



ELECTIONS

IMPRESSIONS FOLLOWING THE ELECTIONS TO THE BASQUE PARLIAMENT

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Any interpretation of the electoral results in the Basque regional elections is inevitably overshadowed by one simple fact: that ETA-Batasuna has maintained and even consolidated its presence in the Basque Parliament. However, the most worrying aspect is not the increase in the number of seats this organization has gained. The main concern focuses on the apparent resignation and image of impotence presented by the present national Government in the face of ETA-Batasuna's successful attempt to evade the legal measures taken to stop it standing for election on a disguised electoral list.

ETA-Batasuna in the Basque Parliament

The participation of the Communist Party of the Basque Regions (PCTV) in the elections has caused obvious harm to the Political Parties Act and the Agreement on Freedoms and Against Terrorism. The result has been a crisis in antiterrorism measures at a national level and in the fundamental goal of the Antiterrorism Pact to maintain antiterrorism policies whatever the party in power. Although there has been an apparent increase in votes for Batasuna, this is not actually the case. This incre-

ase is more due to a lower rate of participation than to the fact that a larger number of Basques have decided to justify and support terrorism. In fact, the PCTV only won 7,000 more votes than the 143,139 obtained by Batasuna in May 2001.

Initially, Batasuna sought to participate in the electoral process using its own name as the bait. This was not possible. It was too obvious, and the Electoral Council refused to even accept the candidature of a coalition that had been previously made illegal. Aukera Guztiak, a list prepared for this purpose, served as a replacement in a new attempt to take part. In spite of initial reticence on the part of the Director of Public Prosecutions and the government, the list was finally contested and both the High Court and the Constitutional Court unanimously declared Aukera Guztiak's candidates to be illegal.

However, another list, presented by a party unknown until then, the Communist Party of the Basque Regions (PCTV), had already been presented. Once the electoral campaign began, all indications pointed to the fact that the PCTV aimed to succeed Batasuna-ETA. The national security forces began to compile proof confirming these suspicions.

The Popular Party (PP) called for a meeting of the signatories of the Antiterrorism Pact, but in vain. The Government refused to summon the members of the Pact and chose to ignore the police reports and not take any action against the new heirs to the ETA movement, on the grounds that the law did not allow them to act. The weakness of the Government's stance is demonstrated by the grotesque reasoning it used to excuse its non-action: it blamed the government of the Partido Popular for permitting the 'legalization' of the PCTV, even though this party only became a disguise for Batasuna in April 2005, and not in 2002.

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The evidence was deemed to have been sufficient for the candidature of the PCTV to be brought to trial, despite the police reports that confirmed the absorption of the PCTV by ETA, the thousands and thousands of posters which a hitherto non-existent and tiny party managed to place on the walls of every town in the Basque Country, the unmistakable coincidence between the authorized representatives and supervisors of the PCTV and those of the illegal party Batasuna, the political declaration of the head of the PCTV's list that the party would adopt Batasuna's postulates, the party's refusal to condemn terrorism, and the fact that Otegui called for the electorate to vote for the PCTV.

Constitutionalism and Nationalism: Watertight Compartments

The most important point to make regarding the electoral behaviour of the Basques at these elections is that there was no movement of votes between constitutionalism –if the Socialists PSE-EE can still be included within this political cate-

gory– and nationalism, in spite of the parties’ strategies. Or at least, we could state that the voting did not swing from one to the other as easily as one might suppose. In this respect, at these elections constitutionalism and nationalism constituted relatively watertight compartments when compared to previous regional elections.

