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978-0-521-71110-4 - Controlling Governments: Voters, Institutions, and Accountability

Edited by Jose Maria Maravall and Ignacio Sanchez-Cuenca

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Introduction

José María Maravall and Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca

We discuss in this book some core topics in the positive theory of democracy. We try to understand the relationship between citizens and politicians: what guides voters at election time, why governments survive and fall, and how institutions modify the power of the people over politicians. These are all relevant questions to determine the role of elections in democracy. Note, however, that elections can be analyzed from many other perspectives different from the representative dimension of democracy. Thus, elections can be also interpreted as an epistemic device to reach the right decision (Coleman 1989); as an exercise of self-government (Przeworski 2005); or as an opportunity for participation and deliberation (Elster 1998).

This book focuses on the representative side of democracy – how rule for the people and rule by the people are connected. Do elections (rule by the people) induce politicians to act in a representative way (rule for the people)? A common theme in all the contributions here included may sound commonsensical or even trivial: we need to combine some analytical rigor with empirical analysis. If we dare to say something so obvious, it is because the field is badly divided into formal analysis and empirical studies. We take seriously what we have learned from economic models of democracy, but we use these conclusions to organize the empirical research of cases that are far removed from the assumptions made in the formal literature.

The analytical approach to the study of representative government revolves around formal models on the control and selection of politicians through elections (for an introduction, see Persson and Tabellini 2000, ch. 4; Przeworski 2003, ch. 8). Control and selection respond to two logics. On one hand, control is associated with retrospective voting, and the main concern is how to induce politicians to behave in the interest of the

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electorate. More technically, the problem is how voters can avoid rent-seeking behavior by politicians (moral hazard). On the other hand, selection is associated with prospective voting. The problem is how to avoid the selection of bad types (adverse selection).

Although formal modeling has reinvigorated the theory of democracy and defined the relevant questions in a sharp and rigorous way, we still have some reservations about its empirical relevance. A brief reference to accountability models will help make the point. In purely retrospective models, all that matters is the past record of the incumbent. Voters set a particular threshold on the evaluation of their welfare between two elections: if it is achieved, they reelect the incumbent; otherwise, they throw him out. Pure accountability models (Ferejohn 1986) require several conditions for retrospective control to be possible: (1) citizens disregard promises and just observe outcomes; (2) they ignore differences between candidates because no selection is involved; (3) they do not differ in their distributive preferences over welfare that could be manipulated by the incumbent (i.e., the political space is unidimensional); and (4) they are able to coordinate on the voting rule that establishes the welfare threshold in virtue of which people vote for or against the incumbent.

Each of these conditions is crucial if citizens are to control the incumbent. These are not merely simplifying assumptions. They highlight how restrictive the conditions for electoral accountability are. It is rather obvious that in actual democracies, these conditions do not hold: there are various types of politicians; it is unlikely that voters will be able to coordinate on a voting rule; voters hear different promises; and politics tends to be run in more than one dimension.

Of course, later models have relaxed these conditions in various ways: for instance, allowing deviations from electoral promises (and not just unsatisfactory outcomes) to explain voters' reactions (Austen-Smith and Banks 1989), considering that candidates differ and have incentives to reveal in the campaign their true intentions (Harrington 1993), and introducing multiple agents that may provide information to the principal (Persson, Roland, and Tabellini 1997). Models of accountability also make important informational requirements: voters must be able to assess whether the incumbent is responsible for past outcomes. These may have been due to the actions of the government or to conditions beyond its control. If voters cannot know the causes of such outcomes, to establish a reelection threshold, and to reward or punish for past performance, becomes arbitrary.

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Despite their more realistic assumptions, these models generally assume that representation can only be guaranteed via accountability. Elections, from this point of view, are little more than a mechanism to create rotation in office. As Riker (1982: 244) put it, “all elections do or have to do is to permit people to get rid of rulers.” This view is echoed in Przeworski’s (1999) minimalist conception of democracy.

