

A political culture unaccustomed to dialogue

The political constraints of the social contract

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Abstract

Reaching lasting political agreements is vital for solving structural problems such as social inequality in Spain. There are several factors that can make it easier or more difficult for political parties, usually at odds with each other, to reach this type of consensus. On the one hand, the lines of political division are many and range from, among others, the economic sphere to the moral or territorial sphere. Their content, importance and way in which they are translated into political competition vary among societies over time. In Spain, as in other southern European countries and in contrast to the north, there is greater polarisation on cultural or moral issues than on economic issues. Left-wing and right-wing parties have consequently reached agreements in areas such as taxation, unemployment, pensions or minimum incomes, which is something that could be repeated in the area of reducing inequality. On the other hand, polarisation on moral issues pushes in the opposite direction and makes it difficult to reach consensus on equality. Furthermore, divided public opinion and an institutional design that makes it easier to govern alone without any agreements also discourage pacts. Changing specific characteristics of parliamentary committees could in turn convert them into a space for negotiation in order to overcome these difficulties and reach positive social impact agreements.



Main ideas

1

Political competition in southern Europe revolves around moral rather than economic issues. For example, almost 85% of left-wing voters in Spain are in favour of adoption in same-sex marriages, while only 60% of right-wing voters are in favour of this.

3

Far-reaching agreements to reduce inequality are possible even in areas where ideological differences remain. Indeed, ideological differences have failed to prevent agreements on tax policy and unemployment protection.

5

Cohesive public opinion is associated with less polarisation and a higher likelihood of agreement, and vice versa. This would, for example, explain the agreements reached on gender equality.

7

A fragmented political scenario, such as that in Spain after 2015, favours coalition governments, which is an opportunity for agreement-based institutional learning.

2

Polarisation on moral issues makes it difficult to reach consensus on equal rights issues, such as, for example, divorce, same-sex marriage or abortion. Nonetheless, disagreement has not resulted in counter-reforms.

4

The combination of economic, moral and territorial conflicts maximises polarisation in the area of education, and this has led to constant counter-reforms.

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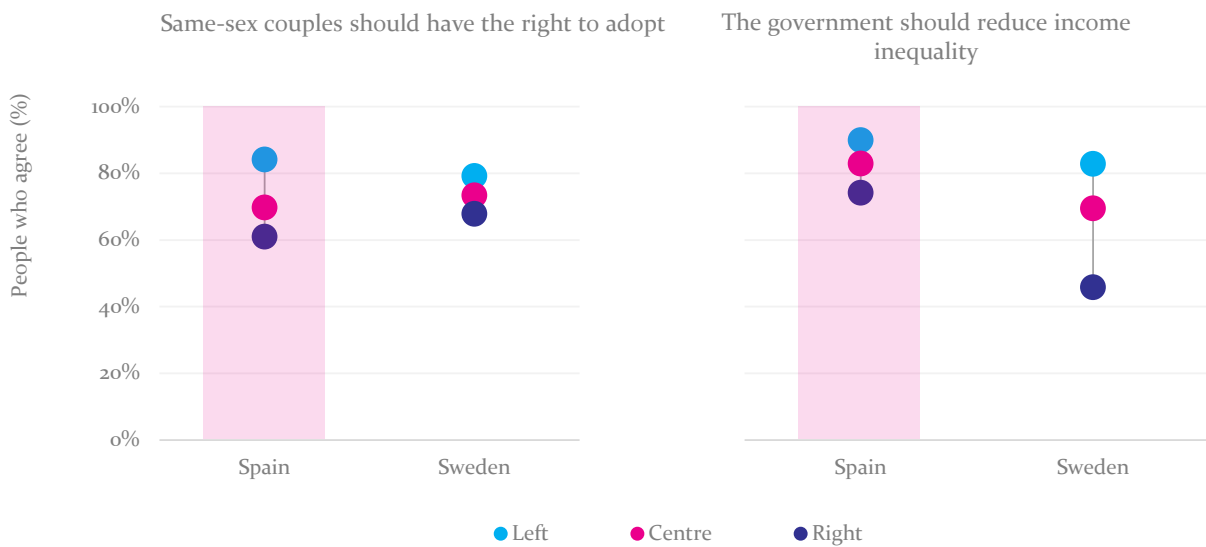
Certain features of Spain's institutional design are not favourable to political pacts, especially legislation by decree laws, whose use doubled between 2005 and 2015.

