

Spain's democratic anxieties through the lens of Franco's reburial

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Abstract

Through a qualitative content analysis of an ideologically representative sample of influential media outlets in Spain, this article identifies three principal discursive frameworks surrounding Franco's exhumation. These frameworks expressed not only deep disagreements over the direction of Spain's regime of remembrance, but reflected deeper anxieties over the state of a democracy in crisis. More broadly, this analysis responds to calls to engage with journalistic sources in the memory studies literature, while illustrating the role of collective memory in collapsing past, present, and future in the articulation of political identities.

Keywords

collective memory, Franco, journalism, memory politics, Spain

Introduction

On 24 October 2019, the remains of Francisco Franco, Spain's late nationalist dictator, were exhumed from their prominent place in the Valley of the Fallen, built near Madrid by Franco himself to promote "reconciliation". A long-awaited event for the many victims of Franco and their relatives, the socialist government of Pedro Sánchez scheduled the exhumation for 2 weeks before Spain's national elections on 10 November 2019, causing controversy and accusations of election-eering from across the political spectrum. Widespread media coverage went well beyond providing factual accounts of the reburial, offering instead a heated debate that reassessed the present and future of Spanish democracy.

In broad terms, center-left *El País* came in defense of Sánchez, arguing Franco's presence in the Valley was an unacceptable anomaly for an otherwise exemplary democratic society. According to an editorial, the exhumation "put an end to the symbolic contradiction with which the [democratic]

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system has coexisted, which otherwise never challenged its unequivocally democratic nature” (*El País*, 2019). On the left, *eldiario.es* problematized the exhumation as a welcome but insufficient step from a political system stained by Franco’s persisting legacy and its failure to honor his victims: “except for a few, there was no reparation or justice and even today we continue to fight for the dignity of the memory of those who remain forgotten in mass graves” (Lafuente, 2019). On the right, little focus was placed on victim groups, and instead electioneering was described as “a crude propaganda practice, more typical of the era of the exhumed than of an advanced democracy” (Ventoso, 2019), as well as a dangerous reopening of old wounds that imperiled the achievements of Spain’s “model” and “peaceful” transition (San Sebastián, 2019).

As prominent journalism scholar Michael Schudson (2014) argues, journalism is “our most public, widely distributed, easily accessible and thinly stretched membrane of social memory” (p. 85). As such, journalism provides a crucial platform for memory struggles such as the one recently witnessed in Spain, where a once seemingly consensual regime of remembrance lies in tatters. The “Pact of Silence,” a term commonly deployed to describe the agreement between Francoist-reformist and moderate opposition political elites to offer a general amnesty for crimes committed during the Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship, began showing cracks in the 2000s, following decades of political consensus over forgetting the past. In recent decades civic pressure and a more accommodating socialist leadership produced the 2007 Law on Historical Memory, which openly called for a recovery of collective memory and condemned Franco’s dictatorship. While this process culminates in the exhumation, there is widespread controversy over what, if anything, should replace the “Pact of Silence.” In other words, Spain’s regime of remembrance is being openly renegotiated.

Collective memories offer social groups a discursively organized framework “through which nationally conscious individuals can organize their history” (Müller, 2002: 3). Such discursive frameworks involve a drive for a minimal consensus about the past, and inevitably contain a formulation of societal problems, their potential solutions, as well as calls to action. In the words of Hodgkin and Radstone (2005), “[t]o contest the past is also . . . to pose questions about the present” since “[o]ur understanding of the past has strategic, political and ethical consequences.” Collective memories are thus significant in either defining or reflecting—most likely both—the political direction followed by a polity. Hence, debates over memory are essentially discursive controversies by which actors struggle over definitions of the past, present, and future of a polity in consequential ways.

Against this background, this article makes two main contributions: first, it argues that the controversies surrounding Franco’s reburial are indicative of a collective anxiety over the state of Spanish democracy, the discursive expression of which finds in collective memory a powerful symbolic repertoire. Said analysis demonstrates the pivotal role of collective memory in fusing past, present, and future at the service of constituting political identities. Second, the article explores the role of journalism in mediating these discursive disputes, heeding calls to correct the almost unexplainable absence of reflection on journalism’s role in memory studies scholarship (Olick, 2014; Zelizer, 2014). Journalism offers an excellent approximation of how political, economic, and cultural elites negotiate collective understandings of memory, that is, of struggles to redefine a regime of remembrance.

Theoretical framework

Memory politics has largely been studied from an instrumentalist perspective and this article is no exception. The approach was introduced by Eric Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented traditions,”

which highlights the ability of political actors to invent or manipulate symbols of the past in the pursuit of partisan or state interest (Ranger and Hobsbawm, 1983). More often than not, memory politics are visible at the level of the nation-state where political elites deploy it in their struggles “for control or influence over the state and its resources” (Friedman and Kenney, 2005: 3) and as “prominent modes of legitimation and explanation” (Olick and Robbins, 1998: 108). Instrumentalist approaches conceive of memory politics as transcending individuals’ diverse intentions and motivations, as these invariably operate within the framework of larger mnemonic structures and thus any reference to politically significant shared memories alters the balance of a given political equilibrium. The focus of an instrumentalist analysis is thus not on often empirically immeasurable conscious or unconscious intentions, but on actual, palpable political implications (Dujisin, 2015, 2020, 2021).

With the above in mind, studies of memory politics would benefit greatly from a focus on how collective memory is intervened in the pursuit of political goals, most notably in struggles to build, shape, or challenge regimes of remembrance. This approach pays heed to Halbwachs’ (1992: 24) observation that mnemonic agents bent on conveying stable meanings will seek to capture the fluctuations of collective memory through formal storage and interpretation. It also builds on Olick’s (2006: 12) more recent suggestions that we treat collective memory as a “wide variety of mnemonic products and practices” that represent different “moments in a dynamic process.” Bell (2008: 155) has similarly argued collective memory is often wrongly bestowed with a static immanence that conceals its fundamentally processual nature. These interpretations invite us to apprehend collective memory in terms of dialectic, iterative oscillations between individual memory and cognition—as Halbwachs himself would have advocated—the shared meanings we attach to memories, and their material and institutional inscription in an extensive array of realms.

In this approach, collective memory has to be analytically disentangled from the concept of *regime of remembrance*, which represents the synchronic capture of collective memory by a political constellation bent on legitimating specific identities, interests, and agendas. These constellations of actors, who include politicians, intellectuals, academics, and journalists, seek wider recognition and adoption of their own vision of the past. Such vision is often expressed structurally—that is, it is not voiced directly by its proponents, but rather in an indirect, organized fashion. Put differently, the above constellations of actors delegate the task of publicly voicing views of the past to those who are in a privileged position to do so effectively. Moreover, said views are hardly ever evoked in isolation from existing political identities, constantly formulated, negotiated, and re-adapted in the pursuit of power. Through narrative form, political identities assume an almost programmatic quality: they assess the present through the lessons, compromises, and commitments inherited from the past, offering audiences a sense of historical continuity that facilitates the imagination of the future. In sum, dominant understandings of the past are necessarily contingent on broader power relations, and likely represent well-defined political identities.

