The Galician Electoral Model

O Modelo Eleitoral Galego

El Modelo Electoral Gallego

Álvaro Xosé Lopez Mira 1.

Resumo

Galiza é reconhecida como nacionalidade histórica no modelo territorial espanhol. No entanto, a representação partidária em seu Parlamento tem relativamente pouco peso nas formasções de caráter nacionalistas, diferente de outras nacionalidades do Estado: Catalunha e do País Basco. Além disso, o sistema eleitoral contribui para dificultar o princípio da proporcionalidade e até mesmo da igualdade de voto, que tende a beneficiar o partido político que tem estado por anos no governo da Xunta e dificultar a entrada de novos atores na câmara representativa galega.

Palavras-chaves: Galicia; Sistema Eleitoral; Comunidades Autônomas Espanholas; Partidos Políticos Galegos; desproporcionalidade.

Abstract

Galicia is recognized as historic nationality in the Spanish territorial
model. Nevertheless, in the partisan representation of Galician parliament, nationalist parties have, relatively, little weight; unlike in other nationalities of the state: Catalonia and the Basque Country. Furthermore, its electoral system contributes to obstruct the proportionality principle and even the equal suffrage principle, tending to benefit the political party that has been more years in the government of the Xunta (regional government of Galicia) and hinder the entrance of new agents in the Galician chamber or representatives.

**Keywords:** Galicia; Electoral System; Spanish Autonomous Communities; Galician Political Parties; No Proportional Representation.

**Resumen**
Galicia está reconocida como nacionalidad histórica en el modelo territorial español. Sin embargo, en la representación partidista en su Parlamento tienen relativamente poco peso las formaciones de carácter nacionalista, a diferencia de las otras nacionalidades del Estado: Cataluña y el País Vasco. Además, su sistema electoral contribuye a obstaculizar el principio de proporcionalidad e incluso el de igualdad de voto, tendiendo a beneficiar al partido político que más años ha estado en el gobierno de la Xunta y a dificultar la entrada de nuevos actores en la Cámara representativa gallega.

**Palabras Clave:** Galicia; Sistema Electoral; Comunidades Autónomas Españolas; Partidos Políticos Gallegos; Desproporcionalidad.
1. The Political Framework in Galicia

Along with Catalonia and the Basque Country, Galicia is one of the "historic nationalities" acknowledged by the Spanish Constitution of 1978; features such as an own language, an own culture and their political claim for differentiation describe its particular identity and are, as well, the starting point for the mentioned constitutional consideration. The centre-periphery conflicts have been constant throughout the history and became even worse both after the establishment of constitutionalism in the early 19th century and due to the exigency of Spanish nationalism during General Franco’s dictatorship.

The Constitution currently in force tried to create a legal and political framework in order to reconcile ambitious views of peripheral nationalisms with the Spanish one, but changes during the drafting of the Constitution\(^1\) cut down the aims of the former because of the unfeasibility of a federal model, which would acknowledge several political nations within Spain (the so-called thesis of Nation of Nations). In fact, at that moment neither Galician nationalists nor the Basques, above all, did not even recognize the constitutional text as lawful, the same constructional text that finally was passed.

Almost forty years after, the model of the Autonomous Communities is clearly deficient in acknowledging historic nationalities, since nationalist parties of these regions still express their dissatisfaction with it. As for Galicia, the main political force of this kind, the BNG (*Bloque Nacionalista Galego*) cannot be compared in terms of importance and political relevance with similar parties in Catalonia and the Basque Country since the latter got the majority and therefore govern their respective Autonomous communities. The ruling party in Galicia, that is the Popular Party (*PP*), is not nationalist and is represented at state level. In Galicia, this party is currently governing due to absolute majority since 1989, while the BNG, who came to be the second party in terms of seats in the Galician parliament and governed in a bipartite government with the PSOE during the period of office 2005-2009 (the only interruption to the absolute majority of the PP), is still at a great distance from the Popular Party. In spite of being scarcely expressed at a political sphere, Galician people maintain considerable signs of their identity. Almost the whole population of this Autonomy understands Galician, their official language; Galician culture enjoys great prestige and some of its traditional and particular economic and social structures still live on in times of globalization. Nevertheless, one of the characteristic features of this kind of nationalities, which use to be archaic in both infrastructure and social development, is self-hate. This is leading to a progressive loss of these signs of identity. As a matter of fact, young people in Galicia, contrary to their predecessors, do not speak Galician at all, although they studied it in school. In fact, political parties at state level, the *PSOE* (Socialist Workers Party) and the Popular Party had no option but to adopt in their proposals some of these symbols, such as the defense of the language and even self-define them as pro-Galicians although not nationalists, which lead them to several contradictions. Nevertheless, these

\(^1\) Some of these were imposed in 1978 by still influential pro-Franco powers such as the army.
"concessions" did not affect these parties in a negative way, that is even more true for the latter, the Popular Party, as we will see in the following.

