labour market reforms that were adopted by the government in the context of the economic crisis. Only at the very end of the term did PP support the government in reforming the Constitution.<sup>19</sup> The content of the agreement was to introduce changes establishing that no government—central or regional—could incur a public deficit beyond the limits established by the European Union (EU), and that payment of the public debt had priority over other payments.<sup>20</sup>

The PP also had to face the problem of corruption by several of its party members and regional governments. In 2009, the media revealed that the PP was being financed via illegal methods through the so-called ‘Gürtel network’.<sup>21</sup> After a long time, during which Rajoy’s passivity was questioned even by some of his party members, most of those involved ended up resigning. Corruption, however, did not seem to affect PP’s electoral results (Rivero Rodríguez & Fernández-Vázquez 2011).

The strategy of PSOE, on the other side, focused on emotional responses in order to counteract the demobilisation of their voters. The campaign aimed at keeping the support of its stronghold of voters, and focused on undecided leftist citizens. Thus, its principal slogan was 'Pelea por lo que quieres' (Fight for what you want). But the party in government also had to confront other problems. The denial of the crisis for several months had conveyed the idea that the party in government was not competent to manage the economy. Moreover, as mentioned before, many of its voters—especially those further to the left—felt ideologically betrayed. Since all polls predicted a clear victory for PP, it was difficult to mobilise these voters by appealing, like in previous elections, to the 'fear of the right'. The distance between PSOE and PP was too big as to make leftist voters think that they could make a difference with their vote for PSOE and, at least, avoid the victory of PP. This was the best scenario for PP: since the majority of Spanish voters are leftists (Cordero & Martín 2011), the best prospect for PP is when left-wing voters demobilise.

Given all of the above, did the electoral campaign have any consequences on voting decision? Electoral campaigns have four main effects: reinforcement, change, mobilisation and demobilisation (Martínez i Coma 2008). The first, reinforcement, means that people vote for the same party that they wanted to support before the electoral campaign. The second option, change, means that voters opt for a different party than they had thought of voting for before the campaign took place. Finally, there are two scenarios in which abstention plays a key role: when part of the electorate that previously thought they would abstain decides to vote and, vice versa, when citizens who thought of voting for a certain party end up not voting for anyone. Table 4 summarises the distribution of these effects in the 2011 electoral campaign.

As can be seen, the party that did best during the campaign was PP, as the high level of reinforcement (78 per cent did not change their vote choice during the campaign) and the low level of change to other parties (16 per cent of those who said they would vote for PP finally didn't) show. Compared to PP, PSOE was less successful in reinforcing its voters and in avoiding that they would end up voting for a different party. However, PSOE did better than other parties in mobilizing initial abstainers. On the other hand, the electoral campaign had strong and negative effects on UPyD and, especially, on IU voters. These parties present the lowest percentage of reinforcement and the highest percentage of change between October and the time of the elections.

## **Conclusions**

The 2011 Spanish general election marked the end of Zapatero's two terms in government. After seven years in office, PSOE obtained the worst election results since the transition to democracy. The economic crisis for sure played a fundamental role. But the way it was managed by the government led many voters to confirm their impression that PSOE was a bad manager when it came to solving economic problems. The adjustment measures were also crucial in creating disaffection amongst the more leftist of its voters. The PP, on its side, did not need a strong strategy to win the

**Table 4** Effects of the Electoral Campaign on Voting Behaviour (%)

	PSOE	PP	IU	UPyD
Reinforcement	71	78	57	69
Change	23	16	38	28
Mobilisation	11	8	4	2
Demobilisation	5	6	7	4

*Note:* The analysis measures 'reinforcement' as the percentage of voters who gave the same answer regarding their vote in the November elections in both the pre-electoral and post-electoral surveys. 'Change' identifies those who mentioned they would vote for the party mentioned in the columns (in the pre-electoral survey) but finally voted for a different one (as they declare in the post-electoral survey). 'Mobilisation' stands for those who, in the pre-electoral survey, said they would abstain but finally voted for the party mentioned in the columns and 'demobilisation' refers to those in the opposite situation.

*Source:* CIS survey no. 7711 (from October 2011 to January 2012). Authors' calculations.

elections: it basically waited for leftist citizens to abandon PSOE by themselves. One of the main problems that PP had to confront was corruption but, as mentioned, this proved to have limited electoral effects. In spite of the limited enthusiasm that Rajoy inspired, even amongst the party's own voters, the crisis and the way it was managed by the government brought victory to PP without much effort on its part. The 15-M movement may have played a small, even if important, role in the rise of some parties: mainly, of Compromís-Q and IU and, to a lesser extent, of UPyD. However, as we said above, the Indignados did not take sides with any of the parties. The future will show whether the success of these parties, and of Amaiur for different reasons, was the product of the exceptional context under which the elections took place, or whether the trend of decreasing concentration of the vote will continue.

