

A Formula to Save Us (From Ourselves): Continuity and Change in the Spanish Legal Domination System (1959–2024)

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how a structure of Weberian rational domination has been built and consolidated in Spain since 1959, the year when the so-called Economic Stabilization Plan was approved. This sort of economic constitution represents one of the most important foundations of a technocratic regime that survived the death of a dictator (General Francisco Franco), not only transcending the traditional differentiations between autocratic and democratic regimes but also offering a different perspective to the debate about the degree of continuity and rupture attained by the Spanish political transition in the 1970s. We analyze the institutions, leadership, most influential networks, political discourse, and historical myths through a theory of power and elites to examine the Spanish case. With this remarkable example of structural transformation and institutional resilience over decades, we also propose a more complex and multidimensional approach that could be fruitful to understanding some of the problems of political representation that current democracies are undergoing.

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND CONTINUITY AND RUPTURE: AN ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL

Political consensus and domination are two unavoidable dimensions when analyzing the legitimacy and stability of liberal democracies. On the one hand, some authors pay more attention to For instance, Robert Dahl, with his notion of polyarchy (1972) and pluralist elitism (2005[1961]) seems to have found a certain equilibrium between the existence of influential power groups that seek certain objectives and the needs of such groups to find consensus among themselves, thus showing that power dynamics are far from being unified and require constant dialogue and negotiation in several specialized dimensions.

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On the other hand, some authors conceive democracies as particular cases of unavoidable domination schemes, as so-called Maquiavellians intellectuals (Burnham, 1987 [1943]) from Gaetano Mosca (1960[1939]) to Pareto (1964[1916]) and Robert Michels (2023[1911]), who wrote at the beginning of the last century. For them, especially in the Moschian notion of political formula, regarding the “legal and moral basis, or principle, on which the power of the political class rests” (Mosca, 1960[1939]: p. 71), democracy represents a special case of what Max Weber would later refer to as rational-legal domination (Weber, 1978[1922]), where the new constitutions or superior laws only reflect the improvement of former rules that legitimated a certain type of power structure and authority. Among some other modern authors, C. Wright Mills’ (2000[1956]) analysis redefined some of the most important Maquiavellians concepts while highlighting the prominence of business within a unified power elite in the US, where the intersection of political, military, and corporate leaders significantly influence democratic decisions.

We have chosen the study of the Spanish period from 1959 to 2024 as a remarkable case among Mediterranean political regimes that transitioned to democracy during the 1970s. This case shows how a parliamentary democracy can be analyzed as a complex structure of rational domination with strong ties to its authoritarian past and the development of institutions responding to the changing economic, social, and international environments.

Democracy as a particular case of “legal domination” systems

Our study adopts an alternative point of view to those that have made an essential distinction between totalitarian, authoritarian, and democratic regimes, as political scientist Juan Linz’s (1990) seminal approach has established with its main focus on Spain. We regard a parliamentary democracy as a particular case among the variety of political systems under so-called legal or rational domination, where the validity of the claims to legitimacy rest on “a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands” (Weber, 1978[1922]: p. 215), and where obedience is not due to the specific individuals in authority but, rather, to “the impersonal order” (1978[1922]: 218), which may be democratic or not.

There is a significant relationship between democratic systems’ institutions and their authoritarian immediate ancestors that must be highlighted: a profound and complex bond that provides an epistemological opportunity to transcend the sometimes simplified dichotomy of continuity or rupture between non-democratic and democratic regimes. We aim to explain the current situation as a result of the complex interaction of change and resilient dynamics. A political transition is not a mere choice between continuity and rupture but a complex combination of continuity, institutional resilience, and ruptural changes that always take place among a dense network of relations between the leaders and institutions of the two different regimes. This institutional network structure, its main components, its links to international organizations, as well as its political dynamics, changes, and hegemonic discourses constitute the main object of this study.

This paper is divided into the following sections: first, a theoretical framework that shows the importance of classic and modern elitist theories for analyzing real existing democracies is presented. Second, we apply a theoretical framework the particular case of the Spanish power structure from 1959 to 2024, not only highlighting the role and relevance of elitist theories’ main concepts but also analyzing the hypothesis of continuity/change mentioned above as applied to the political and economic changes undergone by Spain during the last decades. Third, a concluding section where we reflect on the validity of this hypothesis and the usefulness of this theoretical and analytical scheme for other national cases is provided.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN A DOMINATION SYSTEM

Social change and continuity in elitist theories

Classical elite theory, as formulated by Pareto, Mosca, Michels, and, to a certain extent, Weber (Pakulski, 2012), seems to entail a number of interrelated assumptions about agency, the nature and cognoscibility of social reality, and political change (or rather, the appearance of political change) that, even setting aside its anti-democratic implications, have curtailed its development over most of the 20th century and conditioned its compatibility with other theoretical and empirical approaches to political sociology. Three key ideas emerge as particularly relevant when considering classical elite theory as a framework for the analysis of regime changes in general and democratic transitions in particular. These are presented as follows:

- 1) Agency essentially resides in the ruling class, while the population at large appears as an unorganized mass, incapable of self-government, that provides human resources for the elites to work with. Masses are blind forces to be harnessed and directed by the ruling class, whose actions and infighting for power shape history. Hence, a classical elite theory framework would construe any given regime change as either the deliberate result of elite actions or the byproduct of elite circulation.
- 2) The true, hierarchical nature of social reality is hidden under a veil of fictions and illusions that can only be removed by scientific sociology. However, such sights were not for the masses, as Pareto warned when stating that he would abstain from publishing the results of his quest for social laws in his *Trattato di sociologia generale (The Mind and Society)* should he suspect that it was going to be a popular book (1964[1916]: 47–48). Rather, it is a science for the ruling class, and it amounts to a psychological technique of power, based on the artful manipulation of both ideological illusions and the deeper psychosocial realities underlying them (Aron, 1993, pp. 118 and 119).
- 3) Political change is therefore restricted to the circulation of elites and the institutional transformations they promote to remain in power. Any sort of regime change is illusory. The ruling class may indeed be replaced while the fundamental structure remains essentially unchanged, beneath a variety of superficial alterations and an array of convenient ideological mirages.

