

2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 4 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN SPAIN JUNE 13 2004

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Key points:

- The European Parliament election held on June 13 2004 were marked by the lowest turnout of any election held in Spain since the return of democracy.
- The 2004 European Parliament elections were seen by the parties, the media and the electorate as a re-run of the recent General elections held in March 2004 which, surprisingly for some, were won by the Socialists.
- The electoral campaign was dominated by national political issues with EU political issues taking a back seat.
- The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) won the European Parliament elections, three months after winning the general elections and forming a government, although with a narrower lead.
- The People's Party (PP) narrowed the gap with the PSOE compared to March 2004, cutting the Socialists' lead to 2%.
- The third nation-wide party, the United Left (IU), suffered a further electoral debacle.
- The various coalitions formed by the peripheral nationalist parties did not obtain especially positive results although they maintained their positions.

The Context

The June 2004 European Parliament elections in Spain were strongly influenced by the general elections held three months before and by their result. On 14 March 2004, three days after the terrible attacks on several commuter trains in Madrid, the electorate gave victory to the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) in the general elections.¹ This Socialist victory and the size of the defeat of the conservative People's Party (PP), which lost its parliamentary majority and was forced into opposition, were unexpected events.

¹ See: L. Ramiro, 'The 2004 Spanish General Election', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network/Royal Institute for International Affairs Election Briefing No 14*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex, 2004 at http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern_no_14_spain.doc.

Hence, the country lived through an extraordinary political period in the months prior to the European Parliament elections. General elections had been held quite recently and the context and result of those elections were exceptional. Afterwards there had been a change of government and, just before the European Parliament elections, the country had witnessed the first practical decisions of the new socialist administration headed by Zapatero.

Certainly, the way –in some senses unexpected– that Zapatero had gained power, and the dramatic context of the general elections still attracted much attention in the media during April, May and June 2004. The investigation into the terrorist attacks in Madrid and the recriminations flying between the PP and PSOE in this respect were still relevant issues. Moreover, some of the first actions of Zapatero’s government attracted great public attention. This was the case with the withdrawal of the Spanish army from Iraq. It was a very popular measure that went down well with the many Spaniards who were opposed to the war, to Bush’s policy and to the support that the previous government of José María Aznar had given to the US President. So the Socialists kept one of their main electoral promises, they clearly distanced themselves from the PP and put an issue on the political agenda that the conservatives had difficulties handling in the eyes of public opinion.

In these circumstances the European Parliament elections, normally second or third order elections, appeared in the Spanish case to be especially “contaminated” by the dynamics of national politics. For political parties and the media they appeared to be a re-run, like a second round, of the March 2004 general elections which, taking place in an exceptional atmosphere, had resulted in a victory for the Socialists.

During the weeks after the March 2004 general elections several PP leaders had put the PSOE’s victory down to the general unrest and commotion that the attacks in Madrid had created among the voters and the campaign of ‘spin’ against the government on the part of the media close to the Socialists. According to this view, the conservatives had lost the elections due to causes not connected to their policies in government. The European Parliament elections appeared, then, for the PP as an opportunity to show their strength and ‘true’ level of electoral support unencumbered by exceptional circumstances.

This same logic was applied, although in a different way, to the PSOE. Having won the general elections in an exceptional context, the Socialists saw themselves as obliged to revalidate their victory in the European Parliament elections to show that their election result was based on a real and profound desire for change on the part of the Spanish voters and not on the short-term impact and commotion caused by the terrorist attacks.

In any case, the PSOE faced the European Parliament elections in a better situation than the PP. The pre-election polls predicted a new Socialist victory with a lead over the conservatives of up to 10%.² The PSOE also benefited from a “honeymoon” with the progressive voters during these months. The popularity of Zapatero’s government had not yet been damaged by unpopular measures, the frustration of their electorate’s expectations or by social conflict. What is more, the swift withdrawal of Spanish troops

² The pre-election poll of the *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* gave the PSOE 46.3% of the vote and the PP 36.7%.

from Iraq helped to give the Socialist Government the image of a government that kept its promises. Hence, the PP faced the European Parliament elections with unfavourable results in the opinion polls and a government that was enjoying great popularity.