1 Political competition in southern Europe revolves around moral rather than economic issues

Political parties compete with each other by proposing and debating measures in various spheres in order to win votes. It is traditionally understood that the most important ideological differences between left and right are economic in nature: for example, with regards to state interventionism or wealth redistribution. Nonetheless, political conflict also revolves around cultural or moral issues (such as gender equality), or even others such as territorial or ethnic issues. From a comparative perspective, each of these aspects of political conflict has a different importance depending on the country. In Spain, as in other southern European countries, there is greater polarisation on cultural issues rather than on economic issues. People of opposing (left-right) ideologies in Spain consequently disagree more on issues such as same-sex marriage than on economic areas such as social spending. The opposite is true in continental or Scandinavian Europe. The fact that voters of opposing parties hold relatively similar positions on issues such as redistribution is important and provides an opportunity for parties to sit down and negotiate a social contract to reduce inequality.

Figure 1: Southern Europe is more polarised on moral issues and northern Europe on economic issues

Percentage of people in Spain and Sweden agreeing with each statement according to their ideological self-positioning, 2016



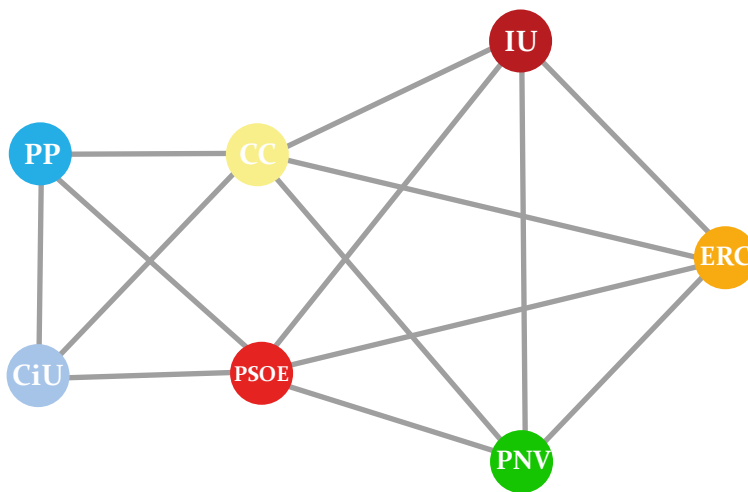
Source: European Social Survey, 2016.

2 Ideological differences have failed to prevent agreements on tax policy and unemployment protection

Parties of dissimilar ideologies also hold different positions in terms of the responsibility of the state in addressing unemployment, or on how much money should be raised through taxation. But analysing their behaviour when it comes to voting for laws on these issues demonstrates that they frequently reach agreements, as occurred in either of two recent laws, even with the PP and PSOE, which are often involved in the dynamics of opposition. Despite the fact that many of the agreed reforms on taxation and unemployment protection were not redistributive in nature, these agreements show that parties are capable of putting aside their differences in order to reach agreements on economic matters, and they also indicate the possibility of doing so in the case of inequality.

Figure 2: Political divisions on economic issues do not prevent cross-party agreements on economic issues

Cross-party agreements in the votes on unemployment protection laws 22/1992 and 45/2002



Note: the figure shows the connections between the parties and resulting parliamentary coalitions. The circles represent the parties, and the lines between them represent the votes in the same direction (either in favour and/or abstention or against) on 20% or more of each of the reforms. The acronyms correspond to the following parties in this and following figures: PSOE: Socialist Party; PP: People's Party; CiU: Convergence and Union; CC: Canarian Coalition; IU: United Left; ERC: Republican Left of Catalonia; PNV: Basque Nationalist Party; UP: United We Can; Cs: Citizens; BNG: Galician Nationalist Bloc, and UPN: Navarrese People's Union.

