

Tipping The Balance? Terrorism and the Spanish 2004 General Election.



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Tipping the Balance? Terrorism and the Spanish 2004 General Election.

The Madrid Train Bombings

Terrorism has always been important throughout Spanish history, but never as much as during 2004, when Islamic terrorism came to the forefront of the national agenda. On the 11th of March 2004, three days before the 2004 Spanish General Election and 911 days after the September 11th attacks, ten separate bombs were detonated on four different trains in three main train stations in Madrid at rush hour. These attacks, known as the Madrid Train Bombings, killed 191 people and wounded 1,841¹. There were also three further bombs that failed to go off and were later deactivated.

Both major political parties, "el Partido Popular (PP)" (The Popular Party), who were in government at the time and "el Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)" (The Spanish Socialist Worker's Party) who were in opposition, initially blamed ETA (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*: the Basque separatist group fighting for independence for the Basque Country) for the bombings, the Basque terrorist group so commonly associated with terrorist activity and bombings in Spain. However, evidence to the contrary soon began to emerge. Detonators and a tape containing verses from the Koran were found in a van near one the bomb sites. An unexploded bomb contained a mobile phone which was traced to a Moroccan man who survivors say was loading bags onto trains just before the bombings. Further investigations into phone cards said to have been used by the bombers and a failed attack on an AVE (high speed) train on the 2nd of April led to a flat in Leganes, a Madrid suburb where seven of the bombers, surrounded by police, blew themselves up, killing one police officer.

On the 31st of October 2007, three of the men suspected of being involved in the bombings, (referred to as "el 11-M" by the Spanish media due to the date on which they occurred, "el 11 de marzo") part of a group said to have been inspired by Al-Qaeda, were convicted of murder and were given sentences of up to 43,000 years in prison each, a largely symbolic sentence as under Spanish law the maximum prison term is just 40 years. Several others were convicted but the said mastermind of the plot, Rabei Osman was acquitted and is now serving a prison sentence in Italy charged with being a member of an international terrorist group².

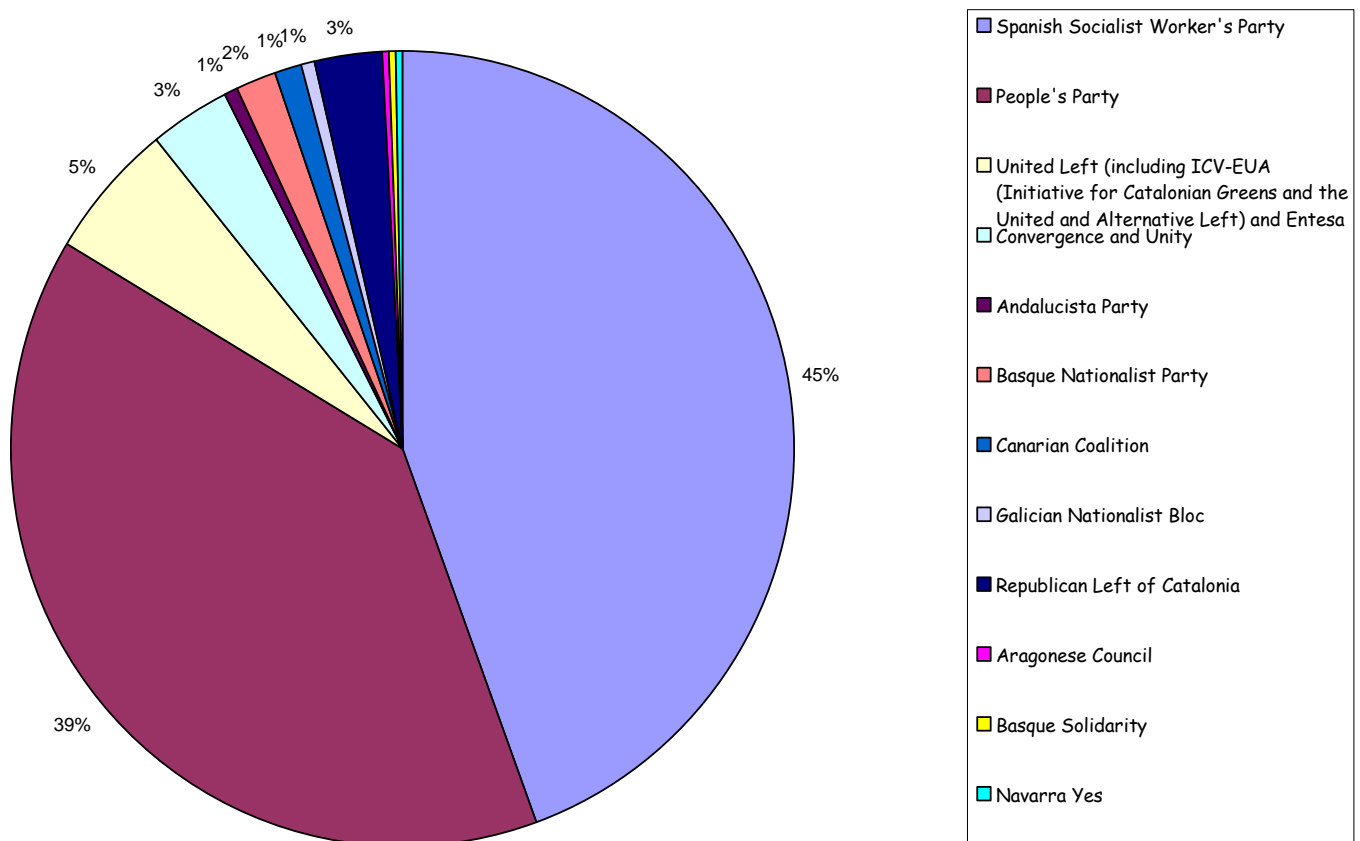
¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/guides/457000/457031/html/default.stm>

