

## THE BASQUE COUNTRY: A PLURAL SOCIETY

### Francisco J. Llera Ramo

Professor of Political Science and Administration

Director of the Euskobarometro

Chairman of the Spanish Association of Political Science and Administration

Visiting Professor at Georgetown University

#### Summary

Basque citizens have been called to polls in thirty occasions during the last three decades. Elections were all held in an exceptional context, due to the pressure caused by the violent anti-system groups and the political tension or polarization that the institutional hegemony of nationalism has managed to impose. This circumstance, which is not a circumstance but rather a pathology, should not be forgotten, because otherwise it may seem that competition is normal in the Basque Country and that Basque citizens are used to intimidation, to hatred (whereby opponents become enemies), to crossed insults, to daily having to decide what we are and what we should do with our identity, to troubled waters and to the “everything is justified” thinking. In addition to the inequalities or disadvantages that can be found in any developed society, in the Basque Country there is a large number of people who are denied their right to freedom of expression, to option and to competition and, thus, their right to representation. Part of the region has come to be exclusively controlled by violent totalitarianism. However, Basque society, although tormented by terrorist violence and the identity tension created by ethnic nationalism, is mostly an autonomist and moderate society,

## The Basque country during Spanish transition to democracy

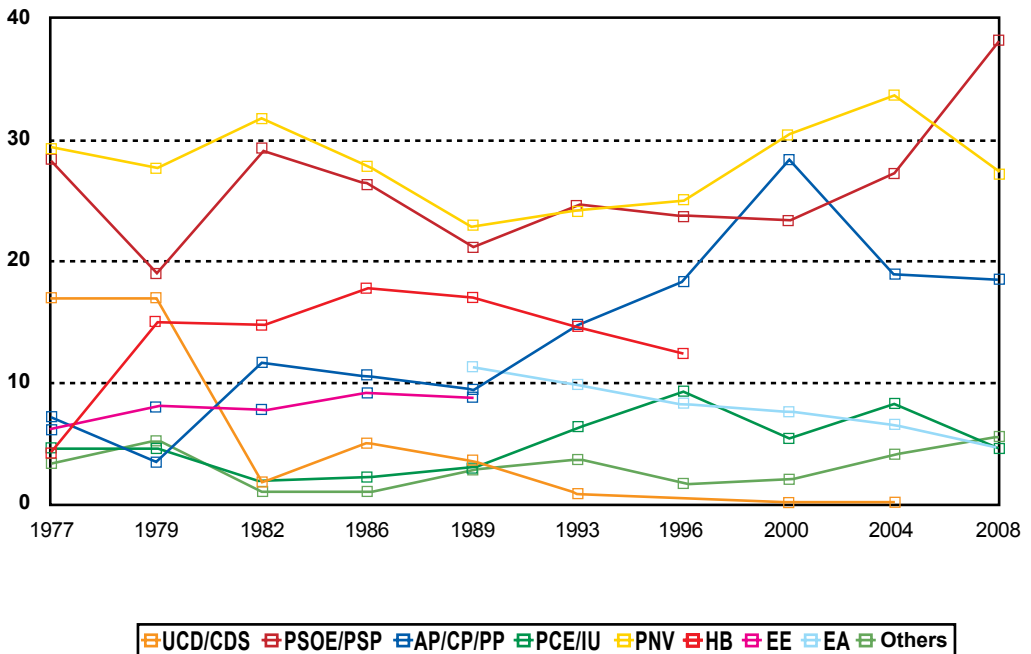
As the territorial question developed into a relevant issue during the Spanish transition to democracy, the Basque Country became an important focus of attention, not only because of the special position of Basque nationalism in its different versions, but also because of the destabilisation pursued by ETA's terrorism. This process of transition had certain specific features in the Basque Country. Firstly, due to the strong impact caused by the violent nationalism exercised during the last years of Franco's dictatorship, and, particularly, due to an increasing pressure caused by ETA's terrorism from 1977 on. Secondly, due to the semi-loyal position adopted during the reform process by the conservative faction of nationalism, represented by PNV (*Partido Nacionalista Vasco* or Basque Nationalist Party), which position was made evident when they abstained from voting in the Constitutional Referendum of 1978. Thirdly, due to the fact that some important political actors, both in the reformist centre and in radical nationalism, delayed in taking a specific political position (LLERA, 1985). Unlike in Catalonia, the Basque Government in exile was not restored, but instead a completely new statutory process was created, especially due to the internal instability and political disorientation of Basque nationalism. The transition to democracy in the Basque Country ended with the approval, by a majority of the Basque citizens, of the 1979 Guernica Statute, which had previously been agreed between all democratic parties. In spite of the difficulties encountered, the Basque Country managed to achieve an unexpectedly broad system of self-government, the recognition of the region's own historical legal diversity and of the *historical rights* referred to in the first additional provision of the Spanish Constitution and, most importantly, the constitutionalization of the Basque Country's special tax and financial system, further defined in the Economic Agreement (*Concierto Económico*). The Basque Statute of Autonomy was the first one to be approved by the Spanish Parliament and it was considered to set the guidelines and the limits for the rest of the regions in terms of self-government. Furthermore, it is also considered as the first step in the territorial and political decentralization model provided for in the Spanish Constitution of 1978.