A memory regime is thus fundamentally a sociopolitical constellation entrusted with disciplining collective memory’s oscillations by safeguarding a preferred identity project. It responds to an injunction to remember by which memory is problematized, citizens reminded of their duty to remember—or forget—and political cultures reaffirmed (Eyal, 2004: 9). Crucially, memory regimes have to be analyzed not only in terms of the founding myths and historical narratives being afforded to citizens, that is, with an eye on their mnemonic substance. They should also be assessed in terms of the mode of remembrance they put forth, that is the implicit *political* ethos each regime advocates: why should we remember? When and how do we engage in remembrance? Who should be heard? Which goal should take precedence, justice, or forgiveness? All the above questions offer insights into the political identities constructed by competing power constellations. Finally, it

should be noted that while resilient, regimes of remembrance are not immutable, vulnerable as they are to unpredictable political dynamics, generational and technological change, or external shocks.

Memory and journalism

There is a striking contrast between, on one hand, widespread acknowledgment of journalism as the principal authority for the mediation and distribution of public knowledge, and, on the other, the paucity of actual scholarship approaching mnemonic questions through analysis of the media (Olick, 2014: 21). Even more puzzling if one considers, as Olick does, that media are implicitly present in some of the classic works in the genre of memory studies: journalism is a prime example of what Maurice Halbwachs (1992) termed “social memory frameworks,” the discursive mnemonic structures capable of shaping both individual and collective memories. Media also fit Nora’s (2007) definition of *lieux de mémoire* as sites for anchoring a society’s memory: Benedict Anderson’s (2006) account of the emergence of shared national identities—and the “shared” memories that sustain them—underlines the key role that journalism has played in solidifying memory regimes.

Journalism and collective memory operate under similar principles: in both, producers select events and materials as well as the interpretative framework to bestow upon them (Zandberg, 2010: 7). Similar to regimes of remembrance, journalism “chooses” the events that help us make sense of the past, and the political lessons to be drawn for both present and future. Journalism is thus not just “a repository of shared memory across time and space” but also “an agent of memory” (Zelizer and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014: 12), equipped with the tools to reshape or reinforce regimes of remembrance and shape political identities.

The attraction of journalism professionals to the past has been justified on many grounds. It is related to their need for legitimacy, given the (growing) challenges faced by the industry: journalists systematically look backward in making sense of the present (Zelizer, 2014: 33), offering historical analogies and context (Edy, 1999), reaffirming their role as cultural storytellers (Berkowitz and Raaii, 2010) or even as public historians, particularly during symbolic events (Kitch, 2006). Professional conventions also weigh in (Neiger et al., 2011: 10): journalism seeks to integrate new developments into familiar, consumer-friendly frameworks, such as a shared history (Meyers, 2007: 721). And since that past actually happened, and history—many believe—repeats itself, references to the past are often deployed as having greater predictive power, being more neutral, and less suspect, than utterances by experts and officials (Edy, 1999: 79).

Journalism’s role in constructing memory regimes is amplified by macro-sociological realities, such as the media’s unparalleled ability to reach large audiences instantly. As individuals come of age, their formal, state-sanctioned knowledge of the past, acquired in schools, gradually cedes ground to the interpretations vehiculated in the media. Moreover, in comparison to the dispassionate history taught in classrooms, the media draws predominantly from personal and emotional aspects of the past that lend themselves to memory-making (Edy, 1999: 71–72).

Such powers barely go unnoticed. As field theorists have claimed, journalism is a profession characterized by weak autonomy. But while the journalistic field is invariably dominated by the political and economic fields, journalism benefits from its privileged role of mediator of public knowledge and power (Benson, 1999: 466). The press thus regularly cedes authority to other prominent actors from adjacent fields, whether politicians, academics, or intellectuals (Zandberg, 2010: 18). In this reading, journalistic content is the result of an interplay of different forces, many of which are located outside the journalistic field proper. Journalism thus offers a discursive reflection of the views of social forces more powerful and encompassing than those embodied solely by the journalistic profession: it is a veritable compass of elite discourse.

Methods

The act of imagining a collective memory is a discursive construct that emerges in social contention and debate, a construct that reflects power relations (Pakier and Str  th, 2010: 6). For our purposes, we define discourse as an ensemble bringing together meaning-producing ideas and social categories, and which are both reflective and constitutive of broader social practices. Discourses are thus not just mere heuristic tools for grasping larger trends: they are a form of action that contributes to the construction of systems of knowledge and belief as well as identities (Fairclough, 1992).

Media discourses can play a significant role in determining how society grapples with a violent, authoritarian past (Sorensen, 2009: 5–6). To unearth the prevailing discursive frameworks surrounding Franco’s reburial, this article offers an interpretive content analysis, paying particular attention to discursive frameworks that connect the exhumation to the development of Spanish democracy. This approach builds on Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger’s (2019: 427) observation that news stories can act as “sites of memory that connect past, present and future.” Rather than quantifying frequencies, the goal is to summarize and describe themes and interpretations, including latent ones, with a view to generate knowledge in narrative format (Ahuvia, 2001; Drisko and Maschi, 2016). Hence, the assumption is that during politically charged events, anniversaries, and controversies, observers can leverage media discourses to infer the evolution of memory regimes based on the discourses they produce.

The Spanish media system has been categorized as belonging to the Polarized Pluralist Model (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). In this system newspaper circulation is low but readers are highly politicized, well-educated and urban, giving rise to relatively high-brow content that serves the purpose of “a horizontal process of debate and negotiation among elite factions” (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 22). The model is characterized by a relatively high degree of political parallelism, in other words by extensive political coverage, external pluralism, and a strong tradition of advocacy and opinion journalism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 73). While political power exerts subtle but consistent pressure on Spanish editors, conformity and homogeneity in coverage is mostly ensured through informal newsroom socialization mechanisms, including hiring and firing practices, reassignments, promotions and demotions (Casero-Ripoll  s et al., 2014; Jim  nez, 2019). Hence while direct control by political parties is increasingly rare, Spanish newspapers remain well-defined instruments for ideological expression and political mobilization, and by representing distinct political tendencies, the political attitudes of their readership are similarly predictable (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 90, 98).

Considering the well-established role of the printed press in intra-elite debate in Spain, this article focuses on those Spanish newspapers that encompass the main ideological orientation of national party politics in Spain, dominated then by the socialist PSOE, the conservative PP, the liberal-conservative Ciudadanos, and the leftist Podemos. These newspapers are *ABC*, *El Pa  s*, *El Mundo*, and *eldiario.es*. The first three are Spain’s largest circulation, national, and generalist papers, traditionally representing the conservative right (*ABC*), the liberal-socialist left (*El Pa  s*), and the liberal-conservative right (*El Mundo*) (*eldiario.es*, 2020). The fourth, *eldiario.es*, is a digital outlet that caters to the left and has the second largest number of online subscriptions, behind only *El Pa  s* (Carvajal, 2020). These categorizations are not meant to be absolute or exhaustive: newsrooms are complex and messy places where one can observe dominant tendencies which, in some cases more than others (i.e. *El Pa  s*), may leave cracks for clearly dissenting voices to emerge. The newspapers’ ideological alignments, moreover, should not be interpreted as corresponding perfectly to particular political parties, but rather to political identities that may overlap across parties. Admittedly, this selection leaves out some important regional media outlets, in particular in

Catalonia, but we believe the public debate over Franco's reburial in the Catalan public sphere would require—and probably deserve—a separate assessment. The content analysis covers the 2 weeks prior and the 2 weeks following Franco's reburial (10 October 2019–7 November 2019), a period that we are confident captures the principal dynamics of the collective memory debates spurred by the exhumation. This timeframe resulted in the analysis of 661 articles (187 from *ABC*, 222 from *El País*, 100 from *El Mundo* and 152 from *eldiario.es*) in opinion, news, and feature sections. As was expected, editorials, as well as articles closer to the day of the reburial offered more explicit articulations of relevant discourses, and the present analysis inevitably privileges those, particularly in the knowledge that editorials are tools to send messages not only to the outside world, but also inside the newsroom. Nevertheless, the 4-week timeframe offered essential contextual knowledge about the general tenor of coverage, to which the content analysis also refers.

