

UNIT 2: THE POLITICAL AND TERRITORIAL ORGANIZATION OF SPAIN

1. Introduction

After the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), Spain was governed by a dictatorship led by General Francisco Franco. Known as the Francoist period or "franquismo," this authoritarian regime lasted until Franco's death in 1975. Following his death, Spain transitioned to a democratic system.

2. Characteristics of Spain's Current Political System

The current Spanish Constitution was established in 1978, following a broad agreement among political parties represented in Parliament. The Constitution was also approved by Spanish citizens in a referendum on December 6, 1978. This document outlines the fundamental characteristics of Spain's political system.

2.1. Parliamentary Monarchy

Spain is a parliamentary monarchy, a system where the monarch (king or queen) is the symbolic head of state, while actual governing authority rests with elected officials. In Spain, the monarchy was re-established in 1975, with King Juan Carlos I taking the throne. In 2014, he abdicated, and his son, King Felipe VI, became king. His daughter, Leonor, is currently the heir to the throne and holds the title of Princess of Asturias. In a parliamentary monarchy, the monarch's role is mostly ceremonial, representing Spain in international affairs and serving as a symbolic figure of unity but without executive, legislative, or judicial powers.

2.2. Democratic System

Spain's political system is democratic, meaning it allows citizens to participate in government through free elections and respects fundamental rights. The word "democracy" comes from Greek: *demos* (people) and *kratos* (power), meaning "government of the people, by the people."

2.3. Rule of Law

As a state under the rule of law, Spain's government and institutions are bound by laws created by representatives elected by the people. This means the law applies equally to all individuals and organizations.

2.4. Voting

Spain recognizes universal suffrage, meaning all citizens over 18 years old have the right to vote. Voting in Spain is free, direct, and secret.

2.5. Political Pluralism

Spanish citizens can choose from various political parties, each representing different viewpoints, allowing for a diverse and representative political environment.

2.6. Separation of Powers

Spain's government is divided into three branches:

- **Legislative:** This branch creates laws and approves budgets. It also selects the Head of Government and oversees their performance. The legislative power is held by Parliament, which is divided into two chambers: the Congress of Deputies and the Senate. Members are elected every four years in general elections.
- **Executive:** This branch handles the internal and external policy of Spain, applying laws in different areas like the economy, education, healthcare, and defense. It is led by the Government, composed of the President and ministers.
- **Judicial:** This branch administers justice by judging and sanctioning those who break the law. It operates independently from the other branches and consists of judges and courts.

2.7. Recognition of Rights and Freedoms

The Spanish Constitution guarantees a range of rights, including:

- **Individual Rights:** Right to life, physical integrity, freedom of expression and religion, equality before the law, and privacy.
- **Political Rights:** Right to vote, free elections, a written Constitution, and a multi-party system.
- **Economic and Social Rights:** Right to work, strike, healthcare, and education.
- **Legal Rights:** Right to fair trials, proper legal representation, protection against arbitrary detention, and freedom from mistreatment.

3. Territorial Organization: Municipalities and Provinces

- **Municipalities:** These are the basic territorial units in Spain. Each municipality has a defined area, governed by a City Council (or “Concello”), which includes the Mayor and council members elected every four years in municipal elections. City councils provide various local services, such as city planning, street cleaning, public safety, and social assistance.
- **Provinces:** These are larger territories that group multiple municipalities. Provinces are governed by Provincial Councils made up of representatives elected by the municipalities. The main function of these councils is to coordinate services that impact multiple municipalities within the province.

4. Territorial Organization: Autonomous Communities

The 1978 Constitution recognizes Spain as a united nation but allows for the creation of Autonomous Communities based on historic, cultural, or economic characteristics. Today, Spain is divided into 17 Autonomous Communities and two Autonomous Cities, Ceuta and Melilla.

4.1. Statutes of Autonomy

Each Autonomous Community has a Statute of Autonomy, which outlines its name, territory, and official symbols (like its flag, anthem, and emblem).

- **Community Institutions:**
 - **Regional Parliament:** Holds legislative power within the community. It enacts local laws, approves budgets, and monitors the regional government. Members are elected every four years and have the authority to choose the President of the regional government.
 - **Regional Government (Xunta de Galicia in Galicia):** Composed of the President and counselors, this branch has executive power within the Autonomous Community, enacting both regional and some national laws.
 - **Regional High Court:** The highest judicial authority within the Autonomous Community.
- **Community Powers:** Autonomous Communities have specific powers over areas such as housing, urban planning, and healthcare, and share responsibilities with the national government in areas like education, road management, and labor laws.

4.2. Government Delegates

Each Autonomous Community has a Government Delegate who represents the central government. This official ensures compliance with national laws and is responsible for public safety, overseeing the national security forces within the region.

Finally, to understand Spain's political and territorial organization, it's useful to study maps of the Autonomous Communities and provinces available on the school's virtual platform.