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7070827.stm>

This however has not been the only focus of the Spanish media and the general public. The election, which took place as planned three days after the bombings, produced a shock result: the Popular Party (widely predicted to win the election by a reasonable margin) had lost the election to Zapatero and the Socialist Worker's Party.

2004 Spanish General Election Results (share of the vote to the nearest %).

Source: El País Online



Why were the election results so far from predictions?

There has been various theories that have emerged since the election result as to why there was such a sudden change in fortunes for the two parties, and I intend to discuss the two most popular and most substantiated.

The first of these theories is named the "March 7th" theory. This is the theory that the main aim and purpose of the attacks was to change the election result and therefore if the election was due to take place on March 10th, the attacks would have been planned for March 7th. The Spanish newspaper El País even said, not long after the attacks, "Whether the attacks were the work of ETA or Al-Qaeda, the rejection of

terrorism is the same. But it could have different political and even electoral consequences."³ The second theory is that the Socialist Party was set to win the election anyway. This was due to discontent with Aznar, his party and his policies but also due to Zapatero and his new liberal policies which attracted the less religious, younger Spanish population. The only thing that changed was that they won a greater amount of votes due to the attacks.

Did terrorism "tip the balance?"

But was it the terrorist action on the 11th March that changed the election result? One of the reasons why it is thought the attacks could have changed the result is the reaction of the government to the attacks. On the afternoon of the 11th of March, the Prime Minister, José Maria Aznar gave a speech in which he referred to ETA as the perpetrators of the atrocities. There are several problems with this assertion by Aznar:

- ETA are known for their warnings given to police stating locations of bombs and when they are to be detonated and none were given on this occasion.
- ETA no longer intend to cause deaths - even after the 2007 bomb in Madrid airport that killed two Ecuadorian migrants, they sent a message to the Basque newspaper *Gara* claiming responsibility and stating "The aim of this armed attack was not to cause victims."⁴
- Even at this early stage of investigations, the government was aware that evidence had appeared suggesting the involvement of Islamic militants. A mobile phone was found inside an unexploded bomb which was linked to a Moroccan, Jamal Zougam and Koranic texts later appeared inside a van found close to the site of one of the bombings.

