

Spain: 1 in 4 ministers were not affiliated with their party when they assumed their role

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One in four ministers were not affiliated with their party when they assumed their role. Credit: moncloa.es

Since the first democratic elections in Spain, some 23.7% of ministers have not had a political party card when handing over their portfolio. This means that Spain has had the highest number of independent ministers compared to those other countries of Europe that have parliamentary governments in which percentages do not exceed 5% according to a study at the University of Valencia (UV).

Juan Rodríguez Teruel, lecturer at the University of Valencia (UV) and author of the programme geared towards MP selection, declares that "in the majority of European countries with parliamentary governments, the number of independent ministers is nil, and never exceeds 5%. In this sense, [Spain](#) is similar to presidential republics such as the USA and

countries in Latin America where the president of the [government](#) can appoint ministers that are not from their party as a strategy in response to the political context of the time."

The study is based on the analysis of the careers of ministers such as Adolfo Suárez through to the recent government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, as well as their journey through government. According to the results, despite there being independent ministers, in Spain no government has ever been technocratic but it has had a high number of academics and a high number of its members have been specialists in their field.

As the researcher points out, "half of ministers are specialists in the field in which they work and practically all of them have at least a university degree. This notion challenges the idea that governments in Spain have low levels of qualifications. In fact, throughout the rest of Europe, the percentage of ministers without university qualifications is higher, between 10% and 40%."

In addition, Rodríguez Teruel outlines that if we observe the ministerial careers of government members since 1977, it is safe to say that ministers have little influence in the government as "the average length of time in a given position does not exceed three years and in just one in five cases do ministers change office. What is more, often they do not return to a position in the government once they have left: only 14 ministers have done so," he explains.

This limits a minister's power to influence and transfers all of the power onto the president, who, in turn, is paradoxically highly vulnerable. The author ensures that "at the end of a mandate, the heads of government in Spain are usually surrounded by inexperienced ministers who have insufficient political force to fill the void of a weakening president. This weakening of governmental teams leads to the president becoming

overexposed and thus a greater personal sacrifice on their part. This happened at the end of presidencies of González, Aznar and Zapatero. In Spain we have strong presidents and weak ministers."

Becoming a minister without passing through congress

In an article written from the study, the author also analyses the impact of politic decentralisation in the careers of ministerial elite. He does so to explain why there are less parliamentary ministers in Spain that what is expected. "Our parliamentary government is not very parliamentary," he concludes.

In this respect, when Felipe González and José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero had to renew their cabinets during their most politically turbulent legislatures (1993 and 2008 respectively), their search for ministerial candidates took place far from the national parliament. The author states that "the parliament appears as another arena which in many cases should come hand in hand with passage through other institutions."

From the ten legislatures that have been so far since democracy in Spain, only in four has the number of parliamentarians in the cabinet exceeds the average of 50%: the first two legislatures of González, the first of Aznar and the first of Zapatero. In terms of parties, the Partido Popular has more parliamentarians than the PSOE and the UCD. Without taking into account the government of the UCD, in each one of the three presidential periods (González, Aznar and Zapatero), the parliamentarians have less weight as the legislature goes on.

"We can say that the majority of individuals that reach the Spanish Council of Ministers have passed through different levels and stages in their politic career. This is particularly the case from the last fifteen

years to the present day, especially as of the Aznar government", reiterates the researcher from the UV.

The political professionalisation of ministers in Spain has come from different government institutions unlike other similarly decentralised countries such as Germany and Belgium (who has federal governments) where the national parliament continues to constitute a vital level through which ministers must pass. As Rodríguez Teruel concludes, "this implies that many Spanish ministers are inexperienced when it comes to national politics. They enter the government with a political vision of the state and have different priorities to their parliamentary colleagues."

More information: Juan Rodríguez Teruel. Los ministros en la España democrática. Reclutamiento político y carrera ministerial de Suárez a Zapatero (1976-2010). Madrid: Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales. 2011.

Juan Rodríguez Teruel. ¿Gobierno parlamentario sin ministros parlamentarios? La influencia de la descentralización en las carreras de la elite ministerial española. Revista Española de Ciencia Política, no. 24, 83 – 105, 2011.

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