Source: compiled by the authors based on documents from the Spanish Parliament and the media.

3 Far-reaching agreements to reduce inequality are possible even in areas where ideological differences remain

The cases of pensions and minimum incomes are examples of more lasting, politically crosscutting agreements. The Toledo Pact managed to unite most political parties, employers and trade unions around a number of pension reform recommendations. This document, as well as the committee in charge of overseeing its implementation, encourages a certain culture of negotiation. Although the Toledo Pact has managed to separate the public pension system from electoral competition, its existence has not led to complete agreement when it comes to voting on specific laws. For example, the 2011 reform (which raised the retirement age to 67) was approved only with the votes of PSOE and CiU, and the 2013 reform (which decoupled pensions from the CPI) went ahead thanks to the PP's absolute majority, without the support of any other party. More recently, the unanimous approval of the minimum living income (IMV by its Spanish acronym) in May 2020 also demonstrates that parties can set aside polarisation to pursue common goals, although in this case the exceptional circumstance of the pandemic may have played a role.

Table 1: Far-reaching, long-lasting agreements have been reached in redistributive areas such as pensions and minimum incomes

Party voting on each law, reform or proposal for measures, 1995-2020

Year	Proposed by	Reform	PP	PSOE	CiU	PNV	ERC	IU/UP
1995	CiU	Toledo Pact	+	+	+	+	+	+
2003	TP committee*	Proposal for pension reform	+	+	+	+	+	+
2007	PSOE	Social security law	+	+	+	+	+	+
2011	TP committee*	Proposal for pension reform	+	+	+	+	+	+
2011	PSOE	Pension reform	-	+	+	-	-	-
2013	PP	Pension reform	+	-	-	-	-	-
2020	TP committee*	Proposal for pension reform	+	+		+	+	+
2020	PSOE/UP	Minimum living income	+	+		+	+	+

Note: *Toledo Pact committee.

Votes can be in favour/abstention (+) or against (-). IU became the UP coalition in 2019. CiU disappeared in 2015.

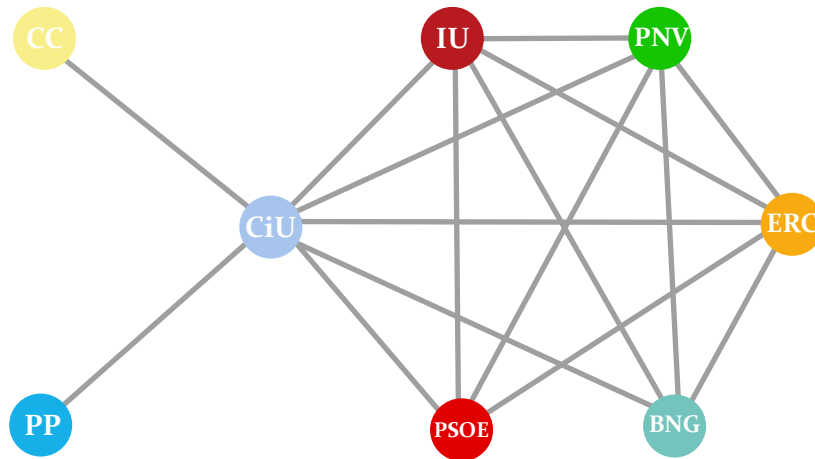
Source: compiled by the authors based on documents from the Spanish Parliament and the media.

