

## Introduction

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The popular enthusiasm that greeted the Second Republic in 1931 proved short-lived, and the military uprising of July 1936 led to a civil war that lasted three years, with the rebels finding themselves too weak to quickly finish the task they had initiated but too strong to be defeated by the government.<sup>1</sup> While the army was the ‘ultimate cause of the breakdown’ of this brief democratic experiment, it was the deep political crisis and the regime’s loss of legitimacy that provided it with the opportunity to act.<sup>2</sup> The experience of a ‘democratic breakthrough’ quickly collapsing and the country turning to authoritarian rule has been all too frequent over the past century, with the ‘Arab Spring’ being the most recent example. In Europe, Spain was perhaps the extreme case rather than an exception. Ziblatt divides the Continent into two major blocks, with countries such as Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, or Denmark following a steady ‘nearly linear’ path to democracy over the course of the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century and others, including Italy, Germany, Portugal, Spain, or France before 1879, taking major detours, experiencing frequent ‘breakthroughs’, followed by ‘democratic breakdowns or coups d’état’.<sup>3</sup> Explaining why the Second Republic ended in civil war rather than a consolidated democracy remains as controversial today as ever. Many blame the traditional rural elite and highly conservative Church for refusing to relinquish power, while others point to the radicalization of a significant section of the Left and their revolutionary endeavours to protect what they considered as ‘their’ republic.<sup>4</sup> Few studies however have attempted to explain why moderate and often apolitical Spaniards became disillusioned in the first place and then attracted to these extremist policies. This book does just this by examining rural Spain, where over half the country’s population still worked and lived in the 1930s.

<sup>1</sup> Juliá 2008, p.173. <sup>2</sup> Linz 1978b. <sup>3</sup> Ziblatt 2017, pp.9–15.

<sup>4</sup> See Moradiellos 2016, for a brief survey.

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The contribution of economic historians in explaining revolutionary events or military uprisings is often marginalized in the literature, as knowledge about long-run growth, income distribution, or growing poverty is usually regarded as providing a background to events but cannot explain political change itself. Therefore, understanding the causes and economic consequences of the Great Depression is insufficient to predict why a liberal democracy became consolidated in countries such as the United Kingdom or France but gave way to social democracy in Scandinavia, or to fascism in Italy, Germany, and eventually Spain. Political scientists such as Juan Linz emphasize instead the importance of decisions taken by politicians at crucial points in time. For instance, there is no doubt that Spanish history would have been very different if, for example, Alcalá-Zamora, the President of the Spanish Republic, had asked right-wing political leader Gil-Robles to form a government in late 1935 instead of convoking elections. David Cameron's decision to call a referendum on Britain's membership in the European Union is another political decision that unleashed fundamental changes in a society.

Lawrence Stone used a three-stage model to understand radical political change in his study of the causes of the English Revolution between 1529 and 1642, dividing the period into 'preconditions, precipitations, and triggers'.<sup>5</sup> In this model, economic and social historians provide the 'structure' or background, leaving to political historians to discuss the partisan manoeuvres and pacts that determine the events that trigger the monumental changes. However, these attempts have been frequently criticized because the connections between the distinct phases are often not clear, and individual political decisions can only be understood by knowing the constraints under which they were made. Returning to Alcalá-Zamora, his authority to decide which politicians could form a government depended on the powers conferred upon him by the 1931 Constitution, a document that itself represented the interests and worries of those elected to the Cortes of that year. The 1931 elections were democratic, but the political interests of family farmers – a group that represented around a third of the country's electorate – went largely unrepresented. The Constitution would no doubt have been very different, and the President of the Republic would have faced very different constraints and opportunities to decide on a new Prime Minister in the winter of 1935, if small farmers had been better organized. Instead, the Constitution reflected the views of urban middle classes and organized labour, creating a 'Republic for the Republicans' as they claimed, rather than one representative of all Spanish society.

<sup>5</sup> Stone 1972.

