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**METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**  
**(WITH APPLICATIONS TO THE SPANISH CASE OF**  
**ELECTIONS IN THE AFTERMATH OF TERRORISM) \***

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the continuing relevance of Max Weber's distinctive methodological perspective by first elaborating its constitutive elements and then applying it to the analysis of an important recent political episode: the Spanish case of elections in the aftermath of terrorism in March 2004. The paper takes as the central feature of Weberian methodology the embrace of *both* poles in a series of intellectual tensions such as the seeming opposition between pursuing generalizing theorization and case-specific nuance and specificity. The paper examines the basis for this approach in Weber's classic Objectivity Essay and then builds a case for its continuing relevance by arguing that the impact of the March 11, 2004 terrorist attack in Madrid on Spain's March 14 elections cannot be understood without a thorough analysis of much that is specific to the case's political history, its pattern of conflict over regional and national identities, and its distinctive nexus between institutional and social movement forms of political engagement. Emphasis is placed on the large shift of votes in the country's plurinational periphery and the electoral impact of micro-demonstrations. The paper argues that this case shows the importance of using generalizing concepts and theories without losing sight of case-specific dynamics that fail to fit within the a priori assumptions of such generalizing approaches.

## RESUMEN

Este trabajo defiende la relevancia actual de la perspectiva metodológica distintiva de Max Weber a través, primero, de la elaboración de sus elementos constitutivos y, después, de su aplicación al análisis de un importante episodio político reciente: el caso español de elecciones después de un ataque terrorista en Marzo de 2004. El trabajo sostiene que el elemento definidor de la metodología weberiana es la adopción de ambos polos en una serie de tensiones intelectuales tales como la aparente oposición entre la teorización generalizante y el matiz y especificidad propios de cada caso. El trabajo examina las raíces de este planteamiento en el clásico ensayo de Weber sobre la Objetividad y sostiene su relevancia actual argumentando que el impacto del ataque terrorista del 11 de Marzo de 2004 en Madrid sobre las elecciones del 14 de Marzo en España no puede ser entendido sin un cuidadoso análisis de mucho de lo específico de la historia política del caso, pauta de conflictos acerca de las identidades nacional y regionales y su distintivo vínculo entre las formas de compromiso político de los movimientos sociales y las de los movimientos institucionales. Se enfatiza el gran desplazamiento de votos en la periferia plurinacional del país y el impacto electoral de las micro-manifestaciones. El trabajo alega que este caso muestra la importancia de usar conceptos y teorías generalizantes sin perder de vista las dinámicas específicas que no encajan dentro de los supuestos de estos planteamientos generales.



I take as constitutive of the distinctively Weberian approach to social science the recognition, indeed embrace, of (*at least*<sup>1</sup>) two more or less interrelated tensions: 1) the effort to delineate and account for what is *specific*, and thus historically individual, in given empirical realities balanced against the attempt to formulate—and then apply in explanatory endeavors—*generalizing concepts and theories*; 2) the pursuit of types of knowledge, and thus the posing of questions, that are *meaningful* from the value-perspective of the investigator (but less so from other value perspectives) alongside the commitment to both *impartiality and rigor* in addressing those questions so that the answers may be seen as objective. In this essay I discuss these tensions, elaborating their place in Weberian methodology and in contemporary social science practice. Given this emphasis on tensions, such as the Weberian opposition between formulations that are strictly *intellectual* or *scholarly* in nature and the exploration of the empirical world as it actually *is*, I complement my discussion of methodology with the examination of an empirical problem, one that I claim cannot be adequately accounted for without the benefit of the Weberian approach as I outline it here. Undoubtedly, some readers may find in this juxtaposition of a theoretically oriented methodological discussion and a case-sensitive empirical examination—focusing on Spain’s experience with elections in the aftermath of terrorism—a certain tension, but that is precisely what I argue to be constitutive of the social science practice defended by Weber.

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<sup>1</sup> One can easily list other fundamental tensions that the Weberian approach embraces—rather than attempting to wish away. These overlapping tensions include: the interest in motivations and intentionality balanced against the assumption of—and search for—*unintended* consequences of action; the commitment to disciplinary communities and approaches coupled with the eclectic embrace of multi-disciplinary approaches and sources; the emphasis on the partial *autonomy* of given institutional spheres such as politics, religion, the economy, etc. juxtaposed against the constant search for causal interconnections among institutional spheres; the adherence in principle to methodological individualism combined with the constant conceptual and explanatory use of macro-level concepts; the assumption that empirical reality is infinitely complex and inescapably specific in its manifestations alongside the constant search for conceptual generalization; the impulse to theorize juxtaposed against the claim that theories are all simplifications and that reality cannot be deduced from them. A final, if more debatable tension, consists of the conflict between scientific precision and esthetic appeal in scholarly expression. Although Weber does not embrace this last tension he does appear to *experience it* in his own writing. One could easily continue, but all of these tensions—along with the embrace of both the value-oriented question *and* the objective response—can be understood to form part of the Weberian approach that seeks (in different ways) validation and/or direction for the social scientist both within the specialized scholarly community and outside it in the larger world we observe, experience, and find meaningful.

What I present above as the *second* tension—Weber’s dual commitment to objectivity *and* subjectivity in the social science enterprise—has likely received the greatest sustained attention in the secondary literature on the Objectivity Essay<sup>2</sup>, as classically reflected in Sheldon Wolin’s influential discussion that accentuates precisely Weber’s synthesis of objectivist and subjectivist perspectives on methodology.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the debate over the place of objectivity and subjectivity in scholarly work remains a lively and important one within a wide variety of fields.<sup>4</sup> Yet I emphasize in this chapter another constitutive tension that is perhaps even more relevant for the work of empirical social scientists, namely the conflict between the effort to build generalizing theory and the commitment (of Weber and those who follow his lead, but *not* of many other contemporary scholars) to know empirical reality as it really is. Weber struggles with, and embraces, these tensions with a clarity that continues to speak powerfully to many practicing social scientists at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Despite the differences between them, I suggest here that these two tensions (and others closely related to them)—most clearly and memorably formulated by Weber in his methodological masterpiece, “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy,” [hereinafter Objectivity Essay]—*both* impel the social scientists who embrace them to look simultaneously toward the world we live in *and* the scholarly community to which we contribute for the meaning and validation of our scientific endeavors. In making this claim I borrow loosely from Theda Skocpol’s recent formulation of contemporary comparative historical scholarship as a “double engagement” oriented toward both the academy and the larger world.<sup>5</sup> I contend here that it is exactly such a simultaneous preoccupation with the world *and* the academy that thoroughly informs the Weberian perspective—and its constitutive tensions. Social scientists uncomfortable with the embrace of these intellectual oppositions are free to concentrate exclusively on the

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<sup>2</sup> Max Weber, “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy,” in The Methodology of the Social Sciences. (Chicago: Free Press, 1949), pp. 49–112.

<sup>3</sup> Sheldon Wolin, “Max Weber: Legitimation, Method, and the Politics of Theory,” in Political Theory Vol. 9 No. 3 (August 1981), pp. 401–424.

<sup>4</sup> For a recent discussion in the field of legal studies and the philosophy of law see José Juan Moreso, “Putting Legal Objectivity in its Place,” forthcoming in Analisi e Diritto.

<sup>5</sup> See Theda Skocpol, “Doubly Engaged Social Science: The Promise of Comparative Historical Analysis,” in James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, (eds.) Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 407–428.

specialized scholarly arena, with its distinctive exigencies, preoccupations, and rewards, but they—unlike the Weberians—risk losing touch with the ever-changing complexities, challenges, and meanings with which the empirical world is imbued.

