



A Guide to the Spanish Elections

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Voters in Spain will elect a new government on March 9. The highly competitive race pits the leader of the conservative opposition Popular Party (PP), [Mariano Rajoy](#), against the incumbent Socialist Prime Minister [José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero](#).

The 2008 election is a rematch of the vote four years ago. Rajoy, 52, was first picked to run for prime minister in the 2004 elections by former Prime Minister José María Aznar. Rajoy led Zapatero, 47, throughout the 2004 campaign, until the March 11 commuter train bombings in Madrid that killed 191 people.

Zapatero's surprise victory three days after the attacks has been attributed to the hysteria fomented by Spain's left-leaning mass media in the hours before voters went to the polls. Because of the questions surrounding the legitimacy of his 2004

win, many Spaniards have considered Zapatero to be an accidental political leader. Adding to their doubts is the fact that Zapatero failed to win an absolute majority, and thus has been beholden to a motley hodge-podge of leftists and nationalist parties to govern.

But Zapatero interpreted his surprise election victory in 2004 as a mandate for fundamental change. He immediately set into motion a series of highly controversial domestic and foreign policies such as legalizing gay marriage, supporting the separatist aspirations of regional Basque and Catalan nationalists, and selling weapons to the authoritarian regime of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.

Zapatero has also managed to reopen many of the wounds relating to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)

that most Spaniards thought had been put to rest with the end of the Franco dictatorship (1975) and the advent of democracy (1978). The result is that Spain is more divided today than at any time in its modern history.

Given this highly polarized political context, the 2008 campaign has (unsurprisingly) turned out to be one of the nastiest spectacles on record. Formal campaigning has been brief (under Spanish law, it is limited to just two weeks), but the typical bare-knuckle campaign rhetoric has featured ill-tempered insults like: Former Socialist Prime Minister (and elder statesman) Felipe Gonzalez dismissing Rajoy as an “imbecile”. Manuel Fraga, the 86-year-old founder of the PP, promising to use the Socialist manifesto as “lavatory paper”. And Zapatero and Rajoy daily accusing each other of being “liars”. [A recent debate](#) between the two men included this exchange: Rajoy: “You lied because you always lie. You never tell the truth.” Zapatero: “No, sir. No, no, no, no. Never.”

The Socialist campaign strategy has been to accuse the PP of scaremongering. The PP strategy has been to persuade [Socialist sympathizers to abstain](#) from voting. Because the Socialists have a far broader base than does the PP, the PP needs a high rate of leftwing abstention to win. For the Socialists, abstentions (historically about 20 percent of leftists abstain) could spell disaster.

According to the [final national polls](#) on voting intentions released on

March 3 (Spanish media are prohibited from publishing polls in the final week of the campaign), Zapatero maintained a narrow lead (4.1 percent) over Rajoy. This could be enough for Zapatero to form a government but not to secure an absolute majority. Such a result would again force the Zapatero to turn to small parties for support, which would give Basque and Catalan nationalists an even greater say over policy.

Although neither candidate has offered a grand vision for Spain’s future, the outcome of the election will have important consequences for the country and for Europe, especially on questions of illegal immigration and Islamist terrorism. What follows is a brief summary of some of the main issues.

1. Economy

Spain’s next prime minister “will spend the next four years [cleaning up an economic mess](#) of a scale not witnessed in Spain in modern times,” according to the London-based Financial Times.

Indeed, almost all Spaniards agree that the economy has replaced terrorism as the central issue in this election. The housing bubble, which has been the driving force behind a credit-financed spending boom, has burst. (Some 20 percent of the Spanish economy is related to housing, twice as high as the rest of Europe.) After 15 years of incredible growth, the Spanish economy is now in big trouble.

GDP growth is slowing fast and unemployment (8.6 percent) is up to the highest level in 11 years. Inflation (4.4 percent) has hit a 12-year high and retail sales are down for the first time in many years. The service sector, which accounts for more than half of Spain's economy, is shrinking and business confidence has hit a record low. The Spanish manufacturing sector is also at its weakest in more than six years. According to a recent poll, more than one-third of [Spaniards rate the economy](#) as "bad" or "very bad" (up from 25.4 percent last year).

Spaniards are also loaded down with debt. Spain's household debt is at record levels of nearly €600 billion. Millions of Spaniards with a mortgage are now paying more than 55 percent of their wages on principal or secondary home repayments, double the percentage considered healthy by most banks. A recent poll shows that 70 percent of Spaniards are struggling to make ends meet. [Spanish consumers](#) failed to pay back €11.5 billion worth of debt in 2007, a 30 percent increase over the previous year.

Adding to the woes in Spain is the [deteriorating current account imbalance](#). Spain has the second highest current account deficit (10 percent of GDP) in the industrialized world (after the United States). The Banco de España recently [sold 80 tons of gold](#), presumably in order to finance the current account deficit.

Both candidates have been focusing on Spain's deteriorating economic situation by relying on old-

fashioned populism; they have attempted to attract voters on the back of generous political handouts. Zapatero says he will increase social spending to ease the economic pain. Rajoy wants to cut spending and stimulate the economy with corporate and income tax cuts.

