What Can Students Learn from the Spanish Case in Comparative Politics Courses?

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What can undergraduate students of comparative politics learn from studying Spain? Clearly, many professors do not see any good reasons to integrate Spain in introductory courses on comparative politics or European politics. Spain is often considered as a country on the periphery of western Europe—geographically, economically, and politically—and thus not worth spending time discussing in introductory courses on comparative politics or even western European politics. Given the time constraints of short semesters, instructors have to make choices about which topics and countries to cover when choosing European case studies for their syllabus, and often settle for a mix of the "classic" cases such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, and "newer" cases, such as new democracies in eastern and central Europe. Spain fits neither the established, advanced industrialized democracies category nor is it of much obvious interest for studying the latest developments in EU expansion. Spain re-democratized in the latter half of the 1970s and is currently celebrating 30 years of electoral democracy. The country joined the EU, then the European Communities, in 1986, together with Portugal and Greece. Thus, the newness of Spanish democracy and its EU membership has long since passed as a point of interest for college instruction, giving way to the new democracies in central and eastern Europe and the more recent waves of EU expansion. At the same time, Spanish democracy is too young to present a classic case of advanced industrialized democracies. In short, Spain does not appear to have much inherent appeal for undergraduate comparative politics courses.

This apparent lack of interest of Spain, or Iberia more generally, for undergraduate instruction is mirrored, and reinforced, by the lack of discussion of Iberia in major comparative and European politics textbooks. An analysis of required readings for introductory comparative politics courses that examined 183 syllabi ranks the most frequently assigned textbooks (Fagan 2005). None of the top nine textbooks include a chapter on Spain or Portugal. While several textbooks on the EU discuss Spain,[1] neither Spain nor Portugal form part of the repertoire of country cases discussed in other introductory European or comparative politics texts, especially those that take an approach based on country case comparisons.[2] A Google search for comparative politics syllabi produced only a few syllabi that either had a focus or assigned readings on Spain.[3] An analysis of these syllabi reveals that if Spain is included in general overview courses, its coverage is often limited to discussions of regime transition mechanisms or regional nationalism and federalization.

This apparent lack of appeal that precludes Spain from comparative politics textbooks and syllabi is particularly striking and contrasts starkly with the potential interest of undergraduate students in learning about Spanish politics (see contribution by Bonnie Field in this symposium). In addition, as the articles and examples in this symposium illustrate, the Spanish case is not just able to respond to students' interest in Spain, but also to provide useful insights to students of comparative politics. Here, I will point to several ways in which Spanish politics can illuminate core comparative politics concepts and can add to the discussion of the long-established classic Western democracies in undergraduate comparative politics classes. In particular, I am referring to comparing paths towards democracy in western Europe, the consequences of electoral laws, and the organization of the economy.

Spain and Patterns of Democratization

Why did democracies in western Europe take hugely different paths towards democracy? This is an intriguing question to ask in undergraduate classrooms. Spain can make a valuable contribution to a discussion and comparison on the paths to democracy. For one, Spain is part of "third wave" democratization (Huntington 1991) and, consequently, one of the youngest democratic systems in western Europe—together with Portugal, which also democratized in the mid-1970s. The Spanish case obviously lends itself to comparisons with other third wave countries, but it can also serve as a comparison to democratization patterns in long-established western European democracies. Textbooks often emphasize the early "incremental," and "gradual" path to democracy taken by Great Britain, and highlight the much rockier trajectory towards democracy in Germany. Spain provides a new variant, where a long-lived dictatorship headed by General Franco (1939–1975) gave way to democracy in a relatively short time period. It took Spain

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less than two years from the death of the dictator to hold democratic elections with competitive parties and universal suffrage, and another two years later a new constitution had been ratified in a popular referendum and new elections were held under the new rules. The contrast to the process in Great Britain, where democracy developed over centuries, is obvious. But the Spanish experience also differs from the democratization process in Germany, where democracy followed the loss of a war and where the introduction of democracy was heavily influenced by the Allies. Spanish democracy did not grow out of a lost war, and neither was it imposed by superpowers or other countries. Instead, explanations of why and how Spain democratized once Franco died center on the role of elites who were in favor of democracy; structural and economic conditions; or the role of the democratic opposition at the mass level, all of which are domestic factors (see contribution by Bonnie Field in this symposium for a detailed discussion). Even the lure of joining the European Community was an incentive and preference that Spain processed at the domestic level rather than an international force imposing it. The lesson learned, then, is that there is more than one path—or two, for that matter—towards democracy, and countries in western Europe are not all the same when it comes to explaining its emergence. The reasons why democracy is introduced and institutionalized vary across countries.