Weber's approach addresses a concern that remains quite relevant for empirical social science one hundred years hence: the issue that Peter Hall has recently formulated as the fit (or misfit) between our scholarly *ontologies* and our *methodologies*, our sense of how the world *is* and how we should *study* it.<sup>6</sup> For Hall, writing in 2003, contemporary social science has all too often elaborated and deployed methodologies that ill fit the most prevalent scholarly wisdom on how the empirical world actually *is*. In the face of this disjuncture, Hall calls for a convergence of *methodology* to *ontology*. For Weber, the effort to theorize in generalizing terms and to search for probabilistic regularities is meritorious, but—if taken in isolation—inherently flawed. It was precisely Weber's *ontological assumptions* that led him to that conclusion.

Indeed for Weber, methodological discussion is constantly interwoven with ontological claims: Weber's ontology assumed the world to be more complex and (within any given empirical setting) more historically singular than any general theory or concept can fully capture, yet he also insisted that it was precisely the world's infinite complexity that made empirical reality unintelligible without a methodology that used generalizing concepts and theories to organize our understandings. His methodology, with firm roots in his ontology, offers an approach insisting on the virtue—indeed indispensability—of the tension between generalizing theory and case-specific nuance.

The dual focus of Weberian social science invigorates and renews the work of those who pursue it but (in ways that Weber himself made at least somewhat explicit in the Objectivity Essay) those benefits come at a certain cost; to be more precise, they run against the grain of views, practices, and incentives that often predominate within the social science scholarly world to which the Weberians are nonetheless fully committed. Weberians—in my understanding<sup>7</sup>—are strongly devoted to conventional social science disciplines but they are at the same time somewhat skeptical of much that goes on—and achieves widespread acceptance—within those disciplines. Following the call of the

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<sup>6</sup> See Peter A. Hall, "Aligning Ontology and Methodology in Comparative Research," in Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, pp. 373–404.

<sup>7</sup> Readers may wish to take my characterization of Weberians as an ideal type.

Objectivity Essay, they see generalizing concepts and theories—which conventional social science almost invariably values more highly than nuanced analysis highlighting the singularity of historical configurations and the inadequacy of existing general theories—as intellectual *tools that may be useful*, indeed necessary, in the course of empirical analysis *but that nonetheless stand as a highly inadequate representation of empirical reality*. Scholars who adopt the approach of Weber look with keen interest not only toward their own disciplines but also toward *extra-disciplinary sources of knowledge and insight*, thus often casting their academic production in a mold that departs from the most prevalent professional norms within their home disciplines.

It is worth noting that, for many scholars, the Weberian perspective may be taken to mean something quite different: adherence to a *particular* set of theoretical claims, the use of a *fixed set* of conceptual and definitional tools, a given approach to the collection and analysis of empirical material, and so forth. Yet, none of those understandings captures the true essence of the Weberian legacy, given the eclectic and diverse range of themes, arguments, theoretical devices, and evidence to be found in Weber's extraordinary corpus of writings. Contemporary social scientists who practice the Weberian perspective are highly quantitative, thoroughly qualitative, or some combination of these two possibilities. They constantly search for useful theoretical claims in existing scholarship but clearly they do not defend one unique or unchanging set of general causal propositions. *They are distinguished not by their research techniques or specific theoretical claims but instead by their dual intellectual devotion to both the specialized scholarly community and the larger world within which it is set*. As suggested above, this dual intellectual devotion is manifested above all in the embrace of a series of interrelated tensions.

Weber's most eloquent and carefully formulated methodological statement—the great Objectivity Essay of 1904—represents the centerpiece of his perspective, but standing alone it clearly assigns *priority* to what he formulates as the intrinsic complexity of the 'infinite causal web,' the inescapable singularity of all historically given realities and the inadequacy to reality of conceptual and theoretical formulations. The 1904 essay unambiguously places at the core of the social scientist's mission the effort to determine why empirical reality is "historically *so* and not *otherwise*." [p. 72] With this primary

objective in mind, he argues that generalizing concepts and theories “are obviously of great value as heuristic means but only as such.” [p. 76] From this perspective, generalizing laws are only a tool, a necessary but inadequate one, in that “the reality to which the laws apply always remains equally *individual*, equally *undeducible* from laws.” [p. 73] Reality is historically and contextually singular and “it is these individual configurations which are significant for us.” [p. 73] Thus even though the Objectivity Essay formulates as *necessary* and as *constitutive* of social science the tension between generalizing theorizations and the actual empirical singularities of all given cases—it does so in a fashion that presents theorization as a mere *tool* while nuanced case-sensitive analysis is clearly presented as the *end objective* of scholarly analysis. However, given Weber’s extraordinary efforts elsewhere at conceptual and theoretical generalization—especially in his monumental achievement, Economy and Society—I take much of what is argued in the 1904 Essay as simply an accentuation of one side of the characteristically Weberian tension.

Although at different places in his enormous corpus of writings Weber (temporarily) prioritizes *either* generalizing theorization *or* case-specific singularities, the constant thread one encounters is his reminder that the tension between the two is essential for the advance of knowledge. Whichever of these two primary objectives one prioritizes, the other is *equally necessary* for Weberian social science. It is this perspective that leads to what anthropologist James Boon (in his paper for the Montreal conference on “One Hundred Years of Objectivity”) persuasively formulates as the constant *point and counterpoint* of Weber’s exposition. The seeming priority within Weberian work may be placed primarily on case-based singularity or generalizing theorization but neither pole of this characteristic tension can be avoided if scholarship is to be persuasively Weberian. Thus I take the Objectivity Essay as the basis for a social science resting on the embrace of certain tensions.

Much follows from the Weberian embrace of *both* poles characterizing such fundamental tensions—and the contrasting *rejection of one side* of these interrelated oppositions that today predominate within much (high quality) conventional social science. For many conventional social scientists, existing theorizations and scholarly debates are seen as the preferred—or for some, the *only appropriate*—point of departure

for posing research questions. For Weberians, changes in the empirical world (including its cultural currents) may lead the researcher to pose questions that had not been highlighted or identified as meaningful in pre-existing theorizations—but in posing *new* questions, the Weberian researcher seeks to enter and address scholarly debates with a commitment to theorization and rigor second to none.

The primacy that many conventional social scientists afford to *a priori* causal propositions and conceptualizations—rather than allowing for the usefulness of empirically-based theorization, case-derived insights, and the formulation of genuinely new questions—may carry many disabling consequences if we assume, as Weberians do, that *our goal is to understand and explain those aspects of the world that we find meaningful*. The Weberian is as interested in generalizing theory and concepts as any social scientist, but is *also* bound to study the history and cultural specificities of contexts under examination, and always allows the possibility of introducing case-specific explanations where they prove useful. Thus, the Weberian is devoted to the advance of generalizing theories *and* the understanding of individual cases which, it is assumed, such theories will never fully illuminate. Moreover, the Weberian will never shy away from posing intellectually new questions that the researcher finds meaningful even if their relevance has yet to be fully enshrined by the existing literature. In the Objectivity Essay, Weber formulated the matter quite emphatically in the following terms: “The points of departure of the cultural sciences remain changeable throughout the limitless future as long as a Chinese ossification of intellectual life does not render mankind incapable of setting new questions to the eternally inexhaustible flow of life.” [p. 84]

Many conventional social scientists see such an approach as unacceptably “ad hoc” or even “atheoretical.” Indeed, many non-Weberians see any reliance on case-specific explanations (or the posing of fresh questions emerging from one’s reading of the world) as scientifically inferior to the exclusive explanatory use of generalizing theories devoid of any case-specific referents and consecrated in prominent scholarly debates. The point at issue concerns not *how many* cases one studies, but rather *how* one

studies them.<sup>8</sup> The Weberian may study many cases or just one, but in doing so seriously examines complex case-specific histories and potentially distinctive causal configurations.<sup>9</sup> The non-Weberian often studies multiple cases but just as easily may limit an investigation to one case (as is exemplified by the exclusive focus of many American social scientists on the United States), typically *avoiding* any serious consideration of its specificities, or its particular claim to interest. For the extreme non-Weberian, cases offer nothing but an opportunity to collect data. If their specificities cannot be easily captured by variables that have been carefully theorized and operationalized prior to the beginning of research, they are assumed to be without scientific relevance. Non-Weberians are disinclined toward the demanding search for *causal configurations* that may be, indeed likely are, somewhat distinctive to particular cases.

