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Chapter Five

Accountability and Manipulation

The main point of this chapter is to discuss some of the ways politicians try to survive in office and to increase their margin of maneuverability to design and implement policies. I assume that, in addition to policy preferences, politicians want to win elections, stay in power, and maximize their autonomy in case their policies diverge from voters' preferences. I also assume that manipulative strategies consist of attempts by politicians to avoid the cost of such divergence.[1] My discussion attempts to link agency theory and Machiavellian politics in order to interpret some aspects of the control of politicians by citizens in a democracy. To provide illustrations of typical political strategies and their consequences, I also draw from evidence pertaining to recent Spanish politics, examining some conjunctures of the Socialist government from 1982 to 1996. This long period in office, most of it with an absolute Socialist majority in Parliament, was marked by four consecutive electoral victories as well as by the troubled waters of unpopular economic policies, high unemployment, a dramatic reversal of position over NATO, and a long string of financial scandals.

Democratic theory has traditionally considered that, although the interests of citizens and politicians may diverge, elections are the instrument whereby citizens can ensure that politicians will act on their behalf and carry out their policy preferences. As a

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[1] The concept of manipulation that I use in the discussion differs from that of Riker in that voters' preferences are not considered as given, strategies largely deal with information, and the main political initiatives do not correspond to the former losers but to incumbents (Riker 1982, 1986).

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consequence, as Dahl (1970: 1) put it, "a key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens." At election time, voters will listen to promises from competing politicians, look for clues about their trustworthiness, compare, and choose accordingly. The choice would be both meaningful and consequential. Elections would thus act as a prospective mechanism for the responsiveness of politicians – under perfect information, *rebus sic stantibus*, politicians will adhere to the mandate. But elections would also protect citizens' interests as a retrospective mechanism: voters will examine past performance and, as a result, reward or punish politicians. In Key's (1966: 76–77) words, "The only really effective weapon of popular control in a democratic regime is the capacity of the electorate to throw a party from power. . . . Governments must worry, not about the meaning of past elections, but about their fate at future elections." Thus, because in democracies politicians suffer the consequences of their policies and unpopular policies make them lose elections, governments will respond in anticipation to the interests and preferences of citizens.[2]

We can examine this relationship between politicians and citizens within the framework of agency theory. An agency relationship arises in those situations in which one actor, the agent, acts on behalf of another, the principal, and is supposed to implement the preferences and interests of the latter. The voters, as principal, will select an agent out of several competitors in an election, invest him with power, and expect him to respond to their policy preferences: that is, to adhere to electoral programs and political promises on whose grounds the selection of the agent was made. The agent will be politically accountable when the principal can hold him responsible for past performance and, therefore, reward him with reelection or punish him with defeat. A perfect agency relationship would reflect a view of political representation according to which "the rulers should be identified with the people; their interest and will should be the interest and will of the nation . . . let the rulers be effectively responsible to it,

[2] This argument plays an important part in Sartori's (1987: 155–56) theory of democratic representation: "If it is true – and it is most of the time – that the leader subject to periodical electoral removability is concerned with how the voters will react to his actions, it follows that he will be monitored (at least, when sensitive issues come up) by the anticipation of what that reaction, whether positive or negative, might be."

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promptly removed by it, and it could afford to trust them with power of which it could itself dictate the use to be made" (Mill 1991: 24).

But are politicians controlled by citizens through elections as traditional democratic theory and perfect agency assume? There is substantial comparative empirical evidence that elections do indeed influence policy prospectively, and that policies can be predicted out of the "issue agendas" that emerge from interparty competition (Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994). Politicians concerned about reelection listen to public opinion when they take policy initiatives. As Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995: 559) vividly put it, "politicians are keen to pick up the faintest signals in their political environment. Like antelope in an open field, they cock their ears and focus their full attention on the slightest sign of danger." The evidence has shown that public opinion drives policy; that, either through electoral replacement of the incumbents or rational anticipation of the latter to policy moods of the citizens that might change over time, governments reflect in their policy initiatives the preferences of voters; that party election programs make it possible to predict the course of action of the winners; and that subsequent policies are congruent with thematic electoral promises.

So democratic governments appear to be responsive, the cause being elections and the anticipation of elections. Yet this view of democratic responsiveness faces several problems. First, it takes voters' policy preferences as exogenous. Second, although considerable empirical evidence shows that prospective evaluations influence the vote (Lewis-Beck 1988), no institutions other than elections exist to force incumbents to implement subsequently their original promises.[3] Third, citizens may be myopic in their preferences: should responsive incumbents care about such policy preferences or about their consequences? Politicians might think that if their policies adhere to the ex ante configuration of preferences that are temporally inconsistent, they may pay the costs later on, when the long-term negative consequences emerge. Thus, politicians will want to influence public opinion, not just respond to it. Can they do so? Considerable evidence exists on the

[3] Manin (1995: 209–14) has examined how two crucial mechanisms of control, imperative mandates and revocable representations, disappeared in the institutional configuration of democracy at the end of the eighteenth century.

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relative malleability of such opinion (Page and Shapiro 1983, 1992; R. Shapiro and Jacobs 1989): politicians can manipulate citizens' preferences and obtain a margin of autonomy for their policies. Jacobs and Shapiro (1994: 9–16) have termed this influence, rather benevolently, as "the leadership effect." Manipulation of public opinion is usually intended to have effects on retrospective accountability at election time; sometimes, however, politicians try to influence opinion prospectively, so that they obtain from citizens a mandate to do what the politicians want. The latter may be attempted through referenda; although their results are usually not imperative, they may provide useful backing for politicians who have to take difficult decisions – and they might also occasionally provide them with serious frights (as in the cases of the Spanish referendum on NATO in 1986, or the French and Danish referenda on Maastricht in 1992 and 1993).

Democratic governments are accountable when citizens can judge their record retrospectively at election time, and punish or reward them accordingly. Politicians anticipate such judgment when they undertake policy initiatives and pay attention to the interests of the voters. So, rather than look at promises, citizens assess past performance. As Fiorina (1981: 6) put it, "Elections do not signal the direction in which society should move so much as they convey an evaluation of where society has been." On the basis of such evaluation, in Key's (1964: 544) succinct dictum, "the vocabulary of the voice of the people consists mainly of the words 'yes' and 'no.' " That is, governments survive or are thrown out of office. A vast evidence indicates, for example, that the performance of the economy has a great influence on the support for incumbents at election time: when economic conditions are bad, citizens vote against the ruling party (Fiorina 1981; Lewis-Beck 1988; Norpoth, Lewis-Beck, and Lafay 1991). Yet Cheibub and Przeworski (1996) also provide exhaustive empirical findings, covering the period from 1950 to 1990 for 99 democracies and 123 dictatorships, that show that the survival of heads of democratic governments is not sensitive to this performance. Elections appear to be mechanisms that displace rulers in ways that are random with regard to economic performance. If it is the case that the life and death of governments are independent from the evolution of the economies, then the mechanisms of democratic accountability must be critically examined. And we all know that politicians often opt for unpopular policies, that these

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can be ineffective, that political promises can be broken.[4] That is, policies frequently appear to be unresponsive to the preferences and the interests of citizens, and they are also poorly evaluated retrospectively. Yet it is not exceptional that politicians manage to survive. How do the mechanisms of accountability operate? When governments lose, is it because their policies are unpopular? And, on the contrary, when they survive, is it because their policies are popular? What is it that they do to remain in power? How do they try to manipulate accountability?

Machiavellian politics assumed that strategies could determine the survival of politicians, accommodating the governed to unpopular initiatives or to breaches of promises: "A prudent Prince neither can nor ought to keep his word when to keep it is hurtful to him and the causes which led him to pledge it are removed. . . . No Prince was ever at a loss for plausible reasons to cloak a breach of faith. . . . It is necessary, indeed, to put a good colour on this matter, and to be skilful in simulating and dissembling. But men are so simple, and governed so absolutely by their present needs, that he who wishes to deceive will never fail in finding willing dupes. . . . He must therefore keep his mind ready to shift as the winds and tides of Fortune turn" (Machiavelli 1992: 46). How can this be done under the conditions of modern democracy, where modern princes are in a less favorable position than in early sixteenth-century Florence?

To examine the context of such strategies, agency theory provides useful clues. An agency relationship will face problems of accountability when the interests of principal and agent do not coincide, the former can not easily determine whether it is in his interest that the policies of the latter are being taken, and his capacity to reward good agents and sanction opportunistic and self-interested ones is limited. Thus democratic accountability entails prospectively an "adverse selection" problem for the principal: how to avoid choosing a bad agent; retrospectively, it turns into a "moral hazard" problem: whenever the principal's (i.e., the citizens') information is unverifiable, there will arise the possibility

[4] Promises may be different in their nature and strength, and this will influence the possibility of assessing their implementation. Promises may refer to policy proposals, but also to general goals and values, or to procedures of decision making. And candidates may give them high salience in their programs or, on the contrary, state them in conditional terms as "potential" pledges (Schedler n.d.).