4 Polarisation on moral issues makes it difficult to reach consensus on equal rights issues

A social contract to reduce inequality has to go beyond the economic sphere to also include inequality when it comes to accessing rights. When conflicts arise in Spain over moral judgements and positions, parties tend to become polarised and it is more difficult to find a space for dialogue and agreement than when economic issues are involved. Examining the votes in the Spanish Parliament on laws with moral content, such as divorce, homosexual marriage or abortion, one can observe the existence of an intense polarisation between left and right at a national level. Consequently, the PP has only reached agreements with CiU, while the left-wing and regional parties have formed large coalitions. Although reforms in this area have been pushed through without agreement, there have been no counter-reforms, as is the case with education. Even so, the lack of a far-reaching agreement casts doubt on the long-term sustainability of reforms.

Figure 3: Political divisions on moral issues lead to less cross-party agreements

Cross-party agreements in the votes on laws with a moral content: same-sex marriage, divorce and abortion



Note: only parties present in most votes with current political relevance have been included. UPN is included as part of the PP, as it has been in coalition with this party during several terms.

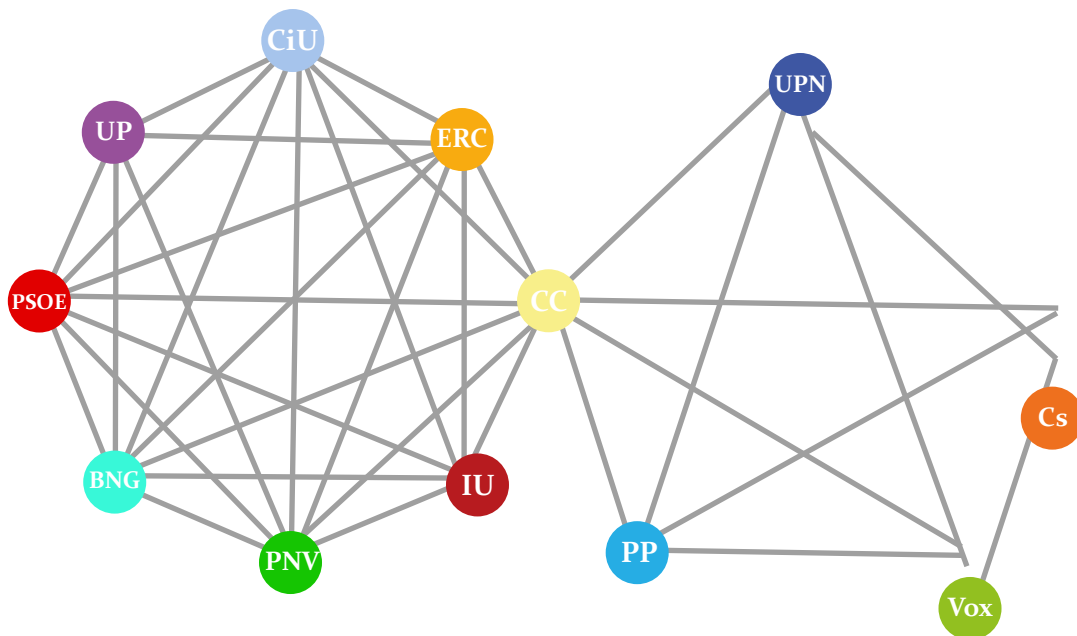
Source: compiled by the authors based on documents from the Spanish Parliament and the media.

5 The combination of economic, moral and territorial conflicts maximises polarisation in education, and this has led to constant counter-reforms

Overlapping moral, economic and territorial conflicts make agreements on education particularly difficult. The laws proposed by PSOE and the PP differ in at least three areas. First, there is a crucial moral element, as the laws by PSOE lessen the importance of religion in academic records by enhancing its voluntary nature. As for the territorial aspect, the reforms by PSOE have decentralised the powers of the education system and given more power to the autonomous communities, unlike the reforms by the PP. This explains why the conservative regional parties vote with PSOE on reforms of a secular nature. As regards the issue of redistribution, the reforms by the PP and PSOE also differ in the degree of autonomy granted to the network of state-subsidised schools, both in terms of student selection criteria and the use of public land. The strong presence of interest groups (Catholic families, charter schools or public school teachers) outside of the Spanish Parliament reinforces political polarisation in this sector. As a result, Spain has a parliament that is divided into clearly distinct coalitions.