Mackie (2003) has extensively shown that there seems to be some deep and unwarranted distrust in these models toward any function of elections that goes beyond kicking politicians out of office. Yet if elections are, after all, a punishment mechanism, it seems a rather inefficient one. Citizens have only one instrument, the paper ballot, to punish or reward the incumbent for the many decisions made during his or her time in office. Further, elections do not provide many opportunities for voters to coordinate on their judgments about the incumbent. Besides, as Fearon (1999) has argued, there are some resilient facts about the functioning of democracy that are scarcely compatible with the idea of retrospective control: (1) voters tend to dislike office-oriented candidates, (2) voters tend to reject politicians who follow too closely the shifts in public mood or who are too sensitive to surveys, and (3) some democracies work under term limits that eliminate the reelection incentive of the theory of accountability.

We have to provide a more realistic description of how the control of the incumbent is part of a wider democratic process. This is where we depart from the formal literature. But we try to stay close to the results of this literature to structure the empirical analysis. We do not believe that the alternative to formal models is running regressions, as is so often the case in the inexhaustible literature on economic voting. We hope to convince the reader that there is some middle ground between formalism and empiricism.

The chapters of the book focus on four themes that reveal the sort of complexities that emerge in the relationship between politicians and citizens. First, government survival does not depend entirely on electoral results. We must also take into account nonelectoral, parliamentary accountability. The mismatch between these two forms of accountability may have large implications for the calculations and strategies of the incumbent.

Second, voters make up their minds by combining judgments about incumbent performance with many other elements: these are not only retrospective and prospective considerations; voters may also vote for reasons that are unrelated to past or future performance.

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Third, the relationship between governments and citizens is mediated by political parties. In the real world, the accountability relationship is a triangular one: the government is responsible to its voters but also to the party or parties that support it.

Finally, the extent of citizen control over politicians depends on institutions, but these institutions are endogenous, for they are designed by parties themselves. Parties, therefore, have certain latitude to decide to what extent they want to be constrained by citizens (Ferejohn 1999).

Note how distant we are with regard to pure accountability models. We have governments that can be controlled in more than one way, voters with varying degrees of sensitivity to government performance, parties that mediate between politicians and citizens, and endogenous institutions that enhance or reduce citizens' capacity for control. In each case, we have new problems that so far have received little attention in the positive theory of democracy.

Let us start with the survival of governments. We know that disconnections between loss of votes and loss of office exist in democratic systems. Such disconnections are particularly important under proportional representation and coalition governments. Cheibub and Przeworski (1999: 231–5) have shown that of 310 peaceful changes in prime ministers between 1950 and 1990, 48 percent were due to decisions made by politicians, either from their own party or from the ruling coalition. If we examine incumbents with majoritarian support in parliament and compare single-party and coalition governments in 23 parliamentary democracies from the end of the Second World War to 2003, 92.8 percent of prime ministers in single-party governments lost office through elections. This was the case for only 56.7 percent of prime ministers in coalition governments; the rest of losses were due to political conspiracies.¹ According to Maravall (2007), the criteria used by voters and politicians to sack a prime minister are antagonistic. In 1,109 country/year observations for these democracies (which included 312 losses of office), when economic performance was bad, the probability of losing power at election time went up; when the performance was good, the probability of being thrown out of office by ambitious fellow politicians increased. This may explain why, on aggregate, the fate of prime ministers does not appear to depend on economic conditions.

¹ The countries are Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.