This book begins by explaining how economic and political developments over the previous half century influenced the outcome of the Second Republic (1931–6). In particular, it shows the interconnections between economic growth, state capacity, rural social mobility, and the creation of mass competitive political parties, and how these limited the effectiveness of the Republican governments, and especially their attempts to tackle economic and social problems within the agricultural sector. It then shows how political change during the Republic had a major economic impact on the different groups in village society, leading to social conflicts that turned to polarization and finally, with the civil war, to violence and brutality. The democratic Republic failed not so much because of the opposition from the landed elites but rather because small farmers had been unable to organize sufficiently to advance their own political interests. Indeed, if Spanish politicians had followed Jules Ferry's observations concerning France's Third Republic, and attempted to build a democracy with the support of family farmers and created a 'Peasants' Republic', the country's democracy might have enjoyed wider support that would have given it a better chance of surviving.

On the eve of the Second Republic, many Spaniards believed that they lived in a poor country, especially in comparison with their European neighbours. Nevertheless, the half century prior to the Great Depression was a period of long-run economic growth, resulting in living standards being significantly above those found in poor countries today, and the numbers living in absolute poverty declining, especially in the 1920s. Other indicators, such as literacy and life expectancy, also suggest that important improvements were taking place. Agriculture, far from being backward, was also changing rapidly, and the growing rural exodus was encouraging farmers to modernize farming practices. Yet by remaining neutral during the First World War, there were few incentives for politicians to invest in state capacity, and this would severely handicap the governments during the Second Republic to choose and implement effective policies. This was particularly unfortunate given the high expectations that the new Republic would resolve social problems, which were worsening because of the Great Depression.

In Spain, unlike much of North-Western Europe, economic growth was accompanied by slow social mobility in rural areas, so that the influence of the landed elites remained strong, and family farmers were economically weak and politically unorganized on the eve of the Second Republic. The two were connected, although not necessarily in the ways that many contemporaries believed. Favourable movements in land prices and wages from the 1870s allowed significant numbers of landless workers to rent or buy plots of land, but these remained poor 'peasant

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farmers', rather than prosperous 'free farmers'. Farm labourers were therefore able to get onto the farm ladder, but the distance between the lower rungs remained significant, keeping most in relative poverty. This, in part, was because of natural resources, as dry-farming methods had to be used on about four-fifths of the country's farm land, which severely limited farmers' ability to increase output and incomes by simply working the land more intensely. However, the slow appearance of autonomous organizations such as rural banks or cooperatives that could help farmers adapt to an increasingly competitive agriculture and create effective farm lobbies also limited social mobility. In most Western European countries the landed elites and the Church hierarchy organized rural voters and built farmer associations to create strong centralized political parties, because they had to participate in competitive elections, and defend themselves against the liberal's attacks in the national parliament. This did not happen in Spain because, even after male suffrage was introduced in 1890, elections were not free and politicians used corruption and bribery to determine outcomes. This allowed the landed elites and the Church to avoid the expensive task of having to build mass political parties and attract small farmers by offering them political and economic support. Instead, the political influence of the *caciques*, or village notables, was actually strengthened by the need to manipulate electoral results and the state's dependence on them to implement a growing range of policies. The result was that when the landed elites and monarchists finally became discredited in 1931, the interests of family farmers were limited in the new Constitution.

In Spain, the social consequences of the 1930s Great Depression had a greater rural dimension than in most of Western Europe. This was because agriculture was still the employer of last resort. In France for example, local farm workers benefitted because unemployed foreign migrants went home, but in Spain the number of farm workers actually increased as unemployed urban workers returned to their villages looking for work. For many contemporaries, especially in urban areas, the 'agrarian problem' became associated primarily with the high concentration of landless and near-landless labourers on the *latifundios* in Southern Spain. These were widely believed to be poorly cultivated, with their owners paying starvation wages. In fact, the causes of rural poverty were much more complex and originated from a combination of factors, including the difficulties of creating agricultural employment using dry-farming practices; the fact that most workers lived in large villages and towns, often at a considerable distance from the fields; and the limited rural exodus. With time, industrialization and high urban wages would reduce surplus farm labour, but this process was delayed in Southern Spain, not

least because the area of cultivation continued to expand in some regions right up until the early 1930s. Unfortunately, the Second Republic coincided with economic depression and low farm prices, which encouraged commercial farmers to reduce labour inputs, just as the demand for work was increasing. The difficulties of improving yields and intensifying agriculture under dry-farming conditions made mechanization attractive for farmers to reduce labour costs.