Conventional social scientists are heavily oriented toward the use of currently fashionable concepts and techniques; a concept that is frequently used within the specialized scholarly community is typically assumed to be important and often treated as if it were *as real* as the empirical world itself. Such fashionable concepts are routinely invoked by researchers seeking to place their own work within the framework of specialized professional discourse. As this implies, doubts over the actual correspondence of such concepts to underlying empirical reality may be seen as secondary in importance or even inconvenient. Weberians, in contrast, answering the eloquent and unmistakable call of the Objectivity Essay, look to the empirical world itself to *assess the validity and usefulness* of prevailing scholarly approaches. Whereas conventional social scientists may come to take for granted that a concept widely in use effectively captures underlying empirical reality, Weberians always look carefully to the empirical world to assess the

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<sup>8</sup> For stimulating essays offering differing perspectives on how one may conceive of cases and case studies, see Charles C. Ragin and Howard S. Becker, (eds.) What is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> The methodological writings of Charles C. Ragin, most prominently The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), and the work on comparative methodology of Samuel Valenzuela, "Macro Comparisons without the Pitfalls: A Protocol for Comparative Research," in Scott Mainwaring and Arturo Valenzuela, (eds.), Politics, Society and Democracy: Latin America: Essays in Honor of Juan Linz, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 237–266, offer important recent arguments on the need to search for causal configurations that may take case-specific forms.

utility of conceptual approaches and related operationalizations, thus leading them to treat with some skepticism the usefulness of many fashionable concepts.<sup>10</sup>

One can easily overstate the contrast between the tendencies currently prevailing in conventional social science and those encouraged by Weber's methodological writings. Many Weberian ideas have been more or less thoroughly incorporated within contemporary social science at its mainstream best.<sup>11</sup> Weber's formulation of causality as an *infinite causal web* has been at least partially taken to heart through the reigning concern over endogeneity, spuriousness, unmeasured variables, interaction effects, and so on. The Weberian emphasis on the *distinctiveness* of cases—and indeed of individuals—is partially, if imperfectly, reflected in the conventional concern over selection bias. And the Weberian understanding of causality as probabilistic in nature is the currently dominant view. Yet having said all this, the Weberian embrace of a series of interrelated tensions is most definitely *not* the norm in contemporary social science. The pressures and predispositions found within the specialized scholarly world of professional social scientists lead largely toward one pole of each of the oppositions that the Weberian perspective instead embraces in whole.

This is not to say that the Weberian perspective has been marginalized in the contemporary social sciences. It is hardly necessary to point out that self-conscious Weberian scholars have attained great interdisciplinary prominence, as in the case of Juan Linz,<sup>12</sup> and others—such as Philippe Schmitter,<sup>13</sup> Guillermo O'Donnell,<sup>14</sup> and Linz's

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<sup>10</sup> In this spirit I offer a strong critique of the concept of “social capital” in chapter four of *Democracy's Voices: Social Ties and the Quality of Public Life in Spain*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> One can see this in some—although not all—of the arguments found in Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Among his important Weberian works, in addition to his classic typology of regime types, see Juan Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown and Reequilibration*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), and—with his frequent collaborator (see footnote 15)—Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and post-communist Europe*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> In addition to his now classic work on neo-corporatism see Philippe Schmitter, *How to Democratize the European Union and Why Bother?* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), as well as his important collaborative work on transitions to democracy (see footnote 14).

<sup>14</sup> See Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics*, (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1973); and in collaboration with Schmitter (see previous footnote), Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

frequent collaborator Alfred Stepan<sup>15</sup>—who share an ability to formulate new approaches and conceptualizations for the study of a constantly changing world. At its best, much of contemporary social science *is* essentially Weberian—especially in the case of those scholars who work simultaneously within more than one discipline.

Indeed, even among social scientists who were not initially seen as self-conscious followers of Weber, some of the most widely acclaimed recent scholarship does successfully work *within* what I present here as characteristically Weberian tensions: using and developing generalizing theorizations while carefully examining all available knowledge on case-specific dynamics; offering strong and highly focused analytical claims while also identifying more complex and historically contingent causal patterns and configurations; addressing questions of unmistakable value relevance to the authors while offering answers of impeccable rigor and objectivity; building from the existing literature with utmost care while offering ideas, understandings *and new questions* extending well beyond the pre-existing theorizations to be found in the literature. Strikingly, both qualitatively oriented social scientists—such as Theda Skocpol<sup>16</sup>—and highly quantitative social scientists—such as Gosta Esping-Andersen<sup>17</sup>—fit this description. Moreover, Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro’s important critical examination of the connection between theory and empirical evidence in contemporary political science<sup>18</sup> can also be seen as a defense of such an approach.

Yet in saying that the *de facto* Weberians are engaged in work that seeks its direction and validation simultaneously from the professional scholarly arena and the world which—in all its complexity and dynamism—surrounds us, it should be clear that *much contemporary scholarship does not fit this description* and that *the purely professional pressures and biases lead elsewhere*, namely toward work that is geared toward *internal* professional controversies—at times without an accompanying concern

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<sup>15</sup> In addition to his numerous collaborative works with Linz, see for example Alfred Stepan, Rethinking Military Politics: Brazil and the Southern Cone, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> See for example Theda Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) and Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorina, (eds.) Civic Engagement in American Democracy, (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> See for example Gosta Esping-Andersen, Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies, (Oxford University Press, 1999) and Gosta Esping-Andersen and Marino Regini, Why Deregulate Labour Markets? (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Donald P. Green and Ian Shapiro, Pathologies of Rational Choice Analysis: A Critique of its Applications in Political Science, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

for underlying empirical reality. Prior theorization is taken as superior to empirically driven nuance and complexity; generalization as superior to specificity and contingency in explanation; literature driven hypotheses as superior to real-world based questions—these views, and others, are the new orthodoxies that Weberian scholars constantly encounter in the professional social science arena. At the risk of tedious redundancy, allow me to add that *Weberians most emphatically do not reject the perspectives preferred within conventional social science. Rather, they combine those preferences with others that are fundamentally dissimilar, thus affording the Weberians a broader repertoire of scholarly approaches and explanatory devices* than the range of possibilities routinely employed by their more conventional counterparts. To underscore this point: *some social scientists adopt neither the Weberian nor the conventional perspective and instead seek virtually all their validation and orientation in the public role of their intellectual production and the resonance of that product with their value-derived priorities. Unlike this third group, the Weberians insist on validation of scholarship through scientific debate in the professional arena.*

As should be clear by now, I believe that the Weberian perspective alone allows scholars to 1) refine and validate the tools of social science by using them in the analysis of questions which the researcher delineates following value-based observation of the world (rather than purely internal academic controversies), and 2) address such questions with all the explanatory rigor, impartiality, and technical or interpretive ‘fire-power’ made available by the accumulation of scientific knowledge, and 3) fully incorporate within our explanations all the relevant available knowledge regardless of whether that knowledge responds directly to *a priori* theoretically-derived hypotheses and without regard to its case-specific or general quality. Thus I contend that the Weberian approach generates a social science superior to any of its alternatives both in its explanatory power and its ability to fully address themes of genuine human concern. This claim may well strike some readers as mistaken or, at a minimum, as excessively strong.

