

ELECTIONS '08

Integrate or Emmigrate

Migrants Voted On But Not Voters in Spain Election

Sonia Dowsett/Reuters

Ahead of a close election on this is suddenly a matter of intense debate. The opposition People's Party (PP) leader, Mariano Rajoy, wants future immigrants to swear to respect Spain's customs. This has provoked jokes about siestas, bull-running and dancing in spotty dresses—three national customs. But it is also a reminder that the election is about more than an economy suffering from high inflation and a burst property bubble.

Mr Rajoy wants immigrants to sign a legally binding "integration contract". This would oblige them to learn Spanish, to work hard to integrate — and to return home if they are unemployed for too long or commit a crime. The proposal was ridiculed by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the Socialist prime minister. Spain's foreign-born population has increased fivefold to some 10% in the past seven years, but he claims this has caused few problems.



PP leader Mariano Rajoy has brought the subject of immigration to the forefront of his campaign

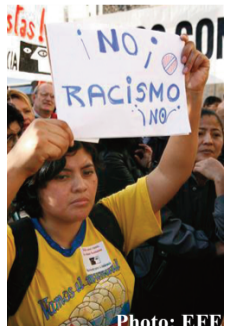
Mr Rajoy used a television debate with Mr Zapatero to accuse him of encouraging an avalanche of immigrants. The Socialists retorted that a xenophobic heart was beating in the PP; the PP said all it wanted to do was to restore order to a chaotic system. Many Socialists seem pleased that Mr Rajoy has chosen to play the immigration card. Mr Zapatero's government has devoted much time to social issues, an area where it feels comfortable. It has legalised gay marriage, made divorce easier, introduced a sex equality law and weakened the Catholic Church's influence over education. Most of these measures have proved popular; PP opposition has allowed the Socialists to preen themselves as a nice party fighting reaction.

A few months ago, however, the PP switched the thrust of its drive to win back the power it lost in 2004. With growth slowing, unemployment rising and inflation hitting 4.3%, it began to focus more on the government's economic competence. Mr Rajoy signed up Manuel Pizarro, a businessman who was formerly deputy chairman of the Madrid stock exchange, for his team.

Mr Rajoy's immigration plans have given the Socialists a chance to divert the debate away from the economy and claim once again to be more positive, caring and tolerant, painting the PP as a jumble of angry negatives. The interior minister, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, asserted that, after months behind a moderate mask, Mr Rajoy had at last revealed himself as "authoritarian and anti-social".

The voters may yet come to a different conclusion. A pre-debate poll in El País showed that 56% liked Mr Rajoy's immigration contract. The PP is aiming at working-class voters the Socialists usually rely on. They are often the first to worry about the impact of immigration on their neighbourhoods and local schools, as well as the first to lose their jobs in an economic slowdown. Mr Rajoy wants these voters either to switch allegiance or just to stay at home. Then Mr Zapatero may find that seeming nice is not enough.

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Immigrants protest contract plans

The 50 or so immigrants queuing in the Madrid winter sunshine can't vote in the Spanish election in March, but find themselves one of the main issues.

Waiting for hours to renew residence permits outside a modern ochre and blue government building, they read and chat to while away the time. Their concerns as workers are similar to those of Spaniards facing the end of an economic boom marked by rising inflation and unemployment.

But as foreigners they cannot vote on March 9. The Spanish constitution allows third-country nationals to vote on the basis of reciprocal agreements. Currently, only Norway has such a contract in place.

Herbert Lawani, a 27-year-old Nigerian with his own asset management business, would like to vote for the conservative Popular Party, as he believes they would steer the economy back to an even keel.

The Popular Party, however, has just made immigration one of the election's biggest issues, calling it a "problem" and proposing measures to compel immigrants to integrate, including restricting the use of Islamic headscarves.