In some senses, the election defeat had momentarily disconcerted the PP. But this concern and its consequences were much greater in the case of the third party nationwide party, the United Left (IU). IU faced the European Parliament elections in a desperate state and in a crisis caused by its abysmal election result in tMarch. But, like for the rest of the parties, the European Parliament elections were like a second round of the March general elections for the IU. In their case, the goal was to recover the electorate that their leaders IU thought they had lost to the PSOE in the general elections. They believed that their terrible general election result had been caused by the strategic vote of the left-wing voters who, in order to oust the PP from government, had voted PSOE. Therefore, the IU saw the possibility of overcoming their difficult electoral situation in the recovery of these strategic voters in the European Parliament elections. IU went to the polls in coalition with ICV, an Eco-socialist Green party from Catalonia, which took second place in their electoral list.³

Along with these three parties, the numerous peripheral nationalist parties went to the polls in three broad coalitions. Given the reduction in the number of Spanish MEPs in these elections (from 64 to 54), the goal of these heterogeneous parties was to maintain their parliamentary representation at a time when it was more difficult to obtain seats. At the same time, the imbalance in the electoral weight of the various parties that made up these coalitions made it difficult to forecast the final result.

Having looked at the basic features of the context and the aims of the parties in the European Parliament elections we should briefly consider the candidates that headed the electoral lists of each of the parties. The preparation of the PSOE's candidates did not present any problems or conflicts. The list was headed by José Borrell, ex minister and ex candidate for Prime Minister during a brief period and linked to European policy as he was one of the PSOE's representatives in the Convention on the Future of Europe. The preparation of the PP's list was more determined by the need to include a numerous group of leaders (including ex-ministers) whom the conservatives' defeat in the general elections had left in an awkward position. Thus, several leaders of the PP exclusively linked to national policy offered themselves to be included in the European list. Heading the list was Jaime Mayor-Oreja, ex-minister of the Interior and former leader of the PP in the Basque Country, who had no specific European credentials. In fact, it seems that the decision for Mayor-Oreja to head the list was taken only after another conservative leader and former minister, Rodrigo Rato, had been guaranteed his post at the head of the IMF. The drawing up of the IU list suffered several problems, delays and conflicts, and the list was eventually headed by the man in charge of International Policy in the IU (W. Meyer), after the leadership were forced to rule out their first choices..

For their part the peripheral nationalist parties went to the polls in coalitions. Some parties which had gone to the polls alone in 1999 co-ordinated their efforts with parties close to their position. Thus, 'GalEusCa' grouped together the main nationalist parties and was made up of the PNV (centre-right Basque nationalists), CiU (centre-right

³ What is significant is that the number two candidate on the list joined the Green group of the European parliament and not the Confederal Group of the European United Left-Green Nordic Left.

Catalan nationalists), BNG (left-wing Galician nationalists) and other smaller groups. Their main candidate was a CiU leader specialised in European policy.⁴ 'Europa de los pueblos' was made up of smaller, more radical nationalist parties than the above; mainly the ERC (left-wing Catalan nationalist party in favour of independence), EA (left-wing Basque nationalists) and ChA (left-wing Aragonese nationalists). Their number one candidate came from the ERC although he pledged to give up his seat to a representative from EA at the end of the legislative period. And, finally, the European Coalition was made up of moderate nationalist parties, almost all of very little relevance apart from the eCC (Canary Island nationalists) and the PA (Andalusian nationalists, one of whose representatives headed the list).

