The elections to the Basque and Catalan Parliaments held in the early months of 1984 constituted an important moment in the development of the decentralised structures of the Spanish 'State of the Autonomies', created under the democratic Constitution of 1978. These were the second such elections in the Basque Country and Catalonia since the grant of Autonomy Statutes in December 1979. The results revealed not only a changing balance of forces within these regions (or 'nations', as Basque and Catalan nationalists insist), but also new tendencies which may affect the political situation in Spain as a whole.

Constitutional Provisions for Regional Autonomy

Under the terms of the Constitution and the Autonomy Statutes, the Basque Country and Catalonia have been given the status of full autonomy as opposed to the more limited autonomy granted to most other Spanish regions (at least during an initial period). This implies a transfer of both legislative and executive power covering a wide range of policy functions from the central Spanish state to the regional level. The policy areas to be assumed by the Basque and Catalan governments included: supervision of local government, management of the education system, the health services, and Social Security; control over an autonomous regional police force and a regional television network; and a number of economic functions (regulation of industry, agriculture, transport, housing, etc.). The Basque and Catalan languages were made co-official with Castilian within their respective regions. In both cases, legislative powers have been entrusted to a directly elected regional Parliament. The regional deputies in turn vote for a President, who together with his Executive Council runs the regional administration.

Despite the number and importance of the powers and functions which have been devolved, autonomy has failed to satisfy the nationalist aspirations of either the Basques or the Catalans. The March 1980 regional elections were won by highly assertive nationalist parties, enabling them to form minority governments with either the support or abstention of other groups, while excluding the major Spanish parties from power within the regional institutions. Although the more moderate nationalists have accepted the democratic framework of the 1978 Constitution, they have continued to press the central government in Madrid for greater powers, and have not renounced self-determination as an ultimate objective. In the Basque Country, the campaign of armed struggle being waged by the pro-independence forces of Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) against the Spanish state and its police forces has gone on without respite.

The devolution process itself has been beset by difficulties and long delays, due partly to the ambiguities of provisions concerning regional autonomy in the Constitution, which failed to establish a clear demarcation of powers between the national and regional levels of the state. As a result, many conflicts have developed between the central and regional governments concerning the scope of their respective
policy domains. Although these disputes are being resolved by the Constitutional Court, they have poisoned the political atmosphere in Spain, especially when they touch on sensitive issues for nationalists such as protection of the Basque and Catalan languages.

The actual transfer of public services, facilities, personnel and financial resources between the national and regional administrations, which constitutes the material core of the devolution process, has also encountered serious obstacles. Some of the ministries and government agencies have been reluctant to relinquish services and resources, while civil servants themselves have resisted being moved to the regional level. The financial issues in particular have been a source of continuing conflict. Although the central government is required to provide the regional governments with sufficient funds to cover the full costs of the services transferred, until recently there was no agreed methodology for determining those costs, and only awkward, provisional compromises have been worked out.

These problems have been aggravated in recent years by the extension of autonomy to a total of 15 other regions. This has created even greater stress within the Spanish state, and led many observers to fear for the viability of the emerging decentralised system, and even that of Spanish democracy itself. Following the attempted coup of February 1981, the ruling party in central government at that time, Unión del Centro Democrático (UCD), and its main opposition, Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), agreed to support the passage of 'harmonization' law (Ley Orgánica de Armonización del Proceso Autonomico - LOAPA). This bill was intended to resolve many of the problems within the devolution process by imposing a certain degree of uniformity among the regions in terms of their internal organisation, legislative powers, policy functions and administrative procedures. Its most controversial aspects, however, consisted in clauses which tended to subordinate the regional governments to national legislation and directives, even in those areas which the regions considered as part of their own 'exclusive' policy domain. Both the Basque and the Catalan governments led an intense campaign of opposition to this bill, and finally appealed to the Constitutional Court. The latter, in August 1983, ruled out many of LOAPA's provisions as unconstitutional, including those concerning supremacy of the national level. This result was seen as an important victory for the Basque and Catalan nationalists, and a major setback to PSOE, which had replaced UCD in the central government after the October 1982 general elections, but continued to support LOAPA. The bill's defeat set the immediate political context for these second regional elections.