Pact of silence or exemplary transition?

Franco's military dictatorship originated in a civil war (1936–1939) that claimed around half a million victims (Lannon, 2014) and that saw nationalist forces emerge victorious over those aligned with the leftist, Popular Front-governed democratic regime known as the Second Republic. The war was followed by reprisals that had “the sole purpose of cleansing Spain of left-wing influence,” with an additional 200,000 people dying as a result of execution, disease or hunger (Encarnación, 2012: 181).

During the dictatorship's first decades, the regime sought to counter its legitimacy deficit by constructing a memory of the Civil War as an almost divine act of salvation against communist, atheist or Republican chaos (Aguilar, 2002: 31; Boyd, 2008: 144). Pivotal to the regime's consolidation process were its conscious efforts at militarizing and memorializing its public places, turning them into sites to honor Francoist figures. No other site embodied this mnemonic offensive better than the Valley of the Fallen which, during the war, Franco had visualized as a religious cult site to commemorate the sacrifice and martyrdom of the victors. Designed in the 1940s in an imperial style that blended catholic and militaristic symbols, which was to evoke parallels between the victory in the Civil War and the victories of the Crusades and of the Spanish Empire, the Valley was soon redefined as a monument of “national atonement” and “reconciliation” (Ferrándiz, 2019a: 65, 69).

With the 1960s economic boom, the regime saw a chance to elevate peace and economic welfare to sources of legitimacy (Richards, 2002), effectively encouraging “a culture of distancing oneself from the past” (Encarnación, 2012: 445). Furthermore, challenged by an emergent cultural and intellectual elite (Chuliá, 2007: 168), the Civil War was increasingly framed, if at all, as “a tragic act of madness for which all Spaniards were to blame,” (Richards, 2002: 111) giving birth to the notion of equal responsibility regarding the war.

Following Franco's death in November 1975 Spain began a negotiated transition to democracy. A window of opportunity to reform Spain's regime of remembrance, the transition was accompanied by a momentous elite agreement that would become known to its critics as the “Pact of Silence”: Francoist reformists would negotiate the terms of Spain's democratization with the moderate opposition on condition both sides put the painful past behind them and focus on building a modern, European Spain. The 1977 Amnesty Law, which guaranteed amnesty for all persons involved in institutional violence during Franco's rule and the Civil War, merely formalized the Pact (Capdepón, 2020: 104). The commitment of Spain's elites to a cautious approach to their past would be further bolstered by outbursts of violence—by separatists, left-wing revolutionaries, and even Franco loyalists in the military, who attempted an anti-democratic coup in 1981. It is also important to note that Spain's transition occurred prior to the development of an international

network of human rights, signatory states, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, these networks offered mechanisms of transitional justice, such as Latin America's truth and reconciliation commissions, which were simply unavailable to Spain in the 1970s (Blakeley, 2005: 45).

The Amnesty Law became an ambiguous landmark: for some, it epitomized an unethical call to forget a painful past. For others, it served as a symbol of Spain's successful or even exemplary democratization (Faber, 2005: 212), a symbolic closure to the divisions of the Civil War. Historian Santos Juliá would become one of the most prominent and consistent defenders of the latter position. He saw the Amnesty Law not as an improvised attempt to silence the past, but the result of a protracted negotiation between dissidents and opposition forces—including communists—who agreed not to politicize old wounds. The plethora of books, documentaries, expositions, and conferences on the Civil War following Franco's death would furthermore attest to a lively intellectual debate about the past (Juliá, 2003).

His position was, however, largely rejected by many historians, left-of-center politicians and victim groups. The "Pact of Silence" had left a simmering resentment among substantial sectors of Spanish society who perceived it as an elite arrangement built on "fundamentally unequal terms." In particular, Republican supporters had for four decades been unable to publicly mourn their victims, and were now being denied the choice whether to forgive or not (Faber, 2005: 209). Moreover, with emerging elites often downplaying the magnitude of the repression (Ferrán and Hilbink, 2016: 2), there was little or no effort put into compensating and rehabilitating victims of the regime. This was true even symbolically: the "Pact of Silence" meant that the late-Francoist narrative of a "fratricidal conflict," for which both sides share responsibility, remained largely undisturbed (Boyd, 2008: 135). Even much of the Franco-era administrative structure in the judiciary, army and civil service had remained in place (Delgado, 2015: 184; Faber, 2021), which provided an additional motive for supporters of the Pact to depict it to its opponents as a break with the past (Labanyi, 2007: 94).

Civil society and the recovery of historical memory

As elsewhere in Europe, Spain was overrun by the 1990s memory boom (Pakier and Stråth, 2010), with internal and external factors interacting to produce calls for justice—even if just symbolic—to the victims of Francoism. The preceding period had seen a large part of the public reticent to a confrontation with the past that would have shown the complicity of many ordinary Spaniards in perpetuating the regime's violence (Graham, 2005: 140). Yet the 1990s brought about a shift in attitudes that can only partly be explained by generational change. Spain witnessed a veritable civil society awakening whereby victim associations formed a momentous alliance with journalists, leading to growing social pressure (Ferrán and Hilbink, 2017: 2) and to the inversion of a memory regime that dominated Spain until the late 1990s (Baer and Sznajder, 2015: 336).

Fearful of reprisals and of unsettling the fragile political settlement of the transition, journalists were lukewarm to victim groups in the early years of democratization. Hence a first wave of exhumations, promoted by relatives who lacked the appropriate political, judicial, economic, and technical wherewithal, had a local, rather than national impact. *Interju*, a left-wing magazine combining sensationalism and naked women with thoughtful political analysis, was one of the few media who dared acting as an "agent of memory" during this period (Aguilar and Ferrándiz, 2016: 17). Its coverage of these early, unofficial exhumations confronted readers with the names of perpetrators as well as gruesome images and details, but was lacking in forensic and judicial expertise. Such coverage, while welcomed by those frustrated with 40 years of censorship, failed to spark a national debate. What had been the most read magazine of the late 1970s eventually had to grapple with a

fall in readership caused by extreme-right threats and public caution when dealing with the past. The 1981 coup merely exacerbated fears and was reflected in self-censorship across the Spanish media (Aguilar and Ferrándiz, 2016: 7).