To sum up, the European Parliament elections were quite relevant for the parties but for reasons which had little to do with European policy. They were important elections for politicians due to their implications for domestic politics. For the PSOE a defeat or a narrowing of the lead over the PP they obtained in the general elections would mean a weakening of the position of the recently formed government and would strengthen the PP opposition. The PSOE hoped that their result in the general elections would be confirmed in the European Parliament elections and their government thereby strengthened. A good result for the Socialist list would also mean approval on the part of the citizens for the first measures taken by the government. For the PP, the European Parliament elections were an opportunity to show their strength, the weakness of the PSOE and begin their fight back to power. With a victory or a good result (which narrowed the PSOE's lead), the conservatives could confirm their thesis which maintained that the Socialist victory in March was due to a manipulation of the tragedy caused by the terrorist attacks in Madrid. On the other hand, a poor showing for the PP could open a leadership crisis in the party and undermine the position and strategy of their new leader (Rajoy).

The campaign

In this context it is not surprising that the campaign centred particularly on domestic issues. The PSOE needed to mobilise its electorate, which had given it victory in the March general elections, and the PP needed to combat the discouragement that its electoral defeat might have caused among its followers and convince them to turn out to vote again. Hence the electoral campaign was intense, including serious accusations and even insults. The national leaders of the main parties (including Prime Minister Zapatero and the conservative leader Rajoy) were intensely involved in supporting their European candidates.

If the Socialist victory in March was dependent on a high turnout, and that the undecided and those (mainly progressive voters) who had previously abstained turned out to vote, it was necessary that this trend continued in the June European Parliament elections for the Socialists to beat the PP. And here the PSOE had to face two fundamental challenges. On the one hand, they had to avoid a high percentage of their own voters from demobilizing in the European Parliament elections. Some Socialist voters might have thought that the main goal had already been achieved with the ousting the PP and putting the PSOE into government and that it was not necessary to

⁴ CiU and BNG had gone to polls separately in the elections to the European Parliament in 1999. The reduced number of MEP's that Spain had and the current electoral situation of those parties made their electoral coordination more advisable in 2004.

vote in the European Parliament elections as they considered them less decisive. On the other hand, the PSOE might have also lost a good part of the votes received in the General elections from voters who were close to IU, who decided not to use a strategic vote in favour of the Socialists in the European Parliament elections once the Conservatives had been defeated.

To overcome these two problems, the Socialists hoped that there existed a certain natural continuity in the mobilisation of their voters; that is to say that the PSOE voters would maintain their level of mobilisation until June. They also trusted in the attractiveness of their leader (Zapatero) and in the effectiveness of their campaign to ensure that the reaction against the PP continued having a beneficial effect for the PSOE.

In any case, the value of the European Parliament elections for the PSOE was essentially instrumental. The real goal of the Socialist leaders, and one which they did not hide in their public interventions, was that they should serve to reinforce Zapatero's government. As an example of this strategy, an internal Socialist document literally stated that they had to convince the voters that their vote in the European Parliament elections "was valid to reinforce in all fields the action of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's government".⁵ Moreover, a new victory would force the PP to stop accusing the PSOE of having won the general elections only thanks to the March terrorist attacks.

For these reasons too, one of the main issues in the Socialist campaign was the war in Iraq. Just as they had done three months earlier, the Socialist leaders once again used this issue to criticize the policies of Aznar's government. It was of course, a central issue in the Socialists' strategy that had undermined the conservative government and led to their victory in March. In the Socialist campaign for the European Parliament elections it became the most relevant issue in the speeches of their main candidates. In the messages of some of the PSOE candidates the war in Iraq did not appear, however, as just a foreign policy issue, but as a problem linked to European policy. Thus, for the Socialist candidate Borrell the PP's policy in favour of United States intervention in Iraq had led to division within and had paralysed the European Union.⁶ Besides, argued the Socialist candidate, by supporting the policy of President Bush, Spain had been isolated in the EU and forced to confront its traditional European allies. In the same way, on numerous occasions the Socialist candidate strongly criticised the policy of the US government. Not only did they criticise US actions in Iraq, but also in Palestine and their support for the government of Israel.