2. The Political Status Quo.

Halfway through the ninth Galician period of office, the 75 seats of the Galician parliament are distributed as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PP</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSOE</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE (EU-ANOVA)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BNG</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since Manuel Fraga, minister with Franco, afterwards leader of the Spanish Right during almost ten years and former president of the Xunta (regional executive), reached the power, "his" Popular Party has been growing ever since in Galicia. The Popular Party broke its own electoral record there in 1989 with 581674 votes, more than 44% of the ballots. While this party got 567000 votes, 48%, in the local elections of 1991, it won 734000, which is more than 48%, in the legislative elections of 1993 in this Autonomy. In the same year, they gained more than 52% of the votes in Galician elections, with 749000 ballots. As for European elections, the result was of 625000 votes, almost 55% in 1994. In 1996 legislative elections were held again and the Popular Party won 820000 ballots in this region, that is 49%, and four years after, in March of 2000, it even reached 54% of the votes which meant that the Popular Party had obtained absolute majority (with more than 850000 ballots only in Galicia). After four consecutive victories with absolute majority in the autonomous community of Galicia, 2005 was the turning point with the above-mentioned triumph of a coalition between PSOE-BNG that would be ephemeral, since the Popular Party regained the power in the elections of 2009 with a new leader, Alberto Núñez Feijóo.

As for the BNG, this party also has continued to grow since 1989 when it got 5 seats in the Galician parliament. In 1993, the number raised to 13 and in 1997 to 18, reaching the power in Galicia with the bipartite government and going backwards after to the current seven seats in the Galician parliament. Contrary to this development, the PSOE has been losing seats; from 28 in 1989 it fell to 19 in 1993 and finally reached the lowest figure with 13 in 1997, but, afterwards regained power until recovering the second position in the Galician parliament, still at great distance from the majority party. This Galician political triad, uninterrupted for twenty years has been increased with the appearance of a new party (Alternativa Galega de Esquerda),

---

2 With bad electoral returns since he was always defeated by the PSOE headed by Felipe González.
between nationalism and the alternative left. After the last election, held in 2012, the winds of rupture with traditional parties seem to be stronger than ever as well in the conservative Galicia.

3. The Electoral Model of the Autonomous Community of Galicia: Object of Some Criticism

This expression may appear to be inappropriate because actually there is no model, but instead of it a kind of mimicry with electoral law which regulates elections for the Chamber of Deputies (lower chamber of Spanish parliament which predominates). Even though not all elements of the electoral system are inside the competences of the Autonomous Community, some of other important elements currently are, such as specifying constituencies, form of casting the vote or the electoral formula. The electoral regulation that concerns elections for the Galician parliament has been almost literally taken from state electoral law, although Galicia’s peculiarities would have justified a different regulation.

As an outline, it can be said that the Statute of Autonomy, basic institutional rule, contains the main determinations concerning the electoral system, which might form a representative single-chamber assembly within a parliamentary system. The following aspects are specified in article 11:

- members of Parliament will be elected by universal, equal, free, direct and secret suffrage
- establishment of a proportional representation system which also guarantees representation of different areas within the Galician territory
- the constituency will always be the province
- the number of members of Parliament will be held between sixty and eighty
- Members of Parliament are not subject to mandatory instructions.

The above mentioned law on parliamentary elections has estipulated that the number of members of Parliament shall be 75, conferring each of the four constituencies an initial minimum of no less than ten members (more than half of it!), with the remaining 35 being divided in proportion to the population of each province, that is constituency. Therefore, in the last elections A Coruña got 24 members, Pontevedra 22, Lugo 15 and Ourense 14. The population ratio per member of Parliament in 2011 would bethe following:

1/47,800 in A Coruña

3 This is to be seen dearly in some cases. The explanatory statement of the Law on parliamentary elections in Galicia 8/1985 (August 13, 1985) states that "the electoral regulation shall not introduce excessive modifications in the electoral law which regulates most of election processes of state relevance". Translation by the author.
1/43.800 in Pontevedra
1/23.400 in Lugo
1/23.800 in Ourense.

From this calculation, it can be gathered that the same seat is worth about twice as much in the constituencies of A Coruña and Pontevedra when compared with Ourense or Lugo. This inequality has to be related to different voting trends to be observed in the four constituencies. The fact that Lugo and Ourense show more conservative tendencies reveals clear connotations of the system's political and pro-party interests.

The following chart contains the results of the most voted party, the Popular Part, for the last three autonomic elections and its percentage of votes and seats, along with the data, the unbalances of proportionality can be observed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of election</th>
<th>Percentage of votes</th>
<th>Percentage of seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>45,03 %</td>
<td>49,03 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>46,68%</td>
<td>50,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>45,79%</td>
<td>54,60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If in both 2005 and 2009 election the overrepresentation was about four points, in the last election it has increased 9 percentage points, what cast doubts on proportionality and with it, on the healthy and necessary democratic politic alternation. Furthermore, the electoral law stipulated an electoral barrier of 3% of casted valid votes in each constituency. This threshold was enlarged unilaterally by the parliamentary majority (that is the PP) to 5% once this law had been amended before the elections of 1993, without giving any kind of serious explanation or justification and even without the consensus with minority parties, as actually had happened when drafting this regulation. The majority party had as wel gained considerable benefits from the electoral system in 1989 since it got absolute majority, which had been just at the limit (38 out of 75 seats). However, the 37 seats of the opposition parties came up to 40000 ballots more than the votes casted for the Popular Party. Finally in 1993, as an effect of the above mentioned modified law, those minority parties which got representation in the most populated provinces (which are the, politically speaking, most progressive) and had therefore gained more than 3% of the ballots, but couldn't overcome the 5% barrier, were eliminated. It is blindingly obvious that, with regard to the D'Hondt formula, the remaining votes benefitted the majority party, the same one that had amended unilaterally this electoral regulation.