In addition, Spain provides an interesting example—together with Germany—to encourage students to think about reasons for democratic breakdown (Linz and Stepan 1978). Democratic breakdown challenges many students' assumptions that democracy is an endpoint, that is, once a country is democratic, it will remain so. The Spanish (and the German) case illustrates that democratic breakdown is not something that only happens in the less developed countries of Latin America, for example, but has occurred in countries in western Europe as well. The large majority of undergraduates in the United States appear to find democratic systems desirable, which oftentimes means that they lack an inherent understanding of why democracies do not always last, and why democratization is a process with an unpredictable outcome. The breakdown of the Second Republic (1931–1936), Spain's first experience with meaningful electoral democracy, led to a devastating civil war, which in turn resulted in Franco's long-lasting dictatorship. Thus, if the course looks at the development of Western democracies over time, the Spanish case demonstrates that dictatorships and democracies have been present within a geographical area—western Europe—and that democracy cannot necessarily be taken for granted.

Electoral Systems and Party Systems

Spain is a useful example to illustrate the complexities of comparative politics concepts because sometimes, it does not neatly "fit" the established categories and patterns related to many of these concepts. For example, Spain has a proportional representation (PR) electoral system (see the contribution by Mark Rush in this symposium), but in contrast to most western European countries with PR systems, it has never had coalition governments. Four out of 10 governments in office since the first democratic election in 1977 have been single-party majority governments, a relatively unusual outcome for PR systems;[4] the remainder have been single-party minority governments, often based on agreements with smaller regional parties for legislative support. This outcome, somewhat uncommon for government formation in western Europe, is in part a product of the high disproportionality of its PR system, resulting in "majoritarian representational bias beneficial to the two largest parties" (Gunther, Montero, and Botella 2004, 89). This, in turn, has helped produce single-party majority governments almost half the time, unusual in PR systems. Furthermore, PR systems tend to produce multi-party systems ("Duverger's Law"). However, the Spanish version of PR has resulted in a party system that features two major parties competing at the national level (the Socialist Party, PSOE, and the conservative Popular Party, PP—during the transition and early days of the democracy, the major center-right party was the UCD), in addition to a smaller leftist national party (United Left, IU) and several subnational parties competing only in a specific region (see Hamann 1999). Spain's party system thus resembles the two-plus party system in the UK (two major parties at the national level plus several smaller, regional-based parties, such as the Scottish National Party, SNP; the Welsh Plaid Cymru; and a number of Northern Irish parties) rather than the party systems in other PR electoral systems where several parties compete at the national level. Italy's more proportionate PR system prior to the electoral reform in the early 1990s would be the prime example to contrast with the Spanish party system. The German variation of PR, with its 5% threshold nationally or, alternatively, a minimum of three "direct" seats won on the first ballot, and the inclusion of a plurality vote to fill half the seats of the Bundestag, can be used as an additional comparison to the Spanish case to explain to students how countries have attempted to achieve representation while simultaneously limiting party system fragmentation. Spain also adds to the discussion of the consequences of electoral laws for government formation.

Thus, Spain is a good case to illustrate how institutions—electoral laws and the territorial organization of the state (quasi-federal structures encompassing the Autonomous Communities as subnational units that form the basis for non-statewide parties)—can combine with voters' electoral preferences to give rise to a party system that does not easily conform with general expectations concerning the consequences of electoral laws. It also showcases that not all PR electoral systems necessarily lead to coalition governments, which provides an illustrative contrast with the German or Italian examples, for instance, where coalitions are the rule. The Spanish case also evinces that minority governments can occur quite frequently, and that minority governments can also be very stable, durable, and policy effective, which many U.S. students find hard to believe.

In this context, Spain lends itself to a useful discussion of the workings of parliamentary systems. The British and German cases point to the loss in importance of the lower houses of parliament due to the government's backing of parliamentary majorities and party discipline, which is rarely broken. This effective loss of parliamentary power vis-à-vis the executive is often emphasized in comparative politics textbooks (e.g. Hauss 2006, 91–3). In contrast, the Spanish example shows that governments' support by other parties can come in many different forms and is not always reflected in parliamentary majorities. Spanish minority governments often enter into agreements for legislative support and policy trade-offs with regional-based parties, especially from the Basque Country, Catalonia, or the Canary Islands, even though these agreements are not reflected in sharing executive power. The lower house of parliament can thus become more important depending on the outcomes of elections, and minor opposition parties are able to achieve substantial influence on policy outcomes if minority governments are looking for legislative support. The power of parliament is thus, to some extent, contingent on electoral outcomes, and can vary over time. This variation on producing legislative majorities adds to the discussion of the "big" established democracies, such as the UK and Germany, where the roles of government and opposition are generally more clearly delineated and expressed in the inclusion in or exclusion from executive power, be it single-party majorities in the UK or coalition governments in Germany.