Despite this evidence and the fact that the bombings seemed to completely contravene ETA's *modus operandi* (M.O. or method of operation), Aznar continued to insist that the bombings were the responsibility of ETA for as long as he could. This spread distrust among the Spanish people and allegations of a political cover-up were born. This is because if the attacks had been those of ETA, Aznar would have gained popularity due to his altogether tougher stance against the independence-seeking group than other parties. However, giving focus to the fact that the attacks were carried out by Islamic extremists would bring focus to his Middle East policy and in particular his support of the Iraq war which was unpopular among the Spanish.

³ El País, 12th March 2004

⁴ Translation from Erksuna : <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/6245013.stm>

The rumours gained momentum when the radio channel Cadena SER quoted an unidentified Spanish intelligence official who said that the attacks more and more appeared to be "an attack by Islamic radicals, committed by a group of between 10 and 15 individuals who may already have left the country."⁵ The officer also suggests that the evidence obtained by the day after the attacks "suggest 99 percent Islamic terrorism"⁶.

This was followed by a report by Cadena SER on the Friday night after the bombings which stated that Ana Palacio, the foreign minister, had sent instructions to Spanish ambassadors around the world on the day of the attacks telling them "to exploit those occasions that arise to confirm ETA's responsibility for these brutal attacks"⁷.

This suspicious-looking front of the Spanish government may indeed have contributed towards the change in result, as it forged much distrust and disappointment from the Spanish people.

Also, as the evidence emerged that this was indeed an Islamist attack, analysts started to point to this attack as a type of retaliation for Spain's involvement in the war in Iraq. This involvement had never been approved by the Spanish Parliament and it was said at the beginning of the Iraq war that 92% of Spaniards were against Spanish involvement⁸. It has been said that the attackers wanted this link to be pointed out as they knew that the PSOE had promised to withdraw troops from Iraq, and so the Spanish would probably vote for them if the attacks occurred close enough to the election date.

Further controversy ensued on the "Día de reflexión" (Day of Reflection), the day before any Spanish election. On this day all political campaigning is banned; no party advertisements or messages are played on television or radio and no demonstrations of any kind are allowed. However on this day in 2004, mass protests appeared outside PP headquarters in major cities in Spain, including some well known actors and singers. Although the protests were technically illegal, no-one was arrested. It was later insinuated by PP officials that the protest was organised by senior PSOE members, even pointing out that the "spontaneous" text messages, sent by protestors to their friends asking them to come along, originated from the phones of senior PSOE officials trying to alter the election result. This has always been denied by the PSOE and protestors on the day have always insisted that the protests were in no way organised by anyone.

⁵ <http://sify.com/news/international/fullstory.php?id=13428144>

⁶ <http://sify.com/news/international/fullstory.php?id=13428144>

⁷ <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/waronterrorism/story/0,,1168984,00.html>

⁸ <http://www.clarin.com/diario/2003/03/29/um/m-537495.htm>

This is bolstered by the fact that the PSOE never once criticised the government's handling of the bombings in the three days before the election⁹. However, it is likely that these protests could have swayed public opinion against the PP at the election.

The final piece of evidence that points towards the bombings being the main cause of the change in the election result is the fact that the bombers intended the PP to lose power at the election in order to force Spain's withdrawal from Iraq. On the 15th of March, the day after the election, Jamal Zougam was taken into court and the first question he asked was "¿Quién ganó la elección?" (Who won the election?). This does support the "March 4th" theory that the attacks were intended to change the election result.

Alternative Reasons for the Election Result: Failures of Aznar

But were the Spanish election predictions wrong? Did the PSOE win the election simply because Spanish people were unhappy with the previous government?