As we have seen, Spaniards believe that PP manages the economy better than PSOE. However, this is the first time that PP has had to confront an economic crisis while in government. For that reason, their main challenge is to maintain this reputation. The PSOE, on the other hand, faces several and diverse challenges. Winning back the support of left-wing voters and choosing a leader who can inspire a sense of competence at the same time as a feeling of renewal are two of the most urgent ones.

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### Notes

- [1] Previous absolute majority governments were formed in 1982, 1986 and 1989 by PSOE and in 2000 by PP. In the case of the remaining six elections, single-party governments were formed with support from regional parties.

- [2] Pedro Sables was minister of economy in Felipe González's governments (1993–96) and in José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's governments (2004–09). Manuel Pizarro is a businessman and he was 'signed' by PP in the 2008 elections.
- [3] Since 2008 Spain has had the highest level of unemployment in the EU, starting with 11 per cent in 2008 and reaching 22 per cent in 2012. EU averages were seven per cent and almost ten per cent, respectively (Eurostat).
- [4] CIS, survey no. 2847 (October 2010).
- [5] In 2008, public debt in Spain was 40 per cent of GDP, whereas in Germany it was 67, in France 68 and in the United Kingdom (UK) 55 per cent (Eurostat).
- [6] According to the Minister of Labour, 24 per cent took part in the strike in public enterprises and 7.5 per cent in the civil service. According to an estimate by the Think Tank 'Economistas frente a la crisis' the demand for electricity fell by 91 per cent compared with a normal day. <http://www.economistasfrentealacrisis.com/>
- [7] CIS surveys measure ideology on a ten-point scale. We consider the most leftist citizens those who place themselves in points one and two, and moderate leftists, those who choose positions three and four.
- [8] The coalition government was formed by the Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (Catalan Socialists' Party, PSC), the pro-independence nationalist Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (Republican Left of Catalonia, ERC) and the eco-socialist Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds–Esquerra Unida i Alternativa (Initiative for Catalonia-Greens-United and Alternative Left, ICV).
- [9] Local elections were held in all municipalities of Spain. The regional elections affected all autonomous communities except for Andalucia, the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia, which hold elections on different dates.
- [10] It was suggested in the press that the date for the elections was not chosen by chance. It coincided with the anniversary of Franco's death and many saw it as an appeal to leftist voters who had previously voted for PSOE. Other interpretations focus on technical reasons. Basically, the date chosen allowed the government not to present the 2012 budget before the dissolution of parliament. However, this would also have been the case if the elections had been set for 13 November.
- [11] During the term 2004–08, he opted to open discussions with the terrorist group, only to be betrayed by ETA during the truce when a bomb exploded in the Madrid airport in January 2007. This failed attempt had a political cost for PSOE in the 2008 elections.
- [12] He became very well known after leading an initiative during the Copenhagen Summit of the UN on Climate Change to protest against the lack of will of the world leaders to reach an agreement. The peaceful protest consisted of sneaking into the Danish royal palace, to a reception offered by the Queen, with a poster. López de Uralde and other activists ended up in jail in the Danish capital, where they stayed for 19 days.
- [13] The Spanish electoral system belongs to the proportional family, but it has a pluralist bias by which the two most voted parties in each electoral district are over-represented, while the smaller ones are under-represented. The small parties with electoral support distributed all over the country get less seats in parliament than their proportion of votes; however, the regional parties—which, by definition, concentrate their votes in a certain region and which are the most voted-for in their constituencies—are treated by the system like big parties.
- [14] These are Eusko Alkartasuna, Alternatiba, Aralar and some independents.
- [15] The other one being Sortu, another political formation created in February 2011. Sortu was declared legal by the Constitutional Court in June 2012, more than one year after Bildu.
- [16] Since 2009 politicians and corruption have increasingly been perceived by citizens as significant problems in Spain. According to CIS, in the summer of 2008 around six per cent of citizens

thought that party officials were 'a serious problem' in Spain. In June 2011, a quarter of those interviewed shared the same opinion. The percentage of citizens who thought that corruption was one of the main problems in Spain went from 1.4 per cent in September 2009 to 12.3 per cent in January 2012.

- [17] These results are confirmed by the post-electoral survey carried out by CIS but they are not shown for reasons of space.
- [18] During the first days of the movement, the discussions about which kind of vote would best express the demands of the movement pointed to the small parties (without indicating any in particular) and to a blank vote. By October–November, though, there was an intense discussion in both social networks and the assemblies on whether a blank vote benefited the main parties or not. This cast doubts on the effects of a blank vote, influencing a preference of many in the movement in favour of an invalid vote.
- [19] This was the second reform of a very rigid Constitution. The only other reform of the 1978 Spanish Constitution took place in 1992 and it was motivated by the signature of the Maastricht Treaty.
- [20] See the new article no. 135 of the Spanish Constitution.
- [21] Several senior PP politicians were involved: Luis Bárcenas, the PP treasurer, Francisco Camps, the President of Valencia, and regional deputies of Madrid were accused of receiving money and gifts from the Gürtel network.

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