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The electoral map of the Basque region has undergone a process of gradual change. The nationalist groups steadily gained support between 1980 and 1986. After this, the trend was reversed, and the nationalist parties as a whole gradually but steadily began to lose electoral support up until the regional elections of 1998. Between 1998 and 2005, the elections in the Basque Country saw the relationship between constitutionalists and nationalists remain unchanged, with the nationalists

VOTING IN REGIONAL ELECTIONS

	1998		2001		2005	
Turnout	70,0 %		79,8%		69,0%	
	% votes	seats	% votes	seats	% votes	seats
PNV-EA	36,2	27	42,4	33	38,3	29
ARALAR	-	-	-	-	2,3	1
BATASUNA	17,7	13*	10,1	7	12,4	9
	53,9	40	52,5	40	53,0	39
EB	5,6	3*	5,5	3	5,4	3
	% votes	seats	% votes	seats	% votes	seats
PSE-EE	17,4	14	17,7	13	22,5	18
PP	19,8	16	22,9	19	17,3	15
UA	1,2	2	-	-	0,3	0
	38,4	32	40,6	32	40,1	33

SOURCE: Institute of Social Studies

*Seats that would have been obtained under the current Basque Electoral Act.

gaining a slight upper hand in regional elections and the constitutionalists gaining the edge in the elections to the Spanish national Parliament.

The unchanging balance between the constitutionalist and nationalist blocs on the Basque electoral map between 1998 and 2005 leads us to conclude that there are no significant voting swings between the two, with the electoral flows being restricted to the parties within each of the respective blocs: the Socialist Party may gain at the expense of the PP and vice versa, whilst the heirs to the ETA movement gain from the decline of the PNV-EA coalition and vice versa.

The 10% decline in turnout compared to the elections of 2001 has been equally detrimental to nationalists and constitutionalists. Using the valid votes cast as the point of reference, Basque nationalism (PNV-EA, PCTV and Aralar) has progressed from 52.5% to 53% of the votes, whilst constitutionalism has decreased from 40.6% to 40.1% of the votes. The coalition headed by Javier Madrazo, for its part, has witnessed a decline in its share from 5.5% to 5.4% of the votes. In all, there has been hardly any movement. The much-needed cross-party movement which could break the long-standing deadlock can be detected in general elections, but not in any regional election to date.

Has the Sovereignty-Based Proposal Failed?

Numerous voices within the media and a number of political leaders have been quick to conclude that the Ibarretxe Plan is dead. They may have been prompted by the apparent electoral misfortune of Ibarretxe himself, who has seen his party reduced from 33 parliamentary seats to 29, but they are jumping the gun.

Although the man who lent his name to the nationalist strategy to subvert the constitutional order has certainly lost votes and seats, it no less true that, in historical terms, the PNV-EA coalition has passed the test (it had 27 seats in 1998).

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At any event, the loss of seats by the PNV-EA coalition has benefited the radical and openly separatist nationalists of the PCTV, who have seen a gain from 7 to 9 seats, and Aralar, which has entered the Basque parliament with a single representative. And we must also bear in mind that the parties that supported the Ibarretxe Plan continue to represent a majority in the Basque Parliament, with the difference that the power division among the nationalists who supported the Plan has swung in favour of the most radical movements, making them a determining factor for Ibarretxe’s investiture as Lehendakari (Basque president).

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“If, as the Government states, there is no proof to link the PCTV to ETA, how can we refuse to accept the institutional role that Ibarretxe, for example, wishes to give ETA-Batasuna in a future regional government? The PP is now the only party with the right to make these accusations. In fact, the Basque nationalists are already hiding behind the Government’s legal guarantee in order to whitewash any pact with the PCTV”

There is another point to take into account. If, as the Government states, there is no proof to link the PCTV to ETA, how can we refuse to accept the institutional role that Ibarretxe, for example, wishes to give ETA-Batasuna in a future regional government? The PP is now the only party with the right to make these accusations. In fact, the Basque nationalists are already hiding behind the Government’s legal guarantee in order to whitewash any pact with the PCTV and claim their right to include them in a Basque government. In this respect, it would seem to be wishful thinking to state that the sovereignty project being promoted by the current Lehendakari is necessarily condemned to failure.