There is evidence to suggest that some of Aznar's policies were deeply unpopular with Spanish people and this could have affected the election result. As already mentioned, the main PP policy that was clearly unpopular was the policy in relation to the Iraq war. Aznar had involved Spain in the Iraq war from the very beginning; in 2007, a leaked document showed a private meeting between Aznar and the American President, George W. Bush, literally a matter of hours before the Iraq war began, in which he told Aznar his plans to dispose of Saddam Hussein¹⁰. When the war began, even though he did not send combat troops to Iraq at that moment, Spanish opposition to his pro-Bush stance was enormous. Opinion polls in the first days of the war showed that 91% of Spaniards opposed it¹¹. Aznar also further angered the Spanish public by pledging Spanish combat troops to help the coalition, by that time struggling to cope with resistance from terrorist and former army groups in the country. As the PSOE, led by Zapatero, promised a complete withdrawal from Iraq, the continuation of Aznar's support for the Bush-led war could have swayed the election results.

Aznar also ran into problems with his Europe policy. He was widely criticized for following a more Atlanticist foreign policy (i.e.

⁹ <http://www.euroresidentes.com/Blogs/2004/12/spanish-president-rodriguez-zapatero.htm>

¹⁰ http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Bush/aviso/Aznar/estaria/Bagdad/marzo/resolucion/ONU/elpepuint/20070925elpepuint_17/Tes

¹¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/mar/29/spain.iraq>

strengthening relationships with the US over those with Europe) especially just before and after the start of the Iraq war. As we have seen, he followed the US line of the war right from the start, which angered the Spanish people. He also took a back seat on European issues after the introduction of the Euro, which was at odds with what the Spanish people wanted him to do. A survey just before the 2004 elections by the Real Instituto Elcano showed that the majority of Spanish people are in favour of Europe, but think that Spain had little power due the actions of the present and past governments. This may have given an indicator of unhappiness with Aznar's Europe policy.

There were also problems closer to home which could have influenced the election results.

Aznar was criticised for his policy on ETA, the Basque separatist group fighting for independence for the Basque Country. Aznar himself was a target for the group, as they had previously attempted to assassinate him in 1995, while he was opposition leader. Contrary to expectations, Aznar did not begin a crackdown against ETA when he first became Prime Minister in 1996. But the change of government still managed to lead to an escalation of ETA violence, as ETA apparently viewed the PP as successors to Franco and his fascist dictatorship. Less than a year after the election of 1996, ETA begins targeting PP local politicians, and several were killed in the years that followed. The first turning point occurred after ETA declared an indefinite ceasefire in 1998. Aznar and his government entered into talks with ETA but after no real progress was made, Aznar called on ETA to put their cards on the table, saying they were "scared of peace"¹². Three months later, ETA cancelled their ceasefire, blaming the decision on the lack of progress in talks with the government, and indeed at the time the Spanish public partly blamed Aznar for the return to violence. As the bombings and violent actions increased from 1999 until the time of the Madrid bombings, this may well have influenced the Spanish public's decision on the 14th March 2004. There was also rising dissent in some of Spain's Autonomous Communities, part of a system similar to devolution in the UK. Cataluña in particular was a centre of unpopularity for Aznar. There were 2 main reasons behind this. Firstly, Cataluña was strongly anti-war and on the intentional day of protests against the planned invasion of Iraq, Barcelona city hall officials and police put the number of protesters at approximately 1.3 million¹³. The second reason was Aznar's opposition to the altered "Statute of

¹² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/545452.stm>

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/February_15,_2003_anti-war_protest#Spain

Catalunya" (Catalan spelling), which would give the Autonomous Community more independence, calling it "a threat to the constitution"¹⁴. Aznar also had problems in the Canary Islands, where he had lost support due to what the Canarians saw as a failure to act against rising illegal immigration from Africa.