2. Immigration

In the minds of many Spaniards, Spain's economic woes are linked to its [burgeoning immigrant population](#): During the past ten years, the number of immigrants in Spain has skyrocketed nine-fold to 4.5 million; immigrants now make up a whopping ten percent of the total population of Spain, a country that for much of the last century was an exporter rather than an importer of immigrants. (Spain accounts for around 25 percent of Europe's total immigration.)

Up until early 2005, half of all immigrants in Spain were undocumented, a problem that Zapatero decided to "fix" by granting [the largest blanket amnesty in Spanish history](#) to nearly one million of them. But while the politically correct prime minister regularly boasts that his "humane" approach to immigration has added a multitude of new contributors to Spain's financially unsustainable social security system, he has been less willing to acknowledge that his leniency has triggered an avalanche of uncontrolled immigration.

In fact, official statistics confirm that today (just three years after Zapatero's amnesty) there are now more

than one million new illegal immigrants in Spain. Many Spaniards are asking themselves how this could happen, but the answer is obvious. By rewarding illegal immigrants with Spanish (and thus European) documentation, Zapatero has unleashed what is known in Spain as the “call effect” to people as far away as Kashmir who now believe that Spain is an easy gateway into Europe.

Because Spain’s immigration problem has spiraled completely out of control, Zapatero now says [the problem is a European problem](#) and as such he has tried to put the onus on other EU member states to find a solution. He wants the EU to dedicate a substantial part of its 2007-2013 frontier control budget to the southern border, for example.

But the EU’s response has been lukewarm. Indeed, most EU countries believe that Zapatero started the crisis with his indulgent immigration policies and, as such, he should find the solution as well. In the words of French President Nicolas Sarkozy: “We see the damage caused by the phenomenon of massive regularization. Every country which has conducted an operation of massive regularization finds itself the next month [in a position that] does not allow it to master the situation anymore.”

Borrowing a page from Sarkozy, Rajoy has called for greater “control and order” of non-EU immigrants, promising, if elected, to require them to sign an “immigration contract” in which they promise to

leave Spain if they cannot find a job. Rajoy proposes that all long-term immigrants pledge to “abide by the laws, respect Spanish values, learn the language and pay taxes”.

Although recent polls show that 62 percent of Spaniards say they support Rajoy’s immigration proposals, Spain’s multi-cultural Socialist elites have reacted with the predictable outrage. Although Zapatero has largely [ducked the immigration question](#), he has tried to paint Rajoy as a xenophobe.

3. Regionalism

Many Spaniards are famously more loyal to their region than to their country. Indeed, regional sentiments have for many centuries complicated Spain’s efforts to build a strong unitary state. Separatism in the form of Basque and Catalan nationalism poses one of the greatest challenges to the stability of contemporary Spain.

Rajoy has criticized Zapatero (who depends on nationalist parties to sustain his coalition government) for threatening Spain’s territorial integrity by granting greater autonomy to regional governments and for negotiating with the Basque separatist group ETA.

Indeed, the Spanish parliament granted [Catalonia greater autonomy](#) in 2006 as part of a reform that recognized the region as a “nation” and gave its government greater control over taxation and other powers. Now the Basque regional government says it plans to stage a

[referendum on Basque independence](#) in October 2008.

Some analysts warn this is the first step on a road that will lead to the [breakup of Spain](#).

4. Terrorism

A few days after taking office, Zapatero withdrew the 1,300 Spanish troops that were deployed to Iraq by the previous government of José María Aznar. Opponents of the withdrawal accused Zapatero of naively thinking that the Al-Qaeda terrorist problem exists only because of the war in Iraq. And although it is true that a majority of Spaniards opposed the intervention in Iraq, many also believed that Zapatero's precipitous action smacked of appeasement that not only weakened Spanish national security, but also destroyed the [international credibility](#) and stature that Spain had built up during the Aznar government.

The withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq sent a symbolic message that represented a major victory for Al-Qaeda. Because what Zapatero did not seem to understand was that Islamic radicals still consider four-fifths of Spain to be Muslim land that must be liberated from the Spanish infidels who drove out the Moors in what is known as the Reconquista (711-1492). Thus by appearing to give in to the demands of Islamic extremists, Zapatero reinforced the perception that it is the terrorists, not the government, that sets the agenda in Spain.

Confirming the growing suspicion that Zapatero's post-modern approach to fighting terrorism lacks a basis in reality, he told [TIME Magazine](#) in September 2004 that "sexual equality is a lot more effective against terrorism than military strength". At the same time, he announced an ill-defined initiative he calls the "[Alliance of Civilizations](#)", which borrows heavily from the "Dialogue of Civilizations" concept promoted by Islamic radicals in Iran during the 1990s; in its essence, the initiative calls on the West to negotiate a truce with Islamic terrorists, and on terms set by the latter.

Indeed, Zapatero seems to believe that multilateral group therapy is the best way to work out his differences with the Islamic extremists who want to take over his country. But the prime minister's initiative has been widely criticized in Spain and elsewhere because of its failure to comprehend that Al-Qaeda and other Islamic extremists are at war not just with Spain or other individual states, but with the very ideals of Western society...not to mention with hyper-secularists like Zapatero himself.