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of politicians who, once elected, will not advance the preferences and interests of citizens, and whose survival is unrelated to their performance. The principal may commit retrospectively two errors: to reward an agent who has shirked or to punish an agent who has worked in the principal's interest. Indeed, the control of agent by principal depends on three requirements: that the actions of the agent and the conditions under which it operates can be publicly known; that both parties are symmetrically able to anticipate fully all possible contingencies that might arise during their relationship; and that the agent can be bound costlessly by the principal to carry out the preferences and interests of the latter (Sappington 1991). Therefore, the control of politicians by voters faces problems of information, monitoring, and enforcement.

Problems of monitoring arise when citizens have information that is either incomplete or asymmetrical. In the first case, they will find difficulties in establishing whether a causal connection exists between the actions of politicians and performance, either because of technical reasons or because the costs involved in finding out are greater than the potential benefits. But the activity of opposition parties, social movements, and civic associations can lower such costs: political mobilization and intensities of interests can thus facilitate democratic accountability as informational instruments. When, on the other hand, information is asymmetrical, politicians will be able to manipulate to their advantage information to which they have privileged access, while vast areas of politics remain opaque to voters. These might have difficulty in assessing whether good or bad outcomes are due to governmental policies or to "objective conditions" whose responsibility cannot be attributed to the government.

Also, new contingencies, which can never be fully anticipated, will arise once the elected politician is in office. These may make citizens uncertain about whether their initial preferences respond now to their real or long-term interests. Such new contingencies partly explain why democratic mandates are never imperative, and why they resemble "relational contracts" – that is, agreements that frame the agency relationship when complete and enforceable contracts that specify the behavior to be adopted are impossible. In such contracts, "the parties do not agree on detailed plans of action but on goals and objectives, on general provisions that are broadly applicable, on the criteria to be used in deciding what to do when unforeseen contingencies arise, on who has what

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power to act and the bounds limiting the range of actions that can be taken" (Milgrom and Roberts 1992: 131). So, the mechanisms of democratic accountability largely operate on implicit procedural contracts rather than on substantive issues. Rewards depend essentially on whether rules have been followed: for instance, on whether the behavior of politicians was honest, the truth was said, information was displayed when needed, the parties acted in good faith. This respect of rules and procedures by politicians is generally valued by citizens: for example, according to a recent Spanish survey,[5] when asked about the main qualities to be demanded from a politician, 56% of people chose "to be honest" as the first one, 12% selected "to keep promises," while only 5% opted for "to be able to take decisions, even if unpopular." However, under such lax controls, voters may find it hard to discern whether the "objective conditions" are indeed different from those anticipated before the politician came to office, whether they are really beyond the control of the agent, and whether they are being manipulated.

Citizens will have limited information on their interests and on whether they are being taken care of by a perfect agent. Did politicians deviate from promises out of concern for the welfare of citizens – "the general interest"? Did they campaign, on the contrary, on popular policies that they knew were ineffective, only to renege once in office in order to adopt effective ones? Is it in the interest of citizens to punish such politicians, voting them out of office in order to enforce the predictability of policies out of future campaign promises? Or should they reward them with reelection because they cared about the "objective interests" of citizens more than about their ex ante preferences?

The enforcement problem has to do with the capacity of voters to sanction or reward politicians effectively. If they are to bear the full impact of their actions, politicians must, first of all, have incentives in their reelection. A basic condition for "no cheating" to be an equilibrium is that the present value of the future gains from not cheating outweighs the temptation to cheat.[6]

[5] Survey of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, April 1995.

[6] This requires several conditions, which include the present reputation of the agent (its political capital value), the value it attaches to holding office in the future (the premium earned for what it supplies), and a discount rate low enough so that future gains are greater than the temptation to cheat. See the discussion of such conditions in firms in Shapiro 1983.

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Enforcement then depends on whether the principal, or citizens, can prevent or ensure such "future gains." Punishing incumbents for bad performance must in addition not entail excessive costs to citizens. But in democratic politics, elections are about policy package deals and relative choices. And the vote is a particularly crude sanctioning instrument: in the words of O'Flaherty (1990: 134), "politics can be nothing more than meting out rewards and punishments, and doing so in a ham-fisted manner." For one, governmental action is multidimensional, and voters may want to reject some policies but retain others that they value. Incumbents will fully play a balancing game, making popular and unpopular policies interdependent. Also, citizens may dislike the opposition even more intensely. As Jensen and Meckling (1976) put it, in examining agency relationships in firms, "the size of the divergence (the agency costs) will be directly related to the cost of replacing the manager." Elections are not just about sanctioning an agent who has performed poorly, but about whether to appoint an alternative one. Thus governments will play a comparative game: the discrediting of the opposition is probably a more usual electoral resource than explanations of past actions or promises about the future. So, although in Ferejohn's (1986) model the importance of challengers lies entirely on their availability and it is the existence of willing alternative office seekers that gives the voter whatever leverage he has on the incumbent, it is also the case that the latter may use to his advantage citizens' mistrust toward the opposition. His room for maneuver is a function of both his reputation as agent and the reputational characteristics of the opponent.

If democratic accountability depends on whether voters have information to assess performance, responsibility can be assigned, and incumbents can be punished or rewarded, then the strategies of politicians who want to remain in office and benefit from a wide margin of maneuver will be manipulative regarding one or more of these requisites. But they will have to do so in a restrictive scenario. Obviously the incumbents will face the strategies of the opposition politicians, who want to replace them and who will manipulate the information in the opposite direction: they will, for example, attribute the responsibility for good news to exogenous factors and for bad news to the government. And more generally, incumbents will deploy their strategies in a scenario occupied by a plethora of actors with crisscrossing interests that will be

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providing citizens with very heterogeneous information relevant for the accountability of the government. This information will be related to policies or policy outcomes; but it may also deal with the activities of politicians previous to holding office, their private lives, and different strategies of discredit. Critical information of this kind may both paralyze the agendas of the incumbents and raise new dimensions of political liability. True or false, it clearly has a major impact among citizens: it may indeed be the case that politicians lose office more easily due to private scandals than to failed policies. So, the flow of information on the performance of the agent and the instruments for monitoring him have a particular complexity in politics.

This political scenario in which the mechanisms of accountability operate has changed very much in recent times. The media often take up the role of the opposition in Parliament: that is, the opposition follows, rather than leads, the media. The parliamentary political agenda is generally set by the information flow of newspapers and radio and television programs. In fact, parliamentary debates have a comparatively limited impact, except on rare occasions. Thus, a motion of no confidence may be presented not just when it might be viable in parliamentary terms, but also when the challenger who is likely to lose hopes nevertheless to raise his political stature through the media. And politicians cultivate the media more than Parliament in the explanation and defense of their policies. Bruno Kreisky, the Austrian chancellor, estimated that 80% of his schedule was dedicated to relations with the media.[7] The judiciary has also acquired a major role in the mechanisms of political accountability and in the definition of the political agenda. That is, politics has become more judicialized and justice more politicized. Politicians often react to this political influence of media and judiciary, contrasting their own democratic support to the nonelected nature of these powerful actors. They would like them to reflect the political majority of the day – for instance, attributing to Parliament the nominations to the judiciary, or introducing participatory democracy within the media (as Andreas Papandreou, the Greek prime minister, attempted to do through legislation). Such reactions are implicitly or explicitly supported by an argument that opposes democracy to pluralism. Of course, the argument

[7] Personal interview of the author with Kreisky, June 18, 1982.

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would be more credible if the institutions of democracy performed satisfactorily as instruments of accountability, providing information on incumbents and facilitating their monitoring; on the contrary, it would appear to be cynical if democratic accountability were to be critically dependent on the institutions of pluralism.

Yet the control over politicians can hardly be ensured by pluralist institutions when democratic institutions (such as Parliament or parties) are impotent instruments of accountability. Such control requires independent media, real pluralism of information, and fairness of coverage. And centers of vast economic and informational resources have interests of their own, which do not overlap with those of citizens, that guide their strategies toward the government of the day. They may use pressure, threats, blackmail, or sheer destabilization: to paraphrase Harry Truman, they can raise the heat considerably inside the kitchen. Such strategies will manipulate citizens; the latter will use information that will facilitate their monitoring of incumbents, but they will also be misled with disinformation.[8] And, although citizens will suspect or be aware of the latter, they will also grant credit to the former, for shedding light over issues that democratic institutions had not revealed. So, when politicians complain of the treatment they get from the pluralist institutions, their best strategy is to facilitate monitoring through Parliament and parties.

In this complex scenario of political accountability, incumbents will be backed by their own party, often held together by powerful instruments of discipline. They will face an opposition in Parliament supposed to play a crucial role in providing information on incumbents and monitoring them. Media and judiciary will be influencing the definition of agendas and shedding light (or

[8] When citizens suffer informative manipulation from multiple sources, a limited interest in politics on their part may paradoxically facilitate the control over politicians. As Ferejohn (1990: 11–12) puts it, "because citizens care so little about politics, political evaluations and attachments are relatively stable and slow to shift. Thus, competitors for office are induced to regard them as external "facts" about their environment and not really subject to intentional manipulation. In a sense, citizens are able to act "as if" they have precommitted to a reward scheme. Thus, the fact that citizens do not pay much attention to new information and that politicians know this implies that politicians are limited in their ability to take advantage of the heterogeneity of their constituency to build new coalitions."