Figure 4: The combination of ideological differences on economic, moral and territorial issues leads to complete polarisation around education reform

Cross-party agreements in votes on successive education reforms



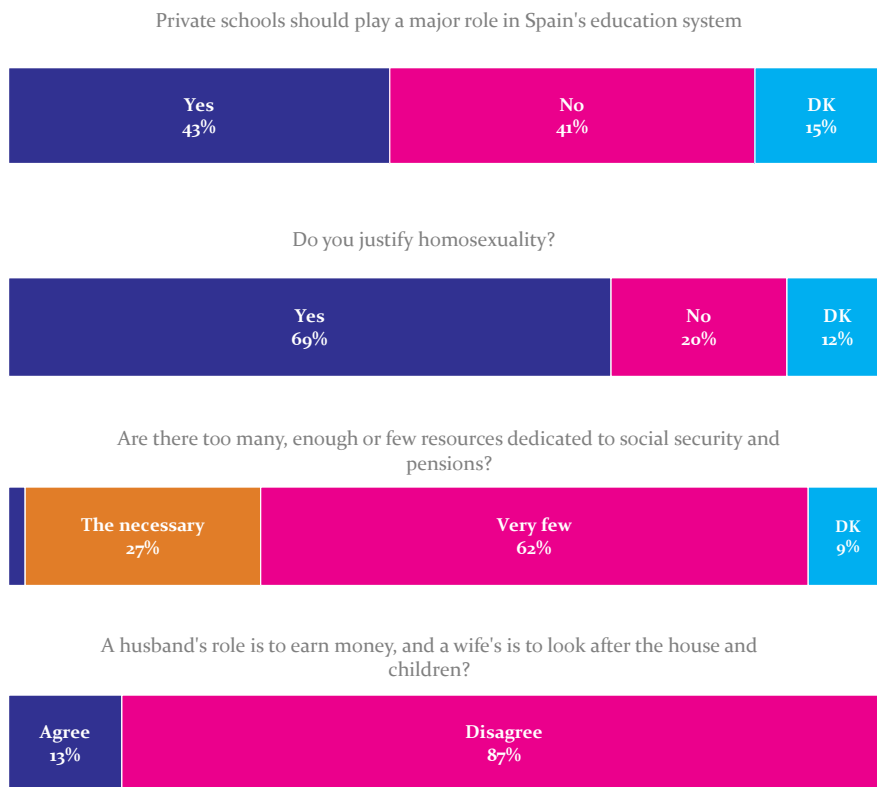
Note: the parties present in most of the parliamentary votes have been included: PP, PSOE, CC, CiU, PNV, IU, ERC, BNG (3 out of 6) and UPN (4 out of 6), as well as the most relevant new political parties (Cs, Vox and UP).

Source: compiled by the authors based on documents from the Spanish Parliament and the media.

6 Cohesive public opinion is associated with less polarisation and a higher likelihood of agreement, and vice versa

There is an undeniable link between public opinion and the positioning of parties, although it is impossible to determine whether one is a cause or a consequence of the other. Whether public opinion is cohesive or divided is therefore a relevant factor for potential political agreement: when public preferences converge in favour of a public policy, parties have no room for competition, and vice versa. The polarisation of public and party opinion generally coincides in the areas examined in this report. On the one hand, the division of public opinion on the role of public schools is matched by similar disagreement in the Spanish Parliament. On the other hand, the consensus on the desirability of dedicating resources to redistribution and equal rights issues corresponds with the adoption of far-reaching political agreements in this area. More than 80%, 68% and 60% of citizens support equal rights and higher levels of social spending on gender equality, gay rights and social security and pensions respectively, which would explain why agreements have been reached on all these issues.

Figure 5: Political polarisation generally occurs in the presence of divisions in public opinion
Level of public agreement on different education and rights issues in %, 2017



Note: in the question “are too many, enough or few resources dedicated to social security and pensions?” the missing category corresponds to “too many” and the value is 2%.