Aznar also had unemployment problems, especially in his second term. Spain had high unemployment at the start of Aznar's first term, when it was stable at about 22%¹⁵. During his first term it dropped and was stable at around 11% at the beginning of his second term. However, attempts to further lower the unemployment rate in his second term went badly wrong when Aznar and his government tried to reform the unemployment benefit system. This was attempted by way of a decree law which tightened benefit entitlement, phased out subsidies for agricultural workers in Southern Spain and made it more difficult for unemployed people to reject jobs offered by the Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal (INEM), the Spanish public employment service which functions similarly to British Job Centres. This was met with great opposition from the Spanish public and eventually led to a 24-hour general strike called by trade unions on the 20th June 2000. This greatly embarrassed the Spanish government during the EU summit in Seville. After a national demonstration on October 5th, the new Labour Minister announced on October 7th that the new law would be scrapped and only subsidies for agricultural workers would still be reformed¹⁶. This was considered to be an extremely embarrassing U-turn for the government which left all workers, especially those in the agricultural sector, very unhappy and ensured that unemployment levels remained largely unchanged until the 2004 elections. This may have also weighed in the minds of many Spanish workers at election time.

Aznar also faced a revolt when trying to reform the educational system during his second term. Aznar's proposed law streamed pupils into ability groups at a lower age, allowed certain state schools to select on merit and introduced a new secondary school leaving exam which was heavily criticised by both schools and the university sector. Opposition to those and the other effects of the proposed Bill including inadequate funding and social division led student organisations, trade unions and left-wing political parties to protest on the streets of major cities in Spain. These

¹⁴<http://hercules.gcsu.edu/~hedmonds/study%20abroad/the%20economist%20articles/Spain%20and%20the%20regions/Spain%20and%20the%20Regions.htm>

¹⁵ INE (Monthly Statistics Bulletin from the 12 months of 1996)

¹⁶http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jos%C3%A9_Mar%C3%ADa_Aznar#First_term_.281996-2000.29

protests led to yet another embarrassing U-turn for the second term of the Aznar government.

Immigration was a problem during Aznar's two terms in office. Before 1996, Spain had escaped a lot of the mass immigration that other EU countries, like Britain, had seen. The overwhelming majority of all migrants, legal and illegal, to Spain are from either African or South American countries, due to language, colonial or culture links or their proximity to Spain and its islands. From 1999, almost at the end of Aznar's first term to the end of 2003, there was more than a 1000% increase in the number of illegal immigrants detained in the Canary Islands after having attempted the crossing into Europe from Africa¹⁷. The Spanish people saw this as a failure of Aznar's immigration policies. The most anger was seen in the Canary Islands, which were completely swamped by the increase in illegal immigrants due to the sheer numbers and their acute lack of sufficient healthcare, education and housing resources.

The popularity of the party also appeared to be waning. The last municipal elections before the general election of 2004 were held on the 25th of March 2003. The PP came in behind the PSOE in terms of votes (they had earned 123,000 votes less) although they had gained a larger number of mayors and town councillors in total¹⁸. This was one of the first signs that the PP may soon be returned to the opposition benches in the *Cortes Generales* (the Spanish Parliament). Opinion polls published by the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* not long before the Iraq war also showed that only 38.5% of PP supporters were intending to actually vote in the 2004 elections, compared with 40.2% of PSOE supporters¹⁹. This is strikingly similar to the actual 2004 results, perhaps showing that events after this did not really influence the election result at all.

All of these issues and apparent failures of Aznar could well have contributed towards his party losing the 2004 Spanish General Election.

Alternative Reasons for the Election Result: José Luís Zapatero, the new Liberal.

Alternatively, were the election results different from predictions because Zapatero's new and more liberal policies attracted more Spanish people, especially amongst the young?

¹⁷ El País

¹⁸http://www.avizora.com/publicaciones/biografias/textos/textos_a/0004_aznar_jose_maria.htm

¹⁹<http://www.eluniverso.com/2003/03/02/0001/14/47E93DF5AEAF4F7C9A75904440E14789.aspx>

His policy on Iraq became a key feature of his campaign both before and after el 11-M. He promised to immediately withdraw all troops from Iraq on becoming President, a policy extremely popular in a country with a history of more than 90% opposition to the war.