## Basque citizens called to polls in thirty occasions in thirty years

Basque citizens have been called to polls in thirty occasions during the last three decades, thus consolidating their political pluralism: four referendums, on the Political Reform (1976), the Spanish Constitution (1978), the Statute of Autonomy (1979) and finally, to decide on the permanence in the NATO; 10 legislative elections for the Spanish National Parliament (1977, 1979, 1982, 1986, 1989, 1993, 1996, 2000, 2004 y 2008) ---- see CHART 1----; 8 regional or autonomous elections (1980, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1994, 1998, 2001 y 2005) and 8 local and provincial elections (1979, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003 y 2007). However, and despite an apparently "normal situation", the abovementioned elections were all held in an exceptional context, due

to the pressure caused by the violent anti-system groups, the excessive prominence given to such groups, and the political tension or polarization that the institutional hegemony of nationalism has managed to impose. This circumstance, which is not a circumstance but rather a pathology, should not be forgotten, because otherwise it may seem that competition is normal in the Basque Country and that Basque citizens are used to intimidation, to hatred (whereby opponents become enemies), to crossed insults, to daily having to decide what we are and what we should do with our identity, to troubled waters and to the “everything is justified” thinking. In addition to the inequalities or disadvantages that can be found in any developed society, in the Basque Country there is a large number of people who are denied their right to freedom of expression, to option and to competition and, thus, their right to representation. Before making any arithmetic-political analysis, it must be taken into account that in the Basque Country, 30 years after the advent of democracy, political competition still takes place in an unequally constituted society, and this circumstance has very negatively affected the quality of political representation in the region.

**CHART 1**  
**EVOLUTION OF VOTING OUTCOMES IN LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY (1977 – 2008)**



Source: produced by the author based on data of the Spanish Ministry of Home Affairs.  
 Note: HB did not exist in 1977. The votes shown are those of ANV (0.6%) and ESB (3.5%), which parties would later merge with HB. In 1982, UCD stood for the elections in alliance with AP.

## Political and social tension, intimidation and fear, usual components in Basque elections

Political and social tension is a usual component in Basque elections. This is due to the intimidation and the different reactions to fear which are generated by the violence exercised by terrorists and their accomplices. After 40 years of terror, a range of political and social behaviours have developed in the Basque Country: affinity, instrumentalisation, cowardice, adaptation, inhibition, abandonment, escape, fear, frustration, hatred and, lately, reaction and courage. However, violence has always been present on the other side of the equation, without any possible equality or equidistance, except in the mind of certain selfish and morally corrupt political groups; most of them comfortably entrenched in the institutional system they claim to detest. They have even “swept away” the representation and democratic pluralism from part of the region, which has come to be exclusively controlled by violent totalitarianism. This violence has been present in many other ways, either through deadly terrorism or through an additional or alternative form of terrorism, the so-called *kale borroka* (whose members have continuously assaulted local representatives of institutional nationalism who support the existing system of autonomous self-government, and committed acts of thuggery during their political campaigns or prevented free exercise of the right to vote, as we have daily seen in the news), and has made itself evident in the difficulties encountered by regionalist parties to propose candidates in areas dominated by violence and by the dramatic reality of a population who feel like victims, are afraid to express themselves politically, and most of whom are trapped in a “spiral of silence”.