The Useless Nationalist Strategy of the PSE

Whilst Basque nationalism is becoming more radical, the electoral and political strategy of the Socialists has been to gravitate towards the ideological postulates and symbolic ground of Basque nationalism. By entering the nationalist arena, the PSE has designed a strategy to win over the nationalist vote. Its actions range from designating the Basque Country a ‘national region’ and presenting a supposedly alternative plan to that of Ibarretxe (drawn up by a nationalist), to distancing itself emotionally and symbolically from the idea of Spain and exerting pressure on the PP authorities in the province of Álava through the nationalists.

“The electoral and political strategy of the Socialists has been to gravitate towards the ideological postulates and symbolic ground of Basque nationalism. The PSE’s pseudo-nationalist policy has not only failed to yield any interest, but has incurred costs. This ambiguous venture into the intellectual wilderness of nationalism has not worked: Emilio Guevara and the López Plan have proved to be useless in attracting the nationalist vote and, as we might expect, the Socialist message has produced bewilderment and confusion within the party’s own ranks”

The strategy has been entirely hopeless in electoral terms with regard to attracting the mass of voters who opt for the traditional nationalism of the PNV and EA. It has actually been detrimental, since a section of the Socialist party’s voters have switched to the PP. The PSOE has been clearly damaged with regard to the general elections of 2004, having managed to hold on to only 80% of its voters, whilst the

PP has achieved an 89% loyalty rate among the voters who supported it in the general elections.

In this respect, it could be said that the PSE's pseudo-nationalist policy has not only failed to yield any interest, but has incurred costs. The place where these costs have been highest is perhaps Álava, the province in which the PSOE managed to defeat the PP in the general election and in the European elections of 2004. On this occasion, the PSE was defeated by the PP. As if this were not enough, the PSE failed to match the results achieved by the PP in the Basque Country under the governments of José María Aznar. It is not insignificant at a symbolic and electoral level that Jaime Mayor Oreja, pursuing a clearly critical and confrontational policy with regard to nationalism, obtained over 50,000 more votes and one more seat than Patxi López did now. Neither should we ignore the fact that the PP obtained a six-seat advantage over the PSE on that occasion, whilst the PSE has now only achieved a three-seat advantage over the PP.

We can confidently state that the PSE's ambiguous venture into the intellectual wilderness of Basque nationalism has not worked, that Emilio Guevara and the López Plan have proven to be useless in attracting the nationalist vote. What is more, the Socialist message has produced bewilderment and confusion within the party's own ranks, as we might have expected.

The PP Exceeds Expectations

In electoral terms, it was to be expected that the PP and the Socialist Party would switch places. The party of national government traditionally leads the constitutionalist bloc within the Basque regional government in terms of votes, behind the nationalists. And that is what has happened. The PP in the Basque Country ceded its second-place position to the PSE. Nevertheless, the electoral swing was not especially sharp on this occasion. The PP has comfortably done better than all the forecasts, which gave the party 13 seats (the same number the PSE had until now), by winning 15 seats, giving it a comfortable and wide-ranging electoral platform.

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At any event, the PP's results are only acceptable if we compare them with those of 2001, although they are truly promising and reflect a changing trend if we compare them with the results of the general election a year ago. It is almost an electoral tradition for the national parties to witness a decrease in votes and percentage share in all Basque regional elections when compared to general elections. The PP and PSOE usually manage to mobilize only 85% of their voters for elections to

the Basque Parliament. From this point of view, as we mentioned above, the PP has managed to sustain its performance rather better than the PSE in relation to March 2004. Whilst the PSE mobilized 80% of the electorate who voted for the party on that occasion, the PP retained almost 89% of its voters. This undoubtedly reflects a favourable trend for the PP in the Basque Country.