Below, I attempt to offer support for this claim through a rather tentative and incomplete analysis of the Spanish election of March 14, 2004, held just three days after

the March 11 terrorist attack in Madrid.<sup>19</sup> My intention is to offer validation for the Weberian approach by using it (however incompletely and inadequately) in the examination of a question of extraordinary current interest at the time of this writing. In analyzing Spain's experience with elections-in-the-aftermath-of-terrorism, I take up a question that holds meaning not only for this author but also for others in the contemporary world. I offer an interpretation that emphasizes case-specific historical antecedents of the election, the interconnection among numerous events and processes, and the complexity of processes, some of which existing conceptualizations would fail to fully capture. *I offer an explanation that relies on both generalizing and case-specific thinking, on existing concepts and a sensitivity toward their limitations, on the delineation of complex configurations and unintended consequences.* I offer an analysis which I could not conceive of as social scientific in its inspiration without the guidance of Weber's Objectivity Essay and subsequent work carried on in its spirit.

### **Spain's March 11–14: Voting in the Aftermath of Massive Terrorism**

The brutal terrorist attack on Madrid's working-class commuter rail lines on the morning of March 11, 2004, occurred roughly seventy-two hours prior to the scheduled opening of the polls on March 14th, the day of a crucial national election, the ninth of the post-Franco period.<sup>20</sup> For countless Spaniards, the immense shock and sadness generated by the massacre were immediately interwoven with questions over the event's likely impact on the impending elections. The campaign, which was in its final two days given the prohibition on electioneering during the 'day of reflection' prior to voting, was immediately halted and never *formally* resumed. The outcome had been in some doubt—as I shall discuss below—although the available polls all coincided in suggesting that the governing conservative Partido Popular (PP) was *likely* to be returned to power, albeit by an uncertain, and possibly rather narrow, margin. The victory on March 14th of the

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<sup>19</sup> As a part-time resident of Spain (who was in Barcelona at the time of the events here analyzed) and as a scholar devoted in part to the study of that country, I have followed these events with a level of interest that made it impossible for me to choose a different empirical focus at the time of the Montréal conference in late March 2004.

<sup>20</sup> The most important work on the emergence of a democratic party system in Spain's post-Franco democracy is Richard Gunther, Giacomo Sani, and Goldie Shabad, Spain after Franco: The Making of a Competitive Party System, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

opposition Socialist Party (PSOE) by a rather substantial margin—exactly 5% of the votes cast—came as a surprise to some (but not others) and quickly raised questions within Spain and well beyond its borders over the possible impact of the terrorist incident on the electorate’s verdict.

In a sense the issue at hand can be taken as a purely ‘academic’ question—perhaps even as a *generalizing theoretical query*—on the way that voting decisions are likely to be shaped by terrorist incidents. Politicians, journalists, scholars<sup>21</sup> and others all came to see the election results—and the effort to establish their greater or lesser connection to the prior terrorist incident—as a matter of considerable importance. As newspaper headlines throughout the world attested at the time, the PSOE victory was interpreted by some as a *de facto* victory for terrorism, a charge that took several forms that I will not elaborate on here. In fact, the PSOE had been consistently opposed to the presence of Spanish troops in Iraq well prior to the events of March 2004, and included in its electoral program a pledge to remove those troops unless the United Nations assumed command over all foreign troops present. Indeed, this position was an integral part of the public appeal for votes offered by PSOE candidate for Prime Minister,<sup>22</sup> José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. In some of his most enthusiastically applauded lines of the abbreviated campaign, during a campaign rally in Valencia, Zapatero replied to a PP charge that he lacked principles by declaring that two of his fundamental principles were “thou shalt not kill ... thou shalt not lie,” which he then presented as the basis for the PSOE’s position on Iraq.<sup>23</sup> Given that the large majority of the Spanish public had opposed the war, this pledge to withdraw troops was seen throughout the campaign, and its antecedents, as a major source of strength for the Socialists—well prior to the events of March 11–14.

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<sup>21</sup> Spanish political scientists quickly wrote on the election. See Mariano Torcal and Guillem Rico, “The 2004 General Election,” forthcoming in *South European Society and Politics*; Josep M. Colomer “The General Election in Spain, March 2004,” in *Electoral Studies, 2004*; and Francesc Pallares, “La Influencia de'l 11-M,” in *El Periódico*, March 21, 2004, pp. 32–33.

<sup>22</sup> In Spanish politics the prime minister is typically known as “the president of government,” thus leading to some uncertainty in rendering this term in other languages, but given that the political system is a parliamentary monarchy lacking a president, for comparative purposes any translation other than ‘prime minister’ can only create confusion.

<sup>23</sup> See *El País*, February 29, 2004, p. 23.

The general theoretical query over the extent to which terrorism may alter election outcomes—perhaps, as a result, attaining its aims—is a reasonable and useful device to begin our analysis but just as Weber leads us to expect, the use of a general theoretical query cannot, in this case, begin to *fully answer* the broader question at stake. We will need to introduce numerous case-specific causal observations in order to understand the dynamics of Spain’s March 11–14 and some of those observations, in turn, may prove useful for generalizing theoretical and conceptual endeavors. In the absence of a rigorous comparative political sociology on the general question of terrorism and elections it is difficult to offer a fully definitive judgement on that broad query, but it appears to be quite evident and easily demonstrable that terrorism does in fact hold an ability to reshape voter sentiments—*although most certainly not in ways fully anticipated or intended* by those responsible for such deeds. Voter sentiments and decisions in the United States (e.g., the 2002 congressional elections), Israel (especially in 1996), and other countries would appear to offer clear evidence that terrorism *can indeed* change mass-level opinion. But as a general matter, on average, the direction of that change is likely to favor the most right-wing and militaristic political forces in the electoral arena rather than the advocates of international law, peace, and negotiations. If taken in isolation from more specific questions and forms of evidence, the *general theoretical question*—and the evidence one could surely assemble in a rigorous *comparative* effort to address it—appears to offer no support whatsoever for politically-motivated claims that Spanish voters bowed to terrorism in supporting the Socialists. Yet regardless of what one makes of the contemporary political critiques of Spain’s 2004 electoral outcome, the general theoretical query, and the evidence it would generate, clearly offer unsatisfying proof, even for those predisposed against the charge that has been made. Neither critics nor supporters of the Socialists’ victory on March 14 would be induced to change their view of the electoral outcome by virtue of general theoretical arguments resting on the analysis of terrorism and electoral politics in Israel and the United States. Clearly, if the March 11 attack contributed to the PSOE’s victory, it did so in ways that run counter to the most probable or generalizable effects of terrorism on electorates. Unusual or possibly case-specific aspects of Spain’s experience with an election-after-terrorism need to be examined—unless one wishes to drop the entire matter. Weber’s charge to explain why

the world is “so and not otherwise” cannot be answered without a careful examination of the case.