## The diversity of the region

Basque politics is marked by the demographic diversity of the region ---see CHART 2 and 3---, the complexity of Basque institutions, as a result of the existing local law (based on a *foral* system), the pluralism and fragmentation of its party system (of *extreme or polarized pluralism*), the political polarization given by the nationalist factor and the existence of an anti-system political movement (represented by political parties such as HB/EH/B/EHAK/ ANV), also known as the *abertzale* left (extremist left-wing nationalism), which uses leftism and nationalist extremism to legitimize and protect the violence exercised by the terrorists (LLERA, 1994). All of the above evidences a highly complex structure in terms of governance, of inter-party relations and, thus, of electoral behaviour. In this respect, it is possible to identify three differentiated periods: the first period, from 1980 to 1986, was characterized by PNV’s minority government; the second period, from 1987 to 1998, was defined by a succession of coalition governments, which used different formulas but were always centre-left coalitions formed by a nationalist party and

a non-nationalist party; and the third period, from 1999 to this day, characterized by an excluding agreement between the nationalist parties and EB with ETA, the radicalization of pro-independence nationalism and the emergence of a politics of confrontation. They both have in common the effective and continuous political hegemony of the nationalist majority in the Basque Parliament and the minority predominance of PNV, which has, in fact, led all ten regional governments formed since 1980. The pressure of the terrorists' violence and the blackmail strategy used by the different political formulas of the so-called *abertzale* left have had serious political effects on the governance of a small region inhabited by only two million people. On the one hand, the nationalist bias has been strengthened and favoured and, on the other hand, government stability has been encouraged, limiting the opposition and weakening strategies against the executive.