The Basque Country

The elections for the Basque Parliament were held on 26th February 1984. The electoral system was based on proportional representation by the d'Hondt method, with the three Basque provinces, Vizcaya, Guipuzcoa and Alava, forming constituencies of 25 members each (increased from 20 in 1980). Parties obtaining less than 3 per cent in a given province were excluded from representation. There were six major parties in contention:

Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV) - the ruling party in the Basque Country since 1980. Founded in 1895, it has been the traditional support for the cause of Basque nationalism. Its ideology is highly conservative in nature, resting on the defense of Basque society, the Basque language and Catholicism against the forces of centralism, modernism and immigration (from the rest of Spain). Its attitude towards the issue of independence is somewhat ambiguous, advocating sovereignty for the Basque Country, but in favour of maintaining links with the Spanish monarchy within a confederation. In recent years it has agreed to accept the 1979 Autonomy Statute as a minimal starting-point towards achieving its goals.
Partido Socialista de Euskadi (PSE-PSOE) - the Basque branch of the Spanish Socialist Party also has a long history within the region, but finds support chiefly among the immigrant working-class in the industrial suburbs of Bilbao and Vitoria. The PSOE's programme in the Basque Country centres on the need to end ETA terrorism, to find solutions for the economic crisis which has severely affected Basque industry, and to avoid discrimination against the rights of immigrants.

Herri Batasuna (HB) - a radical Basque nationalist coalition, with close connections to ETA. HB was formed in 1978 around a platform which includes demands for an amnesty for all Basque political prisoners, the withdrawal of all Spanish security forces from the region, and recognition by the Spanish state of the Basques' right to self-determination. Although HB has succeeded in winning seats at both the national and regional levels, its representatives refuse to take part in any institutions other than local councils.

Euskadiko Ezkerra (EE) - a Left-wing Basque nationalist party formed in 1977. Although EE's goal remains that of self-determination for the Basque people, it has accepted the need to work within the existing democratic institutions. In recent years the party has concentrated on promoting civil rights and acted as a kind of bridge between moderate and radical sectors in Basque politics.

Coalición Popular (CP) - a conservative grouping of Alianza Popular (AP), Partido Democrático Popular (PDP) and Unión Liberal (UL), which is now the main opposition force to the Socialists in Spain. In the 1982 general elections it was allied in the Basque region with UCD. With the latter's disappearance as a political party, CP hoped to attract most of the UCD electorate in the Basque Country, as well as conservative voters opposed both to Basque nationalism and to the PSOE's economic and social policies.

Partido Comunista de Euskadi (PCE-EPK) - affiliated to the Spanish Communist Party, it was the main victim of the latter's long internal crisis and the persecution by the party leadership of reformists within its ranks. Most of the Basque party deserted en masse to join EE in 1981, leaving an orthodox rump which soon became marginalised.

The major issue of the campaign was the question of how to bring peace to the region and end the cycle of terrorism and repression between ETA and the Spanish state. Peace talks involving PSOE, PNV and HB, which the new Socialist central government proposed soon after the October 1982 elections, were frustrated before they even began. The Government then took a much harder line, reinforcing police action and formulating new anti-terrorist legislation. ETA responded with increasing frequency and brutality in its attacks on the Spanish security forces and other targets. Both PNV and EE demanded a new political initiative from the central government and criticised the anti-terrorist measures. The only positive note was the relative success of the negotiations of Basque nationalists with the Government for the 'social re-insertion' of individual members of ETA, which should soon result in the freedom of over 40 prisoners. The basic reality of continuing violence, however, was driven home in traumatic fashion by the assassination of the Basque Socialist leader, Enrique Casas, on the final day of the campaign.