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shadows) on politicians. And centers of economic and informational power will pursue their own interests, developing strategies that will both help and distort the monitoring of incumbents. In this scenario, facing demands for political responsiveness and anticipating accountability, what will modern princes do? Remember that we assume that they are interested in their own political survival, independently from the median voter's position. That is, they want to remain in power and to maximize their margin of maneuver for unpopular policies or breaches of promises. To achieve these goals, politicians will develop strategies directed toward their own party and toward public opinion – or citizens. And they will try to rally them against the opposition, the hostile press, the conspiring centers of power, and the inquisitive judges, whose credibility they will try to undermine.

The role of parties in the mechanisms of political accountability has not been sufficiently studied. Politicians have often been treated in two contradictory ways: either as simple reflections of parties considered as unitary actors (mostly when examining western European politics), or as autonomous from parties viewed as irrelevant (generally when analyzing Latin and North American politics). Many effects of different party systems remain unclear. Take, for instance, the rather trivial argument that in systems of proportional representation, with multiple and centralized parties, governments are closer to the median voter and more representative of the issue preferences of the electorate (Huber and Powell 1994; Dalton 1988); this says little about their accountability or electoral vulnerability. Think of the Italian case, where the median voter was fed up with the unaccountable median politician. Also, while coalition governments are generally considered to be less accountable due to difficulties in the attribution of responsibility, the internal symmetrical information shared by the different partners of such governments, who will compete against each other in future elections, may help monitoring by citizens. It has also been pointed out that political competition reduced to two parties decreases the level of control over officeholders (Ferejohn 1986); that decentralized parties and single-member constituencies hamper the attribution of political responsibilities and hence accountability; that in multiparty systems "voice" has little room as a mechanism of internal democratic control and "exit" is the only alternative for dissidence (Hirschman 1970; Fiorina 1981). As what regards the internal

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affairs of parties, they have been generally considered as irrelevant for democracy. To quote Dahl (1970: 5), "if political parties are highly *competitive*, it may not matter a great deal if they are not internally democratic or even if they are internally rather oligarchical. . . . If the main reason we need political parties at all is in order for them to facilitate democracy in the *government of the country*, then might not parties that are internally oligarchic serve that purpose just as well as, or maybe even better than, parties that are internally more or less democratic?"

Oligarchical parties may indeed be more competitive, and party discipline may be necessary for electoral victories and stable governments. But party members are not just organizational soldiers: they join the party for reasons other than the particular interests of their leaders. Parties, as organizations, embody an agency relationship between members and leaders, and this relationship is relevant to citizens in general. In such a relationship, the interests of activists as principal and those of leaders as agent may not coincide. We may assume that the activists have policy preferences and want power in order to implement them, but, as their preferences may be distant to those of the median voter, they will be willing to make concessions. There is a limit to such concessions, though: activists are not recruited among centrist voters. People join parties due to ideological motivations; if they want their party to be in power, it is in order to implement policies they believe in, not merely for the spoils of office. As for the leaders, besides policy preferences, they want power both within and without the party, and to maximize their autonomy in case their political initiatives do not coincide with those of activists (either because they want to attract votes or because their policies, once in office, are not popular among activists). So "the mark of a successful political party is that it can move to the center and appeal to voters while simultaneously retaining the loyalty and effort of its activists" (Wintrobe 1993: 254). Politicians, as agents, will have to develop strategies toward two principals, leading them to believe that their interests (which only partly overlap) are being taken care of in the best possible way. Party democracy will depend on whether activists have information on leaders' strategies and policies, can monitor their performance, and can reelect or dismiss them accordingly.

But parties are also intermediaries between leaders and citizens. Oligarchical parties may hamper democracy if they are

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an obstacle to political accountability, if their leaders use them in order to manipulate information and prevent monitoring. Democratic political parties may, on the contrary, be important instruments of accountability. If citizens vote a party platform, they will expect that the party will control its leaders regarding promises on policies. If, according to widespread democratic theses, parties are to operate as a crucial connection between citizens and the governmental process, they must follow voters' preferences and control the government, both if they are in power or in opposition. Parties provide citizens with informational shortcuts based on historical images, all the more relevant when other information is limited or missing (Popkin 1993); such shortcuts may or may not be misleading about governmental performance. Leaders may try to protect themselves behind such historical party images, the resilient partisan identity of voters, or the internal solidarity of party members ("partisan patriotism"). But parties have interests that do not necessarily overlap with those of their leaders. They have a longer-term horizon, an "intertemporal brand-name," and, as Moe (1990: 241 n. 22) puts it, they "expect to play the political game again and again, into the distant future." So, in difficult times, parties may opt for a "scapegoat strategy": that is, to change a leader who has become a liability, even if the responsibility for unpopular policies is more collective. Thus, the relationship between parties and leaders is relevant for democratic accountability, and, in principle, both should not be seen as mirror images of each other. Parties are not monolithical actors but arenas of political struggle. It is the combination of such internal struggles and external competition that shapes their organizational structures, the way decisions are made, the mechanisms of control over the politicians that the parties endorse.

When party members, as principal, cannot monitor the activities of their leaders and the party itself becomes an instrument for the manipulation of information, the capacity of citizens to control politicians will suffer. Yet born as vehicles for popular participation, defined as such by many constitutions, parties have become machineries dominated by oligarchies with their own goals. That is, they have increasingly turned into organizational weapons – instruments for competition and power – rather than part of the mechanisms for the democratic accountability of politicians. To use Michels's (1962: 79) words, "in a party . . . democracy is not for home consumption, but is rather

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an article made for export." Most of western Europe, where parties have a long tradition and dominate politics, shows a combination of what Manin (1995) has called *la démocratie du public* and *la démocratie de partis*: that is, parties compete at election time with images, symbols, and personalities, rather than specific policy positions, while in their internal life the power of oligarchies is overwhelming. This bureaucracy is reinforced when a system of public financing of parties diminishes the incentives to expand the number of militants and promote their rights (Pradera 1995). Members of such parties usually have in fact more rights as citizens than as activists; and, lacking channels for "voice," they can only opt for "exit" or for silent "loyalty" (Hirschman 1970). Sometimes, in joint-stock companies shareholders have more rights and administrators more responsibilities. If internal democracy is limited, electoral systems of proportional representation with closed and blocked lists of candidates will transfer decisions from the citizens to the party bureaucrats: citizens will vote for a party, activists will have little say on candidates, and bureaucrats will choose the future members of Parliament. Thus, parliamentary representatives will lose their freedom: they will no longer be accountable to their constituencies but to the party oligarchy.

But I do not intend to discuss in this chapter the impact that different formulas of party organization have on the democratic accountability of politicians. Internal polycentrism or factionalism may not lead to greater accountability than a centralized leadership, as the examples of the French PS and the Italian PSI show. Collusion between plural oligarchies is possible in such organizations. Also, while undisciplined and divided parties make the control of politicians difficult, if only because they blur the attribution of political responsibilities, and are usually punished by voters, parties that are not regarded as internally democratic can be electorally successful, as the case of the British Conservative Party has shown over a long period of time. This complex relationship between party organization, democratic accountability, and electoral performance needs much more careful analysis. What I intend to show here are the strategies followed by politicians and the role that the party has played as intermediary between politicians and citizens in one particular setting: that of a party with an absolute majority in Parliament and a highly centralized leadership. Such conditions are supposed

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to facilitate the attribution of responsibility and hence accountability. This was the Spanish experience for more than a decade.

Let us start with the strategies directed by politicians toward their own party. To keep control of the party in difficult circumstances is crucial for them: incumbents will try to get protection for their unpopular policies or breaches of promises under the party's mantle, that is, quelling internal opposition and manipulating party loyalties rooted in past political experiences. If they are successful, their credibility vis-à-vis citizens will increase: with limited information, a sympathetic voter will think that if the party backs the politician it will be due to good reasons. And if things turn out badly externally, the politicians who control their party will at least be able to survive internally and have a chance in the future to stand again for office. If they fail to control it, they will face political death.

If we turn to examine the Spanish example, for the politicians who had taken hold of the leadership of the PSOE beginning in 1974, party unity and discipline were the central organizational concerns. This was due to several reasons: memories of past fratricidal struggles, the attribution of the defeats in the 1977 and 1979 elections to factional disputes, and the breakdown of the UCD government and party due to internecine confrontations. They believed, therefore, that electoral success and governmental stability required strict party discipline. As a result, from the end of the 1970s onward the Socialist Party was a small but tightly knit organization. Its membership, which had stood at 101,000 in 1979, amounted only to 112,000 in 1982, when it won the general elections for the first time.[9] The ratio between members and voters was one of the lowest of all western European socialist parties, close only to the French PS: it was 1 : 54 in 1979, 1 : 90 in 1982. The leaders' control over the party was achieved through three main instruments: the very large powers of the Federal Executive Committee, the system of majoritarian representation in internal party elections, and the Spanish electoral system of proportional representation with closed and blocked lists of candidates.

The Federal Executive Committee decided on global party

[9] Figures from the Secretary of Organization, Federal Executive Committee, PSOE, Madrid.