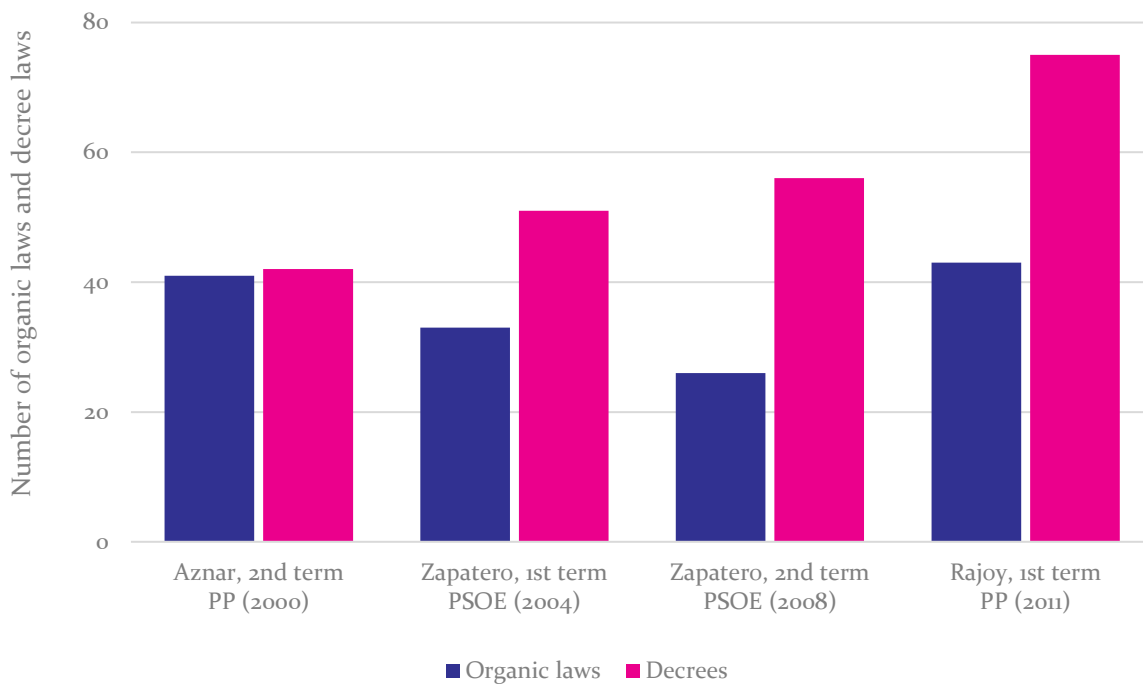
Source: compiled by the authors based on data from Spain’s Centre for Sociological Research (CIS), European Social Survey and Investing in Education in Europe: Attitudes, Politics and Policies (INVEDUC) survey, 2017.

7 Certain features of Spain's institutional design are not favourable to political pacts, especially legislation by decree laws, whose use doubled between 2005 and 2015

Institutional characteristics affect the fragmentation of the party system, the frequency of absolute majorities and the relative power of the executive. The easier it is to govern alone without agreements, the less incentive political actors have to negotiate and reach agreements. Two features of this design in the case of Spain are notable for discouraging dialogue. First, the electoral system facilitates the emergence of absolute majorities, although less so than in other countries with more majoritarian systems. This is because the size of the constituencies is too small for the d'Hondt method to be proportional, and this benefits the majority parties. Second, the Spanish executive has relatively strong power even as a minority government. This exercise of power occurs especially through the use of the decree law, a procedure that allows the executive to legislate outside of the parliamentary arena. Although this tool is theoretically only for emergencies, a worrying rise in its use can be observed in practice in comparison with legislation by organic law.

