

THE SPANISH APPROVE THE EUROPEAN CONSTITUTION BY A WIDE MAJORITY

The Spanish, who were the first to vote by referendum on the European Constitution on 20th February, approved the European text by a wide majority with 76.73% in favour of its ratification. Although this referendum was merely consultative Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (Socialist Party, PSOE) had however warned that if the ‘no’ vote won the text would not be submitted for ratification by parliament. 17.24% of the electorate voted against and 6.03% voted blank. This easy victory was dampened somewhat by the low participation rate during this, the fourth Spanish referendum. Only four voters in ten (42,32%) went to ballot, i.e. the lowest figure in the history of democratic Spain and the second lowest result out of all the referenda that have taken place within the EU (the lowest participation rate –35.4% - having been recorded on 7th June 2001 in Ireland for the ratification of the Nice Treaty). This participation rate is also 2.8 points lower than the one recorded in Spain during the European elections on 13th June 2004. The election took place under high security after the arrest on 17th February of two suspected members of the Basque separatist movement ETA in Valencia who had been planning an attack on the day

of the referendum. One hundred and six thousand security agents were engaged for the occasion.

As during the previous referenda (adoption of the political reform enabling the democratisation of Spain on 15th December 1976, adoption of the Spanish Constitution on 6th December 1978 and on Spain remaining a NATO member on 12th March 1986) it was the Basque Country and Catalonia that had the lowest participation rates (38.74% in the Basque Country, 40.96% in Catalonia). It was also in these regions and in Navarre that most people voted 'no' (33.66% in the Basque Country, 28.07% in Catalonia and 29.22% in Navarre). However in the South and West the 'yes' vote rose beyond the 80% mark (83.24% said 'yes' in Andalusia, 85.19% voting in favour in Extremadura and 80.97% in favour in Leon).

The announced success of the 'yes' vote and the high consensus on the construction of Europe in Spain as well as the complexity of the text and the lack of information given to voters explains the high abstention rate during this referendum to a great degree. With the guarantee of the success of the vote in favour a part of the opposition electorate also abstained in order to attenuate an overly spectacular victory which Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero would be the first to take advantage of. We should also remember that on 20th February it was the fourth time that the Spanish had been called to vote in less than two years

(regional and local elections on 25th May 2003, general elections on 14th March 2004 and European elections on 13th June 2004). However the low participation rate, that is frequent in all Member States in electoral consultations involving the European Union, will be a source of concern simply because it shows how a major part of the electorate still considers Europe as an entity distant from their interests and concerns even though it is increasingly present and of major influence in their lives.

“This participation rate is an example for no one in Europe because it is a failure,” declared Mariano Rajoy, president of the main opposition party, the Popular Party (PP). The conservative party leader, who had called to vote in favour of ratification, had maintained that he would only consider the participation rate as acceptable from 50% of the electorate on. The conservative leader accused the Prime Minister of having wanted to be the first in Europe to organise a referendum at all costs and to have rushed into convening a popular consultation without having taken the time to inform the Spanish. *“The participation rate was the lowest ever recorded in a national consultation in Spain. It is a failure for the person who convened it,”* maintained Miguel Angel Acebes, former Home Secretary to Jose Maria Aznar and secretary general of the conservative party.

As during the electoral campaign some members of the Socialist Party accused the opposition of having campaigned for the “yes” vote far too tentatively. In answer to these accusations the Popular Party reminded them that the main

defenders of the “no” vote – the United Left and Esquerra republicana de Catalonia (ERC)- were the parliamentary allies of the Socialist Party, a factor that helped to create a certain amount of confusion amongst the electorate.

In the losers’ camp, Gaspar Llamazares, leader of the United Left (IU), that had called on its supporters to vote against ratification of the European text said he was, *“happy with the result of the “no” vote,”* stating that *“two and a half million voters fought tooth and nail.”* He also said that the total of the “no’s” and abstentions removed *“both legitimacy and credibility from the European constitutional process both in Spain and in Europe.”* *“The low interest of the Spanish in the treaty proves that Europe will be built with its back turned on its citizens,”* he declared.