Tracing the institutional roots of contemporary Spanish democracy in late Francoism, and specifically in the undertakings of the regime's elites, can be understood, at best, as an oversimplification of complex socio-political processes and, at worst, an elitist rebuttal of the said democracy. However, there are specific elements in each of the general assumptions above that we consider useful for a nuanced sociological analysis of regime change and democratic domination in Spain (and, conceivably, in other national contexts).

Radical structuralist approaches deem individuals interchangeable and structural conditions produce the individuals they require. However, although political leaders are effectively conditioned by structural factors, it is not indifferent to what specific individuals hold in key positions of power. Classical elitist theory may aggrandize elite agency to the detriment of other social agents; however, elite agency remains decisive. Admittedly, this must be understood within its empirical constraints, which transcend the limits of the nation-state. Any serious analysis needs to consider the unintended consequences of action: elites are powerful, but not all powerful. To the extent that the elite agency critically influences the shaping of political institutions, a comprehensive analysis of any social reality must necessarily consider elite structures and how different groups of elites are connected to the various sources of social power (Mann, 2013). Among these, ideological power is particularly relevant when considering the idea of domination, if not as a tool for creating outright fictions as Pareto claimed, at least in the mythical construction of a given political order.

As elitist theorists contend, there are fundamental elements of continuity from one regime to the next that appear when regime change is the outcome of a revolution (see, for instance, Tocqueville, 1856) and when it results

from a peaceful transition. However, acknowledging this is not the same as denying the reality of political change – rather, it is a necessary step toward a deeper understanding of change as it empirically develops. Furthermore, if we do not regard an authoritarian regime and a democracy as essentially equivalent only because we can identify ruling classes in both, examining how the authoritarian past has influenced the democratic present may be useful from a democratic standpoint.

Domination beyond myth-making

When conceptualizing domination in democracy, elitist thinkers tend to emphasize the role of ideology and mass manipulation, which makes sense considering their general assumption that all societies are fundamentally hierarchical. From such a point of view, democracy, as the intended institutional realization of the egalitarian ideal is necessarily an illusion since there can never be true equality. Hence, as Joseph Schumpeter wrote in his private diaries, democracy can be reduced to government by lying (Swedberg, 1993, p. 200), ruling the masses by making them believe that they are ruling themselves: “The fact that the chief and his administrative staff often appear formally as servants or agents of those they rule, naturally does nothing whatever to disprove the quality of dominance” (Weber, 1978[1922]: p. 215).

This also explains the detailed attention that Pareto (1964[1916], v. 2:1–235) devoted to derivations in Chapter IX of the *Trattato*, in itself, a book-length treatise on political deception. Domination in a democracy is a matter of managing public perceptions through the skillful use of fallacies that foster obedience among the masses. To the extent that it can be deployed to support or reinforce legitimacy, ideological power is vital when it comes to the construction and maintenance of long-term domination. Weber states that “custom, personal advantage, and purely affectual or ideal motives of solidarity, do not form a sufficiently reliable basis for a given domination. In addition, there is normally a further element, the belief in *legitimacy*” (1978[1922]: 213). In his well-known typology, the ideological underpinnings of traditional and charismatic domination may be reasonably evident, but the legitimacy of rational-legal domination also hinges on “a *belief* [emphasis added] in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands” (1978[1922]: 215). All types of legitimacy are forms of belief—traditional, value-rational (1978[1922]: 36)—and, as such, they can be manipulated, albeit not unrestrictedly.

Later writers have identified missing categories in Weber's typology (such as “substantive-rational authority” in Sebastián Guzmán, 2015), finding other reasons for subjects to regard a given order as legitimate and obey when commanded. In his seminal work on the Spanish democratic transition, sociologist Víctor Pérez Díaz (1993, pp. 225–227) notes that, besides pure coercion and Weber's three sources of legitimacy, there is also “instrumental consent” that rests upon the authorities' success in managing a number of essential social needs and solving, or at least curtailing, key problems. Subjects accept as legitimate a political order that reasonably delivers on their demands, which not only are symbolic or amenable to ideological make-believe but also include the defense of territorial integrity, as well as the upholding of law, order, and legal certainty, in addition to economic growth and social integration (Pérez Díaz, 1993, p. 226). In a democracy, legitimacy depends on the belief that no other regime can achieve better results in the pursuit of collective goals for a specific country at a specific moment in history (Linz, 1987, pp. 41–42).