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If we focus only on elections and leave conspiracies aside, the bulk of the literature has concentrated on how the fate of governments depends on economic conditions, mainly because economic performance is an easy variable to assess. Yet the connection between economic performance and government survival is obscure. Many studies have indeed shown that past economic outcomes influence the support of governments (examples are Kramer 1971; Shaffer and Chressanthi 1991; Lanoue 1994; Monardi 1994; Svoboda 1995). This support also appears to depend on expectations about the future, however, not just on assessments about the past. Comparative evidence is also inconclusive: past economic performance seems to matter in some countries but not in others (Paldam 1991: 9). Further, economic conditions, even if they influence individual voting, do not seem to affect electoral outcomes and whether or not governments survive. Powell and Whitten (1993), after studying 102 elections in 19 countries between 1969 and 1988, conclude that economic growth, inflation, and unemployment have no consequences on the electoral support of governments. This is very much the conclusion of Cheibub and Przeworski (1999: 226–30): past economic conditions had no effect on the likelihood that prime ministers would survive in 99 democracies between 1950 and 1990, with 1,606 country/year observations.

Barreiro, in her contribution to this book, provides a more comprehensive picture. First, she takes into account other outcomes apart from the economic ones. Second, she contemplates the possibility that different governments are judged differently by voters. As she states in her chapter, “we know very little about how accountability works in different ideological and economic contexts.” It has sometimes been argued that governments are more vulnerable to poor performance in policies at which they are assumed to be competent – as, for instance, the Republican Party in the United States over public spending (Lowry, Alt, and Ferree 1998). Other studies have stated, on the contrary, that this vulnerability is greater over policies at which they are assumed to be less adept – conservative governments over employment (Carlsen 2000; see also Warwick 1992).

Barreiro examines which criteria are used to punish or reward incumbents at election time, and whether they vary when right- or left-wing parties are in power and when the government corresponds to a rich or poor country. She studies 83 democracies between 1950 and 2000, looking at electoral gains and losses by incumbents. Governments in general tend to lose votes from election to election, with a mean loss of 3.9 percent. This tendency to *desgaste* is confirmed in Alonso’s chapter, which

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shows that in multiethnic countries, class-based parties lose, on average, 1.40 percent of their vote between two consecutive elections, whereas ethnic parties lose 0.01 percent. Elsewhere, Maravall (2007) has shown that in parliamentary democracies, coalition governments lost, on average, 1.40 percent of their vote between elections, whereas single-party governments lost 2.50 percent. These findings contradict the hypothesis of an “incumbency advantage” – that is, the idea that holding office increases the likelihood of winning the next election because of the capacity to mobilize privileged resources.

Comparing the relative vulnerability of governments, Barreiro reaches two empirical conclusions: the first is that the criteria with which voters judge governments of left and right, and in rich and poor countries, do vary; the second, that the accountability of governments depends on the extent to which they can be held responsible for outcomes. Thus, although annual variations in per capita real income improve the electoral performance of all kinds of government, they matter somewhat more for governments of the left and in rich countries. Increases in total government expenditures as a percentage of GDP are beneficial for the vote for leftist parties in power (and indifferent for conservative ones). Further, if we accept that voters attribute more responsibility for outcomes the greater the share of seats in parliament of the party in power, this effect is greater in rich countries (i.e., as such share goes up, the greater the losses if performance is bad, and the greater the electoral rewards if performance is good).

Note that Barreiro studies accountability examining losses or gains of votes between two consecutive elections. She argues that “when incumbents lose or win votes for their outcomes, citizens are being sensitive to government performance. It is this sensitivity that may trigger the retrospective mechanism of accountability.” Yet the loss of votes is not necessarily related to the loss of power. Electoral leaks may go on over a very long time before becoming a threat to survival; governments may react with fear or with phlegm. In Great Britain, Tony Blair lost 2.3 percent of Labour’s share of total votes between the 1997 and the 2001 elections and 13.8 percent between the 2001 and the 2005 elections, but he preserved a majority of seats and stayed in power. It is only when votes lead to the loss of office that Friedrich’s “law of anticipated reactions” (1963: 199–215) operates: that is, when politicians, fearing that voters at election time will throw them out, avoid shirking.

These arguments about democratic controls are retrospective: governments respond for their past actions. They abandon two crucial exigencies

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of pure accountability models, however: first, that all politicians in power are alike, so that elections involve no selection; second, that the electorate is homogeneous, so that incumbents cannot manipulate voters' distributional differences. The various contributors to this volume share a similar view of accountability. Sánchez-Cuenca's chapter combines both retrospective accountability and ideological differences among incumbents and voters.

