

Book Review: Territorial Politics and the Party System in Spain: Continuity and Change since the Financial Crisis by Caroline Gray

In Territorial Politics and the Party System in Spain: Continuity and Change since the Financial Crisis, Caroline Gray offers a new analysis of how and why the territorial dimension has contributed to shaping Spain's politics and party system following the 2008 financial crisis. This in-depth account deserves to be read widely by area studies scholars and students interested in the particularities of Spanish politics and by comparative political scientists looking to situate Spain within contemporary party systems in Europe, writes Georgina Blakeley.

Territorial Politics and the Party System in Spain: Continuity and Change since the Financial Crisis. Caroline Gray. Routledge. 2020.

Caroline Gray's new book, [Territorial Politics and the Party System in Spain](#), aims to explain how and why the territorial dimension of politics contributed to shaping Spain's party system following the financial crisis of 2008. It delivers on this promise. The book is organised around the conceptual framework of continuity and change and focuses in particular on party behaviour and the extent to which the financial crisis served to hasten, reinforce or alter pre-existing trends apparent in the nature and evolution of Spain's party system.

Based on an extensive set of elite interviews conducted over the period 2014-19, the resulting analysis is an in-depth case study of how the territorial dimension has affected Spain's politics and party system. It is an erudite analysis that establishes what is distinct about Spanish politics: namely, the importance of the territorial dimension to the political cleavages which structure party competition in Spain and its particular salience following the 2008 financial crisis. Yet it avoids the platitude that 'Spain is different' by situating the analysis within the broader comparative literature on political parties.

As such, this is not a book that will only speak to those interested in Spanish politics. One of the book's strengths is that it shows how Spain is both similar to and different from general trends in Western and Southern Europe: namely, the widespread decline of mainstream parties and the concomitant rise of anti-establishment challenger parties in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. It thus not only adds to our understanding of party system developments in Spain and its regions, in particular those of the Basque Country and Catalonia, but it also contributes to broader cross-national and comparative studies. In that sense, it is a book which will appeal to the area studies market and those specialising in Spain, while also holding significant appeal for comparative political scientists.





The book is structured as follows: Chapters One and Two are scene-setting chapters which analyse Spain's political and party system pre-2008 (Chapter One) and post-crisis (Chapter Two). These chapters provide an analytical framework that is based on identifying the political cleavages and axes of party competition in multi-level Spain, grounding the primary analysis which is subsequently undertaken in Chapters Three-Six. These two initial chapters explain the evolution of Spain's party system from an early multi-party system following the first democratic elections in June 1977 to a predominant party system from 1982-93 and a two-party dominant system between 1993-2015.

Chapter Two then focuses on the breakdown of this two-party dominant system while also situating Spain within the wider context of party system change in Western and Southern Europe following the critical juncture of the Great Recession. Spain's political system became characterised from 2015 onwards by unprecedented political fragmentation as challenger parties emerged, first on the left in the form of Podemos ('We Can') and Ciudadanos (Citizens) and ultimately, on the right, with the breakthrough of the populist radical right-wing Vox in the Andalusian regional elections in December 2018. These early chapters show clearly that Spanish politics continues to be structured by the dominant left-right divide in common with the wider pattern in most Southern European countries, while also showing Spain's distinctiveness due to the impact of the territorial dimension on party restructuring.

The main analysis is undertaken in Chapters Three-Six. The analytical lens of Chapters Three and Four focuses on the regional level of politics, specifically Catalonia and the Basque Country, while Chapters Five and Six analyse how this regional level has shaped national politics, particularly how the territorial dimension has influenced party agendas and alliances on the left and right. Chapter Three contains a particularly well-crafted argument highlighting the important role played by political parties in the emergence of an apparently bottom-up pro-independence movement in Catalonia, while Chapter Four sheds new light on the ostensible paradox of a parallel, albeit temporary, weakening of territorial ambitions in the Basque Country.

While the focus on Catalonia and the Basque Country is understandable given that these two regions have provided the strongest challenges to Spain's territorial model of quasi-federalism, it is a shame insufficient space is given in the book to also considering regional politics within other key regions such as Andalusia and Galicia. However, it is not possible for one book to cover all aspects, and this omission should not detract from the book's numerous strengths. The key contribution – and its appeal to both Spain specialists and general comparative political scientists – has already been highlighted, but three further strengths deserve mention.

First, the author has an admirable grasp of both the economic and political dimensions of the financial crisis and its impact in Spain. To be able to analyse the economic and political dimensions equally and to be able to give each their due weight is rare in analyses of the fallout from the Great Recession in Spain. It is particularly rare to find an author who clearly grasps the complexities of Spain's regional funding arrangements and is able to draw out the many political consequences of these.

Second is the evenness with which the author deals with the evolution of regional politics in the two key areas of Catalonia and the Basque Country on the one hand, and on the other hand, the evolution of national politics in terms of party agendas and competition on the left and right through an analysis of a variety of factors including, but not limited to, the territorial dimension. Of particular interest to comparative political scientists will be the analysis of why Spain initially followed the wider Southern European pattern of the emergence of a challenger party on the left until the emergence of the radical, populist Vox on the right, and the shifting positions and agendas of these challenger parties, particularly the fluidity of the evolution of Ciudadanos from an initial centrist position, within Catalan politics, to a state-wide right-wing party.

Finally, the conceptual framework of continuity and change allows the author to highlight the overall context of change in Spain characterised by an unprecedented level of political fragmentation and instability, while being careful to draw attention to the striking elements of continuity, not least the durability of the left-right divide.

Together these strengths point to a book which deserves to be read widely by area studies scholars and students interested in the peculiarities of Spanish politics and by comparative political scientists eager to understand what an in-depth case study of Spain can contribute to the broader comparative literature on party systems in Europe following the Great Recession.

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.

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