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The Economy

Another example of how Spain can contribute to the discussion of comparative politics concept by representing an "outlier" rather than a "typical" case relates to political economy. Professors commonly use the "Varieties of Capitalism" (VoC) approach (see, e.g. Hall and Soskice 2001) to explain to students how the way the German economy is organized (Coordinated Market Economy, CME) differs from the organization of the British economy (Liberal Market Economy, LME). The Spanish case can add to these models as it does not neatly fit either ideal type: its economy is not highly coordinated and has been described as "underorganized," while still featuring waves of bi- or tripartite social pacts signed at the national level between governments, unions, and employers. The corporatism literature suggests that the preconditions for social pacts are not present in Spain: pacts were discontinued in the 1980s under the Socialist governments of Prime Minister Felipe González and resurrected, or at least signed with a higher frequency, once the conservative PP, led by José María Aznar, won the elections in 1996; and unions are weak by some conventional measures, such as union density (see Hamann 2001). Thus, Spain is not typical of a coordinated market economy. But it also does not cleanly fit the characteristics of the market-driven, uncoordinated economies of LMEs, typified in the British or U.S. economies. In the VoC literature, Spain is often grouped together with other Mediterranean economies, such as Portugal, Greece, and sometimes France, without, however, elaborating on the underpinnings and organization of these countries' economies (e.g. Hall and Soskice 2001, 21). A discussion of the Spanish economy in a comparative politics course is thus fruitfully intertwined with a discussion of how comparative politics establishes categories, the meaning of ideal types, and what to do with cases that do not neatly fit existing categories. Looking at the Spanish economy in comparison to other western European economies can thus help students understand that there are indeed different ways in which capitalist economies can be organized. It also introduces them to thinking about the usefulness and limits of developing ideal types and to considering questions on the interaction between categories, whether theoretically or empirically derived, and cases, as a broader point of comparative analysis (see Hamann and Kelly 2007).

Conclusion

As a relatively young democracy that is now firmly established in the European Union, Spain has much to offer as a case in comparative politics courses as well as in classes on western European politics. A discussion of politics in Spain helps to demonstrate variation in broad comparative politics concepts and explanations, such as the effects of electoral laws on party systems and government formation, models of organization of capitalist economies, or patterns of democratization. Other topics could easily be added to this list, such as the geographical distribution of power—Spain has engaged in a process of federalization since its democratic transition (see also the contribution by Candice Ortbals in this symposium). The country has been characterized as an asymmetric quasi-federalist system, where the sub-national units Autonomous Communities are not represented in a powerful upper house, such as the German Bundesrat, but where the Autonomous Communities have nonetheless an increasing amount of power that is unevenly distributed across the regions, with some regions having more autonomy and power than others. The Spanish arrangement of an asymmetric quasi-federalist system again helps modify and nuance the typical either-or categories of unitary versus federal states and goes beyond the discussion of "marble-cake" or "layer-cake" federalism undergraduates tend to be familiar with from their classes on American government. It also illustrates the importance of political processes leading to specific institutional constellations. Professors will find that a discussion of Spanish politics offers variation to the more established democracies and thus provides useful reference points for comparisons as well as discussions about methodology and approaches in comparative politics.

Notes

*I gratefully acknowledge research assistance from Wendy Whitman in collecting information on textbooks and syllabi.

1. See, for example, Piper (2005); Bulmer and Lequesne (2005) contains a chapter contrasting Italy and Spain; others also discuss Iberia. Other books take an in-depth look at the role of Spain in the EU (e.g., Closa and Heywood 2004) but might be too detailed for most introductory courses.

2. For notable exceptions of books currently in print, see Almond et al. (2005); Magstadt (2007) contains a chapter section on Spain, as does Tiersky (2004), but note that the most recent edition (Tiersky and Jones 2007) no longer contains a chapter on Spain; Wiarda (2001) contains a chapter on "Southern or Mediterranean Europe." Other major textbooks occasionally refer to Iberia or Spain but generally provide no exhaustive and systematic coverage of Spanish politics. In addition, several recent detailed single-country textbooks or monographs that could be used as textbooks on Spain exist (e.g., Magone 2004; Gunther, Montero, and Botella 2004) and many textbooks on comparative democratization contain a thorough discussion of Spain. However, these books are often too detailed for use in introductory comparative politics or even European politics courses.

3. Obviously, this search method has severe limitations and underreports the number of courses that include Spain as not all syllabi are available online in a public domain. The search terms used were "comparative politics, syllabus, spain." Many other, more specialized courses, make more use of the Spanish case. These include, for example, classes on comparative democratization or politics in southern Europe.

4. The PSOE 1989–1993 government controlled exactly 50% of the 350 seats in the lower house of parliament. However, the four deputies from the Basque separatist party HB did not take their seats and boycotted parliament, effectively granting the PSOE a majority position.

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