With the nephews of the defeated coming to age in the 2000s, a young generation brought renewed energy to grassroots activism across the country, this time also finding a strong ally in the media. Two groups took the lead: the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH) and the *Foro por La Memoria*. The first became the locus of a strong civil society movement, whereas the latter prioritized pushing for an “antifascist metanarrative in which the political dimension surpasses the human rights claims of family members” (Baer and Sznajder, 2015: 338). Operating outside any formal supervision, civic activists proceeded to elaborate archeological and forensic procedures that ensured rigorous exhumations (Ferrándiz, 2019b: 29). In parallel to the upsurge in reburials, Spain witnessed a proliferation of monuments, conferences, and documentaries (Armengou and Belis, 2010) that raised public awareness of a contentious past.

But it would be the media to act as the ultimate catalyst for a civic revivalism in forcing through a discussion on the significance of the exhumations. The images of executed and tortured bodies, scattered throughout the country and at times abandoned right outside the walls of cemeteries, shook the foundations of Spain’s “Pact” in two main senses. On one hand, political battles arose in multiple villages, towns, and cities that became aware of the public persistence of Francoism in the form of statues, street names, and other symbols. At a more national level, an incipient discussion on the country’s memory politics increasingly called into question the alleged exemplarity of Spain’s democracy (Ferrándiz, 2020: 303).

The first process was encapsulated by the renewed controversy surrounding the Valley of the Fallen, the preeminent symbol of Francoism ever since it became the dictator’s final destination, and which had meanwhile turned into a site of militaristic nostalgia. Exhumations revealed that in the period between 1959 and 1983 missing Republican bodies from both the Civil War and Francoist repression had been secretly transported from their mass graves to subterranean crypts in the Valley to serve as “filling.” This encouraged not just a flurry of injunctions by civic groups to recover their remains and return them to their families, but it also gave rise to media headlines suggesting Franco himself ought to be reburied (Ferrándiz, 2019a: 65–72).

In a process clearly motivated by bottom-up dynamics, regional authorities were the first to react through appropriate legislation, which meant the state could not stay silent much longer. Elected in 2004 following the PP’s two conservative mandates, the PSOE undertook the task of sailing Spain’s regime of remembrance into unknown waters. As much could be inferred from the inaugural speech of a young politician by the name of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, during which he invoked the memory of his murdered Republican grandfather. Soon his governments moved from words to action: in the period between 2005 and 2011, the state allocated 20 million euros in supporting exhumations and commemorative projects on Francoism and the Civil War¹ (Ferrándiz, 2019a: 67).

This mnemonic revolution reached its peak with the 2007 Law of Historical Memory, enacted 30 years after the 1977 Amnesty Law, and the first official act challenging the “Pact of Silence.” While recognizing citizens’ right to remember the past as they wish, the Law asserted “a governmental role in the search for historical knowledge and the promotion of ‘democratic memory’” (Boyd, 2008: 146). It also offered various forms of compensation to victims of the dictatorship, prohibited the exaltation of Francoism and the Civil War, and encouraged the removal of its symbols from the public sphere (Capdepón, 2020). In practice, the law legalized a model of subcontracting human rights, one by which the state provided limited financial assistance, while delegating responsibility for investigations, identifications and handling of the remains of the exhumations to the various associations, victim groups, and the technical teams with which they collaborated

(Ferrándiz, 2019b: 30). Considered insufficient by many civic groups, the Law undoubtedly legitimated calls for greater transparency and public debate. In many circles, not just rightist ones, this mnemonic revivalism “provoked a near-hysterical rejection by those who denounced their quest as merely ‘raking up the ashes’” that reflected a “process of brainwashing” that Preston (2012) has termed “sociological Francoism” (pp. 520–521).

Party reactions

Thus, the Law of Historical Memory hardly heralded the sort of consensus necessary for a stable regime of remembrance. Instead, it forced a repositioning of political parties on the subject of historical memory, one that merely evinced fractures in Spain’s memory regime and catapulted them into the public spotlight.

The revival of historical memory was eventually embraced by the left, in a manner that some critics found opportunistic. In fact, during its first period of rule (1984–1996), and up until the early 2000s, PSOE’s commitment to transforming Spain into a “modern European democracy” translated in a defense of the necessity of the 1978 Amnesty (Davis, 2005: 878). Yet with Zapatero’s references to his Republican ancestry, coupled by the need to lure coalition partners committed to reviving historical memory, the PSOE became receptive to the demands of ARMH and similar groups. Moreover, his government would rule over a series of significant anniversaries that inevitably put the issue on the political agenda: the 75th anniversary of the foundation of the Second Republic (2006), the 70th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War (2006), and the 30th anniversary of Franco’s death (2005). As the 2011 election approached, the PSOE had its eyes on the Valley, creating a commission to decide its fate—options such as Franco’s reburial or the creation of a space of meditation over the past were all considered.

In contrast, Spain’s main conservative formation (PP) has been the most consistent force in defense of the “Pact of Silence.” Founded as *Alianza Popular* by former Francoist officials, it has since been haunted by uncomfortable institutional and personnel ties to the previous regime—as late as 2002, the PP offered substantial subsidies to the Franco Foundation, an organization dedicated to exalting Franco (Cué, 2002). Predictably, the PP has shown little interest in unearthing the past, resisting requests for governmental support for exhumations, claiming transitional justice issues were adequately dealt with in the past (Davis, 2005: 878), and warning that looking back would re-open old wounds (Ferrándiz, 2019b: 66). While some of the PP’s messaging resonated beyond rightist circles, this period coincided with a flurry of right-wing historical revisionism mostly led by lay historians who insisted on the thesis of Republican responsibility for the outbreak of the Civil War and who accused left-wing historians of covering up Republican crimes (Labanyi, 2007: 96). In 2011, when back in power, the PP closed the division that oversaw the enactment of the Historical Memory Law, ceasing state funding for exhumations, while its local governments continued resisting the removal of Francoist symbols (Capdepón, 2020). Nevertheless, it has made concessions, namely, in 2002 when it passed an opposition resolution in Congress condemning Franco’s coup and recognizing the victims of his repression (Davis, 2005: 873).

By the time of PSOE’s return to power in 2018, under current prime-minister Pedro Sánchez, Spain’s political landscape had been overhauled. PSOE and PP remain its most relevant players, but each side has grappled with the meteoric rise of a potentially long-term competitor: on the left, Podemos emerged in the wake of the anti-austerity *Indignados* Movement that articulated a strong rejection of the two-party system; on the right, the PP has had to grapple with the competition of the liberal-conservative *Ciudadanos* (Citizens) and, more recently, of the far-right Vox.