The most straightforward question that one must confront is virtually impossible to answer with absolute certainty: Would the Socialists have won were it not for March 11 (and its extraordinary aftermath of governmental misinformation and popular mobilization)? A simple, if inadequate, approximation to this issue lies in examining the available public opinion polling. Opinion polls may not be published in Spain during the final six days prior to an election. Polls released early on the morning of March 8 offer us the last pre-electoral public evidence on this matter. The most recently conducted poll released at that time was the radio network Cadena Ser’s tracking poll, the Pulsómetro.<sup>24</sup> That tracking poll indicated that as of Sunday evening, one week in advance of election day, the PP led the Socialists by 2.5%, a margin smaller than that reported at the beginning of the campaign and somewhat lesser than the margin reported in other surveys reported at the same time (but conducted earlier). Thus the available survey evidence suggests that the PSOE was gaining increased support during the campaign, that the PP would likely win by a relatively small margin—thus losing the absolute majority it had enjoyed in Spain’s parliament since the elections of March 2000. Given the narrow margin of difference reported in this and other pre-election surveys, neither a more substantial margin of victory for the PP nor a narrow margin of victory for the PSOE could be excluded.

However, just below the surface, publicly available polling data offered a more troubling message for the governing conservatives, a more hopeful message for the PSOE. In the final Pulsómetro tracking poll (completed, as noted above, one week prior to the March 14 election) an extraordinary 59.3% of the respondents expressed their belief that the country “needed a change of party in government.” Only 30.7% of the respondents replied that the country did *not* need a change in the party of government. This distribution was the most unfavorable to the PP of the entire campaign and it raised the very real possibility that last-minute voting decisions could easily generate a final, if unenthusiastic, groundswell of support for the PSOE just as the electorate went to the polls. Three very distinct sectors of the electorate held the possibility to produce such an

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<sup>24</sup> Much useful data from this regular survey of the Spanish public is available at [www.cadenaser.es](http://www.cadenaser.es)

outcome, providing the PSOE with a last minute surge at the campaign's close: 1) Relatively anti-government non-voters, or to be more precise, voters who had failed to participate in the most recent national election of March 2000, could decide to go to the polls, thus raising the level of electoral participation and providing the PSOE with much additional, albeit 'soft,' support. 2) Supporters of a variety of small or minor parties, including the post-communist United Left (IU) and others, could strategically switch to the Socialists at the last minute in order to increase the odds of defeating the PP. 3) Soft supporters of the PP could decide at the last minute to switch their allegiance to the Socialists. Lest one minimize the magnitude of this final possibility, it is useful to note that the Pulsómetro released on March 8 reported 40.5% of the electorate planning to vote for the PP but only 30.7% willing to clearly affirm that the country did not need a change in the party of government. *It is evident that prior to the terrorist attacks many Spaniards contemplated the approaching March 14th election day with ambivalence and uncertainty.* What was the nature of that ambivalence and uncertainty? Post-election survey work<sup>25</sup> will help us address that question more fully than is now possible, but rudimentary ecological analysis and a more qualitative macro-level examination can help us make sense out of this question.

(The first significant post-election poll to be published, the Pulsómetro released on March 22, 2004,<sup>26</sup> offered highly suggestive findings. Although the large majority of those surveyed reported that they had settled on their vote prior to the terrorist attack, 8.2% of the sample reported that it decided how to vote after the attack took place. A large majority of those interviewed, 64.7%, believed that information was manipulated or hidden from the public in those final days—when the government and state television initially insisted that the attack had been carried out by ETA. Subsequent survey work has reported that a higher percentage of the population presents its voting decision as being influenced by the attack but in most such cases it is likely that the influence of the attack merely *strengthened and reinforced prior preferences.*)

It must be said that on several occasions during the two years prior to the 2004 election *the PSOE had led the PP*, in publicly available poll results, at times by a

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Gunther, José Ramón Montero and Mariano Torcal are currently engaged in such work, as is the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas.

<sup>26</sup> As with all *Pulsómetro* polling, this is available at [www.cadenaser.es](http://www.cadenaser.es)

significant margin. It is instructive to briefly review the evidence. During the spring of 2003, when the Iraq war was in the midst of its most active phase, the PSOE led the PP by 6% in the March 21 Pulsómetro and by 6.5% on April 4. Clearly the Iraq war had pushed ambivalent sectors of the Spanish electorate toward the Socialists and away from the PP by a margin even greater than that ultimately recorded on March 14, 2004. Spaniards knew what they thought of this war—and of its implications for Spanish politics—well before the brutal attack on March 11, 2004, but those attitudes rooted in war were intermeshed with attitudes formed in many other issue arenas. The strong anti-war majority during 2003 was no guarantee of Socialist victory one year later and the PP had various strong cards to play in its effort to retain plurality support. (It is also worth mentioning that over the four years between national elections the first moment in which the PSOE surpassed the PP in professed voter intent occurred well before the Iraq war. During the summer of 2002, a PP plan to restrict unemployment benefits and to eliminate a public employment program for underemployed farmworkers in Andalucía and Extremadura led to a substantially successful general strike accompanied by large anti-government demonstrations on June 20, 2002.<sup>27</sup> In the aftermath of that general strike the PSOE established a temporary lead over the PP in opinion polling. The factors that were capable of leading Spaniards toward the Socialists and away from the PP were never limited to foreign policy.) The evidence examined thus far produces no certain conclusion: Many Spanish voters were ambivalent, and serious examination of public opinion data shows that prior to March 11 there was some doubt over the election outcome. The similarity between the actual March 14 outcome and the distribution of electoral opinion at the time of the invasion of Iraq, roughly one year earlier, suggests that the terrorist attack may have activated a latent anti-war vote but this is far from clear; other political controversies during the two final years prior to the elections had generated similar distributions of opinion.

A highly useful way to address the questions we face is by examining the geographic distribution of votes. The approach I take is a simple one, asking the following question: Where did the greatest movement of votes take place? *Was it a uniform process experienced equally throughout Spain? Did the shift in votes occur with*

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<sup>27</sup> For extensive coverage, see [El País](#), June 21, 2002.

*greatest intensity close to the direct impact of the terrorist attack in Madrid? Or did the greatest shift occur elsewhere?* Three types of change deserve attention: 1) the electoral participation of previous non-voters; 2) the strategic decision of small and minor party supporters to vote Socialist; and 3) the movement to the PSOE of some voters who had supported the PP in the elections of March 2000. It is certain that all three processes took place to some extent but the relative magnitude of each is more difficult to determine with precision. Given limitations of time and space I shall concentrate on both the first and the third of these shifts, the increase in voting participation and the movement of some voters from the PP to the PSOE. In absolute terms the latter process—the direct shift by some voters from the governing party to the opposition—is likely the least important of the three electoral movements, but in *political* terms it is in some ways the most interesting and it would appear to be the place to look for evidence that the attack itself led some voters to change allegiance—perhaps, to follow the arguments of some—in the calculation that a PSOE victory would reduce the danger of further terrorist incidents in Spain.