Borrell, also included more ideological references than is usual in campaign speeches from the PSOE. Thus, he highlighted on many occasions the differences between the social democratic and the conservative programmes for the construction of the EU, he made frequent references to the defence of the social democratic model of the welfare state and the secularism defended by the PSOE. For the PSOE, Spain had to "return to Europe", as their campaign slogan stated, recovering its position alongside the main countries (France and Germany) of the EU. In the same way, references to the project of the European Constitution were not unusual in Borrell's speeches and he accused the PP of having blocked this project and thereby isolated Spain.

⁵ See: *El País*, 13 June 2004, p. 20.

⁶ Borrell stated that: "Of course we have to speak about Iraq. It's impossible not to speak about it and Aznar's responsibility in the enormous division of the Europeans". See: *El País*, 27 May, 2004, p. 18.

Just as in the Socialist campaign, the PP campaign also designed primarily to mobilise their voters. In contrast to the March campaign in which the conservatives used a very low-profile strategy in terms of mobilisation (to avoid, but without any success, provoking potential PSOE voters from turning out to vote), the European electoral campaign was aimed at activating the vote of PP sympathisers. This strategy was necessary due to the discouragement and apathy of their voters after the general election defeat. The most obvious consequence of this strategy was the development of a much more aggressive PP campaign than they had carried out three months earlier. So, the leaders of the PP made use of abundant criticisms of the current Socialist government and the performance of the Socialist governments between 1982 and 1996. The conservative candidate, Mayor, continually accused the Socialist candidate, Borrell, of lying and recalled old episodes of corruption among Borrell's collaborators when he was a minister and which had led him to abandon his plans to stand for Prime Minister at the end of the 1990s. On the other hand, by way of contrast there were abundant glowing references to the period of conservative government from 1996-2004 and its economic achievements. The reference to domestic issues was more notable in the speeches of the conservative candidate (Mayor) than in those of the Socialist candidate (Borrell).

If the PSOE concentrated on the issue of the war in Iraq, the PP emphasised the relevance of terrorism as a political issue.⁷ In this field the PP tried to play on the successes of its government (and of Mayor himself as former minister of the Interior) in the fight against ETA terrorism in the period 1996-2004. Another of the issues which appeared frequently in the PP campaign was the problem of immigration. However, without doubt, in relation to EU policy, the issue which most differentiated the PP from the PSOE were the conservatives' criticisms conservatives of the submission of Spain to France and Germany, which, from their point of view, the PSOE were culpable. The PP presented itself as the only party that could defend Spanish interests in the EU. European policy appeared as an area in which the various countries confronted each other for the allocation of resources and defended national interests. And according to the PP, while the PSOE proposed the total subordination of Spain to the Paris-Berlin axis with negative consequences for the country, the conservatives guaranteed a real defence of national interests. For this reason the PP defended the Nice agreements and accused the PSOE of accepting a reduction in the weight and power of Spain in the European Constitution. Being called at times Eurosceptic and anti-federalist, the PP tried to defend itself by claiming that its position was simply more demanding than that of the PSOE on the workings of the EU.

