

Book Review: The Oxford Handbook of Spanish Politics edited by Diego Muro and Ignacio Lago

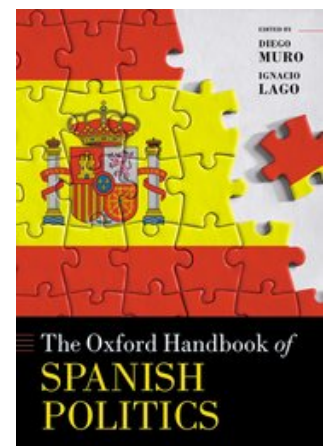
The Oxford Handbook of Spanish Politics, comprising 41 chapters by renowned scholars and edited by **Diego Muro and Ignacio Lago**, makes a hugely valuable contribution to understandings of the country through its consistent analysis of contemporary Spanish politics and governance in a comparative European context, rather than in isolation. The veritable wealth of excellent material and analysis in the volume makes the handbook the most comprehensive and up-to-date account of Spanish politics available, writes **Dr Caroline Gray**.

The Oxford Handbook of Spanish Politics. Diego Muro and Ignacio Lago (eds). Oxford University Press. 2020.

Following the transition to democracy of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Spain rapidly established itself as a consolidated democracy, albeit one which has come to face immense challenges, sparking a notable decline in satisfaction with the quality of that democracy amongst Spaniards themselves in recent times. And yet, Spain often still seems to be somewhat neglected in political science as a discipline when it comes to the study of political systems in Europe, reflecting a bygone era when Spain was perceived as notably 'different'.

In this context, [The Oxford Handbook of Spanish Politics](#), comprising 41 chapters by renowned scholars, makes a hugely valuable contribution to our understanding of the country through its consistent analysis of contemporary Spanish politics and governance in a comparative European context, rather than in isolation. As the editors Diego Muro and Ignacio Lago state in their introduction (Chapter One), 'through the systematic comparison of Spain with other European countries, the *handbook* goes beyond black-box explanations that rely on the cultural singularities captured by the idea of "Spanish exceptionalism".'

One of the handbook's greatest strengths is precisely that the many authors offer in-depth country knowledge which either contributes to, or is furthered by, a wider understanding of Europe and the world where appropriate, while avoiding superficial cross-national comparisons. In this regard, Chapter Two on 'Spain in Comparative Perspective: Contributions of the Spanish Case to Comparative Political Analysis', by Robert M. Fishman, makes a series of observations that encapsulate the ethos reflected throughout the volume overall, and not just those chapters which explicitly make reference to 'comparative analysis' in their titles. Fishman persuasively argues that 'fast-track' approaches to comparative analysis, which primarily involve observing country-level aggregate values of key political variables, often overlook causal dynamics at play that can only be appreciated when a country case is appropriately contextualised through deep knowledge of its specific features. These include, in Spain's case, the nature of devolved governance.





The up-to-date nature of the analyses that the contributors offer is another of the handbook's strengths, enabling the editors to fulfil their stated aim of providing a nuanced view of the strengths and challenges of Spanish democracy. The Great Recession is widely recognised as having posed unprecedented challenges to the political, social and economic model established in Spain throughout the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, which had largely been perceived up until then as a 'success story'. While some signs of change, such as the revisiting of the 'pact of forgetting' agreed by right- and left-wing forces during the transition to democracy, started to emerge under former Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's first mandate in 2004-2008, it was the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis that brought a serious political and institutional crisis.

The contributors to the handbook address these dynamics of change in all their complexity. This includes investigating why some of the factors that were previously deemed to have contributed directly to the Spanish 'success story' are now perceived by growing numbers as part of the problem. Thus, for example, both Josep M. Colomer (Chapter Ten, 'Political Institutions in a Comparative Perspective') and Josep M. Vallès (Chapter Eleven, 'The 1978 Spanish Constitutional Design: Assessing its Outcome') consider, as part of their analyses, how barriers to constitutional reform that were designed during the transition to democracy to avoid the political instability of Spain's past have ended up contributing to the increasing questioning of Spain's institutional model in the present.

While all the chapters provide excellent insights into the different authors' work to date on core aspects of Spanish politics and governance, some also bring new theoretical approaches and/or empirical data. As such, the handbook provides interesting reading not only for those new to Spanish politics, but also for those already very familiar with it. On the theoretical side, for example, Juan Rodríguez Teruel (Chapter Twelve, 'Executive Politics in Spain') offers a 'core executive approach' as an alternative to the usual institutional approach to explaining the dynamics and results of PM-centred executive politics in Spain. In so doing, he points to 'a more complex network of overlapping and interconnected actors that exchange resources to make decisions'. Meanwhile, on the empirical side, Sandra León and Ignacio Jurado (Chapter Fourteen, 'Multilevel Governance in Spain') bring new data to address how well citizens attribute responsibility to different government levels over time.

In terms of structure, following the editors' introduction, the handbook is divided into six sections that cover the 'Past and Present of Spanish Politics', 'Institutions', 'Parties, Elections, and Voters', 'Civil Society', 'Public Policy and Policy-Making' and 'The International Arena'. At a time when the Catalan independence movement is one of the greatest challenges that Spain faces, some might argue that the book's structure comes across as perhaps too heavily state-centric, with no direct mention of Catalonia (or any other region) in the table of contents. Reading the volume itself soon dispels that idea – the importance of multilevel governance in Spain, from the local and regional levels to the supranational level of the EU, and its significance for the workings of Spanish democracy, are recurring themes throughout many chapters, not simply the handful that refer explicitly to 'decentralization', 'multilevel governance' or 'regional and national identities' in their titles.

The chapters that do deal explicitly with Spain's decentralisation model or multilevel governance are focused on all-important, overarching (and often competing) dynamics across Spain's seventeen 'autonomous communities' or regions, while the fullest account specifically of pro-sovereignty politics in the Basque Country and Catalonia comes in Chapter 29 ('Regional and National Identities in Spain') of the 'Civil Society' section. There, María José Hierro provides insights into how regional and national identities have been shaped primarily by Spain's internal conflict between the centre and the historic regions, which has reduced in the Basque Country but intensified in Catalonia since 2010.

Finally, a word on the accessibility of the volume. The editors state clearly in their introduction that the handbook 'has been designed with a wide audience in mind', and that they hope it will go beyond academia to appeal to policymakers, among others, in keeping with the important public engagement and impact agenda in academia today. The handbook undoubtedly provides a fantastic gateway into Spanish politics for a potentially wide-ranging audience and the chapters are generally written in an easily readable style. Classic examples are the editors' own superbly succinct introduction, or Chapter Three on 'Spanish Democratization' by Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, which makes clear his main arguments (three 'significant corrections' to the canonical description of the Spanish transition to democracy) from the outset, rather than making the reader wait until the end for his main conclusions. Including the abstracts summarising each chapter's main conclusions in the hard version, rather than just on the website, might also have been beneficial for busy readers dipping into the handbook. It is just a great shame that the hefty price tag (mirroring that of most volumes sold by academic publishers) will make it unavailable to many potentially interested readers who do not have access via university libraries.

In conclusion, then, this handbook provides the most comprehensive and up-to-date account available of Spanish politics, and there is a veritable wealth of excellent material and analysis therein that should go a long way towards helping to improve understanding of the Spanish case and its wider relevance in academia and beyond.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

Image Credit: Close-up photo of the flag of Spain ([Contando Estrelas CC BY SA 2.0](#)).