Much of the dramatic difference between the election results of 2000, when the PP won 44.52% of the nationwide vote and an absolute majority of the seats in parliament, and 2004, when they won 37.64% of the vote and fell 28 seats short of a parliamentary absolute majority, can be accounted for by the enormous increase in voting turnout. Neither election is a complete outlier in the pattern observed to date in Spain's post-Franco democracy,<sup>28</sup> but they represent two substantially different points in the existing distribution of voting turnout. In 2000, 68.71% of the electorate voted whereas 77.21% of the voters deposited ballots at polling stations in March 2004. Nationwide voting turnout increased by 8.5%. Was this increase, widely thought to have benefitted the PSOE, the *direct and exclusive* result of March 11, as some might have us believe? The data suggest otherwise—although the complex aftermath of the attack was not without its impact. In Madrid, where the attack took place, the increase in participation, at 8.59%, was ever so slightly higher than the national average. The most pronounced increase in voting participation was experienced in the country's periphery, especially in

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<sup>28</sup> On voting participation and exceptional elections in Spain see José Ramón Montero, "Elecciones normales y elecciones excepcionales: algunos datos y factores de la movilización electoral de 1982," in *Estudis Electorals* 8 (1986).

the (more or less) plurinational autonomous communities of Catalonia, the Basque Country, Navarra, and Galicia. In Catalonia, electoral participation increased by a dramatic 12.95% over the figure recorded four years earlier, and in the Basque Country the increase was only slightly lower, with Galicia and Navarra following closely behind. In addition to the aftermath of the attack, two other factors—1) disagreements over the government's rhetoric and policies on issues related to Spain's complex set of plurinational identities,<sup>29</sup> and 2) the intrinsic interest and uncertainty generated by the election campaign—helped to encourage electoral participation. The PP government's apparent electoral calculation<sup>30</sup> that its stance highly critical of peripheral nationalism would win votes in the country's unilingual and unambiguously Spanish-identifying heartland must be weighed against this evidence that the PP unintentionally activated massive opposition in much of the plurinational periphery. *This fundamental component of Spanish politics stands as a far more important piece of the March 11–14 puzzle than an uninformed external observer, or a social scientist armed only with generalizing theoretical queries, might initially perceive.* Moreover, the interconnection of factors in complex causal configurations—a hallmark of the Weberian approach—is evidenced by the intertwining of this history of political antagonism between the PP and the plurinational periphery with the highly charged events of March 11–14.

If we focus on the loss of votes by the PP since the previous national election in 2000, the empirical evidence offers additional pieces of the overall puzzle. Nationwide, the absolute number of Spaniards voting for the PP (9,630,512 in 2004 vs. 10,321,178 four years earlier) was 6.70% lower in the 2004 election. *Yet the decline in Madrid and in adjoining regions was lesser than that experienced in much (but not all) of the country's periphery.* In Madrid the PP lost 4.11% of its 2000 electorate, a figure slightly higher than that of Castilla-La Mancha just to the south and slightly lower than in Castilla y León just to the north. The most dramatic declines in voting support for the Partido

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<sup>29</sup> See the excellent discussion on the importance of such issues for Spanish politics in Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, and the comparative analysis of Basque and Catalan nationalism in Juan Diez Medrano, *Divided Nations: Class, Politics and Nationalism in the Basque Country and Catalonia*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> In the absence of monographic work on the Aznar government's motivation for its policy toward peripheral nationalism, my inference that the policy was motivated by an electoral (mis)calculation should be seen as quite tentative—although it does fit the theoretical image many scholars hold of governmental decision-making.

Popular were: the Basque Country, where the loss of votes represented 28.05% of those won by that party four years earlier; Catalonia, where the decline represented 19.26% of the party's 2000 electorate; Aragón, where the loss was 17.17% of the earlier figure; Navarra, with a loss of 16.58% by the PP in number of votes; Galicia, where the decline was 8.53%; and Andalucía, with a loss by the PP of 8.15% of its electorate from four years earlier.

Clearly, in Spain, *the political—or more precisely, the electoral—shock of March 11 and its aftermath was felt primarily not in the epicenter of the tragedy but hundreds of kilometers away in much of the country's periphery*. Yet the pattern we can observe is in no sense a primarily spatial one. Parts of the geographic periphery—such as Cantabria and Asturias on the northern coast—saw no decline in the PP vote, and in Mediterranean Murcia the vote for the Partido Popular was in absolute numbers significantly higher in 2004 than it had been four years earlier. The fault lines determining *where and how* the shock of March 11 would be felt at the ballot box three days later were largely political in nature and they existed well before the attack occurred, thus underscoring the continuing usefulness of the Weberian approach to explanation with its concern for historical antecedents and complex multicausal configurations. The lines of division in the Spanish electorate involved issues of national identity—Spanish, Basque and Catalan—alongside policies meant to deal with the terrorism of ETA; economic and social policy; and—in the case of Aragón and Murcia—disagreements over a national plan to redirect water from the Ebro River.

The severe deterioration in relations between plurinational Spain and the PP government<sup>31</sup> represents a large part of this overall picture, but this identity-based phenomenon does not explain all that requires an accounting. Economic and social policies, such as the government's curtailment of support for the unemployed, also played a crucial role as is manifested by the large drop-off in votes for the PP in Andalucía where underemployment and unemployment represent extraordinarily important issues. The government's national water redistribution plan was taken by the electorate to be

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<sup>31</sup> One of the most surprising episodes in the broader pattern of increasingly bitter relations between the Aznar government and the plurinational periphery was the sharp confrontation between the Prime Minister and the Basque bishops in June 2002. On Aznar's charge that the bishops, who had issued a letter critical of his government's Basque policy, were guilty of "moral perversion," see *El País*, June 4, 2002, p. 1. For the complete text of the bishops' Pastoral Letter see *La Vanguardia*, June 7, 2002, p. 16.

good for some regions and bad for others; in relatively arid and agricultural Murcia, which anticipated receiving new water from the Ebro to the north, the absolute number of voters supporting the PP *increased* 5.8% over the number recorded four years earlier (although this increase is masked by the fact that the PP's *percentage* of the overall vote declined marginally because the total number of voters in Murcia increased by a larger proportion than the PP vote itself); in Aragón, where the Ebro provides vital irrigation, the drop-off in support for the PP was almost as pronounced as in plurinational Spain. Political disagreements and cleavages predating March 11 best explain this complex pattern of variation by region in the evolution of votes for the PP.

Yet, despite the unmistakable importance of pre-existing political opinions and cleavages, the terrorist attack did fundamentally alter the political atmosphere and the array of actors surrounding the electorate's trip to the polls on March 14. However, it did so in a way that was *indirect, extraordinarily complex, and that was not designed or knowable in advance*. Neither prior theoretical work nor the political actors themselves could have fully predicted this complex constellation of causality. Terrorism *had* been a major theme of political debate during the Spanish election campaign, but it was ETA, rather than Al Qaeda, that much political discourse had emphasized.

The PP's campaign heavily emphasized its hard line on ETA terrorism and on pro-independence or pro-sovereignty peripheral nationalists in the Basque Country and Catalonia. Moreover, the conservative governing party was harshly and incessantly critical of the Socialists for their coalition government in the Catalan autonomous community with Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), a pro-independence left-of-center party, and Iniciativa per Catalunya, a post-communist formation. The initially secret meeting of ERC leader Carod Rovira (hereinafter, Carod, the first of Carod Rovira's two last names) with ETA representatives in early January (discovered and reported by a conservative Madrid daily, ABC) was repeatedly used by the PP as illustrative support for its claim that the PSOE could not be trusted with governmental power in Madrid. The conservatives insinuated that Carod had negotiated a separate peace for Catalonia, a claim he emphatically denied while defending his meeting to listeners by reminding them that years earlier *he had* persuaded a small Catalan terrorist group, Terra Lliure, to abandon armed struggle in favor of the peaceful and legal pursuit

of independence.<sup>32</sup> In the controversy surrounding this incident, Carod was forced to resign his number-two position in the Catalan regional government but the alliance of ERC with the Socialists remained in force.