The Second Republic significantly raised expectations that rural poverty could be alleviated in Southern Spain. Nevertheless, the decision of the new Left Republican-Socialist government to carry out a far-reaching land reform to create employment was both ineffectual and divisive. The weak state capacity that the government had inherited implied that it had virtually no information concerning how the latifundios actually operated, thereby severely limiting the debate on the feasibility of a reform. In particular, we show that, contrary to much of contemporary opinion, not only were the latifundios actually well cultivated by the standards of the day but there was very little new land that could be brought under the plough. Spain, in many respects, was already too rich for a traditional land reform, as converting pasture land to cereals would not only have created only limited amounts of employment but would reduce meat production, for which there was a growing demand, and increase wheat output, of which there was a surplus. But it was also too poor to fund a 'green revolution', which required large-scale investments in water storage and canals for new irrigation schemes, as well as the development of new plant-growing technologies, and the creation of the necessary food chains to process and transport high-value foods to consumers in distant markets. As a result, land reform settled fewer than 15,000 farmers on plots of land that were far too small to create a family farm, frustrating the hopes of many rural workers and poor tenant farmers, but also alienating small farmers who feared that future governments might extend the reform to incorporate their properties, especially following the Socialist-organized land invasions of March 1936.

While the threat of land reform directly challenged the traditional landed elites, the Left Republican-Socialist government's social and labour legislation of 1931 and 1932 risked increasing farmers' production costs at a time of weak farm prices. Among other things, it introduced collective bargaining, restricted the use of migrant labour, and required farmers to provide emergency assistance to workers through temporary land settlements. This legislation was highly contentious because its implementation at the village level was often arbitrary and highly politicized. When the Socialists controlled municipal governments, it was put into effect, and membership of its trade union soared. However, when the

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Centre-Right won the elections in November 1933, landowners and farmers often ignored the legislation. The Socialists now faced the dilemma of having to either accept the legitimacy of the new municipal governments at a time when the living standards of its members were deteriorating or pursue illegal resistance and reject the authority of the state. Many chose the latter, resulting in the revolutionary uprising in the northern mining region of Asturias in October 1934.

Less visible, but affecting far more families, were the economic problems facing small farmers and tenants across the country, whose prosperity depended on both high farm prices *and* low wage costs, demands that were diametrically opposed to those of rural labourers and urban dwellers. Just as weak state capacity led to the Left Republican-Socialist government's failing to resolve the problems of landless labourers, conservative governments were now unable to intervene effectively in commodity markets to help family farmers. Instead, following the Right-Republican victory of November 1933, many farmers simply ignored collective bargaining agreements and blacklisted trade unionists. When the Popular Front won in February 1936, many small farmers, fearing that the Left-Republican government would again follow partisan policies, looked to more extreme alternatives.

There was clearly a class dimension to these rural conflicts, with the volume of unrest increasing or decreasing according to the political group in power, and whether policies favoured absentee landowners and farmers or landless workers and small tenants. Yet a second, less visible but more divisive cleavage was the fact that many small farmers and workers still depended economically on interlinked contracts and patron-client networks. This led many to continue to side with landowners, rather than joining the local labour syndicate. Others quite simply preferred to use their entrepreneurial skills and hard work to climb the farm ladder and become independent of both the village caciques and labour unions. The deep polarization of Spanish villages in 1936 was therefore caused by the clash between two very different ways of organizing rural society: the traditional patron-client hierarchical structures and the new class-based groups. Numerous conflicts took place over whether it should be the landowner or the Socialist FNTT that determined which groups of tenants should be given land, and which workers. There were also often disputes between neighbouring villages, while the conflicts between the socialist and anarchist syndicates at times, according to Manuel Azaña, the Republic's Prime Minister, descended into 'an authentic civil war'.