Prime Minister Zapatero can therefore be happy since the result is as he had wanted it when organising this referendum, *“confirming Spain’s return to the heart of Europe,”* after his predecessor, Jose Maria Aznar (Popular Party, PP), had showed leanings towards the other side of the Atlantic. *“This will be a contribution worthy of a process in the construction of Europe to which we owe so much and from which we have also benefited so much and to which we are contributing,”* he declared on 11th January last as he announced the date of the referendum to the Congress of Representatives. *“The support we had today in this referendum in favour of the European Constitution makes both Spain and Europe stronger. We, the Spanish, entered Europe at a late hour and in spite of*

ourselves we have expressed our thanks,” declared Zapatero. *“The Spanish have entered European history by sending a message out to our fellow citizens to follow us,”* he added. As far as the participation rate was concerned on the eve of the referendum the head of government pointed out *“that since no party had called for abstention, none could draw any advantage from abstention. In democracy the most important thing is the result not the participation rate,”* he added saying that he would be satisfied with the participation of one third of the electorate.

King Juan Carlos and his wife, Queen Sofia set the example by voting as early as 9:15 on Sunday morning in the polling station at the Monte del Pardo College in the north east of Madrid near his residence, the Palace of Zarzuela.

Incidentally the sovereign was called to order by the president of the polling station just as he was about to vote, the latter having asked him for his identity papers! We should remember that for reasons of neutrality, King Juan Carlos never votes in the general elections. However the King did participate in the previous three referenda organised in Spain.

“We want express our satisfaction at the referendum result in Spain. I think that we can now send out a sign of encouragement to the other Member States and to the 220 million people who will be called to vote on the Constitution,” declared Margot Wallström, vice-president of the European Commission and Commissioner for Institutional Relations and Communication. *“The participation rate is still a challenge,”* she added. *“This is an additional reason to*

encourage governments, Parliaments, and European institutions to improve the campaign in informing the public about the Constitution.”

“The Spanish have said “yes” to Europe, “yes” to the future European Commission is extremely happy,” declared the President of the European Commission when the results were announced. *“Spain has clearly said “yes”. By opening the way with this unambiguous vote in favour the Spanish people has sent a strong sign to its fellow citizens , who will be asked to vote on the Constitution in the coming months,”* José Manuel Durao Barroso.

“I am convinced that the results in Spain will have a positive impact on the consultations that are to take place in other Member States in the European Union in the coming months. The Spanish has shown massive support for the Constitution. This is an important step in the ratification process,” maintained Javier Solana, High Representative for Foreign Policy. Finally, Josep Borrell, president of the European Parliament also expressed his pleasure at the major victory achieved by the “yes” vote. *“It is a very good result. It is a clear victory for the “yes” vote and it is a clear victory for the European Constitution,”* he emphasised.

In France, the President of the Republic Jacques Chirac expressed his satisfaction in the same way. *“This vote in favour of the Constitution and Europe by the Spanish people is a major sign and shows the way to the other countries who will be ratifying this treaty over the next few months,”* declared Jacques Chirac. François Hollande, leader of the

Socialist Party (PS), indicated for his part, *“The Spanish have shown us the way, this unquestionable success is good news for Spain and for Europe”*. The former President of the European Convention Valery Giscard d’Estaing exclaimed *“Bravo and many thanks to the Spanish.”*

Prime Minister Zapatero did not forget that on Sunday evening the day when the Spanish were organising the first European referendum on the Constitution, his Portuguese neighbours were electing the representatives in their Parliament. *“After a long period of time both the Spanish and Portuguese clocks are now in harmony,”* he declared during a TV speech congratulating the Portuguese Socialist leader, Jose Socrates, on his victory in the general elections. After this great Spanish victory three countries will now submit the ratification of the European Constitution to referendum: the Netherlands, France and Luxembourg. Let us hope that the magnitude of the “yes” vote in Spain augurs well for the next popular consultations and that the voters will take heed of the words of a Spanish lawyer who, on voting, declared, *“it is an historic moment even though we don’t realise it yet. When Europe expresses itself as one then it is the greatest power in the world.”*

Corinne Deloy

Translated by Helen Levy

**Results of the referendum on the ratification of the
European Constitution
20th February 2005**

Participation rate: 42.32%

Question submitted to referendum	% of “yes” (the number of votes is in brackets)	% of “no” (the number of votes is in brackets)	Blank Votes (the number of blank slips is in brackets)
Do you approve of the draft treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe?	76.73 (10,804,464)	17.24 (2,428,409)	6.03 (849,093)

Source : Spanish Home Office