Critics of the PP hoped that would be the last of the matter, notwithstanding the unceasing criticism emanating from the PP, but days later a video appeared in which two masked men, speaking below an ETA emblem, announced that their pro-independence terrorist group had declared a truce in Catalonia—but not in the rest of Spain. This announcement proved highly embarrassing for both the PSOE and ERC. The Socialists insisted that their opposition to ETA terrorism was as unflinching as that of any other political party—as attested to by the fact that several prominent Socialists had been killed by the terrorist organization—and they argued that ETA should not be permitted to determine the agenda of Spain's national election campaign. Carod reiterated his insistence that he had not negotiated a separate peace for Catalonia. However, the PP seized on the circumstance as an opportunity to argue that ERC was thoroughly disloyal and that the PSOE was untrustworthy given its Catalan alliance with Esquerra. One PP government minister went so far as to state in public that the Socialists were allied with murderers—a charge that deeply angered Catalans who thought of Carod Rovira in decidedly different terms, regardless of whether they had ever voted for his party.

When Spaniards learned of the horrendous bombing early on March 11, most quickly assumed that ETA had chosen to prove its ability to launch a massive attack in Madrid, while respecting its declared truce in Catalonia. Catalans cringed at the thought that truce in their territory might be linked to massacre in Madrid. Black sashes began to appear on balconies throughout Barcelona, as Catalans in massive numbers hung these visible symbols of mourning, striving in that manner to show that their grief and sense of horror were as deep as the shock and sadness to be found in Madrid. To the extent that Spaniards thought of the election during the very immediate aftermath of the explosions, most of them probably concluded that the PP would be swept to a decisive victory in a collective repudiation of the Socialists and their Catalan ally Carod.

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<sup>32</sup> For a small sample of the extensive press coverage on this incident—and its political aftermath—see El País, January 28, 2004, pp. 1, 14–17; February 2, pp. 17, 18 and 20; February 3, pp. 14,15; February 5, p. 20; March 2, p. 19; and La Vanguardia, February 3, 2004, pp. 12–17.

Government officials and top-level representatives of the PP quickly spoke out, declaring not only their sense of profound outrage at the attack and solidarity with the victims but also indicating their firm conviction that ETA was responsible for the attack and that the election campaign could not continue under such circumstances. All significant parties shared in the declaration of outrage, in the affirmation of solidarity with the victims and their families, in their rededication to the effort to overcome terrorism, and so forth. Election campaigning was formally suspended by all political parties. In a decision that PP leaders may have later regretted, the government called for massive nationwide demonstrations on Friday afternoon to permit citizens the opportunity to express their shared sense of outrage. Government officials, including Prime Minister Aznar himself, contacted newspaper editors and other opinion-makers to present the case that ETA was responsible for the outrage.

From some point on Thursday itself, only hours after the attack took place, evidence began to emerge that Al Qaeda rather than ETA was guilty of the atrocity. A prominent Basque politician close to the pro-independence terrorists insisted that they were not the authors of the deed. Police quickly found a van near the railway station where the bombs were planted on trains and in which detonators and other materials were found. Among the materials police encountered in the vehicle were tapes with Koranic verses in Arabic. Later that same day Al Qaeda claimed responsibility. The chain of evidence was to grow longer rather quickly. ETA explicitly denied responsibility. A second claim of responsibility by Al Qaeda was made. And more importantly, on Saturday the police made their first arrests of Islamic militants believed responsible. By the time of nationwide demonstrations on Friday afternoon,<sup>33</sup> many Spaniards had concluded that Al Qaeda was responsible but others continued to believe that ETA had carried out the attack—as *the government and state television continued to argue*. Granted, a note of uncertainty was introduced into official declarations on Friday, but as late as Saturday morning, during the official “day of reflection” prior to voting on Sunday, Mariano Rajoy, the PP candidate to succeed Aznar as Prime Minister, indicated publicly his “moral conviction” that ETA was responsible.

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<sup>33</sup> For extensive press coverage of these demonstrations, held throughout Spain on March 12, see [El País](#) and [La Vanguardia](#), March 13, 2004.

The state of public opinion was tellingly illustrated by perhaps the most commonly chanted slogan during the massive demonstration in Madrid: “¿Quién ha sido?” (Who did it?) The stark contrast between the growing public realization that the evidence pointed to Al Qaeda and governmental claims blaming ETA was neatly captured on Saturday morning, March 13, by the headlines in Barcelona’s relatively conservative establishment daily newspaper, *La Vanguardia*: “The Evidence Points to Al Qaeda; But the Government Insists it was ETA.” The deep incongruity between, on the one hand, official declarations, and on the other, the growing realization that Al Qaeda had carried out the attack, gained added meaning for Spaniards for at least two reasons: 1) State television, widely watched in many parts of the country, continued on Saturday to insist that the evidence pointed toward ETA, and 2) no one could tell with certainty what most Spaniards believed on this matter or how those beliefs might affect the casting of votes. One could speculate that an attribution of the attack to ETA would help the PP by reminding voters of the truce declared in Catalonia following (but not necessarily negotiated during) Carod’s secret meeting, whereas an attribution to Al Qaeda could help the opposition by reminding voters of the PP’s highly unpopular support for the invasion of Iraq. Yet no one knew with any certainty what most Spaniards believed nor how their vote might be influenced by these extraordinary events.

It is highly likely that many Spaniards—especially in the country’s plurinational periphery—interpreted the government’s inaccurate attribution of the attack to ETA as simply the extreme culmination of a policy that had harshly criticized regional nationalists and their allies as allegedly soft on terrorism, or worse. Thus, in its electoral impact, the PP’s attempt to blame ETA interacted with its previous policies and campaign strategy on matters of national identity. The fact that the greatest erosion of PP electoral support in March 2004 took place in the plurinational periphery underscores this point.

In this setting, the arena of politically relevant actors was drastically and unexpectedly transformed, reducing the salience of institutionalized actors such as political parties and increasing the role of the news media, social movements, spontaneously organized demonstrations, and micro-contextual phenomena such as conversations among friends, fellow workers or students, and family members attempting

to make sense out of the events.<sup>34</sup> The abrupt end to the campaign prevented political parties and their leaders from channeling public expressions of support (or other opinions) in conventional ways during the final three days prior to balloting. Yet this closing down of the conventional political arena was not accompanied by a decline in public interest. A number of factors—the attack itself, the massive demonstrations on Friday afternoon, and the combination of controversy and confusion over the identity of the terrorists responsible for the explosions—combined to heighten public interest *and outrage*. As should by now be clear, the extraordinarily multi-causal nature of this configuration of factors influencing the election is quintessentially Weberian.

The massive demonstrations held throughout Spain on Friday deserve special attention, and they help to underscore the indispensability of the Weberian tool kit with its tendency not only to use generalizing concepts (such as “demonstrations,” “political mobilization,” or “social movement”) but also to look beyond conventional conceptualization toward underlying empirical reality in all its complexity. Although each major Spanish city was the site, in principle, of only one *officially sponsored demonstration*, in practice the millions of people who participated generated countless *micro-demonstrations* within the larger crowds assembled. Signs denouncing the news media and the government for allegedly hiding the truth, banners opposing the war in Iraq, denunciations of terrorism in general, chants demanding the full truth over the incident, insults directed toward the governing party or others, simple expressions of grief—these sentiments, and others, were communicated by Spaniards in their uninstitutionalized encounter with one another in the streets where millions demonstrated.