**CHART 2**  
**ELECTORAL RESULTS BY BASQUE PROVINCES IN THE 2008 GENERAL ELECTIONS**  
**(AS % OF VALID VOTES)**

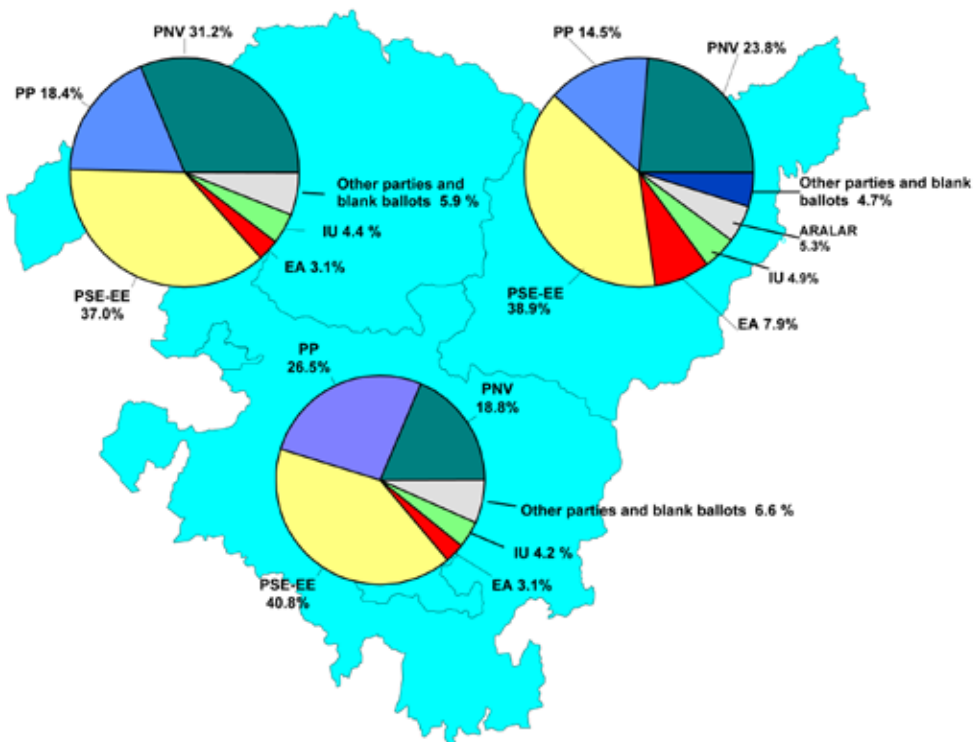
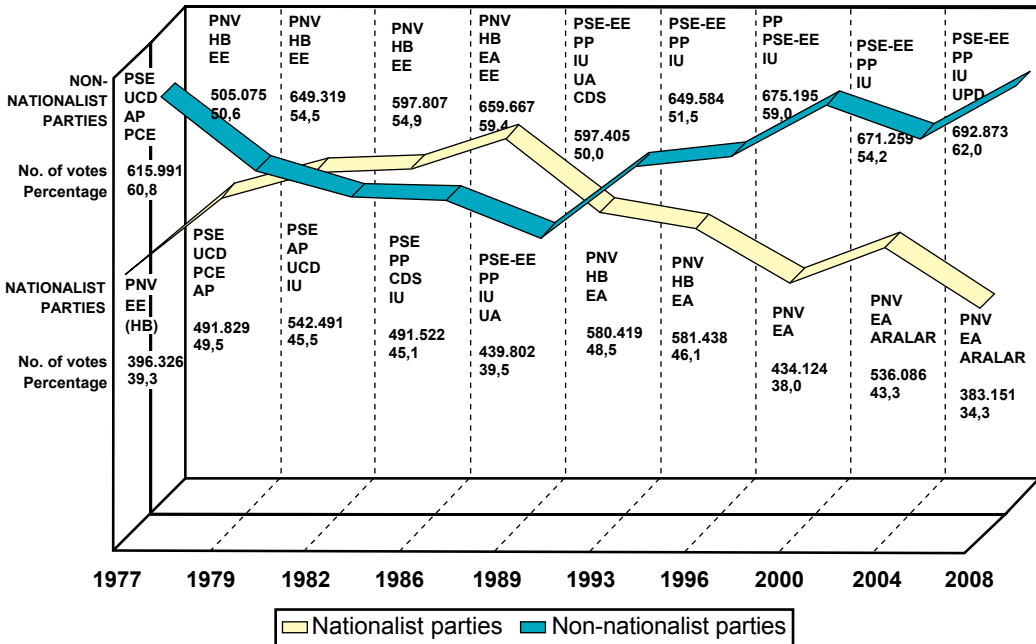


CHART 3

EVOLUTION OF THE NATIONLIST VOTE/ NON-NATIONLIST VOTE IN THE BASQUE LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS, 1977 - 2008



The political party system in the Basque Country: “a polarized pluralism”

All annalists have always defined the political party system in the Basque Country as a system of *polarized pluralism* ----see CHART 3 ----, which is still a valid definition, since the main parameters have basically remained unchanged: the highest level of multi-partyism in Spain and its Autonomous Regions, a high and stable fragmentation (around 80 %) -which is very unusual in stable democracies-, a high level of competition between political parties, a high degree of multiple polarization and, above all, the blackmailing capacity of a strong and continued anti-system option, which supports the most durable terrorism in Europe.