Weber explicitly distinguished economic power from all forms of domination (Weber, 1978, p. 214) while acknowledging its close connection to the legal order in capitalist societies. The power of control and disposal over economic resources is legally regulated, which hypothetically should suffice to legitimize it, but the precise way in which it is regulated and exerted elicits practical consequences on what we may call the economic returns of a given political order. In fact, certain types of legitimacy can be detrimental to the formal rationality of economic activity (for instance, in plebiscitary regimes – see Weber, 1978[1922]: 269). Thus, an interplay exists between legitimacy (which rests on beliefs and social perceptions) on the one hand and efficacy and efficiency on the other (Linz, 1987,

pp. 43–45), where the latter reinforces the former (or deteriorates it when negative) and the former tinges perceptions of the latter. Deception may be the main instrument in the Paretian elite's toolkit, but even if “people can be fooled some times,” it does not mean that it always works (Linz, 1987, p. 45).

The Moschian notion of “political formula,” often invoked in the sociological analysis of elite strategies in situations of crisis, change, and reform (Kelley, 1983; Kolankiewicz, 1994) is not restricted to a deceptive superstructure of Paretian derivations. A political formula is not a quackery “invented to trick the masses into obedience,” but an answer to the social need “of governing, and knowing that one is being governed, not on the basis of mere material or intellectual force, but on the basis of a moral principle” (Mosca, 1960[1939]: 70–71). While a restrictive interpretation of the notion would understand it as a useful illusion confined to the field of ideology, a more comprehensive approach must also consider other dimensions (organizational, economic, etc.) of rational-legal domination, particularly in democracies.

A political formula is supposed to outlive temporary governments within a given political regime, and it is therefore expected to guarantee a minimum efficiency threshold independent of the performance of specific rulers. Having implicitly or explicitly accepted the legal and moral principles upon which their own provisional power rests, rulers' decisions cannot openly contradict them without questioning the political regime itself. By the same token, the (political, social, and economic) outcomes of their decisions must meet a fuzzy set of minimum expectations or risk jeopardizing the political institutions rather than just their own administration. Hence, the need to incorporate outcome/efficiency-related elements in the political formula, such as an “economic constitution,” particularly when applied to democracies (or regimes closer to the democratic end of the democracy-oligarchy spectrum; Linz, 2017) rather than overestimating the power of ideological devices to produce domination on their own. Such reductionism can only be upheld from a classical elitist position, which views all regimes as essentially interchangeable as long as there is a ruling class.

The political formula of Spanish democracy

As defined by Mosca, political formulas are society-specific, although fundamental similarities may be noticed between formulas in societies presenting significant elements in common (1960[1939]: 70–71). Therefore, political formulas for successive regimes in a given society may be expected to present elements of continuity, even if a democratic political formula is cemented in its opposition against a prior, non-democratic regime. Again, identifying such elements of continuity does not imply equating a democracy with an authoritarian regime but understanding that, to the extent that both have operated over the same society throughout different periods in time, both will have probably dealt with similar problems and sometimes arrived at not completely disparate solutions. Even when restricting the political formula to its ideological dimension, it is evident that both an authoritarian and a democratic regime must tackle common symbolic issues derived from earlier history and culture.

Furthermore, a political formula, democratic or otherwise, is expected to provide a certain stability: an institutionalized framework for the orderly circulation of elites that can outlive the administration by any of the said elites. Similar to many other human creations, it is developed with a vocation of permanence, which does not avoid its eventual mutation and demise. But, in any event, a certain dose of continuity is to be expected even when the formula is not designed solely as a device to disguise the permanence of underlying structures and hierarchies under a cover of superficial change. This is more apparent when other sources of power (Mann, 1986) besides political and ideological power are considered. The restricted notion of political formula seems to pertain only to the use of ideological power to legitimize political power, and, as such, it would seem to imply a subservience of the former to the latter; political formulas would then be distinctly contained within the political regimes they are designed for. However, a comprehensive approach aiming to take “instrumental consent” (Pérez Díaz, 1993) into account must necessarily incorporate other sources of power, and, to the extent that power networks overlap and intersect in what Mann denominates “the promiscuity of organizations and functions” (1986:17), a clear-cut

periodization in terms of political regimes needs to be at least qualified by the elements of continuity carried from one period to the next.

We contend not only that such an approach is potentially more fruitful than the restricted approach but also that it is particularly pertinent when applying elite theory to the analysis of specific democracies, where, as Linz (1987) notes, there is an intricate interplay between legitimacy and efficiency. In the absence of some expected practical outcomes, no political power can last only on the strength of the ideological power it is able to deploy. Some of the advantages of this approach would include restoring the broader, not restricted to the political “ruling class,” Paretian conception of “elite,” without its normative connotations, and allowing for a nuanced operationalization in the analysis of specific elite networks as they empirically overlap and intersect (see, for instance, Villena Oliver, 2017). As well, analyzing not only how political power seems to use ideological power and, eventually, military or economic power, and not less importantly, how these other powers condition the exercise of political power and the specific terms of the political formulas that crystallize at different moments. We also consider how these limits are defined not only “internally,” within a given society, but also “externally.” Mann (1986) famously rejects the classical view of societies as “unitary” or “totalities”. Power networks reach beyond the conventional boundaries of the nation-state and, therefore, at the very least define the “context” into which any political formula is supposed to fit.

This is especially relevant for a political formula, that of Spanish democracy, shaped in a period of globalizations (Mann, 2013). Some of its elements, as we will show in the next section were first laid down during the second half of the Francoist regime, decades before the democratic transition, and were strongly influenced by the international context after the regime's early period of forced (if allegedly willful) autarky (Hofmann, 2023).