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strategy and had a decisive influence on the final say over lists of candidates to the Spanish Parliament, to regional assemblies, and to local councils in large towns. While Felipe González provided the ideas and strategy, the deputy leader, Alfonso Guerra, controlled the organization: they had both accumulated vast personal loyalties ever since the party was reconstructed in the final years of Franco's dictatorship, but the leadership also had powerful instruments for the control of the organization. Thus, internal party elections were regulated by a majoritarian principle: delegates to congresses were elected in accordance with the rule that "winner takes all." And bloc voting procedures were established so that large territorial delegations would have a unitary vote attributed to the head of the delegation. Although there were some exceptions to these rules,[10] the oligarchical trends were very strong and the possibility of protest votes very limited. The percentage of congress delegates who held public office either by election or by appointment went up in the 1980s: it represented 57% in 1981, 61% in 1984, 67% in 1990. And the leadership became more and more rigid: while in the 1979 congress, only 42% of the Executive Committee was reelected, the proportion went up to 76% in 1981 and 1984, to 81% in 1988, and in 1990 only one member who did not want to stand again was replaced.[11] Ever since 1979, the congresses of the PSOE produced majorities of over 80% of votes on policies. The PR system with closed and blocked lists for Parliament also attributed large powers to the party oligarchy; deputies knew that their survival as future candidates depended on the sympathies that they could muster within it, to the cost of their representative function and of the mediatory role between citizens and the governmental process that parties are supposed to fulfill.

Such mechanisms of power probably contributed to the strong competitiveness of the party during the 1980s. But within the party, they led to an uncritical delegation of decisions to the leadership, the languishing of internal debates, the inhibition of information. This could be useful in the short-term (i.e.,

[10] Such exceptions were that political resolutions were voted by individual delegates, that a minority surpassing a threshold of 20% of the vote could have 25% of the delegates, and that "currents of opinion" (but not "organized tendencies") were accepted from 1983 onward.

[11] Figures from Craig n.d.

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correspond to the interest of the present leaders) but costly in the long-term horizon. The connections with society, the capacity to provide warning lights, and the anticipation of demands of accountability for broken pledges all suffered. Concern over these costs was expressed in an internal document written to González:

> The party has been changing very much. The density of the power relations cannot be compared to that existing at any other time. Endogamy, clientelism, "praetorian guards" have been reinforced. The ideological and political poverty is today very great. People think that, as deputies, all kinds of precautions are necessary in order not to be a victim of sectarianism. If this were true, if one should be more concerned with the apparatus than with voters, then the consequences of the internal politics of the party would be of a very serious nature indeed. The party needs reflection: serious, wide, and audacious. Not because this will shed light miraculously on anything, but because it will allow us to foresee problems, to act and to react. . . . The question is that many sectors of the party can be described as follows: too many mafias, too little principles.[12]

Such an organizational weapon was very successfully used by the government in difficult situations. The connection between party and public opinion was well perceived by the leaders: while Guerra used to say that "when we convince the party, then we shall be able to convince society" (on the issue of NATO), González argued that "society will help us to convince the party" (on the moderation of socioeconomic policies). To ensure the support of the organization, leaders appealed to "partisan patriotism," used past symbols and memories, and when internal criticism was voiced they argued that "the dirty linen should not be washed in public," that once an issue had been debated and decided upon activists should obey it, that party membership was voluntary (and, thus, that "loyalty" and "exit" were the only options). In October 1986, González himself warned against "serious indications of oligarchization and intolerance within the PSOE," and in February

[12] Document written by the author to Felipe González, July 8, 1987. This document and those mentioned in notes 18, 24, and 31 were part of a series written between December 1979 and September 1990, as a member of the Federal Executive Committee (1979–84 and 1988–94) and of the cabinet (1982–88).

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1990 he declared that "there is fear within the party."[13] Yet the party remained mostly an instrument for power. On some delicate policies (such as the reversal over NATO or economic policies) and over a prolonged period of time, this instrumental and disciplined party provided crucial help for the government in rallying acceptance from citizens. But its growing internal rigidity, its incapacity for circulating information and monitoring its leaders, its lack of internal criticism, and the opacity of its internal politics became eventually very damaging, both for the government and for the long-term interests of the party. Thus it played an impotent role in the string of scandals that emerged in the 1990s.

The internal evolution of parties became a growing public concern during the 1990s, while their discredit in public opinion rose. Partisan disaffection became an important issue in western European politics during the decade, although this disaffection was often unrelated to the internal democracy of the organizations. As a result, different formulas with which to change their internal life and increase their attraction were discussed – none highly imaginative or successful. In Spain, the constitution of 1978 declared parties to be "a fundamental instrument for political participation" and required that "their internal structure and operation must be democratic" (Article 6). Thus, when the PSOE promised a "new democratic impulse" in the elections of 1993, this included a law promoting such internal democracy within parties, protecting the rights of activists, and reforming party finances and electoral lists. Some of the party leaders had come to accept that internal party politics could hamper not the information of citizens on politicians but the information of politicians on citizens and on themselves – that is, their rational anticipation of accountability. Following these elections, the PSOE formed a minority government with the support of the Catalan nationalists; the law was drafted but it was never passed, either because of incapacity or unwillingness. It is indeed difficult to imagine why politicians would want to transform parties from instruments of power into potential arenas for democratic accountability.

Let us now examine more closely politicians' strategies in critical conjunctures. These strategies will be addressed to the two

[13] Speech by Felipe González to the "Autumn School" of the PSOE, Madrid, October 1986, and statement of González in a meeting of the Federal Executive Committee held on March 20, 1990.

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principals, the party activists and the voters, and will try to manipulate information and monitoring, both internally in the organization and externally among citizens. Rather than allowing bottom-to-top internal monitoring within the party, which would be facilitated by competition for the leadership, incumbents will try to transform the party into an instrument for the external manipulation of citizens. They will also use political explanations strategically in order to structure public opinion and shore up political support for the politicians who provide the account and for the unpopular policies.[14]

1. A first strategy consists of concealing policies – that is, preventing a critical dimension of politics from emerging in the public realm. The strategies will try to extend total opacity over such policies, which might have to do with actions or nonactions. Nonactions by governments refer to the exclusion of potential issues from the political agenda, knowing that public opinion would force them to take unwanted decisions. Pollution or poverty are well-known examples of issues that were in the limbo of politics over a long time (Bachrach and Baratz 1970; Crenson 1971; Lukes 1974; Gaventa 1980). When a latent issue enters the public domain, it is normally as the result of political struggles in which segments of the population, extramural actors, and different agencies of political pluralism confront governments. These confrontations illuminate previously unknown facts, extend information, augment public sensitivity over the issue, and eventually help voters in assessing the performance of governments. Actions, on the contrary, refer to underground initiatives and hidden faces of power, public knowledge of which governments will try to avoid. Examples are numerous: they often refer to affairs of security and defense, usually protected under the label of "reasons of state." But they extend to many other issues: three recent examples are bovine spongiform encephalopathy in Great Britain, the public provision of AIDS-contaminated blood supplies in France and Japan, and the Iran-Contra affair in the United States.[15]

[14] The impact of such explanations will, of course, depend on the verisimilitude of the accounts, the politicians who provide them, and the different predispositions of voters. See Stone 1989; Kuklinski and Hurley 1996; McGraw and Hubbard 1996.

[15] Wintrobe defines as a typical "Iran-Contra" strategy one in which politicians first break the law, then lie to the public, and finally, if discovered, blame the whole affair on the unauthorized actions of subordinates (Wintrobe 1993).

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The illegal financing of parties (and the associated political corruption) may be considered as another illustration of underground political activity. Hidden over a long time, the use of under-the-counter commissions, false receipts, and a wide panoply of predatory instruments related to executive power as a method of financing the parties (and as a source of personal enrichment) has turned into a major issue in many democracies. Its political impact has recently been dramatic in Japan, South Korea, and southern Europe. In Italy, over several decades party bureaucracies were transformed into Asiatic satrapies, into *nomenklaturas* that used every public resource as private property (Flores D'Arcais 1990). In France, Greece, and Spain, the presence of the Socialist parties in government after a long exclusion from power, presenting themselves as holders of moral banners, made revelations about their involvement in illegal finances particularly scandalous.

Let us look a bit more closely at the Spanish case as an example that has many similarities with other experiences. The illegal financing of parties emerged publicly as an issue in January 1990, with a scandal over the enrichment of the brother of the vice-president of the government, Alfonso Guerra, which gradually revealed a complex network for the illegal financing of the Socialist Party and was followed by a string of successive scandals over the following five years.[16] From the initial scandal onward, the issue was brought into the open by the press and then by the judiciary.[17] The opposition only followed when the issue was already on the agenda, and it stayed silent about its similar underground economic activities.[18] Parliament only debated, more or less heatedly, what was already being discussed outside it. This

[16] These scandals involved the underground activities of Juan Guerra, brother of the deputy leader of the party and vice-president of the government; Filesa, a company set up by several members of the party close to the secretary of administration; Luis Roldán, director general of the Civil Guard; Gabriel Urralburu, president of the regional government of Navarra and secretary general of the party in the region.

[17] There is a good study that compares the evolutions of the Juan Guerra affair and other scandals under different regimes and shows the very different role played by the press: see Jiménez 1995.

[18] These activities were revealed in three affairs of illegal finances: they involved the mayor of Burgos; Rosendo Naseiro, the national treasurer of the Popular Party; Gabriel Cañellas, president of the regional government of Baleares.