In this respect, the results achieved by the PP in Álava are highly significant. On 11 March 2004, the PSE surpassed the PP comfortably in this province, and did so again in the European elections of June 2004. On this occasion, however, the trend was clearly reversed, since the PP managed to defeat the PSE by a narrow margin. With regard to voting loyalty in general elections, the customary trend throughout the whole of the Basque Country is always accentuated in Álava. The PP retained 89% of its voters from 2004, whilst the PSE only retained 76.6%. However, the results achieved by the PP in Álava are even more startling when we consider that the party was only surpassed by a coalition of two parties (PNV-EA) that were unable to defeat the PP separately.

The explanation for the PP's solid performance resides in a series of diverse factors, which have to do with the party's clear and reliable message, one that contrasts with the PSE's flirtation with nationalism and the progressive erosion of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's credibility among voters who are concerned about nationalist breakaway tendencies. However, there is another factor that cannot be ignored: María San Gil. It is difficult to find quantitative data that attest to the electoral pulling-power of this PP candidate, but there is general agreement both in political circles and the media that San Gil has provided an electoral boost to the PP in the Basque Country.

“The number of voters on the electoral roll in the Basque Country is falling. Between 2001 and 2003, thousands of people left the Basque Country, usually young, urban voters who could promote change. This undoubtedly makes it more difficult to bring about political change, whilst exacerbating the current fossilization of the electoral map, which favours a continuation of the nationalists' hold on the reins of power”

The Urban Hope

Except for the PP's solid electoral support in the Basque Country, there is very little cause for optimism in the Basque electoral arena. However, there is one hope for change, one very powerful reason to believe that nationalism can be defeated at the polls and that a democratic option in the Basque Country could become a reality. The power of the constitutionalist parties lies in the most densely populated urban areas, whilst the power of the nationalists lies in the least-populated rural areas. And there is one basic certainty in electoral sociology: the direction of significant political and social change is dictated by changes in the urban population. With regard to the recent regional elections, if we take the Basque provincial capitals and towns of over 50,000 inhabitants as our point of reference, we can see that the PP and the PSE won 50.7% of the valid votes, whilst the nationalists only won 41.8%. Conversely, if we analyse the towns of fewer than 50,000 inhabitants, the figures are reversed, with the nationalists winning some 65.5% of the votes, compared to 28.2% in the case of the constitutionalists.

This sense of optimism must be qualified. The sociological principle that those who manage to lead the urban areas finally manage to bring about socio-political change throughout the entire region, may not necessarily apply in the Basque Country. The constitutionalists had won a clear majority within urban areas by 1998, yet since then they have not been capable of instigating the electoral revolution which could usher in the long-desired political change. This does not mean that this basic sociological principle has failed in the Basque case. It simply means that there are other factors to be taken into account.

One of them is fundamental and must lead us to qualify our optimism and rein in our hopes. Every year, well-educated young people leave the Basque Country in large numbers in search of better job horizons and equal opportunities, hoping to find, perhaps, a cheaper home, or a place where they can exercise their freedom of expression without fear of discrimination or other problems. The number of voters on the electoral roll in the Basque Country is falling. Between 2001 and 2003, thousands of people left the Basque Country, usually young, urban voters who could promote change. This undoubtedly makes it more difficult to bring about political change, whilst exacerbating the current fossilization of the electoral map, which favours a continuation of the nationalists' hold on the reins of power.

VOTE DISTRIBUTION BY SIZE OF MUNICIPAL AREA

REGIONAL ELECTIONS 2005*			
	TOTAL	Over 50,000 inhabitants	Fewer than 50,000 inhabitants
Turnout	69,0%	67,7%	70,5%
PNV-EA	38,3	32,1	45,2
ARALAR	2,3	1,6	3,1
BATASUNA	12,4	8,1	17,2
Nationalists Total	53,0 %	41,8%	65,5%
EB	5,4	5,7	5,0
PSE-EE	22,5	27,0	17,5
PP	17,3	23,2	10,6
UA	0,3	0,5	0,1
Constitutionalist Total	40,1%	50,7%	28,2%

Source: Institute of Social Studies

*57% of the total electoral roll resides in municipal areas of over 50,000 inhabitants.