Zapatero also seemed to be with popular opinion concerning Gibraltar. Gibraltar was handed over, albeit reluctantly, to Great Britain by Spain in the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, and having been converted into a garrison, was made a colony in 1830. There have since been many talks over sharing sovereignty, although the current constitution of Gibraltar, written in 1969, would never allow for this to happen. A referendum was held in 2002 when the people of Gibraltar overwhelmingly decided that they would not want the territory to come under the joint sovereignty of Great Britain and Spain. However, the majority of Spanish people do not agree with this decision. Zapatero himself has shown opposition to Gibraltar remaining a British territory, a hugely popular policy in Spain. Gibraltar has been a British territory for nearly 400 years, but the Spanish have always disputed this, even though they themselves hold 2 territories in Africa, Ceuta and Melilla, that Morocco have always claimed for their own and which Spain refuses to discuss²⁰. This policy could have helped sway the election result in his favour, as many Spanish people were unhappy with what they perceived as "deadlock" over "The Rock".

Zapatero's view on Europe seemed to tally with the current public opinion. As we have previously seen, Spanish people seemed to be unhappy with Aznar's Atlanticist foreign policy just before the election, and that policy was in stark contrast with Zapatero's own more pan-European stance. He also supported a distribution of power set out in the European Constitution which would have given Spain equal or more power. This could have been seen by the Spanish people as an attempt to get Spain more involved in Europe, which would naturally make Spanish people benefit more from its money and social policy. This would fit with Spanish opinion over Europe, and thus gain some more support for Zapatero and the PSOE.

Zapatero's manifesto also included many liberal policies that would have been unheard of in 1980s or even 1990s Spain.

He introduced a policy of making same-sex marriages legal in Spain, a move that would allow same-sex couples the same rights as married couples and which would allow them to have ceremonies in their local town or city hall. This was a brave move in Spain where in 2003 81% of the population declared themselves to be Catholic²¹. But this policy seemed to

²⁰ http://www.gibraltar.gov.gi/latest_news/news/19-2002.htm

²¹ 2004 US International Religious Freedom Report

be very popular, especially among young people who, whilst being religious, seem to have taken on a more liberal view in recent times.

Zapatero's manifesto for the 2004 elections also continued with more policies that seemed to be uncannily popular amongst the Spanish electorate. His plan for bilingual education was hugely popular in most Autonomous Communities, especially those who have asserted more independence over the years and have a strong community language, such as Catalonia and Galicia. In reality these areas had been effectively practising bilingual education for years, but the PSOE candidate's endorsement of this increased his popularity there.

Zapatero also wanted to push for specialist Spanish courts that dealt with domestic violence issues. This was welcomed by women, women's groups and the wider population as domestic violence has long been an issue in Spain. During Franco's dictatorship, it was not considered as a crime but it was a great taboo. There is even a Spanish phrase which states, "I broke it (the feminine pronoun) because it was mine." The problem has become so large that serious cases appear on the news every single day and in October 2003 more than two women a day were killed as a result of domestic violence²². Zapatero pledged to tackle the main problem of the system, the low conviction rate.

The PSOE also decided to continue on with old policies that were popular to the Spaniards, such as building more new houses near cities and towns to reduce prices.

Zapatero however also had a few controversial policies up his sleeve. His policy of negotiating with ETA was not tremendously popular, especially considering the result of Aznar-ETA negotiations in 1999. He also had an equally bizarre policy of forging stronger links with communist and left-wing South American countries. This included Cuba, still under a Communist dictatorship then led by Fidel Castro and Venezuela, whose leader Hugo Chavez had begun to transform the country into a Communist regime by nationalising oil, television and gas companies there.

Despite this, it seems that Zapatero's new and more liberal policies could have swayed the electorate without them being influenced by the Madrid Train Bombings.

The PP and A Conspiracy Theory.