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limited role of the opposition and Parliament was due, on the one hand, to the existence of a monolithic party with a parliamentary majority that blocked any investigation; on the other, to inter-partisan complicity. As the leading political analyst of *El País* wrote, "denunciations for illegal financing affect the great majority of political parties. . . . The normal operation of representative institutions is paralyzed or obstructed when all (or nearly all) parties collude in a strategy of concealment or silence" (Pradera 1993). The result was that the provision of information for political accountability was mostly due to the press and the judges.

What did the accused politicians do? Their strategies were directed toward the party and toward public opinion. And the first reaction was the use of "denials" (McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995): that is, the denial that any offense had been committed. In other words, the agent first reacted by denying to the suspicious principal that he had been involved in illegal activities for his own profit using agency privileges. Defensive strategies directed toward the party tried to quell internal protest and suppress demands for internal accountability stemming from potential competitors for organizational power. In fact, the underground economy of the party had been a secret affair, used to finance not just elections but control over the organization. It was based on the opacity of internal party politics, sectarianism, and informal nuclei of power. As none of the elected bodies knew about such economic activities, denials were first addressed to them, then to the party as a whole, and finally to Socialist voters.

Evidence was declared to be false, and the sources of information were discredited. The fact that many media had been involved in virulent antisocialist campaigns helped this strategy for some time. Conspiracies, which did in fact exist,[19] and external enemies were denounced; a rhetoric of "them against us" was systematically used to rally support. "Us" involved stressing identity, a history of past struggles, loyalty, and "partisan patriotism." "Them" comprised a threatening and dark coalition of adversaries:

[19] The conspiracies were organized with great skill and vast resources. They were mostly financed by a banker, Mario Conde, imprisoned after the Bank of Spain discovered a major fraud, and spearheaded by a newspaper, *El Mundo*, and its editor, Pedro J. Ramírez. Such conspiracies tried to force the government to drop charges against Conde. They found the cooperation of some strongly antisocialist magistrates and public prosecutors. The goal, eventually, was to bring down the government. See Ekaizer 1996.

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powerful sectors of the press, the judiciary, big business, banks. The politicians involved exhibited, to use Michels's (1962: 218) words, "a notable fondness for arguments drawn from the military sphere. They demand, for instance, that, if only for tactical reasons, and in order to maintain a necessary cohesion in face of the enemy, the members of the party must never refuse to repose perfect confidence in the leaders they have freely chosen for themselves."

The party, which had been unable to exert monitoring (i.e., to detect what was going on), was now unable to play any role as mediator between citizens and politics. It was, most of the time, an internally manipulated instrument that served to manipulate citizens – that is, an obstacle to democratic accountability. Only gradually, as the scandal continued, did internal tensions increase. But dissident voices were accused of complicity with the enemy, of being "victims of the Stockholm syndrome."[20] That is, the reaction tried to prevent "voice" and restrict internal options to "exit" or "loyalty." After a bitter discussion in the Federal Executive Committee, in which once again informers were discredited and information on the scandal denied, a report written to González denounced "the sectarian tendencies and paranoid outbursts referring to alleged internal enemies. . . . They see enemies everywhere, generate vague and infamous suspicions on supposed accomplices."[21] The internecine struggle went on for four years; the result was that, although Guerra and his followers were able to win the 1990 congress of the party, their power slowly declined. Thus, Guerra was sacked as vice-president in March 1991, and, although he survived as deputy leader in the 1994 congress, his position became minoritarian. This internal change in the party was mostly due to the divergent views of González and Guerra about the model of the party and the strategies of accountability, to the growing evidence about what had been going on, to the succession of additional scandals, and to the increasing disaffection of public opinion.

Whenever hidden policies emerge in the open as scandals, politics becomes a battle for public opinion (Lang and Lang 1983). In this Spanish example, the initial strategy of politicians toward citizens consisted also of the denial of information and the dis-

[20] These were accusations formulated by Alfonso Guerra in a meeting of the Federal Executive Committee held on September 12, 1990.

[21] Document written by the author to Felipe González, September 15, 1990.

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crediting of informants. An argument that was repeatedly used in the battle for public opinion was that no political responsibilities could be accepted until penal responsibilities had been established. Only then could the principal expect the agent to resign or dismiss him on fair grounds. The contrary would make politicians very vulnerable to defamation, accusations without proof, and public trials without guarantees. It would thus be easy for powerful extraparliamentary actors to throw from office politicians backed by the popular vote. This is an argument that may end up, as I argued earlier on, opposing democracy to pluralism. The consequence is also an extraordinary politicization of justice and a judicialization of politics.

Over time, however, as the accumulation of evidence became overwhelming and additional scandals erupted, the strategy gradually shifted to "excuses" (McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995): that is, to the rejection of full or partial responsibility. The problem was presented as one of isolated individual corruption, rather than of illegal partisan activities: a "scapegoat strategy." Although the number of "scapegoats" actually became quite large, the leadership never accepted any institutional wrongdoing, although it was also unable to tell a convincing story of what had actually happened. Finally, the strategy tried to minimize electoral punishment by emphasizing the resulting costs to the voters themselves. The opposition, as the alternative agent, was accused of being involved in similar practices. If the choice on this matter was between Scylla and Charybdis, then the principal ought to look at other dimensions of politics, such as leadership, policies, and traditional partisan identities.

The electoral defeats of incumbents in Greece in 1989 and France in 1993 were largely the product of popular rejection of similar scandals. In Spain, however, the government was able to survive a general election in 1993, largely due to the remaining popularity of González, his promise to "regenerate" the party and politics, sympathy with some governmental policies, and mistrust toward the opposition. But the impact of the economic scandals was important: at the time of elections, 89% of the people thought that very much or considerable corruption existed in Spanish politics; 56% believed that it was present in every party, while 34% thought that its incidence was greater in some of them. Of the latter, 71% considered that it was particularly concentrated in the Socialist Party. Another survey also carried out in 1993 revealed,

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however, that 64% viewed the opposition in bad terms. But the string of scandals continued. In 1995, corruption was the main political concern for 36% of Spaniards, preceded only by unemployment and terrorism.[22] The consequence was that the government could not survive the following election, held in 1996. But, as had been the case in Greece, the defeat was limited: the Socialists managed to maintain 37.5% of the vote, against 38.8% won by the Popular Party.

2. Let us now turn to what politicians do when they try to transform unpopular policies into palatable ones, thus avoiding sanctions from citizens. I will assume that governments have mandates that are not controversial: that is, that they are not tied by a narrow electoral victory, that they dispose of sufficient executive and legislation power. As agents, politicians will try to have unpopular policies that do not correspond to electoral undertakings assessed according to "rules of exception" rather than to "rules of transgression" (Schedler n.d.). That is, they will argue that the former are due to unforeseen conditions that justify the violation of promises, and will deny that they fooled voters ex ante with inconsistent, unrealistic, or deceptive pledges.[23] The new position may also be presented as a display of "statesmanship." As Salmon (1993: 31) has noted, "the hallmark of statesmanship often consists in a leader bypassing his or her party . . . supporting or implementing policies that are disliked both by it and by public opinion." And the strategies deployed to persuade the principal, citizens, will be either prospective or retrospective. In the first case, the incumbent will wish to obtain the support of the principal before embarking on a policy course so far unpopular. That is, it will try to influence public opinion in order to appear as responsive when undertaking initiatives that carry political risks. In the second case, the incumbent will not try to influence the policy preferences of citizens, but to survive the costs of unpopular policies at election time through justifications and compensations. The policy initiatives will not depend on the support that these find

[22] The figures are from surveys of DATA, S.A., in May–June 1993 (for the Spanish team of the Comparative National Election Project, led by José Ramón Montero and Richard Gunther), and the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, December 1993 and April 1995.

[23] "Rules of exception" refer to changed circumstances, new information, modification in voters' preferences, or popular opposition to specific parts of the program. See Schedler n.d.

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among citizens, but the government will try to minimize electoral costs.

In both the prospective and the retrospective cases, the bluntness of the electoral choice can be used strategically by the government; this is so when the issue space is multidimensional and/or when the opposition is not trusted. Although situations are analytically different, they may have similar substantive implications for how agents can behave. I argue that, in the Spanish case, because a majority of voters favored positions of the PSOE in different dimensions of policy and because, even if they disagreed with the party's position on a critical issue, they trusted the government more than the right, they eventually had little choice when votes had to be cast. I focus here on the strategies of political survival of the government, hardly on why it would decide to follow an unpopular policy. It could well be argued that the government chose an intertemporal trade-off (costs today vs. benefits tomorrow) and that, even if unresponsive, it was representative: that is, if voters had been an assembly of self-governing citizens with the same information as the government, they would have made a similar choice. I am only concerned here with the strategical management of policy choices that are politically risky – with the strategies of survival deployed by an agent that tries to persuade the principal ex ante or ex post to accept such policy choice.