This book differs from most recent interpretations in three major areas. First, it argues that the low levels of state capacity that the Republican governments inherited were an important explanation for the failure of

agrarian and social reforms during the Second Republic. This is illustrated by the inability of successive governments to widen the tax base, and in particular to fully implement an impartial land tax; by the limited information that was available to understand the extent that agriculture had progressed since the turn of the century; and by the lack of administrative capacity to implement legislation in a fair and objective manner. A second explanation is that agrarian policy was heavily biased towards the needs of landless workers and failed to respond to those of small farmers, who represented a third of the total electorate and who suffered from falling farm incomes at a time when government politics were pushing up their costs. Finally, historians have usually explained rural conflicts during the Second Republic in terms of either class or a clash between Marxist and Catholic ideologies. Although both arguments were used by the Left and Right to frame contentious policies and construct collective identities, they greatly simplify the nature of conflicts. In particular, they ignore the fundamental difficulties of trying to allocate impartially the inadequate amounts of land and employment during a major economic crisis. Conflicts broke out not just between workers' syndicates and farmers but also among different groups of workers, between those small farmers who joined a Socialist or anarchist syndicate and those who preferred to remain in a traditional patron-client relationship, and between neighbouring villages. Therefore, although none of these made civil war inevitable, most villages in Spain had become heavily polarized by the summer of 1936. A map following the military uprising of July 1936 suggests a country divided into two, with provinces where small family farmers predominated supporting the rebellion and those with latifundios remaining loyal to the Republic. In fact, this greatly simplifies the story, as the real divisions were *within* villages, in areas of both latifundios and small farms across the country.

The book is organized in five parts, each with two chapters. Part I provides the European context. From the mid-nineteenth century, Western Europe enjoyed an unparalleled period of economic growth and rising living standards, while increased state capacity saw governments widen their tax reach, experiment with central planning, and create a professional civil service. Changes in income distribution, rapid urbanization, rising literacy, widening of the suffrage, and the growth in trade unions led to significant demands for political change, especially following the First World War. By 1920, only Bolshevik Russia and Hungary of Europe's twenty-eight states were not democracies or had limited parliamentary systems. However, both the timing and sequencing of change varied significantly across countries. In particular, how governments responded to three major exogenous shocks – namely, the late nineteenth

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century ‘grain invasion’, the First World War, and the Great Depression – would have very different consequences across the Continent. By the 1930s, governments everywhere were in crisis, which helped strengthen liberal democracy in some countries (Britain, France) but led to authoritarian governments elsewhere (Soviet Union, Germany) or social democracy (Scandinavia).

Economic and social change were arguably as great in agriculture as in any other sector. In the late nineteenth century, agriculture was still by far the largest sector, and the influence of landed elites on national and local government remained essentially undiminished. However, the growing integration of international markets and domestic industrialization contributed to undermine the traditional elites’ economic and political influence. At the same time, higher wages attracted large numbers of farm workers to the rapidly growing industrial cities, as well as the New World. Those who stayed behind benefitted from a combination of falling land prices and rising wages, allowing them to gain access to land and become farmers. Food shortages during the First World War led governments to prioritize increasing farm output, and government policies changed to favour farmers, rather than landowners. By the interwar period, family farmers in many countries accounted for a significant proportion of the farm vote and could potentially form a major political grouping to challenge the urban middle classes or organized labour. The political direction that small farmers took would have a major implication on whether liberalism prevailed, or the country turned to fascism, or social democracy.

Part II shows that Spain experienced rapid economic growth and enjoyed relative political stability in the half century before the Second Republic. Recent estimates suggest that GDP per capita increased by two-thirds between 1875 and 1931, by which time both Madrid and Barcelona had almost a million inhabitants, and Spain was becoming an increasingly modern European society. Agriculture played an important role in this change, with almost a million male and female workers, or a fifth of its workforce, leaving the sector during the two decades before 1931. Spain on the eve of the Second Republic had a much more dynamic economy than is usually suggested in the historical literature.

Although Spain had much in common with other Western European countries, a number of major differences emerged at this time. First, the Restoration settlement (1875–1923) provided the country with an unusual amount of political stability, undisputed national frontiers, and a marked absence of ethnic-racist nationalism. This was in contrast to the considerable disruption that the country had suffered following the highly destructive civil wars during the previous half century. But stability



came at a price. In particular, while universal male suffrage was introduced as early as 1890, no mass competitive political parties developed, as parliamentary elections were fixed in advance by the political elite using clientelism, corruption, and fraud. Trade unions were also frequently banned. The association of parliamentary elections with patronage and corruption would be difficult to erase, and politicians of all parties simply adapted the system for their own ends during the Second Republic.