**CHART 4**  
**CONFIGURATION OF THE BASQUE PARTY SYSTEM 1980-2005**

	1980	1984	1986	1990	1994	1998	2001	2005
Parliamentary fragmentation	.81	.72	.81	.81	.82	.79	.77	.79
Adjusted party dispersion in Basque Parliament	.87	.90	.94	.94	.96	.92	.92	.92
Volatility	---	17	23(*)	12	15	8	8	10
Number of parties represented in the Basque Parliament	7	5	7	7	7	7	6	7
% of seats of the most voted party	41,7	42,7	25,3	29,3	29,3	28,0	34,7	29,3
% of seats of the second most voted party	18,3	25,3	22,7	21,3	16,0	21,3	25,3	24,0
Difference between the first and second most voted parties	23,3	17,4	2,7	8,0	13,3	6,7	9,4	5,3
Most voted party	PNV	PNV	PSE	PNV	PNV	PNV	PNV	PNV
Second most voted party	HB	PSE	PNV	PSE	PSE	PP	PP	PSE
% of seats held by the first and second most voted parties	60	68	48	51	45	49	59	53
Minimum parliamentary majority	2	2	3	2	3	3	2	2
No. of governing parties	1	1	2	3(**)	3	2(***)	3(****)	3(*****)
Government composition	PNV	PNV	PNV/PSE	PNV/EA/EE	PNV/EA/PSE	PNV/EA	PNV/EA/EB	PNV/EA/EB

(\*) In 1986, EA is founded and CP has to compete against CDS.

(\*\*) The first coalition government, formed by PNV, EE and EA breaks up in September 1991. EA is replaced by PSE and a new government coalition is formed by PNV, EE and PSE.

(\*\*\*) The government is formed with the support of EH and a parliamentary alliance known as "Parliamentary Cooperation Agreement"

(\*\*\*\*) Minority government without parliamentary alliances, but with the occasional support or abstention of EH (or SA)

(\*\*\*\*\*) Minority government without parliamentary alliances.

The truth is that PNV has moved from a clear predominance over the regional party system and the self-government institutions until the party's crisis in the mid 80's, to adopting, until the recent 2008 general elections, a solid and comfortable position in the central institutions (sometimes thanks to electoral coalitions with EA, a political party formed after a split with PNV), which has been favoured by the weakness of parliamentary majorities in Madrid since 1993 and particularly encouraged by the high level of competition existing among regionalist parties (PSE-EE and PP), which attract most of the votes in the two areas which define PNV's political identity: nationalism and right-wing ideology.

Pluralism and fragmentation indicators as well as the analysis of the correlation between political parties give an approximate idea of the strong competition

existing between political actors in terms of the functioning of such system, but what really matters is the ideological distance and the tensions between them, to the extent that these determine the intensity of political confrontation. As I have already described in earlier studies, polarization has two different dimensions, or two main scales on which the ideological distance between Basque parties may be represented: on the one hand, class polarization and ideological position with regard to the existing economic system, which synthesises social interests and the world conception in Western political culture, usually measured in terms of right-left; on the other hand, the intensity of nationalist sentiment expressed in a bipolar continuum between two national identities (Basque and Spanish) experienced as more or less compatible or exclusive. Although both political dimensions are theoretically different, the first one being more rational and ideology-based, the second being more symbolic and emotional, both of them are measured on a 1 to 10 scale, bearing in mind, however, that the results are always approximate and taking into account the relative value of such measurements, whose validity is nevertheless supported by a large number of researches. Basque voters have been more influenced by the second of the above dimensions.