Finally, the votes were casted in closed and blocked lists so that it contributed to an exaggerated control of the party leadership and, in particular by the head of it, in a country characterized by scarce tradition of participation in democratic processes, low political education, high structural abstention indexes, limited membership in parties short of internal democracy.
There is almost unanimity according to doctrinal criticism of the Galician electoral system. First, if all, the overrepresentation of small and more conservative constituencies such as Lugo and Ourense, which contrasts with the underrepresentation of A Coruña and Pontevedra, has to be pointed out. This comparison raises doubts about the basic principle of equal suffrage. Secondly, the province as constituency, created in 1833 so as to fulfill better the purposes of a centralist state, does not seem to be appropriate for the election of an institution that has to represent the Galician population, that is the Galician parliament. Provincial electors could find difficulties in identifying a representative chamber for all Galicians besides not representing different areas of the Galician territory as required by the Constitution and the Statute of Autonomy. In fact, it has also to be taken into account that candidates in different constituencies always find themselves at the discretion of political parties. Thus, the provincial party machine carries a lot of weight when it comes to the making up of electoral lists. That causes a distortion of Galician politics that should appeal to general interest. With regard to this aspect, González Encinar states the following: "votes of a party in a province are, to a certain extent, independent from those ballots obtained by the same party in another province. Once the election finished, the party won't add up votes in different provinces (except for analyzing purposes) but sum, in case there are, elected candidates." This badly implemented partition in four has already caused that a party with more votes in Galicia as a whole has remained without representation because of not having sufficient ballots concentrated in a specific constituency (which attempts on the required aspect of proportion). Hypothetically, it could happen that a candidate for president of the Xunta gets no seat although his political faction gains all the seats in the remaining constituencies.

One might highlight the fact that the Statute of Autonomy itself did not even allow any other possible alternative for it appears to be a rigid regulation, almost impossible to reform. The obvious procedure would have been to defer electoral regulation to following laws passed by the Parliament, which would have been therefore more flexible. What is more, an intrinsic difference of conception between a regional Autonomy and an Autonomy divided in four provinces (four constituencies) that might slow down political and social implementation is in the center of controversy. The history of the actual Galician statute reveals that provincial factions have been decision-making powers in order to prevent the first bill of the Statute of Autonomy from being passed. This Statute had been drafted and agreed jointly by powers inside and outside Parliament, but another one (actually in force) was passed, in its essential content by a political party that no longer exists in Spanish Parliament.

4. Conclusions

---

4 J.J. González Encinar: Galicia. Sistema de partidos y comportamiento electoral 1976-1981, Madrid,
Professor Maiz has demanded central importance of the Galician parliament related to the direction of general politics of the Autonomous Community (task that seems to have been forgotten), in its legislation work and particularly in the control of the Xunta. He also points at the need for this executive to be reorganized and restructured in times when the main political weight goes to the provinces as constituencies. Moreover, this "shows the whole antidemocratic and break-up potential of a self-government in the hands of traditional clientelist network that can only be read and understood in administrative and antiparliamentary terms."\(^5\) Similar to Maiz, Keating has pointed out that the majority party in Galicia since this Autonomous Community exists, the Popular Party, which currently governs both in the Galician and in the Spanish Parliament, has failed yet to suggest a development and modernization project for this Autonomous Community. In fact, the Xunta itself "is organized to reflect the factional interests within the ruling party with a lot of duplication, fragmentation and personal fiefdoms", which appear to be useful for clientelism and distributive politics\(^6\).

This criticism gains more relevance, if possible, within the framework of underlying cleavages of the Galician society. One of the main collective features\(^7\), according to Cores, is its entropy where the activity of the power and all its institutions were aimed historically at controlling civil society to the extent of considering it to be nonexistent for political purposes (opposite of the development in western societies). Hence, political and social action developed separately. In the course of more than thirty years since the establishment of this Autonomous Community the development has followed this pattern. The Galician parliament and, in particular, the Xunta, being aware of positive connotations conveyed by itself, has failed to manage to provide a backbone for the Galician society. To a great extent it has become another administrative machine with political authorities, whose only aim lied in attain and maintain the power. There can be no doubt that one of the key instruments for achieving these goals has been the set of elements that form the electoral system, components of some sort of a marked deck to benefit certain political-party interests.

### Bibliography


---


\(^6\) Michael Keating: "Rethinking the region. Culture, institutions and economic development in Catalonia and Galicia" in journal *Grial* number 146, Vigo, Galaxia, 2000, p. 254.


*Recebido em 11/04/2013  
Aceito em 16/07/2013.*