THE SPANISH ECONOMIC CONSTITUTION AND THE “DEMOCRATIC CONTINUITY” OF A LEGAL-RATIONAL REGIME

Spanish democracy can be analyzed as the current stage of a special and particular case of a legal-rational domination system. This system tends to be stable over time, although it has been challenged by international, economic, and political changes and events that have modified certain features of its structure. Moreover, this stability constitutes one of the regime's main features.

This system was originated in the 1950s, after a series of international arrangements, among which the following may be highlighted: first, the political and military agreements that were made with the United States in 1953, the same year of the signing of the concordat with the Holy See; second, the cabinet reshuffle of 1957, which brought several Opus Dei technocrats to government key positions and began to restrict the power of the “Movimiento” authoritarian unified party; third, the administrative and fiscal reforms approved from 1957 onward by the new cabinet. Fourth, and maybe the most renowned, an economic stabilization plan which was approved in 1959 and has been considered as either the beginning of the economic process of convergence with the future European Union, the so-called “Spanish economic miracle.” These historical events and structural changes, among some others, significantly altered the nature and normal functioning of the political regime that had risen after 1939 (Preston, 2019), starting a new era consisting of a set of institutional and economic changes that helped the Francoist regime gain political support and a prevailing influence that would survive the dictator's death and even the transition to democracy.

The above-mentioned changes have been synthesized by Moya (1984) as a type of rationalization of a national state that follows Weberian theoretical rules. Using this definition and enhancing its political scope, our approach aims to analyze and explain Spanish democracy as a legal domination system that has undergone constant transformations and adaptations since the economic reforms of the 1950s. These changes respond to political, social, economic, and international events and challenges, and they draw a line of structural continuity between the Francoist reformation that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, the constitutional and democratic regime that started

in 1977, and the bipartisan democracy that was consolidated in Spain from 1982 to at least 2014, when several economic, social, and institutional changes started to challenge the political status quo.

This paper focuses on the continuity of the economic faction of the governing elite and in particular, on the social networks established around technocratic positions specialized in economic affairs. Indeed, the role of the 1959 stabilization plan is conceived, as Spanish philosopher José Luis Villacañas (2022) has stated, an “economic constitution” aimed at not only the solution of national problems but also the legitimization of the political regime born after the end of the Spanish civil war.

Elements to understand a complex regime

The complex relationship between the institutions and features of a democratic regime and its autocratic past needs to be studied, while considering a certain set of dimensions adapted from Mills' (2001) [1956] framework of analysis of the United States power elite, part of which was drawn from his Moschian intellectual background (Laurin-Frenette, 1989), but that has been applied to many political systems, such as the Mexican governmental elite under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Gil Mendieta & Schmidt, 2005), as well as to Chinese political and business elites (Keller, 2016), among others.

The legal domination system that best explains Spain's most recent political history can be divided into three main dimensions:

1) “Power network dimension”.

This comprises the links between the most relevant institutions and leaders of a certain national political system. This dimension can be understood as a dual social network of relationships (Breiger, 1974) that, on the one hand, includes all the regime's political, bureaucratic, and business leaders and, on the other hand, registers the relevance, imbrication, and entwining of the institutions these aforementioned leaders command. Its members constitute a national “inner circle” (Useem, 1986) that comprises different profiles of national leaders, something that Baena del Alcázar (1999) identified as the “nuclear structure” when studying the Spanish political elite from 1939 to 1992. This dual network structure implies, on the one hand, agreements between these institutions and, on the other hand, a constant movement of renewal and exchange of political, business, and technocratic leaders. This is known and popularly referred to as “revolving doors” (Blanes et al., 2012), which can be understood as an individual counterpart of the system of power relations established between public and private institutions that usually take part in a Western industrial state, as authors like economist John K. Galbraith (1967) has noted during the second half of the last century. It can also be conceived of as a technocratic version of the Paretian circulation of elites.

According to this power network definition and as a result and a complementary consequence of it, relational cohesion emerges as a remarkable feature. It can be defined as a set of political, professional, familiar, and personal ties as well as similarities that exist among regime leaders. This structure defines a stable path of relationships and agreements that tend to prevail over political and economic conflicts. Conflict may arise from the different groups existing here among technocratic, political, religious, military, cultural, or territorial factions. However, when there is not a combination of several of them within the inner circle—this cohesive superstructure tends to integrate its members, as Gwen Moore (1979) discovers when studying the structure of the American elite network. Cohesive links also contribute to assigning certain positions in a political division of labor, as well as orientations of roles and status within an elite system. This social cohesive structure has proven to be very useful when analyzing the Francoist dictatorship, as Miguel Jerez-Mir (1982) did when he studied the different political factions and the relation between what he called “centers of extraction,” during the first half of the authoritarian period (1939–1957).

2) *"Mythical discursive dimension"*.

This can be defined as a dominant ideological discourse that permeates every institution of the regime and is widespread and shared by public opinion. This mythical dimension consists of a political and social construction of the origin, meaning, and legitimacy of a certain regime, and it often comprises a set of events that are considered fundamental to understanding the status quo. These relevant and foundational events are usually related to not only a declaration of independence, civil or national liberation wars, political revolutions, or democratic transitions but also economic or international events such as a certain economic plan, a set of institutional reforms, or joining an international organization, among others.