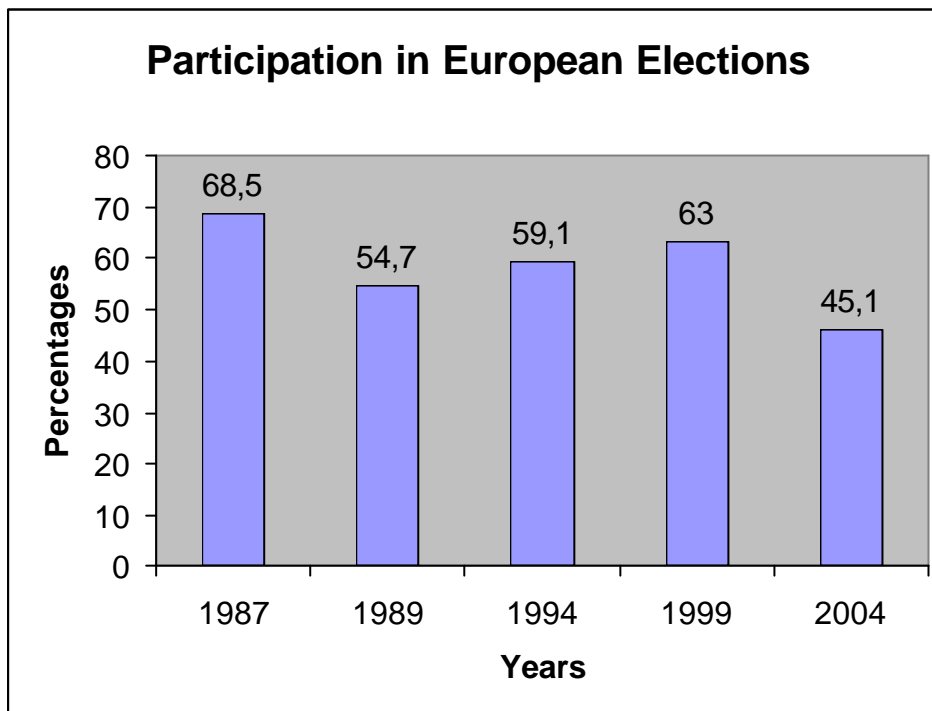
The results

After this intense and aggressive election campaign, in which the national leaders were directly involved, the most relevant feature of the results of the European Parliament elections of June 2004 in Spain was the low turnout. Only 45.1% of potential voters actually turned out to vote. This fact is especially relevant because it is the lowest turnout rate in Spain's history.⁸

⁷ Thus, Mayor declared that: "Terrorism is the main problem of the Europeans. Not the war". See: *El País*, 1 June, 2004, p. 24.

⁸ In spite of the fact that debates were held between the main candidates on TV (something very infrequent in Spain).

Compared with the previous European Parliament elections in 1999, turnout was down by 17%. It is true that in 1999 the European Parliament elections coincided with regional and local elections and that this coincidence may have led to a higher turnout. Nevertheless, on other occasions on which the European Parliament elections were held in isolation, turnout had never been as low as it was in 2004. Besides, PSOE, PP and the media analysed the results of the European Parliament elections in comparison with those of the March general elections. Making this comparison the fall in turnout was dramatic: 77% in the general elections and 45.9% in the European Parliament elections.



Apart from this, the different distribution of turnout between the various autonomous communities gave rise to interesting political interpretations. In Catalonia and Andalusia, two of the most highly populated communities and both electoral strongholds of the PSOE, the abstention rate was far higher than the national average (54%). In Catalonia the abstention rate was 59.7% and in Andalusia it was 58.6%. On the other hand, the abstention rate in Madrid and in the Valencian community, conservative strongholds that also formed a large part of the total electoral roll, was clearly lower than the national average (in both communities it was 49.7%).

Hence, Socialist strategists found themselves on 13 June with one of their most feared electoral scenarios: an abstention rate extraordinarily high that could mean a demobilisation of the progressive electorate. Whether it was because voters were tired, the European Parliament elections being held just three months after the general elections, the lower level of importance that was attached to these elections, or all of these reasons, turnout was much lower. What were the results obtained by the various parties in the framework of this low turnout?

Table 1. European Parliament elections.⁹

	2004			1999		
	MEPs	Votes	%	MEPs	Votes	%
PSOE (Socialist)	25	6,741,112	43.3	24	7,477,823	35.3
PP (Conservative)	24	6,393,192	41.3	27	8,410,993	39.7
GalEusCA (CiU, PNV, BNG) (Peripheral Nationalist)	2	798,816	5.2			
IU-ICV (Left-Green)	2	643,136	4.2			
Europa de los Pueblos (ERC, EA, ChA) (Peripheral Nationalist)	1	380,709	2.5			
Coalición Europea (CC, PA) (Peripheral Nationalist)	-	184,575	1.2			
IU (Left)				4	1,221,566	5.8
CiU (Center-Right Catalan Nationalist)				3	937,687	4.4
Coalición Europea (Peripheral Nationalist)				2	677,094	3.2
Coalición Nacionalista (PNV, CC) (Peripheral Nationalist)				2	613,968	2.9
BNG (Left-Wing Galician Nationalist)				1	349,079	1.6
EH (Extreme-Left Pro-ETA Basque Nationalist)				1	306,923	1.4

