CHAPTER 4

Political Institutions and Democratization in Spain

How can the extraordinary stock of social capital that underpinned the consolidation of democracy in Spain be explained? Certainly, it cannot be attributed to a vibrant and robust civil society. Nor can it be explained away as a product of Spanish history. Prior to the transition to democracy in 1977 there was no history in Spain of autonomous cooperation between the state and actors from civil society such as organized labor. Contemporary Spanish history is, after all, a long, tortuous tale of entrenched social conflict, especially class strife, which was at the heart of the Spanish Civil War and the collapse of the Second Republic. Moreover, the history of the labor movement in Spain, one of the pillars of the social concertation process, hardly predisposed it to engage in trust-based interactions with the state and the employers. The successful deployment of social concertation in Spain is more compelling still because attempts to erect analogous policies of negotiation and compromise by other democratizing societies have failed to get off the ground and have had the unintended outcome of exacerbating rather than alleviating social conflict. As shown in chapter 5, a dearth of trust among the social partners explains the failure of social pacts as a means for assisting in consolidating democracy in Brazil.

In the following analysis I attribute the making of the social capital that underwrote the policy of social concertation in Spain, and by extension, the consolidation of democracy, to the performance and institutional configuration of the political system. I emphasize, first, the commitment of democratically elected leaders to the principles and practice of democracy and the manner in which they served to create a sense of national solidarity
around the project of democratization. Second, I focus on the role of the state in promoting social and economic welfare prior to the transition to democracy and the manner in which this enhanced trust within Spanish society and endowed the state with credibility and legitimacy. Third, I stress the influence and reach of the party system, especially the Socialist and Communist parties, which served as a bridge in the relations between the state and civil society. I demonstrate how parties conditioned the willingness of key sectors of civil society (especially the labor movement) to assume risks by entering into explicit agreements with previous enemies, namely the government and the employers. They also assisted the policy of social pacts by fostering moderation across civil society, including sacrificing short-term political gains for the more important, long-term goal of consolidating democracy. Parties in Spain could play these roles because of their capacity to incorporate and represent civil society.

**Governing Regime Change**

Numerous aspects of governance in post-Franco Spain can be credited with promoting trust, solidarity and reciprocity and none is more obvious and suggestive than the role of King Juan Carlos I in shepherding the nation through the transition to and consolidation of democratic government. His courageous and steadfast support for democracy is generally credited with providing a symbol around which all Spaniards could rally around and aiding in legitimizing the institutions of the new democratic system as well as introducing moderation, restrain and civility in a country traditionally known for its zero-sum politics. These contributions of the king to the process of democratization figure prominently in analyses of the cooling of passions and the depolarization of politics evident in Spain in the post-Franco era. McDonough et al. write:

The King has functioned as a bridging figure, uniting Spaniards of traditional and modern persuasions, if not their regions. Juan Carlos gave the transition an elemental coherence, adding more than just a grace note to the ground bass of depolarization. Moral drama invigorated dull calculation.¹

Upon gaining control of the nation following Franco’s death in 1975, Juan Carlos expertly and judiciously exploited the vast powers granted to him to lead his nation out of four decades of institutionalized authoritarianism and into a Western-style democracy. This role fittingly earned him the