In the Spanish case, December 1978 appears to be the foundation of a democratic era after the approval of a democratic constitution. However, the 1959 stabilization plan and the events that surrounded this key economic reform exerted a latent profound influence on political and economic discourse to the extent that it could play the role of an economic constitution with a long scope of influence, as we will see in a further subsection.

3) *"Structural or institutional resilience dimension"*.

This dimension consists of a recurring tendency to overcome international, political, and economic challenges, while maintaining its main structural elements. The regime's stability has been challenged by changes derived from the economic and financial crises of the 1970s to the political transition to democracy. This began in 1976 – and the democratic and political changes as well as the institutional challenges that happened during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, the global financial crisis in 2008, and among other decisive events have also challenged the structure and legitimacy of international and worldwide elites (Morgan, Hirsch, and Quack, 2015).

The sources of the Spanish technocratic formula: an elitist explanation

There is a broad consensus in the literature about the decisive importance of the Spanish political transition, as well as about the influence of this process over other democratic transformations abroad. However, the prominence of this theoretical agreement may have underscored several institutional changes that occurred before 1978 and have nevertheless exerted a strong influence on the present institutional situation. For this reason, we emphasize the importance of the institutional changes that occurred during the 1950s, especially around 1959, the date of approval of the so-called economic stabilization plan. This perspective focuses on modifications that have attained significant changes in different dimensions, thereby enabling a multidimensional theoretical approach. From this perspective, the economy plays a major role in its transversal importance in the national affairs and evolution of a country that was considered an undeveloped nation in the 1950s; a country that would experience growth and development that would contribute to stabilizing the legitimacy of its institutions.

The year 1959 has been deemed a special date, commonly established as the start of Spanish political and economic modernization, that would constitute the legal infrastructure with which Spain would become a future member of the European Union. It can also be understood as the beginning of the second stage of the Franco dictatorship, a period from 1959 to 1975, when economic and diplomatic matters would see their relevance progressively grow and when a new common sense would be built. The 1959 economic reforms played the role akin to an economic constitution (Villacañas, 2022), the first and most undeniable step for Spain towards a developed and stable democracy.

The multiple dimensions of the Spanish great leap forward (1959–1975)

Several changes that happened during the decade of the 1950s paved the way to the political and economic reforms that can be symbolized in 1959, the year of the approval of the "stabilization plan."

Among these changes, we highlight the international agreement signed with the United States in 1953, which implied, among other facts, the end of Spanish international isolation after the Second World War; military collaboration with and financial aid from the United States government and private banks, playing the role of an embryo version of the Marshall Plan; Spanish entry into the most important international organizations that were constituted after World War II, including the United Nations in 1955, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 1958, and the OECD in 1961; and the signing of the Concordat with the Catholic Church in 1953 (González, 1979; Hofmann, 2023; Sardá, 1970).

However, apart from crucial international issues, there were also political, social, and economic issues, such as the cabinet reshuffle in 1957, which occurred under three main circumstances. First, the context of social unrest, working-class strikes, student protests, and manifestos during the critical year of 1956 (Lizcano, 2006; López-Pina, 2010). These protests occurred at the same time the illegal opposition of the Communist Party altered its strategy with the well renowned slogan of the "national reconciliation policy," which ushered in a new stage of collaboration with different opposition groups, many of them working-class Catholics, and non-violent strikes against the political regime (Juliá, 2004). Second, there was an increasing showdown between several factions of the Francoist regime, namely, the post-fascist official party, "Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS,"¹ which wanted to gain control over the State apparatus, against monarchists and Opus Dei catholic technocrats (Hofmann, 2023).

The latter contenders were, on the one hand, debating about the future form and head of the Spanish State, with the candidate Don Juan de Borbón leading its so-called "private counsel" from Estoril, which comprised a great part of the Spanish financial oligarchy and that would be dissolved after his son Juan Carlos I was nominated by the dictator in 1969 to be the King of Spain (Muñoz, 1969). On the other hand, Opus Dei members radically opposed Falange's political reforms, criticized economic autarky disadvantages in the wake of inflation, and accounted for the current crisis that occurred after a mild economic recovery during the first half of the 1950s (González, 1979).

The cabinet reshuffle that happened in 1957 implied the recruitment of who would be later known as the "technocrats," a great part of them members of the religious catholic current Opus Dei, although assisted by numerous technicians with neither religious nor party affiliations (López-Rodó, 1990). These technocrats, on the one hand, occupied economic-oriented ministries, such as the Ministry of Commerce, presided over by economic professor Alberto Ullastres, who would later play a major role as the permanent ambassador in Brussels. Professor Ullastres would also help initiate the process of joining the European Economic Community in 1962. This was followed by the successful signing of a commercial preferential agreement with the EEC in 1970, and the Ministry of Finance, occupied by jurist Mariano Navarro-Rubio, who would be subsequently recruited as the governor of the Bank of Spain (Tamames, 1973).

On the other hand, the Opus Dei technocrat network was supported in the presidency of the government by members or sympathizers of this catholic current, such as the general secretary of the presidency, Laureano López-Rodó, and the vice secretary, future president of the government and most influential Franco political consultant, Luis Carrero-Blanco. Carrero-Blanco, who did not belong to Opus Dei, would become president in 1973, until his murder in December of that year by the Basque independentist and terrorist organization Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA). These changes in the Francoist elite of the regime illustrate the Paretian concept of circulation and the alterations that happened within the official power network: a set of international, political, and economic changes favored the temporary rise of Opus Dei leaders. However, this did not imply the disappearance of military and post-fascist Francoist factions (Jerez-Mir, 1982) but contributed to changing the political equilibrium within the elite that surrounded the head of state, Francisco Franco.