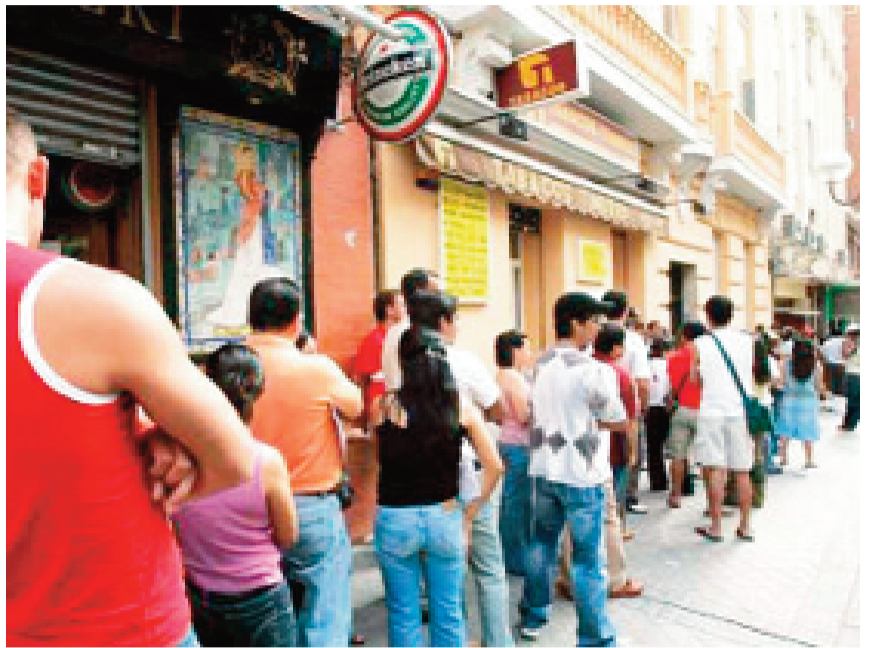
"I would like to vote, but I don't think I can," said Lawani, dressed in a leather jacket and ironed shirt, who was pushing a young baby in a new pram.

He has lived in Spain for nine years and sudden price rises are a concern. "I'm finding it very difficult these days, it's not like before," he said. "Even the Spanish are complaining."

Although headlines have focused on desperate Africans trying to enter Europe by sailing to the Canary Islands in rickety open boats, these kinds of migrants are actually a tiny minority of foreign residents in Spain.

The largest migrant groups are represented by Moroccans, Latin Americans and Eastern Europeans, many of whom came to the country in the first half of the decade seeking work in Spain's now-fading construction boom. The number of foreign residents surpassed four million for the first time in 2006, reaching nine percent of the population at a faster rate of growth than the rest of Europe put together. These first-generation immigrants came to Spain during a period of strong economic growth and their jobs are now vulnerable as many work in the troubled construction sector, some on temporary contracts.

The Popular Party hopes a tough stance on immigration will be a vote winner with working-class Spaniards worried about job security as the fast-growing economy



Immigrants queue patiently at a Social Security office in Madrid

begins to slow.

Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero is wary of appearing a lenient gatekeeper for economic migrants seeking entry to Spain, despite dismissing the opposition proposals as xenophobic.

His government granted an amnesty to nearly 700,000 illegal workers in 2005 in an attempt to harness more taxes. Spain, with one of the lowest birth rates in Europe, depends on foreign workers to fill its tax coffers.

"The legalisation of those workers was certainly a very positive move, but it generated a negative perception of immigration in the public's eyes," said Ricard Zapata-Barrero, politics professor at Barcelona's Pompeu Fabra University.

Spaniards regularly rank immigration as one of their major worries in opinion polls, alongside unemployment and terrorism.

"We Spanish need immigration, but within reason," said 29-year-old Pilar Torio, pregnant with her fourth child, looking after toddlers in the playground of a high-rise, red-brick apartment block near a shanty town in Madrid.

"I wanted to put my girls into a public nursery here and I couldn't because all the places were taken by immigrants, and many are illegal," she said.

Back at the work permit centre, 28-year-old supermarket worker Luz Adriana Ochoa Calderon from Colombia says she would like to vote for the Socialists if she could, and likes the way they have given more opportunities to women.

"We immigrants deserve to vote, we have the same right just by being here," she said, pushing strands of blonde hair from her face. "We pay taxes, so why shouldn't we have rights?"

Editor's Comment

This is a particular bugbear for me and many others in a similar situation to myself. Being a UK citizen, I am of course eligible to vote in all UK elections. I've been of voting age for 17 years. However, 13 ½ of those, I've lived away from the UK, 11 of which have been spent in Spain. My property, business, job and my life in general is based in Spain and decisions made in Madrid have a massive effect on my life here. Yet I cannot participate in the democratic process.

Bizarrely, my vote can affect the lives of people living in the UK, despite the fact that any decision made in Westminster has absolutely no effect on my life whatsoever.

The only solution available to me is to renounce my UK citizenship and become a Spanish citizen. Is this really something I want to do? Well, not particularly. I am

a European citizen and this should be enough — we are, after all, allowed the luxury of free movement between the member states. Surely the time has arrived for another solution to be sought.

Maybe members of EU countries could be allowed to vote in another country's election if they have lived in that country for a designated period of time, can prove that their primary source of income comes from that country and that is where their taxes are paid.

Maybe to vote back in their own country, they must serve a qualifying period of continuous residency of, say, two years. Surely as 21st Century democratic nations, we can come up with a system that does not disenfranchise many thousands, if not millions if we look Europe-wide, of voters.