Another major factor was Spain's neutrality during the First World War. This had obvious benefits, but it created no political demands for governments to invest in state capacity. By contrast, the experience of the Great War played an important role in state building in most Western European countries and was valuable for when governments had to respond to new problems, especially those associated with the 1930s Depression.

Finally, agriculture differed to most North-Western European counties, because of both the large numbers of landless labourers in Southern Spain and the constraints imposed by dry-farming. This book challenges the arguments that the nineteenth-century liberal land reforms failed to create a society of small family farmers, but Spain remained essentially a 'peasant' society, rather than one of small, economically viable family farmers. By the interwar period, Spain was, therefore, predominantly a country of small farmers, although large numbers of landless and near landless lived in poverty in the regions of latifundios in the south. Dry-farming technologies made it difficult for small farmers to introduce labour-intensive crops, which was a major constraint that would restrict governments' responses to the depressed international markets conditions of the 1930s.

Part III examines the links between the persistence of an economically influential and politically strong rural elite and traditional Church, and a peasant agriculture. For economists, small farms are seen as being competitive, because family labour is more productive than wage workers, while political scientists believe that agrarian societies where family farms predominate are more egalitarian and democratic than those with large estates. Family farmers have to cooperate among themselves however, both to take advantage of the growing economies of scale in some economic activities and to create lobbies to channel their economic and political demands. Many small farmers in Western Europe from the late nineteenth century responded to the rapid industrialization and lengthening commodity chains by creating credit and producer cooperatives to reinforce their competitive position. These were slower to appear in Spain, and provide an institutional explanation for why family farmers were economically weaker, and failed to create effective pressure groups to protect their interests. In particular, it argues that there was a causal link running from weak farm

cooperatives to small farmers' limited political voice and representation in political parties before the Second Republic, and with the over-representation of the interests of urban republicans and organized labour in the 1931 Constitution, which resulted in the opposition of many small farmers to the Republic from the outset.

The limited presence of civic associations and farm cooperatives in Spain was not caused by a lack of social capital and trust as some historians have argued, as village grain banks were successfully operating since at least the eighteenth century, even in areas of latifundios. Instead we suggest that there was a lack of top-down support to create federations across wide geographical areas. In many northern European countries, the extension of the franchise encouraged urban-based liberal political parties from the 1870s to attack the privileges of both the Church and landed elites, leading them to create defensive alliances to build a mass conservative party to defend their interests in the national parliament. Their success at organizing small farmers led to new political entrepreneurs and Christian Democracy appearing, and a marked decline in influence of both the landed elites and Church hierarchy. However, the Restoration political settlement in Spain made it unnecessary for these groups to organize small farmers and build a mass political party before the Second Republic. Only in Catalonia did competitive regional party politics require politicians to intervene actively to help farmers, explaining the region's more dynamic associations and cooperative movement.

Part IV shows that many Spanish contemporaries believed that extremes of land inequality produced absentee landownership, poor farming practices, and widespread poverty among the landless. In fact this book shows that the land ownership structure in Southern Spain was not an obstacle to increasing farm output or improving living standards for most workers during the half century prior to the Republic. Instead, the agrarian problem is explained by the difficulties in creating employment for a growing number of workers during the Great Depression, at a time when weak farm prices encouraged farmers to reduce the area cultivated and cut labour inputs by mechanization.

The Second Republic created widespread expectations that it would end rural poverty and reduce inequality of opportunities. Central to this was the 1932 Land Reform Law which aimed to break up the large estates and create small holdings or collectives. However, only a few thousand families were settled, a tiny fraction of those in need, and these received far too little land to make them independent of the highly seasonal labour markets. The failure of land reform is usually explained by a combination of budgetary constraints, determined opposition from the landed elites, and a lack of commitment by urban-based politicians. Chapter 8 argues