Complementing this politically upward circulation of the elites, we should also mention another tendency during the 1960s and 1970s which consisted of a movement from ministries and public enterprises to private positions in the banking industry (Baena del Alcázar, 1999; De Miguel, 1975). The economic conjuncture during the second half of the decade of the 1950s, with a frequent double digit inflation, an endemic trade deficit led to a persistent scarcity of reserves that were necessary to import food and capital goods for the development of a

stagnant industry (González, 1979; Navarro-Rubio, 1991; Sardá, 1970). This led to the conditions that made the dictator Francisco Franco acquiesce to Opus Dei counsel and to accept an IMF-inspired plan of inflation targeting reforms, capital movements liberalization and legislative changes to open the national economy to enjoy part of the strengthening European postwar and Marshall plan-inspired economic growth.

These structural changes were known as the Spanish stabilization plan, which would be formally approved in June 1959 and entailed the arrival of up to US\$ 544 million within the framework of an international financial assistance program. The stabilization plan, as summarized by Joan Sardá (1970), who is regarded as its mastermind, can be defined as follows: a set of economic policy actions to move from a closed and state-controlled economy to an open one, with a liberalization of trade, a new parity with the dollar—after a devaluation of the national currency, the peseta—and greater freedom for foreign investment. The economic “stabilization plan” would be remembered as the beginning of what would be later considered and officially named as the “Spanish economic miracle” (Preston, 2019). A new political formula which did not dispute the military victory of 1939 was then solidified: official discourses would combine political ideology with good economic performance from then on as a way to justify the legitimacy of the authoritarian state.

This resulting political formula can be understood as the political discourse emanating from the new equilibrium within the elite regime, and the new changes implemented to respond to international and economic challenges. A modernized country, as Spain was becoming during the 1960s, not only needed to be the reincarnation of the national victory after the Civil War but also had to deliver and ensure prosperous economic development. Along with this Spanish miracle, several institutional changes have modified the structure of the key centers of the Francoist power elite. Carlos Moya (1984) has considered the reforms of the 1950s and 1960s as the Weberian rationalization of the Francoist regime, with Opus Dei leaders combining Catholic doctrine with a Calvinist entrepreneurial spirit, which materialized in the foundation of the first elitist private Business School University, IESE, inaugurated in Navarre in 1958 by Opus Dei founder José María Escrivá de Balaguer (Moya, 1975; Ynfante, 1970).

This process of rationalization of the state had several major landmarks. First, the fiscal reform of 1957, which tried to improve the Spanish public finances through the reduction of the public deficit (González, 1979; Navarro-Rubio, 1991). Second, the Administration law of the same year, which sought to modernize a traditionally inefficient administration importing management techniques from the private sector, with an inspiration in the EEUU local councils (Hofmann, 2023). Third, the stabilization plan of 1959 which devalued the national currency, the peseta in relation to the US dollar. Applied inflation control measures enabled the liberalization of the Spanish economy thus relaxing several rules to liberate imports and promote foreign investments (Sardá, 1970).

Other major milestones that changed the orientation of the economic policies during the 1960s were the law of nationalization and reorganization of the Bank of Spain, signed in 1962, that would start the process of modernization and autonomy of this central institution (Navarro-Rubio, 1991; Pérez, 1997); the publication of the World Bank report, also in 1962 that would legitimize the promotion of the 4-year development plans from 1964 to 1975 (Hofmann, 2023); and the change in the strategy of the National Institute of Industry (NII); this planning institution had been born in 1941 inspired by fascist Italy and oriented to an autarkic national industrial development; in 1962, the NII saw its budget frozen and its operations and policy reoriented to a more intense and subsidiary collaboration with private enterprises (Cabrera & Del Rey, 2002; Comín & Martín-Aceña, 2003).

The above-mentioned structural framework of power institutions and technocratic leaders was key to the Spanish economic development and the first initiative towards joining the future European Union and stabilizing the Francoist domination with continuous economic growth and an increase in consumption levels (González, 1979; Hofmann, 2023). At the same time, and as we have explained, the circulation of elites altered the composition of the main leaders of the regime, with decreasing presence of the unified party and the growing influence of Catholic Opus Dei technocrats. A mixture of political formulas, the military victory of 1939 and the economic development of the 1960s as proof of the effectiveness of the regime, prevailed as the definitive ideology that remained stable until 1967 when economic and political crises within the regime began to erode its legitimacy.

Democratic transition and technocratic reproduction: an uncertain happy ending

In addition to its role in promoting growth, or rather, to facilitate foreign investments and touristic exports (Montes, 1993) and other changes, the institutional scheme that was generated in 1959 also had a political dimension that consisted of the survival of the regime after the dictator's death, something for which several political factions of the authoritarian elite had been fighting for a long time (Hofmann, 2023). These changes also had a dynamic dimension that demonstrated the bureaucratic connection between the authoritarian Francoist and democratic regime that would follow (Baena del Alcázar, 1999; Baena del Alcázar et al., 1984). According to these latter references, which have paid most attention to the bureaucratic elite (Beltrán, 1977) as a key feature or characteristic of the Spanish ruling class, a great part of the elite circulation during the transition period corresponded to a select group of civil servants that would remain in key political and economic positions during the democratic period.