But what do the terrorists think? In March 2007, Al-Qaeda launched new threats against Spain, this time over its military deployment in Afghanistan. In a video, a hooded man said the presence of Spanish troops in Afghanistan "exposes Spain again to threats" unless they withdraw their troops from the country. "The Spanish people have been tricked by a Socialist government which withdrew troops from Iraq and sent 600

to Afghanistan,” the man proclaimed. So much for Zapatero’s truce with Islam.

Zapatero’s approach to domestic terrorism has not fared much better. In June 2006, he agreed to begin a dialogue with ETA, the Basque separatist group, without first requiring that the group disarm. ETA, which is listed as a terrorist organization by both the European Union and the United States, has killed almost 900 people over the past four decades in its quest for an independent Basque state in seven parts of northern Spain and southwest France.

To initiate his dialogue with ETA, however, Zapatero pulled out of an agreement that he himself had proposed in 2000 with the PP not to talk with ETA unless it agreed to disarm. “Any normal person understands you cannot negotiate with someone whose negotiating weapon is as powerful and hard to argue with as a pistol,” Rajoy said at the time. The PP also opposed any talks with Batasuna, the outlawed political front of ETA.

Undeterred, Zapatero said at a year-end news conference on December 29, 2006 that his peace initiative was making progress. “Are we better off now with a permanent cease-fire, or when we had bombs, car bombs and explosions?” he asked. “This time next year, we will be better off than we are today.”

The very next morning, ETA set off a powerful car bomb at Madrid’s newly inaugurated international

airport, killing two people and bringing to a dramatic end nine months of a so-called “permanent cease-fire”. The bombing caught Zapatero completely by surprise and shattered his attempt to solve the 40-year Basque conflict through dialogue.

Rajoy has denounced Zapatero, accusing him of “surrendering to terrorists”. Zapatero has countered that the Rajoy has broken a cardinal rule of Spanish democracy by politicizing terrorism.

But what is threat from terrorism today? The Spanish Interior Ministry has placed the country on high alert for the possibility of a pre-election bomb attack by ETA. Zapatero fears that a fatal attack would once again transform the campaign, but this time not in his favor.

5. Social Policy and Church-State Relations

The Catholic Church, which historically has had considerable political and moral influence in Spain, has been at odds with Zapatero since he came to power in 2004 and embarked on a broad, aggressive agenda of liberal social reform. Indeed, the Catholic Church is the only institution in Spain with enough power to push back against the radical social engineering programs of the Spanish Left.

The powerful [Episcopal Conference of Spanish Catholic Bishops](#), in a recent widely disseminated “message to the public,” reminded Catholic voters of their duty to defend traditional values and to elect

leaders “responsibly” when they go to the polls. Without naming a political party, the bishops admonished that: “Not all [party] programs are equally compatible with the faith and the demands of Christian life.”

The Socialist Party responded by promising to eliminate public funding of the Catholic Church. The secretary of Spain’s Socialist Party, Jose Blanco, said that “the relations between the Catholic hierarchy and the government will not be the same after March 9.” Blanco said the legislature would take “definitive steps” to eliminate the economic aid the Church receives in Spain. (The Catholic Church is partly financed from contributions taken direct from the public’s taxes. About one third of taxpayers choose to pay a contribution which adds up to about €150 million each year.) The PP called Blanco’s statements “intolerable blackmail.”

The rhetoric is similar to the dispute over a new government-imposed civics program known as “Education for Citizenship and Human Rights”. The innocuous-sounding scheme purports to instruct students in ethics. But many parents say that in reality it is a vaguely-worded program that seeks to indoctrinate children with the sexual ideology and social agenda of the Spanish Left, including the acceptance of homosexuality.

The Spanish Bishops Conference issued an [official condemnation](#) of the program, saying it “implies a serious wound to the original and

inalienable right of parents and schools, in collaboration with them, to choose the moral formation that they want for their children. This is a right recognized by the Spanish Constitution. The government cannot supplant the society as an educator of the moral conscience.”

But Spain’s Socialist demagogues don’t take kindly to dissent. The intellectual godfather of the “Education for Citizenship” program, a well-known Socialist and anti-clerical attack dog named Gregorio Peces-Barba Martínez, now spends most of his days lashing out at anyone who dares question the wisdom of his plan to impose his moral preferences on all Spanish children.

In a scathing opinion piece titled [“Regarding Education for Citizenship”](#) and published by the leftist daily El Pais, Peces-Barba wrote that he was outraged at the bishops’ opposition to his plan, and accused them of “an extreme arrogance, a sensation of impunity and an insufferable sense of superiority, derived from the fact that they administer ‘superior truths.’” In Spain, the constitutional right to ideological and religious freedom is a one-way street.

Some observers say this also explains the Spanish Left’s love affair with Islam, which Socialists view as a weapon against the Catholic Church. Indeed, Zapatero and his post-modern co-religionists believe that by strengthening Islam, they are weakening Catholicism, which is the main barrier to the spread of the Socialist cult of secular humanism.

No wonder why many Spaniards fear for the future of their country.

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