A vast literature, from Downs (1957) onward, considers that elections are about selecting the best candidate for office and that this selection can be reproduced in a spatial "least distance" model. The "best" candidate is the one whose policies are closest to the voter's ideal position. Minimizing ideological distance is what guides both voters and parties. This is, of course, a prospective view of elections: no accountability is involved. In a different conception, elections are about holding governments accountable for their past record in office, and voters ignore differences between politicians. Very few consistent bridges have existed between these two distinct views of elections: what empirical studies have often done is simply juxtapose them – this has tended to be the case with the oceanic research on economic voting.

Sánchez-Cuenca shows why ideological voting and accountability can be combined. At election time, voters can assess the "ideological reliability" of a party – which depends on both the consistency of its policies and its political capacity. This assessment has to do with the past: "a government's performance provides plenty of evidence about its consistency and capacity." The "retentive power" of a party is then defined as the percentage of individuals who, being ideologically closer to that party, vote for it. Such percentage goes down as voters critically assess the capacity and consistency of the party despite its ideological proximity. Sánchez-Cuenca shows that a third of voters who were closer to the British Conservative Party or the German Christlich Demokratische Union/Christlich Soziale Union (CDU/CSU) than to any of their rivals did not vote following ideological proximity. The loss of retentive power was particularly important for the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE): in 2000, only 52.3 percent of those voters who were closer to the PSOE than to any other party voted for it. Using conditional logit models, Sánchez-Cuenca demonstrates that such loss was first due to voters' attributions of inconsistency between ideology and policies (in the elections of 1986 and 1989) and later to their critical assessments of the party's capacity, mostly due to internecine struggles (in the elections of 1993, 1996, and 2000). This analysis therefore departs

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both from the simple logics of ideological proximity and of retrospective performance voting; it combines ideology and performance in an analysis of accountability where differences exist among parties and among voters.

Ideology can thus guide voters in several ways. It can contribute to assessments of the political reliability of a party; it can help to select the candidate closest to the voter's preferences; it can reduce information costs; it can also introduce biases in voters' judgments of performance. Maravall and Przeworski (2001) have shown that ideology influences voters' expectations about governments: when assessments of the past and expectations about the future are combined, voters can find intertemporal or exonerative arguments to rationalize their vote. Ideology can lead them to think that if the past was bad, it was a necessary pain for a brighter future; or that a bad past and a bleak future are caused by conditions beyond the control of the government. In both cases, voters go on supporting the incumbent. The reward–sanction mechanism of pure accountability models is thus thwarted.

We do not know to what extent nationalism operates as an extreme form of ideology. Strongly ideological voters may follow the dictum “my party, right or wrong” – they will consider no other alternative. In similar fashion, nationalist voters may only conceive voting for a party that responds to their conception of the demos. When a part of the electorate holds to a different national identity, how does this affect the democratic control of the government? Are nationalist governments electorally more immune to past performance? Is the nationalist vote less volatile and more subject to political blinkers? The chapters by Alonso and by Aguilar and Sánchez-Cuenca shed light on these largely unexplored questions.

As Alonso puts it, “if it is true that ethnic allegiances provide nationalist parties with a competitive electoral advantage over class-based parties, *ceteris paribus* (i.e., under similar institutional settings), ethnic parties should show lower fluctuation of votes, less electoral punishment, lengthier duration in office, and less political erosion with the passage of time than class-based parties.” She studies five countries with fourteen ethno-regions (where ethnic and nonethnic parties compete), and 329 country/year observations. The analysis consists of a Weibull duration model in which the risk of losing office is assumed to vary as a function of time. She finds that the connection between government performance and survival in office is very different in majoritarian and proportional representation systems, both for ethnic and nonethnic parties. Because proportional representation facilitates party fragmentation, it also generates competition

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within the nationalist camp – that is, more shifts of votes within blocs than between the nationalist/nonnationalist blocs. On the contrary, in majoritarian systems, access to office requires parties to compete for votes beyond ethnicity barriers – thus, competition between blocs is greater.