Figure 6: The use of decree laws has increased in recent legislatures

Number of organic laws and decree laws per government, 2000-2015

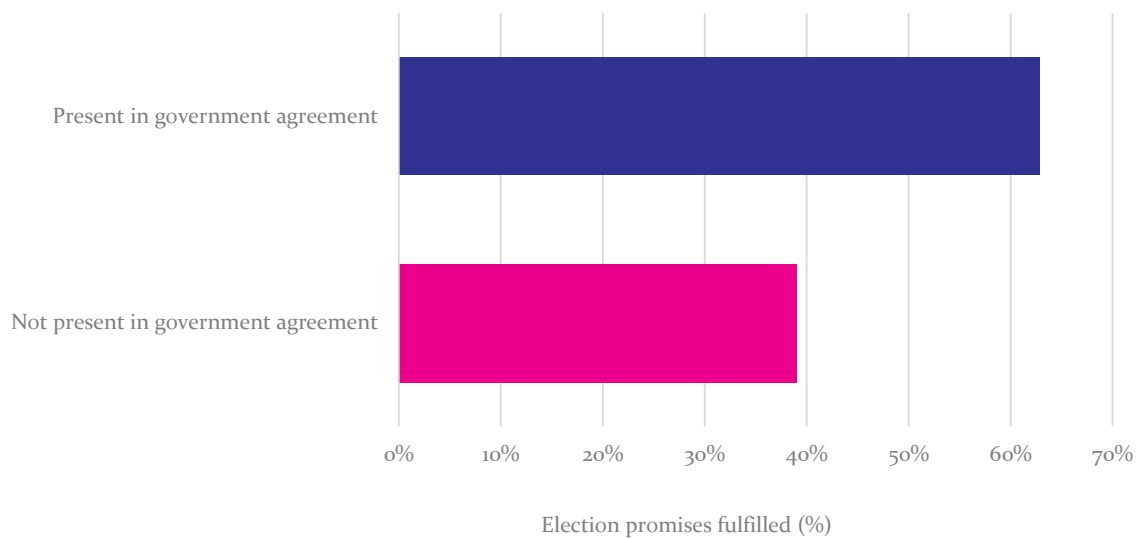


Source: adapted from Palau and Muñoz (2015).

8 A fragmented political scenario, such as that in Spain after 2015, favours coalition governments, which is an opportunity for agreement-based institutional learning

The advent of multi-party politics has forced major parties to pursue alliances that help them to reach governmental agreements in order to achieve investiture. It has also been demonstrated that the electoral promises of coalition agreements are more likely to be fulfilled if they are included in such an agreement. This may be due to the fact that the content of coalition agreements is receiving increasing media and public attention. The drafting of such agreements should therefore be the result of slow, consensual negotiation. In order to achieve this, it may be useful to develop institutional learning from the experience of other countries with a longer history of coalition governments, such as the Netherlands, where governments such as these between conservatives, liberals and social democrats have been in place for many decades.

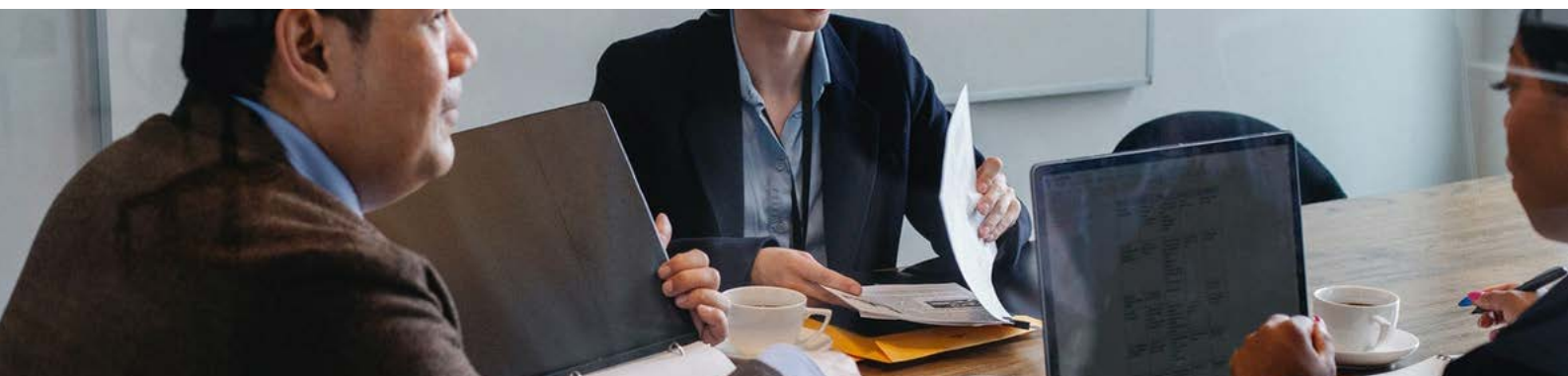
Figure 7: Election promises included in agreements are 33% more likely to be kept
Percentage of election promises fulfilled depending on whether or not they are present in coalition agreement, Ireland, 2007