Both academic (Ban, 2016; Pérez, 1997) and journalistic research (Gutiérrez, 1991; Heras, 1990; Rivasés, 1991) have described how the main economic policy institutions, such as the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Finance, the Bank of Spain, and especially its Department of Studies, the Commissioner of the Development Plans, and the National Institute of Industry, which belonged to the ministry of the same name, would actively recruit during the 1960s and 1970s a series of technocrats. These appointments would later command the main economic ministries during the governments of the center-right Democratic Center Union (Unión de Centro Democrático, UCD), from 1977 to 1982, and of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE), from 1982 to 1996.

These ministers of the Spanish bipartisan golden age had occupied relevant positions during the *authoritarian modernity* stage and contributed to the reproduction of a bureaucratic elite that mostly specialized in economic and legal matters. They had also participated in several political demonstrations and protests against the dictatorship as had happened with socialist economic ministers such as Miguel Boyer and Carlos Solchaga, with the governor of the Bank of Spain from 1984 to 1994, Mariano Rubio, or with UCD's ministers of Industry, Carlos Bustelo, and Economy, José Luis Leal, among others. Here, elite circulation movements can also be seen as what Mosca would call cooptation or recruitment and the progressive institutional integration of potential adversaries of the regime. Former members of the democratic opposition to the Francoist regime would later occupy decisive positions in the first governments of democracy.

The stabilization plan approved in 1959 and the wide range of policies that followed, such as the developmental plans that were programmed from 1964 to 1975, have been considered as the beginning of a long but successful road to development that brought Spain among the most developed countries in the world. For our purpose, it is important to highlight that this conclusion can not only be found in Francoist ex-ministers' memoirs, such as Laureano López-Rodó's (1990) and Mariano Navarro-Rubio's (1991). It is a common idea shared by democratic opinion makers and analysts, like, for instance, the former editor in chief of *Diario 'El País'* (Estefanía, 2014).

In this way, the social reproduction of technocratic elites is followed by a cultural rationale, a political formula that is often used when economic and political crises arise, as it happened during the Eurozone crisis (Fernández-Villaverde et al., 2012). These analyses usually reproduce and even enhance the connection between the stabilization of the national economy in 1959, the economic development that followed and the decisive steps to enter the European Union. They appear to suggest that certain orthodox economic measures should imply development and integration in democratic supranational areas. Modernization theory, which claims that economic development can make a decisive contribution to democracy has had relative success among Spanish authors; in fact, one of the promoters of this theory, W.W. Rostow, collaborated with Spanish technocrats in the elaboration of the development plans (Hofmann, 2023).

Modernization theory has been considered by certain historians (Gilman, 2018; Sirera, 2015) as a key tool for building a permanent and durable political consensus in Spain. It is a symptomatic fact that the expression "the long march," that is, the political journey from dictatorship to constitutional monarchy, has been used by Francoist

ministers (López-Rodó, 1977) and by left-leaning democrats (Estefanía, 2014). Spanish parliamentary democracy returned after Franco's death, and, in 1977, free elections were held. That same year, and under serious economic threats which included a balance of payments and fiscal crises, an economic, political, and social consensus was sealed among the main political parties. The "Moncloa Agreements," constituted a new stabilization plan against double-digit inflation, trade deficits, and a budget crisis. All of these risks were happening at the same as rising trade union activity during social and political unrest were threatening the possibility of a sustainable transition process to democracy (Cabrera & Del Rey, 2002). The success of the Moncloa Agreements, however, played the role of an economic support for the democratic constitution that would be approved and signed in December 1978.

As it was in 1959, economic agreements and measures were again a way to stabilize a threatening situation that was this time channeled through an emerging party system. However, a sign of the continuity between these two key dates in Spanish history, and the prevailing role of the technocrats, was the fact that many of the technicians who worked on the 1959 reforms were also present in the 1977 agreements, as had happened with economists Joan Sardá, Luis Ángel Rojo, and, especially, Enrique Fuentes-Quintana, among many others (Pérez, 1997). This technocratic prevalence and the relevance of bureaucrats over the whole period serve to characterize the process of the circulation of elites as a continuous mixture of new and old elements (Michels, 2023 (1911)).

The failed coup d'etat that happened in January 1981, when a far-right sector of the army rebelled against the parliament and the legal government led to the majority victory of the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) in the 1982 elections. The Spanish entrance into NATO that same year, ratified by referendum in 1986, and its incorporation into the European Economic Community in 1985 have been considered the confirmation of a successful and solid political transition process. The signing of the Maastricht treaty in 1992, opened a way to a legitimate membership to what would be the European Monetary Union in 1993.

Spain's relative success when joining supranational organizations, something that had also happened during the authoritarian period, would be defended as a good result of the democratic era, especially during socialist executives from 1982 to 1996. However, this apparently unimpeded progress which happened under conservative governments that ruled from 1977 to 1982 and 1996 to 2004; and subsequently by progressive executives from 1982 to 1996 and 2004 to 2011 would be questioned after the 2008 financial crisis. The bursting of an enormous housing and construction bubble, the return of double-digit unemployment, and a financial solvency crisis would threaten Spain and a part of the Eurozone with a return to fears of economic regression.