It is in this renewed political context that the discussion over the fate of the Valley of the Fallen reached its political conclusion: the announcement that Franco’s remains were to be moved from

the mausoleum where he had been interred for the past 44 years. Sanchez had warned he considered the persistence of a public tribute to the dictator as “an affront to democracy” (Reuters, 2019), in a call to move Spain toward a more mature democracy. While his left-wing competitors from Podemos welcomed the announcement, the measure was found insufficient for bringing justice to Franco’s victims as well as tainted by electoralism. Right-wing politicians and media insisted the Valley should not be redeveloped as it was already a place of reconciliation (Ferrándiz, 2019a: 70). Without openly opposing it, PP dismissed the reburial as an electoral move that diverted voters’ attention from the future of Spain, and on the day of the reburial its leader Pablo Casado cited Juliá to underline that the past belongs to the past (Aduriz, 2019b). Ciudadanos hesitated between its erstwhile support of the measure and its pressing need to win over PP voters, which gradually pushed its messaging toward underlining the reburial’s propagandistic purposes and irrelevance to the present (De Carreras, 2019). The latter discourse was most energetically embraced by Vox, which exploited its status as a political newcomer to accuse other rightist forces of passivity or complicity with the left’s memory politics, and benefited the most from the backlash against them. PSOE’s introduction last September 2020 of a “Democratic Memory Law”—an extension of the 2007 Law—has further advanced the discussion on how to redevelop the Valley (Calleja, 2018). It calls for its transformation into a civil cemetery and for the removal of the remains of José Antonio Primo de Rivera, founder of the fascist Falange Española.

Meanwhile, Spain’s consolidated democracy faces a veritable legitimacy crisis, unprecedented in post-Francoist history: the Catalan separatist movement has openly challenged the sovereignty of the state; a series of scandals have made calls to abolish Spain’s constitutional monarchy ever more vociferous; and Podemos’ entry into the coalition government with PSOE in 2020, together with Vox’s rise and increasing acceptance on the right, have all exacerbated left-right polarization to unseen levels. While the fears of terrorism and military coups of the early transition no longer resonate with the population, many defenders of the mnemonic status quo now fear these new “populist” threats could derail Spain’s democratic consensus. With political anxieties at an all-time high, Franco’s reburial thus not only became “the cornerstone of a tense political and memorial struggle about his regime and his moral and historical legacy” (Ferrándiz, 2022: 212). It offered a symbolic entry point from which to assess the power of memory in discursively conveying anxieties over the past, present and future of Spanish democracy. The next section analyzes three different interpretations of the reburial by the Spanish printed media, showing them to be part of larger, discursive constructs aimed at shaping Spain’s regime of remembrance.

***eldiario.es*: Spain as a flawed democracy**

Founded in 2012 in the wake of a financial crisis that hit the Spanish news industry hard, *eldiario.es* became a pioneering online newspaper, attempting to secure editorial independence through newsroom ownership and financing via subscriptions. The publication claims to belong to a community of citizens sharing values like equality, democratization, and social justice, which has made it very popular among younger, Republican, and leftist readers.

The discourse expressed by *eldiario.es* in the period around the reburial of Franco’s remains was strikingly consistent across opinion and news articles, with a clear blurring of lines between the two. From among the newspapers analyzed, *eldiario.es* provides by far the most thorough coverage of historical crimes committed under Francoism, assuming a memorializing role expressed in several interviews with surviving victims, their relatives, and groups dedicated to unearthing the disappeared. The discourse privileged by *eldiario.es* is best captured by the simple notion of Flawed Democracy: the exhumation, while a long due step in the right direction, offers insufficient

reckoning to victims and opponents of the Francoist regime. *eldiario.es* thus expresses a strong dissatisfaction with the status quo enshrined by the “Pact of Silence,” a flawed regime whose most morally reproachable element is a lingering and resurgent (neo-)Francoist right.

The line taken by journalists at *eldiario.es*, particularly in opinion pieces, is thus unequivocal: the reburial is simply insufficient to address a deeply unjust mnemonic settlement, one symptomatic of a flawed democracy. The political challenge of historical memory is thus projected into the future:

Why will Franco’s new grave continue to be financed with Spanish public money? . . . Will our children someday study the real history of Spain and not a false story that softens the Franco regime? . . . Too many unanswered questions that demonstrate to what extent Spain remains a deeply abnormal country, in democratic terms. (Hernández, 2019)

On a similar note, another journalist recognizes that “[t]oday, Spanish democracy is undoubtedly more dignified, but getting Franco out of the Valley of the Fallen should not be the end of anything, but the beginning of a path in which much remains to be done” (Palomera, 2019a). In sum, while the reburial is indeed “the end of a national shame, and that is no small accomplishment,” it should also stand as a reminder of an “unworthy chapter of Spanish democracy,” given that the “state honored him for four decades” and thus “[t]o consider what happened as a complete success of historical memory would be too optimistic” (Sáenz de Ugarte, 2019).

The critique of the present political settlement—“an unworthy chapter of Spanish democracy”—is made explicit in a consistent condemnation of the “Pact of Silence,” the product of a connivance with Francoism and a reflection of Spain’s democratic deficiencies. This condemnation has two principal dimensions in *eldiario.es*’ coverage. The first, a moral failure to bring justice to its victims. The second, a moral deficit in the political system, manifested especially on the right.

The first dimension sees journalists ultimately underline a failure of transitional justice:

The transition brought us democracy, yes, but also a selective silence on the Civil War and the dictatorship. Except for a few, there was no reparation or justice and even today we continue to fight for the dignity of the memory of those who remain forgotten in mass graves. No, it was not done well. None of the butchers and torturers paid for their crimes. (Lafuente, 2019)

Another news piece notes how rather than heal wounds, silence has merely postponed Spain’s day of reckoning: “History haunts all peoples and always catches up with them . . . forgetting the past, acting as if it never existed—one of the crucial features of the Spanish transition—is a somewhat dishonest, but above all a useless exercise” (Sáenz de Ugarte, 2019). A point repeated elsewhere: “[w]hat happened in the war continues to divide the country and the coexistence between Spaniards continues to be based on talking as little as possible about these matters with those who do not share their feelings” (Elordi, 2019).

The second dimension of the critique of the Pact of Silence leverages an immoral past that purportedly reverberates with the flaws of contemporary politics. The political establishment is thus made responsible for the 44 years in which the dictator rested in the Valley: a period

in which the government has been led by coalitions of convenience . . . All that time, the grave in the basilica remained a place of worship honoring the dictator, positioned above all those who are buried there, who died during the Civil War, unlike him. (Rejón and Remacha, 2019)

In another scathing systemic critique, an opinion article reminds readers that

the fact that the person responsible for numerous human rights violations was buried did not mean that the political, military, economic, academic, religious and cultural apparatus that had developed during the 40 years of dictatorship had been buried under that slab . . . The disappearance of the man who left everything “tied and well tied” did not mean that his power structure and those who benefited from his political and economic corruption ceased to tie knots in the process of return to democracy. Thus, a great wall of impunity was built, which with the collaboration of left-wing parliamentary formations ensured that, for decades, there would be no political debates on the past and that the biographies of regime representatives would be cleared . . . To all these benefits one has to add the promotion of ignorance in schools, one that guarantees Francoist elites full democratic rights and an unfettered continuity in power. (Silva, 2019)

But a substantial amount of *eldiario.es*’ ammunition is directed at the political right, in particular the PP. The continuities of the right with Francoism are bluntly underscored in several news pieces dedicated to the PP’s various refusals to condemn the dictatorship, and its warnings against the reopening of old wounds. The rejection of the conservatives’ position is expressed in a news piece published on the day of the reburial:

The PP’s nervousness at the mention of Francoism is nothing new. They were always opposed to moving the dictator . . . To justify it, they claimed that they did not want to “reopen old wounds,” as if the thousands of people who did not know where their family members, shot by Franco, were buried, had to resign themselves. (Sáenz de Ugarte, 2019)

Crucially, the PP’s opposition to the reburial allows *eldiario.es* journalists to put the conservatives’ democratic credentials into question. At times this argument is elaborated without explicit mentioning of the PP, such as the assessment that “Franco’s political heirs cleansed their biographies and became democratic, and no one dared to ask for more explanations” (Lafuente, 2019). Yet the politically consequential connection between past and present is often bluntly articulated, as in an article describing the PP as

still conditioned by those origins. Six times the party avoided condemning the dictatorship at las Cortes [legislative chamber], and now it has chosen to remain silent in the face of the dictator’s exhumation . . . its leader, Pablo Casado, did not utter a single word on the disinterment in his only public intervention . . . a few hours before the exhumation. (Aduriz, 2019a)

Other political forces on the right are instead attacked based not on dubious historical antecedents, but rather dodgy political alignment in the period around the reburial. The active opposition to the reburial by Ciudadanos and, especially Vox—“where today the nostalgic of the Franco regime take refuge” (Palomera, 2019b) deserves strong admonishment:

What, without a doubt, will remain forever in the collective imagination is the clumsiness of the right wing represented by PP which, due to its historical complexes with the Franco regime, has refused to appear in what is a photograph of the State, not even of the government. Nobody in a decent democracy takes a sidestep when facing a dictator, and Pablo Casado and [then Ciudadanos head] Albert Rivera have done it. (Palomera, 2019a)

In sum, articles at *eldiario.es* emphasize how four decades after the demise of Franco his defense remains normalized and its condemnation obstructed, while placing the blame for these persistent flaws on the political system that emerged from the transition, with special emphasis on the PP. Ultimately, conservatives are condemned for missing yet another opportunity to make a decisive step forward toward democracy and away from Francoism. An accusation captured succinctly in

the title of an article published the day of the exhumation itself: “The Right sits out a historic day and prevents a state consensus over Franco’s exhumation” (Aduriz, 2019b).

***ABC* and *El Mundo*: the left’s desecration of democracy**

ABC and *El Mundo* occupy relatively distinct places among the country’s readership, yet both position themselves on the right-of-center. After *El País*, *El Mundo* is considered the largest national daily in Spain and its online edition is one of the country’s market leaders. First published in 1989, the newspaper identifies with a strain of liberalism within the Spanish right, although it is often described as simply conservative. *ABC*, in its turn, was founded in 1903 on monarchist principles. While siding with Franco during the dictatorship, it attempted to maintain a veneer of objectivity. Having been overtaken by *El País* as Spain’s leading daily in the early days of the transition, *ABC* has retained its relevance as a voice for Spanish conservatism.

ABC’s and *El Mundo*’s coverage of the Franco reburial translated the right’s ambiguity toward it: *El Mundo* allegedly supported the exhumation (“This newspaper has defended the pertinence of this decision” (*El Mundo*, 2019) and occasionally criticized the right’s indifference to it (Méndez, 2019), whereas *ABC* rather avoided outspoken opposition to the reburial, but made few concessions as to its potentially positive value. Nevertheless, opinion-makers in both dailies mostly emphasized the risks associated with the “great electoral trick” (EP, 2019), particularly for the transitional settlement. In this reading, the left’s “toying” with the delicate political settlement that brought democracy to Spain opens a Pandora’s box at a time when nationalists and populists question the legitimacy of the system. *ABC* and *El Mundo* underline not just the irresponsibility, but also the distaste of the government’s actions, expressed by the event’s excessive mediatization and the authorities’ insensitivity toward Franco’s relatives and religious institutions. Hence, we argue the discourse found in both newspapers can be summed up by an overarching sentiment of Desecrated Democracy.

The reburial’s mediatization is taken as evidence of its predominantly electoral motivation. For *El Mundo*, the socialist government broke its “commitment to carry out Franco’s exhumation . . . through an intimate and discreet act,” according to an editorial. Instead, the Sánchez cabinet “orchestrated an electoral propaganda show” (*El Mundo*, 2019), which, as another opinion article emphasizes, “brutally” mediatized and dramatized the event. Sánchez, the article claims, “is not a pioneer in discovering the mobilizing power of historical narratives; he is the first to entrust its crafts to television and to his eager publicists” (Redondo, 2019). *ABC* similarly underscored the reburial’s propagandistic value and disregard for the government’s own promises of discretion (*ABC*, 2019a, 2019b), describing it as an “[a]buse of power” by a leader bent on “the appropriation of state media and institutions that should be at the service of Spaniards, not him” (*ABC*, 2019c). An *ABC* column titled “Sánchez outdoes himself: Yesterday he plagiarized Franco” further implies Sánchez’s displays of “authoritarianism” were inspired by the dictator himself:

It was a typical action of great agitation and propaganda. [we were told it would be] done without the media, which in Dr. Sánchez’s Kingdom of Lies meant that almost 500 journalists from 150 media in 17 countries were accredited. Many more than those accredited by the regime they call fascist during the state funerals that took place right there. (Pérez-Maura, 2019)

Notably, the quote not only implies Franco’s propagandizing with memory politics pales in comparison with Sánchez’s recent display, but it also surreptitiously introduces the notion that Franco should not be considered a fascist, a suggestion nowhere to be found in *El Mundo*’s coverage.

Instead, *El Mundo* offers another extensive angle of desecration by covering the government's religious offenses. The publication repeatedly gives voice for ecclesiastic authorities to express their outrage at the alleged religious insensitivity of the government (EFE, 2019; Junquera and Verdú, 2019; Polo and Herraiz, 2019). The theme of religious insensitivity is further pursued through a panoply of human-interest features on Franco's aggrieved family. Examples of humanization abound. One feature focuses on how 22 "members of his family will accompany him in his (new) and last goodbye, but no authority will offer their condolences for such a sensitive loss" (Yagüe, 2019), the guilty party being the Spanish government and its refusal to offer condolences. Similarly, another feature describes Franco as a "grandfather" whom his family is unable to honor (The headline reads: "The Francos will not be able to celebrate, for the first time, the funeral of their grandfather") (Miranda, 2019a). However, the article does not make clear why Franco's family would not be able to honor him on the same day, in a different setting. Another feature of the same journalist, on the day of the reburial, claims Franco's grandchildren and great-grandchildren showed "family unity" (Miranda, 2019b). The feature describes grandson Cristobal as having fathered "two beautiful children," one of whom was the victim of a serious accident, after which he decided to nurse his grandmother.