Coalitions were the norm in ethnoregions: 85.5 percent of all observations against 73.0 percent in regions with no ethnic parties. Most of such coalitions were mixed – that is, they included nationalist and nonnationalist partners. Although the fluctuation of votes was greater in ethnoregions because of their more fragmented party systems, mixed coalitions had lower electoral losses than homogeneous coalitions. This was due to the greater stability of the vote of ethnic parties in systems of proportional representation. Here, ethnic parties could follow a conservative strategy: they could simply rely on their own nationalist constituency rather than compete for nonnationalist voters. So, in ethnoregions, nationalist parties did better in preserving their voters than class-based parties. Alonso concludes that “voters judge an ethnic party less severely when it shares office with other parties . . . than when it is in office alone. Governments made up of only one party are similarly judged by voters, irrespective of the type of party. An ethnic party in office alone will probably be judged not only by the defense of the ethnonationalist program, but also by its economic performance.”

An intriguing question remains, as Alonso points out. The presence of nationalist politicians in mixed coalitions and the support given by nationalist voters to the collaboration with nonnationalist forces suggest a political pragmatism and a programmatic flexibility that contradicts the alleged rigidity of nationalist identities. So we need to move from a comparative analysis based on aggregate data on parties and governments to survey data on individual voters.

This is what Aguilar and Sánchez-Cuenca do in their chapter. They study the reactions of voters to the performance of a government in a complex scenario where, on one hand, nationalist parties enhance identity rather than performance, and, on the other hand, political decentralization increases voters’ difficulties in attributing responsibility for past outcomes. The Spanish case provides an *experimentum crucis* to test the reaction of voters in a politically decentralized system where (1) the same party could hold the national and a regional government – it would thus be easier for voters to attribute responsibilities (the case in the chapter is Andalusia); (2) one party could hold power at the national level and be part of a coalition with nationalists at the regional level (the Basque Country);

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or (3) different parties could be in office at the national and the regional levels – the regional government could be either nationalist (Catalonia) or nonnationalist (Castilla-León). The empirical analysis uses individual data from a 1992 survey with large national and regional samples.

Aguilar and Sánchez-Cuenca assess the relative influence of nationalism and ideology on the vote. They estimate the spatial distances between voters and parties both in a nationalist and an ideological dimension. What they find about the effect of such distances on the vote is the following:

1. The influence of ideology is stronger in general than that of nationalism. Both dimensions have a similar effect on nationalist voters, however. For nonnationalists, ideology matters much more.
2. There is coattail voting with respect to the central government. This is so particularly in nonnationalist regions, where the performance of the central government influences vote intentions for the regional governments.
3. In regions where nationalism is strong, the performance of regional governments has a greater effect on voters. This is particularly so for nonnationalist voters, who respond very much to the performance of the regional incumbent.
4. Nationalist voters tend to exonerate nationalist regional governments when the performance is poor. This is more the case with Basque than with Catalan nationalists: the former are much less sensitive to performance when deciding their vote. Nationalist voters also assess the performance of the central government much more critically than nonnationalist voters.

Therefore, the conclusion, which is based on comparative aggregate data, that nationalist governments survive longer in office than their non-nationalist counterparts under systems of proportional representation is coherent with the results of individual-level data. Nationalist voters tend to exonerate nationalist governments, their vote is less sensitive to performance, and their assessment of the central government is much more critical. So nationalists vote with political blinkers, and nationalist governments are more immune to performance.

So far, we have examined several aspects of the democratic control of governments, ignoring issues of information. However, citizens can hardly exercise such control if they do not know what is happening – that is, if they ignore political facts, if they cannot monitor the actions of the incumbent, if they cannot assign responsibilities for outcomes. If voting either consists of selecting the best candidates, generally on the basis of ideological