With an event of this magnitude and the consequences that it caused, conspiracy theories always arise, but the conspiracy theory that appeared in the weeks and days after 11-M and the 2004 elections has shocked

²² Red Feminista Contra la Violencia de Género

many. Although there is very little evidence to substantiate this theory, I think that it is worth discussing as it is the explanation that some sectors of the Popular Party as well as *El Mundo* and some other press outlets give for the authorship of the bombings. They state that ETA, in conjunction with the PSOE and the secret services of Spain and Morocco, planned the bombings and that a group of Islamists actually carried out the attacks. They cite circumstantial evidence linking the Islamists who were said to have solely planned and carried out the attacks to 2 members of ETA who were detained together with a van containing 500 kilograms of explosives just 11 days before the attacks. Even though the majority of international agencies and governments agree with the Spanish government's stance that the bombings were solely caused by a group of Spanish resident Islamists, rumours and theories persisted. These include the assertion by sections of the Popular Party that evidence suggesting a different authorship of the bombings had been destroyed after it had been collected and that there were no autopsies carried out on the men that blew themselves up in the flat when police discovered them after the bombings. These claims have always been denied by the "*Tribunal Supremo*" ("Supreme Court") who even prosecuted the union who called themselves "*Manos Limpias*" ("Clean Hands") for making false accusations.

Conclusion

My research has shown that there is evidence to support each of the theories that I have put forward as a reason for the 2004 General Election result differing greatly from predictions.

The evidence supporting the "March 7th" theory - that the bombings were timed to change the election result, and thus if the elections were due to take place on March 10th, the bombings would have occurred on March 7th - is clear. The Madrid Train Bombings had Islamic authorship, and many terrorist analysts pointed to this attack as an example of retaliation for Aznar's Atlanticist policy on the Iraq war and thus an attempt to alter this policy. There is even a court recording of Jamal Zougam, one of the main players in the Islamist group responsible for the attacks, asking who won the election before his first hearing. Surely this shows that changing the election result was the main aim of the bombings, and that such a powerful act must be the main reason for the change in the predicted election result?

There is also evidence supporting the other theory that I have put forward, that Zapatero and the PSOE were going to win the election

despite predictions, either due to Aznar's policy failings or Zapatero's new policy ideas.

Aznar had struggled during his second term, with problems such as immigration and the ETA negotiation failure. He also had to face embarrassing U-turns on policies he created, including unemployment benefit reform and educational reform. If that was not enough, he had also faced criticism over his ties to the US and Bush and the popularity of a party took a blow in the municipal elections in 2003. But is this really so much more than any administration of any democratic country has to face during its term in office? It could be said that Tony Blair had to face many more problems than this during his 2001-2005 term and yet he was still re-elected.

Zapatero's new more liberal policies seemed to have caught the attention of the Spanish public. He wanted to reverse many "Catholic" policies of Aznar Spain by legalising gay marriage and tackling the unspoken issue of domestic violence. Coupled with the policies of bilingual education and increased housing provision, this looked like a vote-winning manifesto for the PSOE. But why didn't the Spanish people's support for the PSOE manifesto policies show in the opinion polls? Could it be that they weren't actually that popular at all, or that Zapatero's more controversial policies of ETA negotiation and diplomacy in left-wing South America put off potential liberal voters? Ironically, his policy on Iraq withdrawal may have also been the reason why the attacks were timed so soon to the election. Although the failings of Aznar and Zapatero's new policies seem to be strong evidence that the election result was unchanged by terrorism, I think that the failings of Aznar were not major enough to lose the election and that if the election was to be won as a result of Zapatero's policies, the opinion polls would have reflected this long before the election itself.

I also think, when looking at the evidence, that the theory that some factions of the PP created afterwards to explain the election result is almost completely unsubstantiated. Even in the extreme unlikelihood that this was the case, I think it would be unlikely that the evidence they needed to prove this to the world would ever be found, especially as they have accused the secret services of at least 2 countries.

Considering all the evidence, I think that the Madrid Train Bombings and therefore terrorism did "tip the balance" for the 2004 Spanish General Election as the actual bombings themselves led to chain of events (firstly mass protests, then focus on Aznar's poor handling of the event, his Iraq policy and the policies of Zapatero and the PSOE) that effectively turned the tide of conservatism and the 8 year Aznar reign.

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