The PSOE won the elections with 43.3% of the votes cast. This result was a great improvement on the previous elections to the European Parliament in 1999. But what was really important for the Socialist leaders was that the PSOE maintained the support it had obtained three months earlier in the legislative elections. In spite of a lower turnout, the PSOE won the elections and maintained its share of the vote.

However, the PP could also be very satisfied with the result they obtained. Conservative leaders gave the result a purely domestic reading which they felt was tremendously positive. The PP had slightly improved its share of the vote compared with the 1999 European parliament elections but the most relevant piece of data was that it had obtained 3.5% more than in the March general elections in which it had lost government. Thanks to this increase on their result three months earlier, the conservatives had narrowed the gap with the PSOE to just 2% compared to more than 5% in March. Thus both the Socialists and the conservatives could say that they were satisfied. The criteria of domestic politics through which they evaluated the European Parliament elections made this possible. The PSOE had won in spite of a lower abstention rate and the PP had narrowed the gap that separated them from the Socialists (due, surely to a lower turnout).

⁹ Changes in the coalitions make comparison difficult for 1999-2004. The PSOE in 2004 included candidates of some regional Green parties (one of the MEPs won by the PSOE will form part of the Green parliamentary group).

What can we say about the results for the other parties? In general, few of these could be as satisfied as the big parties. IU obtained a disastrous result (although in Catalonia ICV obtained a positive result) that accentuated the crisis in the organization. Their share was down on the 1999 elections of 1999 and also, what was even worse, on their March 2004 share in the 2004 General elections. The main peripheral nationalist parties also obtained negative results. Except for PNV (integrated in GalEusCa) and the main parties of 'Europa de Los Pueblos' (ERC, EA and ChA), the rest of the nationalist parties did not have any motives for satisfaction. Within this party family, it was the more significant ones that suffered the greatest defeats: the Catalan nationalists of CiU, the Canary Island nationalists of the CC, the Andalusian nationalists of PA and the Galician nationalists of the BNG all suffered defeats of varying magnitude that in some cases deepened existing crises. Thus the final picture is a reinforcement of the two main parties (PSOE and PP), the governing party maintaining its position and a reduction in the support for the other parties.

Summing up

The European Parliament elections of June 2004 in Spain were of notable importance, but due only to their consequences for domestic politics. Although the parties did not consider them as irrelevant the elections only had an instrumental value to achieve exclusively domestic political goals: for the PSOE the most important thing was to reinforce the Zapatero government; for the PP it was to show their strength, their electoral recovery and weaken the Socialist government. The fact that general elections had been held three months earlier turned the European Parliament elections into a type of 'second round' of those elections.

In this way, the main part of the debate centred on the war in Iraq and the debate about the merits of the national governments of the PSOE and the PP. Issues of European policy appeared in the candidates' speeches but played an equally instrumental and subordinated role. While there was a general pro-EU consensus on the part of the PP and the PSOE (only IU-ICV and BNG showed a Soft Eurosceptic stance), we could see a less federalist and more critical position on the part of the conservatives who showed continual mistrust of the role of France and Germany in the EU.

Turnout was extraordinarily low. The low level of interest that European Parliament elections normally provoke was increased on this occasion as the elections were held in isolation (without coinciding, as on other occasions, with other types of elections –local and regional) and for the "tiredness" of the voters after the decisive general elections of March 2004. Both the PSOE, which won the elections, and the PP reinforced their weight, while the rest of the parties saw their relevance somewhat diminished.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration.

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