Source: compiled by the authors based on data from Mansergh and Thomson, 2007.

Conclusions

Reaching a social contract against inequality requires the capacity for agreement among political parties of different political persuasions. This study has focused on how the different lines of political division enable or hinder the ability to reach agreements in various public policy areas. In Spain, as in southern Europe and in contrast to the north, divisions on economic issues lead to less polarisation than disagreements of a moral basis. This is true both for public opinion and for parliamentary activity: left and right have voted together on a number of reforms on unemployment, tax reform, pensions and minimum incomes. The fact that agreements have already been reached in economic areas suggests that it can also be done again in the future, and this should encourage the parties to tackle together the growing problem of inequality, at least in its purely economic aspect. In contrast, both public opinion and parties appear more divided on moral issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage or, in the past, divorce. Reaching agreement is particularly difficult in the case of education, an issue in which there are conflicting economic, moral and territorial autonomy convictions. There are also a number of institutional factors that alter the incentives for parties to negotiate or confront each other in these various areas. In the case of Spain, imperfect bipartisanship and a significant concentration of power in the executive have led to government terms without major agreements. Also worrying is the growing use of decree laws to legislate without the need for parliamentary debate or consensus. One element of institutional design that could, on the contrary, help to achieve social contracts is parliamentary committees, although these would need to be given greater power, effectiveness and diversity. The shift towards a multi-party system that began in 2015, in which coalitions have become increasingly important, may provide an opportunity for institutional learning based on political dialogue and agreement.



Proposed actions

1

Strengthen the separation of powers by reducing the legislative capacity of the executive, notably through a reform of decree laws.

3

Encourage the specialisation and permanence of MPs in parliamentary committees, as well as the presence of expert staff in order to enhance their technical nature.

5

Increase resources for committees and the Spanish Parliament to improve their power to act. Committees often do not have their own office and staff, and instead obtain these resources through the parliament. In contrast, there is a significant budget allocation for this purpose in Denmark, which also provides a great deal of technical and expert advice to MPs.

2

Promote the role of parliamentary committees as spaces for cross-party negotiation, especially in the case of issues around which there is political polarisation, and provide these committees with greater legislative and executive powers.

4

Promote gender parity in parliamentary committees.

6

Encourage closed meetings that can facilitate negotiation in areas of extreme political polarisation, as already occurs in the case of Danish committees or in Spanish subcommittees, known as “ponencias”.



Study characteristics

This study assesses a number of factors that have enabled and hindered agreements among political parties in various policy areas with a potential redistributive impact. The research is also intended to formulate a set of proposals that could make it easier to achieve far-reaching, long-lasting social contracts. Nonetheless, the proposals mentioned at the beginning of this study and elaborated in the conclusion, most of which are of an institutional nature, will not lead to the elimination of political conflict or electoral competition. The growing fragmentation of the party system and the intense polarisation currently experienced in the Spanish Parliament are factors that are very difficult to influence. Despite all this, analysing what kind of political conflicts occur and what institutional contexts facilitate political agreement is an important step on the road towards a social contract to reduce inequality.



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