One cannot understand this phenomenon without appreciating the massive level of participation generated both by the country’s collective sense of grief and the institutional sponsorship initiated by the government and quickly seconded by the opposition. *Yet neither that official sponsorship nor a conventional conceptualization of*

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<sup>34</sup> Indirect evidence for this assertion is to be found in the election results in small municipalities. Strikingly, relatively similar neighboring villages—such as Bubión and Capileira in the Alpujarra district on the southern slopes of the Sierra Nevada—moved electorally in opposite directions in 2004. In one of these villages the absolute number of votes for the PP increased from the 2000 baseline whereas in the other it dropped sharply. In the absence—as of this writing—of systematic national data analysis on this point, this illustrative paired comparison suggests that the micro-contextual foundation of voter choice was likely informed by highly localized (and varied) interpretations of March 11 and its aftermath.

*demonstrations can fully capture the complex nature of what happened on the streets of Spain that Friday afternoon.* A huge proportion of the public—perhaps a third of the adult population—engaged in this enormous collective encounter two days before the election. A characteristic feature of the Spanish political arena, well before these events took place, was the relative weakness of parties juxtaposed against the prevalence of protests, and crucially, *the predisposition of many Spaniards to demonstrate publicly in often spontaneous or improvised ways.*<sup>35</sup> The demonstrations of Friday afternoon permitted those Spaniards most skeptical of the government's claim of ETA responsibility to reach a crosssection of their fellow citizens with banners and chants transmitting their views. The trip to the polls two days later was to become as much a social movement event as a routine and institutionalized political episode.

By Saturday many of those Spaniards who were convinced that Al Qaeda had authored the massacre had grown increasingly angry at the government's declarations (which did begin in the course of that day to allow some possibility that the terrorists responsible for the attack might be Moroccan extremists rather than ETA) as well as the coverage on state television. Their anger was accompanied by concern over what other Spaniards—especially those who learn of news only from state television—knew or believed. With the elections set to take place the following day, Spaniards witnessed an extraordinary and thoroughly unpredictable “day of reflection.” Repeated television appearances by the Minister of Interior and representatives of the major parties were only some of the departures from the norm for the day before voting. Concerned citizens began to contact one another through internet postings and mobile phone messages, conveying their sense of concern at the information being provided by the government and calling for action. The micro-contextual conversations and debates among friends and family over the vote to be cast the next day inevitably came to focus on the simple question “Who did it?” Those with access to satellite or cable television and who knew foreign languages quickly reported to their conversational circles that foreign news media had attributed the attacks to Al Qaeda.

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<sup>35</sup> On this phenomenon, see Robert M. Fishman and Suzanne Coshov, “Setting the Reach of Protest: Institutions, Movements and Social Ties in Spanish Working Class Collective Action,” paper presented at conference on “Authority in Contention,” University of Notre Dame, August 14–15, 2002.

In this setting, spontaneous demonstrations broke out in front of PP headquarters in Madrid and other cities denouncing the government's information policy and, in the case of some demonstrators, placing at least some responsibility for the March 11 massacre on the government in the view that the attack had been a consequence of the PP's highly unpopular decision to support the Iraq war. For some of these spontaneous demonstrators the critique of the official handling of the incident blended into an anti-war critique of earlier (and continuing) PP policies. The demonstrations, reported in some news media, quickly spread. In Madrid, the central Puerta del Sol was the scene of a continuous protest from Saturday afternoon through early Sunday morning. In Barcelona, spontaneous "*caceroladas*" broke out throughout the city as a cross-section of residents went to the streets, banging on pots and pans, to denounce the government. Others blacked out their lights at 10pm in protest against the information being provided by state television and official spokespersons. The next day, as Spaniards went to the polls in massive numbers, several PP leaders were unexpectedly met by hecklers at their polling stations.

The space that parties typically occupy in channeling public sentiment at the close of a campaign had been obliterated by the tragic end of the campaign and in its stead—partly encouraged by the dynamic intrinsic to the demonstrations on Friday, the confusion created by official attempts to blame ETA, and the pre-existing Spanish predisposition toward spontaneous protest—social movements and improvised expressions of opinion set the backdrop for the trip to the polls. What may have begun (and what was perceived by many) as a governmental effort to use the terrorist incident to remind voters of ETA's truce in Catalonia (and the alleged role of PSOE ally Carod Rovira in that regard), ended up backfiring, so to speak, as it seriously diminished the government's credibility and instead reminded many voters of the massive anti-war protests one year earlier. Some voters did surely see their vote as an opportunity to express opposition to the war but that opposition was not new nor had it been generated by the March 11 attack.

It seems clear that the massacre on March 11 did drastically change the backdrop to the elections of March 14, but it did so in ways that could not have been predicted in advance. No one political actor can be seen as uniquely responsible for the ultimate

electoral outcome—or for the way in which terrorism shaped it. A complex and inherently unpredictable dynamic, in which spontaneous protest and perceived governmental dishonesty played a large role, helped to guide the collective sense of grief toward the ultimate electoral verdict rejecting the PP at the ballot box. *Yet that outcome rests also on prior political cleavages and sentiments.* The most important new sentiment generated by March 11 and its aftermath was outrage, an outrage that likely increased voting participation. In this environment the PSOE benefitted from the synergy between its institutional form of expression and the social-movement-like protests in the streets.<sup>36</sup> For many Spaniards, voting Socialist on March 14 became a *de facto* social movement event. Yet when the Socialist victory became apparent late on Sunday virtually no public celebration took place. The feeling of collective grief and exhaustion lingered—although for many Spaniards it was now qualified by an accompanying sense of relief.

A Weberian searching for validation of the emphasis on complexity and multi-causality might find in the Spanish experience the basis for an appealing general proposition: that the impact of terrorism on voting is shaped by a complex process involving multiple actors and pre-existing cleavages. Yet even this conclusion could be dangerously absolute if taken as a universally applicable causal law. One cannot easily dismiss the possibility that a future terrorist incident occurring shortly before elections *could* massively shift an *entire* electorate in a way far less mediated by micro-level and meso-level actors and their interactions, far less conditioned by prior political preferences. Indeed, if ETA had been responsible for March 11, the outcome analyzed in this essay would have been drastically different and if the attack had hit another country the story would likely have been highly dissimilar. The superiority of the Weberian perspective lies not in an unchanging (or for that matter, in a *new*) set of causal propositions this school can call its own but instead in its ability to look toward the world that matters to us with genuinely open eyes and toward the scholarly arena with a dedication to rigor second to none (even if constraints of time or resources—especially in the case of the early work on a topic, such as is evident in this essay—may often leave scholars short of the full Weberian objective). Yet this is not to say that Weberians are

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<sup>36</sup> On the ability of some activists and leaders within the PSOE (but most decidedly not others) to forge a political style rooted in the combination of social movement and party-institutional experiences, see *Democracy's Voices*, chapter six.

uninterested in the formulation of new concepts and theories of a generalizing nature. Far from it. Many works by latter-day Weberians concentrate more on the search for generalizing propositions than does this essay—just as Weber in some of his works prioritized the search for generalizing concepts to a greater extent than in his Objectivity Essay. But the generalizing ideas that Weberians formulate and deploy are developed in constant tension with the effort to make sense of actual empirical reality in all its complexity and historical singularity. The concepts, arguments, and causal assertions to be found in this examination of Spain’s experience in March 2004 do not in any sense represent an unchanging core of presumed Weberian “truths” but they would not have been developed—or effectively deployed—without the benefit of Weber’s methodology and its embrace of tensions. Without the benefit of the approach eloquently articulated by Weber in the Objectivity Essay, the search for an adequate understanding of the Spanish March—or any equally meaningful and challenging political episode—would be left entirely to amateurs or journalists, with their characteristic shortcomings, rather than professional social scientists.