Another important issue surrounding these elections concerned the economic situation in the Basque Country. The Basque economy is based to a large extent on heavy industry, especially steel-making, which has become highly vulnerable in the current crisis, and unemployment is above the current Spanish average (20 per cent). Basque nationalists blamed the PSOE's economic policies and plans for industrial restructuring as the cause of job loss, while the Socialists attacked the Basque government on its inaction in the economic field, despite the important policy tools which the central
government had already devolved to the regional level.

Finally, much of the debate during the election campaign centred on the progress of devolution and the character of the new regional institutions which have been set up since 1980. The tense relations between the central and Basque authorities have prevented agreement on transfers of important functions, such as the health services and control over the universities, or on the basis for a more permanent financial arrangement between them. The long dispute over LOAPA also created confusion and animosity. The Basque nationalists accused the Socialists of seeking new means to limit Basque autonomy and to reduce it to a mere form of administrative decentralisation.

The election results reflect the specific regional character of this contest, especially when compared with the last general elections. Turnout fell by over 10 per cent, perhaps because of lack of interest by a portion of the immigrant population. PNV increased its share of the vote by 10 per cent over 1982, while the other Basque nationalist parties, HB and EE, maintained their positions. The Socialists, while improving their 1980 score, could not equal their 1982 general election success, when they drew almost even with PNV. CP failed to obtain the combined total it achieved together with UCD in 1982, and many UCD voters seem to have switched instead to the moderate nationalists. PNV has thus been able to capture most of the Right-wing vote, while presenting itself as the most effective defender of Basque autonomy. The Socialists were forced to split the Left vote with HB and EE, and were identified with unpopular policies, such as LOAPA and austerity, promoted by the PSOE government in Madrid.

Table 1: General and Regional Election Results in the Basque Country (1977-1984)

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<tr>
<td>PNV</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>31.7</td>
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<td>25 - 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSE-PSOE</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>29.4</td>
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<td>9 - 19</td>
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<tr>
<td>HB</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>16.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>EE</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>6 - 6</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>11.3</td>
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<td>2 - 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCD</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6 -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCE-EPK</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1 -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>60 - 75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Turnout: 76.0 % 65.9 % 59.8 % 80.0 % 68.4 %

Source: EL PAIS 28/11/1984  Key: GEN. - General Election  REG. - Regional Election
The present composition of the Basque Parliament has added some degree of uncertainty concerning the region’s future. The refusal of HB to participate in the assembly has again permitted PNV to form a regional executive on its own, holding a bare majority of 32 votes among the 64 sitting members. But the new Basque government may be forced to seek a consensus with other parties on important questions. The PSOE Government in Madrid, having failed to oust the Basque nationalists, will also be obliged to seek an agreement with them on matters such as transfers, policing, industrial restructuring and public finances. Talks in this sense between the Prime Minister, Felipe Gonzalez, and the Basque President, Carlos Garaikoetxea, have already taken place. The latter’s position, however, has been seriously undermined by the internal crisis which has emerged within PNV since the election. Some of Garaikoetxea’s own supporters have been expelled by the conservative hardliners in control of the party apparatus, who favour an understanding with CP (despite the latter’s centralism). The political balance may become increasingly unstable and block any move towards solutions to the very serious problems threatening the Basque Country today.

Catalonia

The Catalan regional elections were called by Jordi Pujol, president of the Catalan government (or Generalitat), for the 29th April, 1984. The electoral system followed similar rules to those in the Basque case. The four provincial constituencies, Barcelona, Tarragona, Girona and Lleida, have 85, 18, 17 and 15 members respectively in the Catalan Parliament. Five major parties were engaged in this contest:

Convergència i Unió (CiU) - the ruling party in Catalonia, actually a two-party coalition, composed of Convergència Democrática de Catalunya (CDC) and Unió Democrática de Catalunya (UDC). CDC, led by Jordi Pujol since its creation in 1974, has brought together Catholics, liberals and social democrats, in a centrist ‘catch-all’ party united around the defense of the Catalan nation as a self-governing entity. UDC, which dates back to the 1930’s, maintains a purely Christian Democratic identity. Forming joint slates since 1979, the coalition has until now found most of its support in rural areas and in middle-class districts in the cities.

Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (PSC-PSOE) - formed in 1978 through the fusion of various socialist parties in Catalonia, and federated with PSOE in the rest of Spain. Until 1982 it retained its own separate group in the Spanish Parliament, and has attempted, perhaps unsuccessfully, to distinguish its own positions from those of PSOE on major issues such as the protection of the Catalan language, the nature of local government institutions, and LOAPA. In both general and local elections it has consistently obtained the largest share of votes, but, significantly, not in the regional elections of 1980.

Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (PSUC) - the Catalan Communist Party, founded during the Spanish Civil War. In formal terms it is independent of the Spanish Communists, but it has representation on the PCE's Central Committee and Executive, and conforms generally with PCE's Eurocommunist strategy. The Catalan Communists, like the Basques, have suffered from an internal crisis, which led in 1982 to the formation of a separate pro-Soviet party, Partit dels Communistes de Catalunya (PCC), and a disastrous decline in support.

Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) - the Catalan Left Republican party, founded in the 1930’s, and in control of the Generalitat under the Second Republic, until Franco's victory in 1939. Since 1975, ERC's programme advocates self-determination for Catalonia as a final goal, but in the
short-term it seeks mainly to broaden the Generalitat's power through a revision of the 1980 Statute. Its votes have been essential in maintaining CiU in power since 1980.

Coalición Popular (CP) - composed as in the Basque Country of AP, PDP and UL, until 1982 it polled poorly in Catalonia. In these elections it hoped to attract votes that previously went to Centristes de Catalunya (CC-UCD), the Catalan branch of the now defunct UCD, as well as conservative, middle-class sectors opposed to nationalist aspirations.

As in the Basque case, the Catalan campaign was dominated by tension between nationalists and Socialists. The record of CiU during its first four years in office and the personality of its leader, Pujol, became the central issues. This was encouraged by the nationalist coalition itself, which emphasised the Generalitat's role in creating long neglected public services and infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals and roads, following Pujol's philosophy of 'getting things done'. The nationalists were also successful in unloading responsibility for deficiencies and problems within the region, such as rising unemployment, upon the PSOE government in Madrid. They were able to play on Catalan suspicions of centralism by reminding voters of PSOE's role in promoting LOAPA, and even accused the Socialists of conspiring with the Spanish Right to revise the Constitution in order to reduce Basque and Catalan autonomy. But most of all, CiU benefitted from the degree to which Pujol himself was identified by the public with the Catalan nationalist cause.

The Catalan Socialists' strategy was in fact hampered by their moderate opposition to Pujol over the previous four years. Many of the most important policy decisions, especially those concerning the nature of the fundamental political and administrative structures of the Generalitat, were based on an all-party consensus which included PSC. The turn to a more aggressive line shortly before the elections, with vague accusations of financial irregularities and nepotism within the regional administration under Pujol, appeared artificial and demagogic.

The final results in Catalonia again display a marked difference compared with those of the last general elections. Turnout was again lower than in 1982, although slightly up on 1980. The clear victor was Pujol's coalition, doubling its share of votes in 1982 and falling just short of an absolute majority. It appears to have gained support from middle-class sectors which previously voted for CC-UCD and CP. But it also did well, for the first time, in the working-class suburbs of Barcelona (with a large immigrant population), taking up to 40 per cent of the vote and in some areas surpassing PSC. Pujol has thus been able to convert his coalition into a hegemonic, multi-class force within Catalonia. The Socialists made some gains on 1980, but lost 15 per cent on their 1982 total. CP also fared badly, dropping to half its 1982 level. PSUC recuperated slightly from the disastrous low of the general elections, while its pro-Soviet rivals, PCC, were frustrated in their attempt to gain a seat. ERC failed to repeat its 1980 success, scorned perhaps by radical nationalists for giving its support to the moderate Pujol during the previous four years.