However, *ABC's* and *El Mundo's* amplification of accusations of religious insensitivity and political impropriety ultimately reflect a more serious indictment: a feckless socialist government is toying with a precious and delicate democratic equilibrium—inaugurated by the "Pact of Silence." Whether they consider the exhumation as generally inopportune (*El Mundo*) or unnecessary (*ABC*), both publications put forth a plotline that enshrines the transitional pact:

The authorities, in collaboration with the Francoist Cortes, immediately undertook the task of leading Spain from the Law to the Law through the Law and managed to carry out an exemplary transition, which is studied in universities as a model for implementing a peaceful democracy . . . A transition achieved at the cost of . . . a great tacit pact between Spaniards, determined to bury the Civil War forever, heal wounds, look to the future and build together in freedom . . . until Zapatero gave birth to his infamous Historical Memory Law and his gifted student, Pedro Sánchez, took over La Moncloa. (San Sebastián, 2019)

Thus, it is the transition, and the "exemplary" democracy it brought to life, which should be cherished and remembered, in contrast to a Francoism that ought to be forgotten, as underlined in yet another opinion piece:

What ended yesterday was not Franco's dictatorship but the spurious attempt to resurrect his memory in a crude and necrophilic propaganda operation. . . . Let's leave behind the one that has been buried for four decades, not under the slab of the Valley but under the civic and legal architecture of an impeccable and modern democracy. (Camacho, 2019)

In less pompous terms, *El Mundo's* editorial on the day after the reburial is also unequivocal, formulating a dire warning that merges past, present, and future:

The PSOE, which was one of the political axes of the transition from dictatorship to democracy, is now feeding revisionist positions. Removing Franco from the Valley cannot become an instrument for delegitimizing the reformist process that culminated in the 1978 Constitution . . . It is fine that Franco won't be given a grave by the state. But it would have been even better to capitalize on this procedure to renew our democracy's foundational pact. Its success does not lie in correcting past grievances, but in the freedom and prosperity achieved during the past four decades. (*El Mundo*, 2019)

Particularly through its editorials and opinion articles, *El Mundo* and *ABC* not only indict the socialist party for disturbing the delicate balance achieved during the post-Francoist transition, but also offer concrete examples of the dangers lurking behind an opened Pandora's box. This includes the allegedly short-sighted PSOE itself, accused by an *ABC* writer and journalist of sacrificing Spanish democracy at the altar of its own, divisive identity politics:

[The exhumation] is concocted to reactivate the memory of the confrontation and keep awake the furious Spanish tradition of reckoning. Because it tries to divide the conscience of a nation that long ago overcame that sad stage of backwardness, cruelty, stupidity and shame. And because Francoism no longer exists except in the retrospective imaginary of a left that has reneged on its own pact of reconciliation and coexistence to reestablish itself in the dubious legitimacy of the old trenches. (Camacho, 2019)

A similar point is made in the pages of *El Mundo* in an article titled "On Eternal Francoism." A creation of "a good portion of the academic, mediatic and intellectual left . . . carefully cultivated by PSOE ever since it went into opposition in 1996," this intellectual predisposition posits Francoism "as a problem and its relentless denunciation as a profession." The indictment against "Eternal Francoism" conveys a core belief on the Spanish right: that much of the left is consumed by a misguided and arbitrary obsession with the endurance of Francoism, ultimately serving the "delegitimization of adversaries" and endangering democracy:

In the anti-fascist struggle, fascism is not only embodied by recognized fascists, but by all those who protect the preconditions of fascism. That is to say: anyone who the on-duty interpreter of anti-fascism decides is a fascist. In our case, anyone who defends this democracy and this system. And that is the reality that PSOE will face for frivolously insisting on the instrumentalization of the past for self-serving purposes: as a mechanism to delegitimize its adversaries. (Del Palacio, 2019)

In this worldview, the exhumation has set the stage not only for the delegitimation of the right, but also of the entire post-Francoist political settlement:

Here lies the paradox encapsulated by the PSOE-orchestrated exhumation of Franco: whereas Sánchez sells to the world the triumphal gesture that spectacularly closes the transition, the public to whom this product is directed merely applauds what it interprets as the first act of its dismantling.

The pages of *ABC* and *El Mundo* identify Spain's "populist" as the most likely beneficiaries of a divisive trend, with frequent mentions of Catalan nationalism, Podemos and Vox:

These years we have experienced another type of transition: the one that has led us to a public life characterized by the rejection of consensus and the celebration of conflict. The rise of Podemos and the sovereign turn of Catalan nationalism have normalized the frontal rejection of our democratic Constitution . . . Spanish politics has suffered a primitivist regression with the importation of Latin American populism. (Arias Maldonado, 2019)

Podemos, a frequent target of right-wing media,

may recover one of its most corrosive causes: the questioning of the transition, the Monarchy and the Constitution. In the imaginary of Podemos, the proof that today's democracy is the inheritor of Francoism lies precisely in the fact that for 40 years it has tolerated the tyrant's remnants in the Valley of the Fallen. (Redondo, 2019)

On the right, the rise of the far-right Vox, which on the left is seen as evidence of a persistent Francoist threat looming over Spain's democracy, is instead framed as a mere reaction to the offenses of the left:

Vox rises because it is not normal how they have demagogically organized the exhumation of Franco . . . Vox rises because so much hatred is not normal, so much desire for revenge, to manipulate history. (Burgos, 2019)

[Sanchez] has resurrected the dictator, who had spent years without occupying the least space in our concerns, with the desire to wake up a far-right that is happily asleep or integrated into parties of an irreproachable democratic nature, to incite it, provoke its anger and encourage a reaction, if possible violent . . . (San Sebastián, 2019)

In sum, *El Mundo* and *ABC* emphasize not the righteousness and historical significance of the reburial to Franco's victims, but rather the allegedly opportunistic reopening of old wounds in an already healed society. Through this interpretation, they offer an idealized account of the transition to democracy, and place exclusive responsibility for contemporary tensions on the left.

***El País*: Spain's vindicated democracy**

Spain's leading newspaper in terms of both circulation and prestige, *El País* started publishing a few months after the death of Francisco Franco and its young, urban, and mostly left-wing newsroom soon turned it into a symbol of Spain's transition to democracy. The newspaper became a bastion of the post-Francoist democratic regime when, during the attempted coup d'état in 1981, *El País* was alone in publishing an evening edition firmly condemning the coup. In the 1980s and 1990s the newspaper also aligned itself closely with the PSOE, although recently this alignment has proven erratic. Still, *El País* earned an international reputation for a newspaper of record, and currently has over 65 million readers worldwide (Almiron and Segovia, 2012: 2894–2896).

In the period surrounding Franco's reburial, and compared with the other outlets analyzed, *El País* offered a more plural account of the reburial, welcoming some dissenting voices. Yet ultimately the newspaper confirmed its alignment with the 1978 constitutional order, privileging the interpretation of the reburial as morally righteous and a vindication of Spain's democracy. This is revealed most obviously in the constant reminders that the victims of Francoism would no longer suffer the moral affront of sharing their resting place with their main executioner. But, more importantly for our purposes, the exhumation is assessed as a consensual step aimed at removing a symbolic anomaly in an otherwise healthy democracy.

El País claimed a fundamentally systemic support for the reburial, one that transcends public polemics. The cover story of *El País*' edition on the day of the reburial underscored the exhumation's endorsement by "the executive, legislative and judicial powers, after decades of political debate, and a year and a half-long judicial battle" (Junquera, 2019b). An editorial from the following day similarly commends "the high degree of agreement on the core of this initiative . . . demonstrated that the dictatorship is effectively history, part of a past that has nothing in common with the present" (*El País*, 2019).