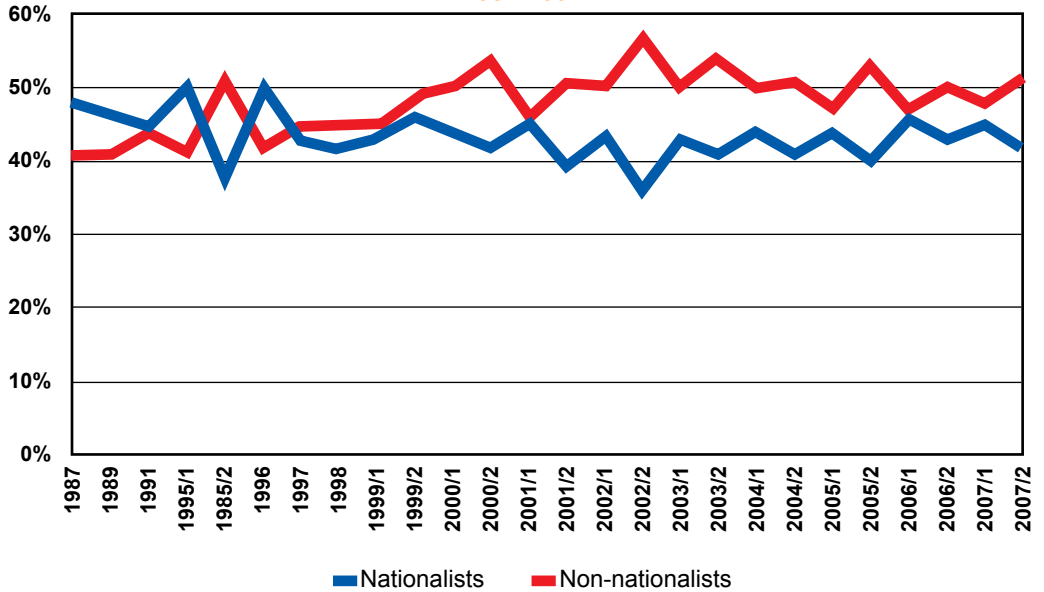
### An autonomist and moderate society

However, Basque society, although tormented by terrorist violence and the identity tension created by ethnic nationalism, is mostly an autonomist and moderate society, as shown on the following results taken from the EUSKOBARÓMETRO (Basque Barometer survey) ([www.ehu.es/cpvweb/euskobarometro](http://www.ehu.es/cpvweb/euskobarometro)).

In the first place, it is important to point out that there has traditionally been a clear division between nationalists (42 %) and non-nationalists (51 %). At the end of last year, non-nationalists were once again in the majority ---see CHART 4---. Non-nationalists, who generally hold a slim majority, have a clear majority in Álava (57 %) and Biscay (51 %) ----compared to the 39 % and 44 % of nationalists, respectively. In Guipuzcoa, however, there is a well-balanced situation between those referring to themselves as nationalists (42 %) and those identifying themselves as non-nationalists (46 %).



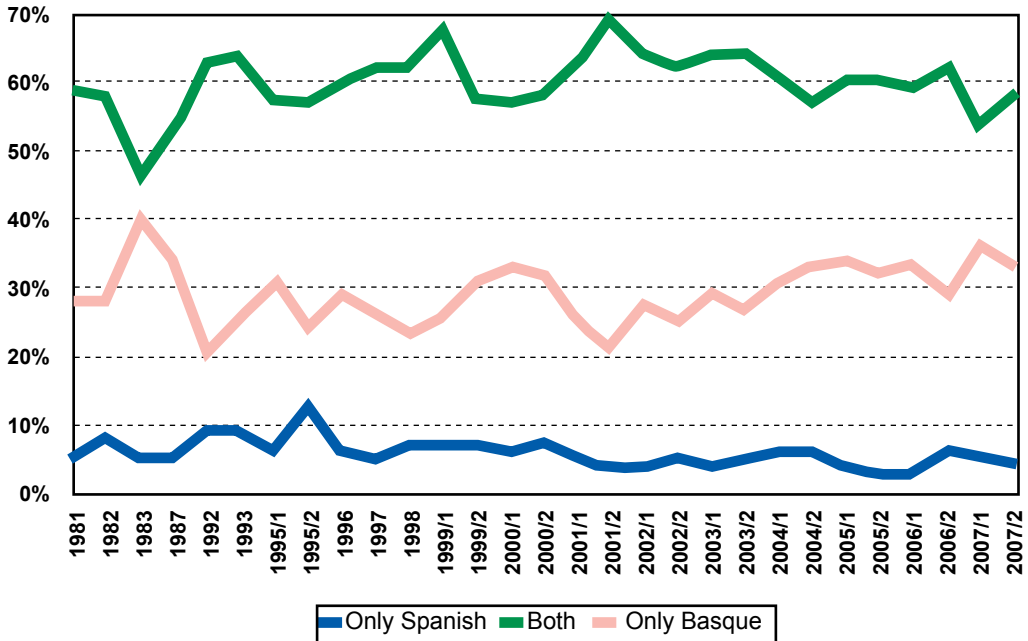
**CHART 5**  
**EVOLUTION OF NATIONALIST SENTIMENT AMONG THE BASQUE POPULATION,**  
**1987-2007**



Euskobarómetro (Basque barometer), November 07

Secondly, with an important overall advance in the last semester (+ 5 points), most of the Basque population (58 %) maintains a double Basque and Spanish national identity, even though the percentage of those feeling only Basque (22 %) is superior to the percentage of those who consider themselves only Spanish (5 %). On the other hand, extreme Spanish sentiment remains at a low 4 % while exclusive Basque sentiment has decreased to 33 %----see CHART 5----.