Pujol's triumph has allowed him to form a new government, backed by a solid CiU majority in the Catalan Parliament. This should free him of the need to negotiate the consent of other parties in future policy decisions. At the same time, the Generalitat is in a much stronger position to wrest concessions from Madrid on transfers and finance. Recent events, however, would seem to preclude any improvement in the relationship between the national and Catalan authorities. Shortly after the elections, the Spanish state prosecutor brought charges against the Catalan President for his role in the scandal surrounding Banca Catalana. The latter was created by Pujol and other Catalan businessmen in 1959 as an autonomous source of finance for regional investment projects. It became overextended in the late 1970s, and was eventually bought up by one of the larger Spanish banks, after being bailed out with central state funds. Nationalists believe the case is being manipulated by the Gonzalez Government, in an underhanded attempt to attack Pujol's credibility and,
through him, that of Catalan autonomy.

Table 2: General and Regional Election Results in Catalonia (1977-1984)

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<td>CiU</td>
<td>16.8</td>
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<td>27.6</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>46.6</td>
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<td>PSUC</td>
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<td>18.6</td>
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<td>CP</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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<td>14.6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCC</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>135</td>
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Turnout

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pacte Democratic per Catalunya (PDC)</td>
<td>CDC + PSC-ex Reagrupament + Esquerra Democràtica de Catalunya (EDC) + Front Nacional de Catalunya (FNC).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Solidaritat Catalana (SC), conservative list with AP support.</td>
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</table>

Source: EL PAIS 1/V/84

Key: GEN. - General Election
REG. - Regional Election

Conclusion

The results in both the Basque and Catalan elections show that the nationalist parties have been able to reshape, at least partially, the party system and the political agenda which prevail in the rest of Spain. In other Spanish regions, the political scene since 1982 has been polarized between the two major parties, PSOE and CP. In the Basque Country and Catalonia this configuration has been replaced by the rivalry between moderate nationalism and Socialism. The failure of Coalición Popular to penetrate deeply in either of these two regions is probably due to the thinly veiled hostility of the Spanish Right to the devolution process, and the past connections of much of the CP leadership with the Franco regime, which antagonised both the nationalist and democratic sentiments of the Basque and Catalan middle classes. This situation has raised doubts about the possibilities for CP of actually winning the general elections and replacing PSOE in the central government. Several attempts to create a new centrist party which could successfully challenge the Socialists in 1986 have been floated recently. Perhaps the most interesting of these is the 'reformist option', launched by Miquel Roca, the CiU leader in the national Parliament, which involves an alliance of the Catalan nationalists with the small Partido Democrático Liberal (PDL) and regionalist parties in other parts of Spain. If it succeeds, it would represent the fulfillment of the historic ambition of the Catalan bourgeoisie, winning power in Madrid.
The nationalist victories may also create more immediate difficulties for the Socialist central government. Entrenched in their regional governments and backed by the economic interests of Basque and Catalan capitalism, the nationalists in some ways present a more formidable opposition than that of CP. The considerable powers which have been devolved to the regional level may allow PNV and CiU to counter PSOE's economic and social policies, or to prevent the redistribution of resources to the poorer Spanish regions. PSOE remains, however, the only party present in strength throughout Spain, although it appears to be suffering some erosion in its support, especially over the issues of unemployment and membership in NATO, as well as those raised by the devolution process. The solution to the problems of the latter would seem to entail an evolution of the Spanish 'State of the Autonomies' towards structures analogous to those found in federalist systems.

Further Reading

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