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Spain has changed politics for the better

Rarely, if ever, has a country gone to the polls just three days after an attack that killed more than 200 people. This horror obviously had an impact on the voters. Spaniards do not have hearts of ice. But the elections had to go ahead. To have postponed them would have been a gift to the terrorists. The elections gave the country the chance to exorcise its grief, and allowed us to share our faith in the democratic system that unites us. The government was the scapegoat.

When a community suffers such a tremendous blow, you have to look for some ritual through which you can return to normality. First came the massive demonstrations, which sent an unequivocal message that we rejected terrorism, whatever its source. Then came the election, the democratic ritual *par excellence*. The Spanish people flocked to the polls in huge numbers. The high turnout was a direct consequence of the attacks and we voted for change. Mobilised by the Madrid massacre, the people's mass vote in favour of democracy was the best way to reject the terrorists' attempts to destroy our society. But the impact of March 11 would have been different if, during the long year that began with the Prestige oil-tanker disaster in north-west Spain, the Spanish government had not systematically duped, misinformed and derided the people.

The Prestige disaster was only one of a long list of events that the government handled with the same arrogance and instinct for manipulation that it showed in the days following March 11: the Gescartera fund management scandal, the crash of a chartered Ukrainian aircraft in which Spanish soldiers returning from Afghanistan died, the war in Iraq, and the failure to discover weapons of mass destruction there. The war, in particular, opened a deep rift between the government and the public, which was strongly opposed to the conflict. José María Aznar, the prime minister, did nothing to close that gap;

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on the contrary, he widened it with his scorn for the opposition parties and his disdain for the people.

The Spanish people saw a haven in the calm and consensual style of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the Socialist leader. Those who elected him covered the whole spectrum: as well as the party's natural political constituency, there were young people, whom the Socialists would have been unable to attract until recently; supporters of Izquierda Unida - the former Spanish Communist party - who decided to cast their vote to get rid of Mr Aznar; centrists irritated by the governing Popular party's style; and some votes from supporters of regional parties.

Satisfying all of them equally will be a near-impossible task. The first big test will be Iraq. Mr Zapatero has confirmed his electoral promise to withdraw Spanish troops, unless the United Nations takes charge of the process. In some countries, the promise to withdraw has been seen as a concession to the terrorists and a lack of loyalty to Spain's allies. But Islamist terrorism is a nihilist terrorism with massive destruction as its sole aim. It has no realistic political goal. Voting for Mr Zapatero to rid ourselves of al-Qaeda, apart from being immoral, would have been wrong-headed. Spaniards voted for Mr Zapatero because they were against Spain's participation in the war. The facts show increasingly that war in Iraq had nothing to do with the war on terrorism. On the contrary, war in Iraq *increased* terrorist activity. So Mr Zapatero has the right to pull the troops out, but he must use the three months before June 30 to make a diplomatic effort to rally support.

The Americans have heard and understood the warning sounded by the Spanish election result. Even the hardline Paul Wolfowitz, US deputy defence secretary, has said America must now give Spain reasons to stay in Iraq. Mr Zapatero's first act as prime minister-elect has achieved greater change than a whole year of unconditional support for the US from Mr Aznar. That is why what happened in Madrid affects everyone, and why it represents a victory for those who believe that there is more than one way to fight terrorism.

This election was decided on fundamentally political grounds. Mr Zapatero must show that he can recover the active consensus that characterised the Spanish transition to democracy three decades ago. Such consensus involves more than simply falling in behind government policies; it means trying constantly to persuade people to think more about the common good than about what they might have to give up to achieve it. This is the return of democratic politics as it should be, and that is good not just for Spain but also for the whole of Europe.

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