**CHART 6**  
**XIII- EVOLUTION OF PERCEIVED NATIONAL IDENTITY AMONG THE BASQUE**  
**POPULATION, 1981-2007**



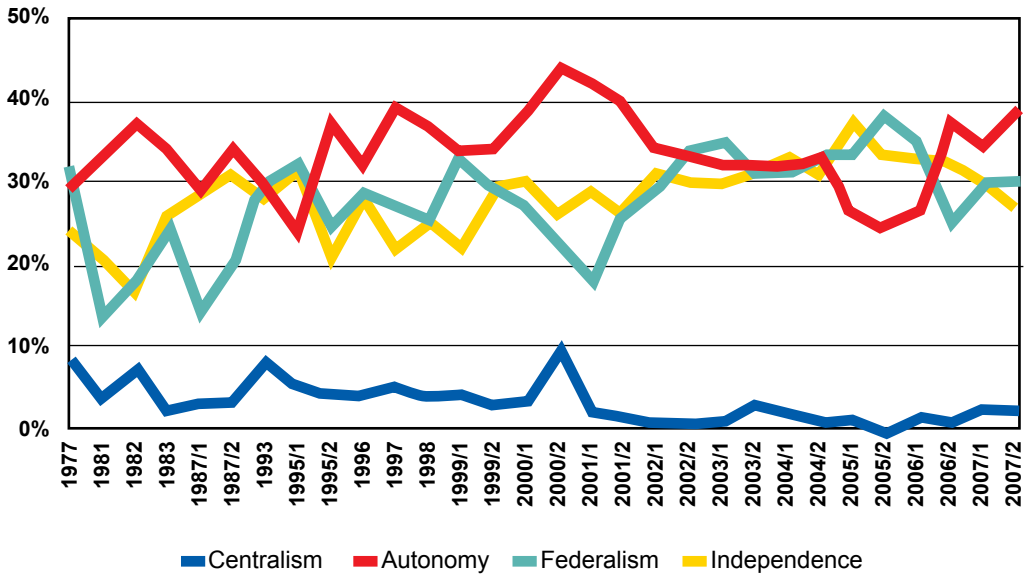
Euskobarómetro (Basque barometer), November 07

Finally, in a context of high inter-annual stability of the options available regarding the territorial organisation of the State, the Basque population is still divided between autonomy, federalism and independence. Since autonomy has recovered 15 points in the past two years, it remains the preferred choice for two out of five Basque citizens (39 %). It is still the majority option among the voters of the Spanish conservative party PP (93 %) and the voters of the Basque Socialist Party PSE-EE (63 %) and, generally, for all non-nationalist voters (59 %). The idea of self-government through a federal system has become more stable, and is supported by slightly less than a third of the Basque population (30 %). It is the majority option among the voters of EB (62 %) and Aralar (50 %), and has an important support among the voters of PNV-EA (39 %) and those of the Socialist Party (27 %). Both integrationist systems have a clear majority support, since they are supported by more than two out of three Basque citizens. On the contrary, as opposed to these decentralizing and integrationist formulas, the independent government system implied by alternatives such as self-determination or confederation has experienced a slight decline in support, currently being the preferred option of more than a fourth of the Basque population (27 %). It has a clear support among the voters of EHAK (84 %), but it has decreased among

the supporters of Aralar (44 %) and PNV-EA (30 %). Centralism remains stable, being supported by a meagre 2 % of the Basque population, a figure which can be regarded as testimonial or as an expression of rejection -----see CHART 6-----.

### GRAFICO 7

#### XI- EVOLUCIÓN DE LAS ALTERNATIVAS SOBRE LA FORMA DE ESTADO EN LA C.A.V. 1977-2007



Euskobarómetro (Basque barometer), November 07