There is substantial empirical evidence on governments' capacity to mold public opinion, in spite of political competitors and media interested in the contrary and capable of providing alternative information to citizens. Page and Shapiro (1983, 1992), for instance, have shown that 25% of 357 significant changes in policy preferences in the United States between 1935 and 1979 were due to such influence of the government; they have also examined more closely the official rhetoric, and the use of lies and deception in several cases having mostly to do with foreign policy. In fact, this area of policy seems to provide a large number of cases of prospective manipulation. And referenda are a typical instrument used by governments to obtain public backing before undertaking either a risky initiative or a reversal in promised policy courses. European integration provides examples, such as those of Great Britain in 1974, Denmark and France in 1992 and 1993. I will examine here the Spanish referendum over NATO membership, held in 1986, as an illustration of the agent's capacity to influence the principal's view of what the latter's best interests are.

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Spain had joined NATO in May 1982, a decision taken by a conservative government widely expected to be routed in elections due only a few months later. The decision was backed by Parliament, with the opposition of the Socialist and Communist parties. This opposition reflected a wide hostility toward NATO in Spanish society, largely due to a long history of international isolation, a military agreement between the U.S. and Spanish governments under Francoism, and an unsuccessful negotiation with the European Community since the return to democracy. Thus, in October 1981, when Parliament debated the decision of the government, only 18% of citizens supported it, while 52% rejected NATO membership.[24] The Socialist Party argued that the admission of Spain would increase international tensions, carry costs without benefits for the country as it would not provide protection against its main security risks nor contribute to membership in the European Community, and was of sufficient importance to call a referendum on it. In the parliamentary debate González committed himself to call a referendum on NATO if the Socialists were to win the next elections. Such positions were confirmed by the congress of the PSOE held in November 1981. But membership had been completed at the time of the elections, in October 1982. In the electoral manifesto, the PSOE maintained the commitment of the referendum and promised to freeze entry into the integrated military command of NATO until citizens had decided on the issue of membership.

When the Socialists won the elections the question no longer was whether to enter into NATO but whether to leave it. The dilemma was substantially different: as González put it, "not getting married is less traumatic than getting divorced." The traumas of divorce referred to its effects on membership in the European Community and on international tensions over the deployment of Pershing II and Cruise missiles. Foreign leverage (particularly exercized by Helmut Kohl) used these arguments quite forcefully, in order to both maintain Spain in NATO and replace the referendum by a general election. But González also used uncertainty with skill: while he expressed solidarity with western European governments that were facing domestic problems over the deployment of the "euromissiles," he exerted

[24] Survey of *El País*, October 1981. There is an interesting book on Spanish politics and NATO: see Val 1996.

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strong pressure on these governments to accelerate the admission of Spain as a member of the European Community. As a result, the European summits of Stuttgart and Fontainebleu, held in June of 1983 and 1984, opened the doors to membership.

So the government faced two dilemmas: whether to remain in NATO or to leave the Alliance, and whether to call a referendum or to replace it with a general election. And it had to respond to the party and to the electorate. The order of decisions of the government was as follows: the party had to be convinced first, then the electorate; the policy position had to be made clear first, then the decision on the referendum would be taken examining the reaction of public opinion. Of course, the problem of the government was that, in opposition, it had made strong promises, that the context had now changed, and that it perceived the situation differently. If it were to take Spain out of NATO, the external costs would be serious; if it were to break its pledges, its electoral support and the party's cohesion would be damaged. But it had two cards to play: the first was the progress on admission to the European Community; the second, that the conservative opposition wanted to keep the country in NATO.

In the fall of 1984, negotiations over European Community membership were at an advanced stage. Although France had raised most of the difficulties ever since Spain requested admission in 1977, Mitterrand now declared that Spain would be a member of the community as of January 1, 1986. In a parliamentary debate on the State of the Nation at the end of October 1984, González unveiled the position of the government, which defended the permanence of Spain in NATO. The change of course was defended with three main arguments: first, the situation itself had changed, and the consequences of exit were very different from those of not entering; second, external constraints were powerful, as European security arrangements had to be stable and a country that wanted to be part of western European institutions had to share defense policies as well; third, the position of the government entailed compensations that made the policy package acceptable. These compensations included a withdrawal of U.S. troops from the military bases that had been established in Spain since 1953, under Franco; independence from the integrated military command of NATO; and a pledge that no nuclear weapons would be stored in Spanish territory. That is, the package emphasized the inevitability of the decision, the remaining autonomy on defense, the

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minimization of costs, and the benefits of "Europeanization." Eventually, the position of the government was presented in terms of the general, nonpartisan interest (the slogan was *En interés de España*). The conservative opposition, however, rejected joining the government on this platform: it opposed the restrictions to full membership in NATO and the possibility of calling a referendum, and, hoping to put the government in a tight spot, declared that it would campaign for abstention.

So the government could not play the second card, and the Socialists were on their own. Convincing the party was not very difficult: González had vast and solid loyalties, and the control of the leadership was very strong. A congress held in December 1984 backed the government: while most members (76%) of the former Federal Executive Committee were reelected, González won 71% of the votes for his new policy on NATO and over 80% for every other issue discussed. Thus the organizational weapon was ready to be used to rally voters. They, however, were less easy to convince. After the policy reversal of the PSOE, in October 1984, the distribution of views on NATO among citizens did not vary, with 52% against membership and only 19% in favor of remaining in the alliance.[25]

The consequence was that the second dilemma of whether to call the referendum or replace it by a general election became dramatic. After the change in the policy position, influential actors strongly defended abandoning the pledge to take it to the popular vote: foreign prime ministers, domestic bankers, businessmen, newspaper editors, and politicians argued that simply to call a referendum on such an issue would be an irresponsibility and that a defeat that appeared as likely would be a catastrophe. The decision on the referendum was then postponed for some time. But shortly after Spain joined the European Community in June 1985, the government started the last year of its mandate. Polls taken in October and November 1985 indicated that two-thirds of citizens demanded to vote in a referendum on NATO, that 46% of them opposed membership in the alliance, and that the proportion of supporters remained at 19%.[26] It was clear that the referendum could be lost. But popular exigencies for the government to call it

[25] Survey of *El País*, October 1984.

[26] The figures are from polls of Sofemasa and the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas carried out in October and November 1985.

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increased, rather than diminished, and the government did not know the electoral costs and the general political discredit that dropping the pledge on the referendum would entail. Additional considerations were also expressed in an internal document written to González:

> The credibility of democracy is at stake. It is not only a problem of personal credibility: it affects the whole political system. About 70% of citizens demand to be consulted through a referendum. It is true that the results are uncertain, and this uncertainty will remain until the very end. But most important is that citizens are ready to listen to reasons, and we must provide them. Our society today is particularly sensitive to Europe: it understands that membership entails costs, but is ready to accept them. People demand information and leadership. And while they may have confidence in you, they demand to be consulted. On this issue, a gap between what Parliament might decide and the preferences of society would be very damaging for Spanish politics as a whole.[27]

Eventually the government decided to be responsive prospectively, rather than accountable retrospectively – that is, to call a referendum in March 1986, rather than include the issue among the many others on which it would be held accountable at the time of the next election, due a few months later. The result of the referendum was not binding, but the government assured citizens that it would comply with it. It tried to obtain a mandate for a change of policy course that was very unpopular. The logic it used was "you will see in the future that what we want to do is best for you, but we need your acquiescence first." Probably such initiative can only be undertaken by governments and prime ministers still largely untainted from the tenure of office, confident that they can mobilize voters into supporting something different from their initial preferences.

Such mobilization was not easy. In the last month, support for NATO increased only from 21% to 26%, and opposition declined only from 39% to 36%.[28] The visible mobilization corresponded overwhelmingly to the anti-NATO coalition, while the conservatives were using the occasion to discredit the government. And while the pro-Socialist press was torn by its traditional pacifist

[27] Document written by the author to Felipe González, November 22, 1985.

[28] Surveys of Instituto Alef on February 2–4 and February 28 to March 1–3, 1986.

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stance and the dramatic situation of the government, the right-wing press was much more active in attacking the PSOE and González than in defending NATO membership. Facing a very likely defeat, the Socialists intensified their campaign over the last two weeks. They insisted very much on all the previous arguments: that, due to the changed circumstances, the external constraints, and the compensations, the position of the government was the best possible option, that the others entailed serious costs, and that "Europeanization" was at stake. But they increased the drama with two additional resources: the resignation of González as prime minister in case of defeat, and the risk of an unpopular opposition throwing the government out. The campaign thus became plebiscitarian, facilitated by the conservatives' strategy. The confusion of citizens, as a principal being required by its agent to change its policy preference, was considerable: they were uncertain about the true nature of the external constraints, the costs of sticking to the initial preference, the altruism or opportunism of the opposition. And although the *horror vacui* in case of the government being defeated was very extensive, the uncertainty lasted until the very last moment: the final published survey before voting day predicted that the government would get only between 40% and 46% of the votes, while the "no" vote would reach between 52% and 56%.[29]

The vote eventually backed the government: 53% supported its position, and 40% rejected it. A postreferendum survey revealed how close it had nevertheless been:[30] 27% of the voters had made up their decision in the last three days, and an additional 21% in the last two to three weeks. The percentages were similar for the electorate as a whole and for voters of the PSOE in the earlier general election of 1982. Only 12% of the voters declared that they had voted yes because they had always believed that Spain should join NATO. The reasons of the government had a clear influence on voters: 44% had been convinced that its position best represented the general interest (against 30% who had not); more particularly, 27% of those who voted yes argued that they had done so because Spain had to share the responsibility of European defense, and 17% because of the restrictive conditions on NATO

[29] Reported by *El País*, March 6, 1986. Similar results were predicted by surveys of Emopública, Sigma Dos, Aresco, Técnicas de Comunicación.