Under political turmoil, due to the publication of corruption scandals affecting both main parties, namely, PSOE and PP as well as the budget cutbacks and economic crisis, King Juan Carlos I had to face public criticism after he had an accident during a secret hunt in Botswana, which he attended in the company of an alleged lover. Against the backdrop of this political contagion, the Spanish political system showed the first signs of alarm in 2014 when the emergence of a new leftist and republican party, Podemos, and the abdication of the king began to seriously threaten the status quo. The executive constituted in 2015 by the conservative Popular Party ruled out the possibility of a risky political change but was frustrated in June 2018 when the party was condemned by the Supreme Court of the State for a series of corruption and illegal financing scandals.

The government that was formed in 2019 between the socialists and the Unidas Podemos coalition, after a no-confidence motion had expelled the conservatives from the executive in 2018, has faced different challenges. However, this political formation, which was renewed by the end of 2023, appears to have reached a new political equilibrium, promoting economic, social, and political reforms under new European constraints, among which higher monetary and fiscal flexibility are to be taken into account for the contribution to a maybe leftist political formula under the Spanish state.

Nevertheless, this coalition could only be constituted after the radical party, Podemos, reached an agreement with the communists of the United Left Party and had adapted, after several schisms and the renouncement of alternative ways of political organization, to the rules of Spanish democracy as a more European-oriented social democratic formation.

TABLE 1 Development of the legal domination system in Spain (1959–2024).

	Authoritarian Francoism (1959–1975)	Democratic transition (1975–1982)	Consolidated democracy (1982–2024)
Power network dimension	Government technocrats, 'Movimiento Nacional' unified party, military power, international organizations, Bank of Spain, private corporations and domestic banking industry.	Democratic technocrats, Bank of Spain, domestic banking industry, private corporations, and bipartisan system (center-right and center-left parties).	Democratic technocrats, Bank of Spain, bipartisan system, European Union policymakers, domestic banking industry, private corporations.
Mythical discursive dimension	Economic liberalization, modernization, development, international integration, Atlantic alliance.	Modernization, democratic Constitution, European integration, Atlantic alliance.	Modernization, welfare state, European integration Constitution, Atlantic alliance.
Structural resilience dimension	Crisis of legitimacy, economic constitution, inflation and current account problems, workers strike, latent demands for democracy.	Worldwide economic crisis, class conflict, industrial and banking crises, military menaces, terrorism.	World financial crisis, Eurozone sovereignty crisis, national and international terrorism, bipartisanship lack of legitimacy, Monarchy instability.

Table 1 outlines the main features defining the forms of rational domination experienced in Spain from 1959 to 2024.

DISCUSSION: STABILITY AND CHANGE AS AN EXPANDED POLITICAL FORMULA

While some influential approaches to the Spanish democratic transition tend to focus on the transition itself and the key episodes in which leaders' decisions were pivotal (for instance, Colomer, 2006), we believe that a fuller understanding of the roots of the process and its sociological significance calls for an analysis of how elements of the legal-rational domination system were shaped decades before the advent of democracy and how such elements have adjusted to changing internal and external circumstances.

This perspective neither neglects elite agency nor does it overstate its impact: leaders do make a difference, and the goals they pursue are relevant to a proper understanding of their actions, provided that the goals are not conflated or confused with the actual outcomes. By applying this approach to the Spanish democratic transition, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, the longevity of a political formula depends on the balance between its constituent elements. It can withstand a moral crisis if it still provides grounds for instrumental consent but not when it does not deliver in either field. The representation crisis of the second half of the 2010s, in addition to the financial crisis that accelerated it, have tested the Spanish democratic political formula to an unprecedented extent and may have precipitated fundamental changes therein.

We also need to consider the global environment and interconnections of power networks that constitute the framework for the political formula and essentially influence its constitution and implementation. The Spanish democratic political formula begins to take shape when the country leaves autarky behind and is fundamentally conditioned by the economic, political, military (and, eventually, ideological) networks with which Spanish elites aspire to connect. Again, the effectiveness of the formula is tested using global phenomena, such as the 2008 financial crisis.

A democratic political formula, and specifically the Spanish formula analyzed here, can be regarded as a way to shape a democracy that is manageable and does not collapse due to an overload of demands, particularly after a

four-decade authoritarian regime. The formula is supposed to 'save us from ourselves,' providing stability and gradualness while discouraging popular desire for radical change through the evidence of economic and institutional successes that can be achieved. The "mythical discursive dimension" of the legal-rational domination system highlights the departure from the dictatorial past, emphasizing the symbolic elements of democracy in the historical narrative of the transition, much as the victory over the so-called anti-Spain in the civil war was the key legitimizing myth, at least during the first half of the regime.

The role of political leaders must be understood in the context of wider, often overlapping elite networks and, at least as importantly, within the structure of opportunities and constraints presented by different power networks. Besides charisma and other individual qualities that may be relevant in political action, the connections between political leaders within elite networks are decisive not only for their chances of gaining access to positions of power but also for the choices they make and how they govern when they are granted such positions. These networks do not connect them to only other political leaders and other hopeful figures but crucially to other power networks (economic, military, and ideological) that constrain political action.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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ENDNOTE

¹ Falange Española Tradicionalista (FET) y de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista (JONS) was the name of the sole legal party of the Franco Regime. Its name can be translated into 'Traditionalist Spanish Phalanx of the Councils of the National Syndicalist Offensive'.

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How to cite this article: Villena-Oliver, A., & Romero-Reche, A. (2024) A formula to save us (from ourselves): continuity and change in the Spanish legal domination system (1959–2024). *Sociology Lens*, 37(2), 240–255. <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12459>