[30] Survey of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, March 1986.

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membership that the government had established. Former PSOE voters more frequently provided reasons of loyalty: in 41% of the cases they had voted yes because that meant supporting their party or the government. Their support was crucial for the final result: they provided 67% of the yes vote; in contrast, former voters of the Popular Party, the centrists, and the Communist Party represented only 7%, 5%, and 1% respectively. The government had won by mobilizing its previous electorate.

A few months later, in June 1986, the PSOE again won the general elections, with 44% of the vote and an absolute majority of the seats. This percentage was four points below its 1982 result. According to a postelection survey,[31] of those previous Socialist supporters who switched their vote to another party or to abstention, only 28% had voted yes in the NATO referendum; the rest had mostly voted no (47%), abstained, or provided a blank vote (16%). So the policy change had a cost for the government, albeit limited. And honoring the pledge to call a referendum had carried serious risks indeed. The government was able to survive them with a strategy that emphasized changes in circumstances, external constraints, compensations, and the costs that punishing the incumbents would carry for the voters. So the agent adapted the principal to the former's policy preference and could claim to be prospectively responsive.

3. The strategies of a government as agent vis-à-vis its citizens as principal are much more often addressed to the latter's retrospective evaluation at election time than to its prospective support for embarking on a risky policy course. Referenda are exceptional initiatives; strategies for surviving unpopular policies, betrayed promises, and political reversals at election time are, on the contrary, part of what politics is normally about. I will not discuss why politicians follow such paths: they may have made opportunist electoral promises that they never intended to fulfill; they may have had access to new information; the "objective conditions" may have unexpectedly changed; the constraints may be overwhelming. Governments, for whatever reason, might think that popular but inefficient policies will eventually generate more political costs than unpopular but efficient ones. Eventually, citizens' preferences will be temporally inconsistent; if the government is responsive, its electoral support will suffer when

[31] Survey of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, July 1986.

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the time of being held accountable comes. Over the past fifteen years many governments have undertaken economic policies that combined in different ways the betrayal of electoral promises, unpopularity, and also poor performance. Yet their political consequences have not been inevitably disastrous. The principal appears to have considered that performance was not attributable to the agent, that the latter was doing as best he could, that alternative courses of action or another agent would lead to worse material outcomes. How can the agent influence such benevolent considerations?

I shall examine, by way of illustration, the Spanish experience of economic policies between 1982 and 1996. The Socialist government had not made promises comparable with those of the PS in France or the PASOK in Greece before their electoral victories of 1981. It did not commit itself to vast nationalizations, state- and demand-led growth, or irreversible steps toward socialism or *changer la vie*. But it promised growth and the creation of 800,000 jobs over four years. Its record on economic growth was rather satisfactory: over that period, the average annual rate was 2.4%, an improvement over the rate of 0.6% in the previous four years, and equivalent to that of the European Community as a whole. In contrast, its performance over jobs was dramatic: the unemployment rate went up 3.7 percentage points, reaching 21.2% of the active population.[32] Cheibub and Przeworski (1996) have shown that unemployment is the only outcome that appears to affect the political survival of heads of government in parliamentary democracies. Yet after his initial electoral victory of 1982, González was able to win three consecutive elections – in 1986, 1989, and 1993.

The paradox not only lies in the "objective condition" of high unemployment but in the "subjective condition" of a deep unpopularity of the government's economic policies. We may divide the Spanish experience into four main phases: first, harsh economic adjustment and tough economic conditions (1982–85); second, rapid growth and intense job creation (1986–91); third, sharp economic deterioration and growing unemployment (1992–94); and, fourth, renewed economic growth and lower unemployment (1995 and 1996). No clear connection existed between such

[32] The figures on economic performance over time are from *Economie Européenne* (1995: tables 3 and 10, pp. 102 and 116).

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"objective conditions," "subjective conditions" (i.e., popular evaluation of the economic situation and of economic policies), and political support for the government. Pessimism over the economy and hostility toward economic policies were always considerable, but much less so in the first period of hardship, when voters were clearly prospective and their views on the economy were influenced by their hopes in the new government. At the end of this first period, in June 1986, the PSOE won its second election, with 21.2% of the active population unemployed. In the following phase of prosperity, economic policies became much more unpopular. When new elections were called in October 1989, the annual rate of growth had stood on average at 5.2%, while unemployment had fallen by 4 percentage points. Support for the government fell by 5 percentage points of the overall vote, although it managed to win for the third time. In the following phase of economic crisis, growth fell to 1.4% on annual average and unemployment went up again to 22.8% of the active population. This time such deterioration was reflected in a massive pessimism about economic conditions and an intense hostility toward economic policies. Yet the government managed to win again for a fourth time, in June 1993. Then, after two years of strong economic recovery, the PSOE was thrown out of power in March 1996.

Economic policies were disliked both by the party and the electorate, and performance had no clear influence on their views. On the contrary, social policies were always more popular and their support, rather than weaken, increased over time. Let us consider, for example, popular assessments of the evolution of education, health care, and the economy at four points in time. In 1986, after a long crisis and when an economic recovery was starting, only 20% of citizens believed that the economy had improved over the past years, while the percentages for education and health care were 52% and 46% respectively. In 1988, in the middle of a phase of strong growth and job creation, positive assessments of the economy went up to 31% (still below negative ones, which amounted to 35%), but represented only 13% for employment policies (negative ones reached 46%). The views on education and health care hardly varied: the percentages of positive assessments were 52% and 41%. In 1993, in the middle of a new recession, only 29% of citizens considered economic policy as "good," while the percentage for education policy was 61%. Finally, in 1995, when economic growth had picked up again,

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only 20% of people thought that the economy had improved, but the corresponding percentages for education and health care were 68% and 65%.[33]

Voters tended to support the government if they approved of social policies, even if they disliked economic policies, and this was quite independent from the economic cycle. The same happened within the party, where the ministers of the economy were always unpopular. Their power was only a delegation of González, who used to recall the advice of Olof Palme that the prime minister ought to back the minister of the economy in 98% of the occasions [*sic*]. González also used social policies to defend his economic policy both within the party and toward public opinion. His arguments were that there was little margin for options in macroeconomic management; that, although economic efficiency was a means for social policies, it was also their necessary requisite; and that the political identity of the government depended not on a distinct macroeconomic program but rather on choices over social policies. That the combination between social and economic policies was not an easy one is reflected in the following report written to González:

> In a first moment, a governmental discourse based on technical rationality dazed our supporters. To listen to members of a socialist government speaking of liquid assets or the stational evolution of M-3 produced astonishment. The government not only connected with demands for social reform, but it also seemed to master cryptical knowledge. This impact has now vanished. Unemployment, conflict over industrial reconversion, failed concertation with unions, strikes, insecurity: all this has eroded the faith in our quasi-thaumaturgical virtues. On the contrary, we now have an image of "job destroyers." True, in the name of a future recovery, but we do not explain well why we should have hope in the future. Our policies appear considerably distant and indifferent regarding the anguish of so many of our citizens; we are far from expressing sufficient concern over their conditions. The government seems to consider itself the only economically rational agent. To declare that there is no alternative macroeconomic policy is a terrible expression of pragmatism. If this is so, then we have to establish the differences in a lot of other policies. These differences are so far not sufficient enough. We must reinforce our fairer and more

[33] Surveys of Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, May 1986, February 1988, April 1995, and of DATA, S.A., May–June 1993.

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humane policies: this is what was expected from us, and this is what is still expected.[34]

Anticipating elections, governments look at opinion polls and organize their strategies accordingly. In the Spanish case, the government knew that when citizens considered its record in office, they sympathized more with social policies. The campaigns thus gave more prominence to this dimension of accountability. The strategy thus resembled what Nagel (1993) has called "reinforcing the winning dimension" – a heresthetical device used by incumbents in order to maintain a winning majority. The result was that, when asked in postelection surveys about their main reason for supporting the Socialists, a large proportion of voters answered its overall policy record: the percentages were 29% in 1986, 37% in 1989, 23% in 1993, when popular social policies could successfully compensate for the more unpopular aspects of such a record.

The government also knew that, in a *démocratie du public*, the attraction of the leader is important: thus, González was a major factor in the campaigns. The percentages of Socialist voters who declared that González had been their main reason for supporting the government were 22% in 1986, 14% in 1989, 23% in 1993.[35] But perhaps the most crucial influence of leadership was on the undecided voters. This was clearly revealed in a panel study of the 1993 general election: surveys had indicated since January 1992, with few exceptions, that the PSOE was behind the conservative Popular Party in electoral support, and the prediction that the government would be defeated lasted until the very last day. Eventually the PSOE won by a difference of 4 percentage points. Its victory was due to a last-minute decision of a substantial proportion of the electorate; as Barreiro and Sánchez-Cuenca have shown, these voters were situated on the left, most of them being former supporters of the party unhappy with the policy record of the government, and they eventually rallied round González, stimulated by a campaign centered on him (Barreiro and Sánchez-Cuenca 1996). Thus, when election time comes and citizens, as principal, have to evaluate the performance of the agent under conditions of imperfect information, they look for clues. A "good

[34] Document written by the author to Felipe González, March 22, 1984.

[35] Postelection surveys of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, July 1986, November 1989, June 1993.

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guy" might lead them to assume that he did his best under conditions that were not totally under his control, and that he pursued the principal's interest as best he could. This consideration might be reinforced by distrust toward the alternative agent. This additional strategy of highlighting the costs for the principal of sanctioning the agent was systematically pursued by the Socialists.

Finally, loyalty to the party and the historical image of the PSOE were important reasons given by Socialist voters to explain their continuing support. If we look at the three elections of 1986, 1989, and 1993, partisan loyalty was what moved 14%, 15%, and 14% of the Socialist electorate to vote for the PSOE; in addition, 20%, 22%, and 24% indicated that the main reason for their vote had to do with the traditional identity of the party (in terms of democracy or the left). As Popkin (1993: 23) argues, "party loyalties are not easily changed. They reflect past political battles that have shaped the ways in which voters thought about politics and government." Thus, the influence of such informational shortcuts rooted in historical images, together with the overall policy record of the government and the personal attraction of the party leader, helps to explain the capacity of the Socialists to survive in office.

To sum up, the Spanish government framed its economic performance with a strategy that used a panoply of different arguments vis-à-vis the party and the electorate to avoid punishment for policies that these two principals thought were not in their best interest:

The Inevitability of Such Policies. This was due to the inheritance of previous governments (*la herencia recibida*): the government presented its tough economic policies as an antidote to previous mismanagement. If they were harsh, that was due to others' mistakes. They were also determined by exogenous constraints. When the government announced its program of economic adjustment, González argued that the government would do by itself what the International Monetary Fund would force it to do otherwise. Later on, the European Community was often used by the government as a justification: that is, as a source of overwhelming economic exigencies referring to antiinflationary policies, fiscal discipline, and industrial reconversion. González was himself more careful in this respect, in order to avoid an anti-European backlash; economic globalization took the place of the

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European Community, his argument being that even without the Maastricht requirements economic competitiveness would require similar measures. The alternative would be worse: isolation, protectionism, sanctions from the European Community or from the international economic community. The consequence might be called the TINA ("there is no alternative") syndrome: economic conditions would be worse if other policies were implemented. This strategy thus leads to what César Luis Menotti, the Argentinean soccer trainer, called "the shrinking of spaces" (*el achique de espacios*): a reduction of the space for policy options.

The Promise of Light at the End of the Tunnel. That is, things will improve, but only after crossing a "valley of tears." This argument is intertemporal; the trade-off is the opposite to a popular Spanish saying: rather than "bread today, hunger tomorrow" (*pan para hoy, y hambre para mañana*), the promise consists of "hunger today, bread tomorrow." The government made systematic use of such an intertemporal discourse: it used different metaphors, such as "entering the European first division" or "not missing the train of modernity," in order to make it worthwhile crossing the tunnel. Other policies were presented as a risk, as a delay of the end of the problem, as involving worse intertemporal trade-offs because they would lead to a bleaker future.

The Offer of Present Compensations. These consisted of social policies but also of popular political initiatives that no alternative government would allegedly provide (a reform of abortion is an example). As I have argued, the government inserted unpopular policies in more-attractive "policy packages." Social policies tried to reduce hardship, avoid distributional opposition, and build support constituencies. Social and political compensations tried to provide clues about the political identity of the government to disoriented voters, activate associations with historical party images, and attract complicity and understanding among supporters. Sometimes, parliamentary or extraparliamentary confrontations with ideological antagonists over popular policies (such as reforms of education or abortion) served to provide additional clues and gather support from citizens unhappy about other initiatives of the agent.

The Popular Leadership in Contrast to the Mistrusted Opposition. The alternative agent was used over a very long time as a disincentive for the principal to punish the incumbent. When

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the credit of the opposition is low, either because of its past policy record or poor leadership, the autonomy of governments increases – that is, its accountability diminishes because of the enforcement problem that the principal faces. The historical image of the party, associated with its democratic and leftist past, was used as a powerful symbolic instrument to mobilize voters suspicious of the true identity and intentions of the opposition.

The success of such arguments in defending unpopular economic policies, which is part of the manipulation of accountability, varies according to the situation in which the government finds itself. A new government that undertakes unpopular policies will use more successfully the first two arguments. In such case, the strategy will try to influence a pattern of prospective voting. Voters will attribute hardship to the past, be pessimistic in retrospect, support a government that has taken over after a discredited predecessor even though things are bad, and be optimistic prospectively. But the past is rapidly forgotten, honeymoons do not last long, and voters have a limited memory of past performance. And when a government that has aged launches unpopular policies, it will have to rely more on the last two arguments, which will be handled conservatively: that is, emphasizing the risks of losing progress made over the past years, of missing opportunities, of changing an experienced agent. This strategy will try to induce retrospective voting: it will claim credit for achievements of the past. Voters will be pessimistic, and their support for the government depends a lot on resignation and on whether they see the opposition as worse.

The passing of time did matter for the strategies of the Spanish government. After winning in unexpected fashion in 1993, it followed the same strategy in 1996. The economy was in fact performing much better. But other issues and time had made the government more vulnerable, past achievements less effective, and González less credible. Among such issues, the emergence of the scandals that I discussed earlier had a decisive influence. And yet, insisting on social policies and the leadership of González, the Socialists managed to reduce an initial disadvantage close to 10 percentage points in opinion polls to 1.3 at election time. As agents, incumbent politicians can skillfully manage a repertoire of strategies for manipulating accountability and do well. And if the principal eventually decides to replace them, they will stand by, waiting for the next election, the rapid erosion of memory of the principal, and unhappiness of the latter regarding its choice of a new agent.

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Thus, politicians do not face in passivity the uncertain verdict of citizens. They develop typical strategies of survival that are not irrelevant for democratic accountability. Rather than look at principals (i.e., citizens), I have focused on what it is that agents (i.e., incumbent politicians) do, if they are interested in staying in power and maximizing their political autonomy, when their policies are unpopular. What they do is manipulate to their advantage the problems of information, monitoring, and commitment of citizens when assessing whether the incumbent is pursuing their interest, and whether he should be rewarded in elections.

Agents operate in complex scenarios, with multiple interests involved in political struggles and competing to persuade citizens. While this variety of sources of information increases the monitoring capacity of citizens, contradictory information that generates mistrust regarding their reliability may be used by incumbents to their advantage with strategies of discredit. And while the incumbent party is an important aspect of democratic accountability as far as it involves agency relationships between voters and party, activists and leaders, its predominant role in contemporary democracies as an instrument for power (winning elections and protecting the government) serves politicians to manipulate accountability. A party that is both unitary and transparent, democratic and disciplined, is a rare political animal. Most of the time, democratic accountability and political success, both in elections and in office, are not easily compatible. So, difficult choices have to be made.

Unpopular policies may be kept out of the political domain or be publicly known. When a formerly secret policy emerges publicly, incumbents will use strategies of concealment of political responsibility and will mobilize "partisan patriotism" and discipline to get protection under the party's mantle. I have used the example of illegal party finances to illustrate the margin of maneuver of politicians for disorienting citizens and avoiding punishment. In such cases, politicians' collusion may paralyze democratic institutions as mechanisms of accountability. When this happens, as it often does, politicians will surrender their own control to other institutions (the press, the judiciary), and democratic accountability will be distorted.

When governments publicly embark, for whatever reasons, on unpopular policy courses, they have two options. One is to get the

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ex ante acceptance of citizens, so that, after changing their initial policy preferences, governments may appear as responsive. Referenda are a typical example, and I have examined the strategies of the Spanish government to get an unpopular position over NATO backed by citizens. The other option is to win the ex post approval of citizens at election time, with retrospective strategies. I have discussed, as illustrations, the strategies of the Spanish government for surviving its unpopular economic policies and large unemployment. Both options require that the agent persuades the principal that the policy course is not due to the former's responsibility, but to the inheritance of past administrations, to unexpected changes in "objective conditions," or to overwhelming and unanticipated external constraints. The principal's approval also depends on the discrediting of alternative options, an acceptable intertemporal trade-off, and additional policy initiatives that will make the "package" more palatable. In some circumstances (for instance, a recently elected government), mistrust toward the alternative agent, the historical image of the party, and personal qualities of the incumbent ("leadership," "good guy" image) will be part of the manipulative strategy.

This is not a study of the probabilities of survival that are associated with such strategies. But the illustrations from recent Spanish politics show that this repertoire of strategical resources can be skillfully used. This may help us to understand why incumbents often manage to survive negative "objective conditions," political reversals, and unpopularity. Machiavellian *virtú* is part of the explanation: the fate of politicians is not inexorably tied to their performance, and to some extent they can manipulate accountability. As a result, governments may dispose of "relative autonomy" vis-à-vis citizens. What this means is that, on the one hand, short-term political opportunism is not a necessary condition for survival, and that an agent may work in the long-term interest of the principal; but also, on the other hand, that an agent who has shirked, that is, been a "bad government," may also be rewarded if he is a "good politician."

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