El País' editorial line thus conveys the notion that Spain's democracy is free of Francoist remnants and that the reburial is a mere grappling with an enduring symbolic idiosyncrasy:

The transfer of the dictator's remains puts an end to the symbolic contradiction with which the system established by the 1978 Constitution has coexisted, without questioning its unequivocally democratic nature . . . One should not lose perspective of what Spain was under Franco and do justice to what it is

under the Constitution. This Thursday there was no battle against the dictatorship and it is not now that it was defeated. Because its defeat, its authentic defeat, was not symbolic but real, and it took place when an overwhelming majority of Spaniards supported in 1978 the Constitution that is still in force. (*El País*, 2019)

Said editorial line is mirrored elsewhere in the newspaper. An opinion piece stated that “the real problem with Franco ended the day the Constitution came into force. The exhumation corrects an aberration and has symbolic efficacy” (Gascón, 2019). Another one claimed the Valley

is still controlled by the same regulations that the regime left . . . [It] does not fulfill any other function than that of the day in which it was inaugurated: to immortalize the Francoist victory in “the Crusade.” The exhumation and transfer of Franco’s remains this month will resolve this anomaly. (Junquera, 2019a)

This narrative is furthered by unambiguous headlines, such as “Spain puts an end to the last great symbol of the dictatorship.”

A few voices dissented from the celebratory tone dominating *El País*’ coverage, offering a more pessimistic appraisal. In an opinion article with strong undertones of the *Flawed Democracy* discourse, writer and regular contributor Josep Ramoneda (2019) warns that Franco’s reburial offers an opportunity to undertake a new and necessary path to transform Spain’s imperfect political regime:

Spanish democracy is stranded: with the Catalan sovereign conflict, with the social fractures that are widening and with dangerous signs of desocialization . . . Franco’s exhumation will only be fruitful if it provides an impetus to a new era of legislative and institutional renewal of a regime that emerged from a pact that, at a given historical moment, was probably the only possible one. 40 years have passed. That the exhumation of Franco has finally been viable should be an invitation to undertake the profound pending reforms and build a new consensus.

Another space for controversy concerned accusations of electioneering, which *El País* addressed extensively while insisting on the ultimate institutional consensus behind the exhumation. Most articles minimized or dismissed electioneering concerns by naturalizing memory politics, pointing out the accusers’ hypocrisy or insisting on the primacy of the moral imperative behind the exhumation. One columnist argued Sánchez “could have hardly done something in 2019 that did not lend itself to the accusation of electioneering. Of course, not only him. Those who accuse the President of electioneering are also doing electioneering. The electoral cycle is for everyone” (Gross, 2019).

On this subject *El País* offered space for prominent dissenting opinions. Francesc De Carreras (2019), a leading ideologist for Ciudadanos, conveyed elements of the *Desecrated Democracy* discourse by criticizing the exhumation’s electoral exploitation and excessive mediatization as distractions from the pressing problems of the present, although not sparing critiques to the state of Spanish democracy:

A discreet relocation of Franco’s remains would have been much more appropriate, except if the small event was to be used as electoral propaganda for the governing party . . . This move is not, as has been said, a grave and forgotten pending account of the Transition, nor has it improved the health of our democracy. The latter’s problems are of a very different kind and in the face of events such as these, one suspects the reburial is an attempt to hide them: partocracy, the contagion of populism to all parties, the misunderstanding of what parliamentarism means, the difficulties in the separation of powers, the defects of the electoral system . . . These, and more, are the problems of our political system.

A similar assessment is conveyed in another opinion piece by writer Daniel Gascón (2019), who nevertheless takes the opportunity to vindicate Spain's democracy:

Sometimes politicians try to appropriate things that have already happened: hence Sánchez's emphasis on a reconciliation achieved by previous generations. They do not know how to solve the problems of the present . . . but they can offer a project for the past.

Yet elsewhere in the newspaper the emphasis was placed on the frivolousness of the above accusations of electoralism, which pale in contrast with the reburial's moral imperative:

In a normal country, all parties in the parliamentary arch, apart from the self-exclusion of the far-right, would have celebrated the news. . . . The denunciation of the presumed electoral advantage that the PSOE may extract from an initiative that . . . no Government before it took, should be relegated in favor of the general interest and, above all, of the ethical debt that the Spanish State contracted with the victims of Francoism. (Grandes, 2019)

In sum, *El País* generally views the exhumation as a vindication of Spain as a normal, democratic country, which finally corrected a lingering anomaly. Through assertions such as "Democracy has knocked down its last taboo" (Cué and Junquera, 2019), the center-left daily depicts the Valley of the Fallen as the *last* relevant remnant of Francoism in an otherwise fully fleshed democracy, and the exhumation as a moral imperative befitting of said democratic status. The discourse of *Vindicated Democracy* thus separates the Francoist past from the democratic present, and projects the future as a continuation of today's democracy, without paying substantial attention to demands for reforming the public discourse around Francoism—coming from the left—and dismissing, albeit offering voice to, the existential concerns of the right over the potential for delegitimation of the 1978 constitutional regime.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has used the printed press coverage of Franco's reburial to grasp the significance of the reburial in manufacturing competing political identities. It has interpreted the role of journalism as that of a public mediator of knowledge and power, which is particularly true in Spain where the printed press functions as a space of inter- and intra-elite communication. This allows the present analysis to approximate the fractures within Spain's regime of remembrance and to show how controversies over the past are deployed to mobilize contrasting political identities at a time of elite anxiety over the state of Spanish democracy.

Debates around the exhumation seldom pitted facts against each other, instead Spanish elites offered contrasting interpretations of the past to convey a *political ethos*, with clear implications for Spain's present and future. This article has identified three distinct and coherent discourses surrounding Franco's reburial in the media, corresponding to specific printed press outlets, as would be expected from Hallin and Mancini's (2004) political parallelism theory: *Vindicated Democracy* (*El País*), *Flawed Democracy* (*eldiario.es*), and *Desecrated Democracy* (*El Mundo* and *ABC*). The discourses manifestly differed in their assessment of the political implications of the reburial, not on the merits of Franco and his regime: if *El País* represented it as ultimately the result of a political and institutional consensus, both *eldiario.es* and the conservative media offered a more critical viewpoint, but for very different reasons: *eldiario.es* depicted the exhumation as an insufficient step for bringing justice to the victims of Francoism, whereas for *ABC* and *El Mundo* the exhumation was a tasteless exercise in governmental propaganda that distracted from Spaniards' real worries.

Crucially, these discourses also offered a glimpse into how different political and media elites attempt to advance their own views of what shape should Spain's regime of remembrance assume and, by extension, the future of its polity. As the content analysis showed, all the various mnemonic frameworks conveyed distinct anxieties about Spanish democracy, merging past, present, and future in the constitution of discreet political identities. The *Flawed Democracy* discourse offers the most comprehensive injunction to remember: it calls for remembrance of Francoist history, of its victims, of the flaws of the transition, offering a tragic vision of Spanish history that evokes its persistent flaws in the present: the presence of Francoist remnants—as evidenced by the rise of Vox—in a regime against which struggle remains warranted. If it can claim one victory, it is that the “Pact of Silence,” as much as its proponents may praise it, is essentially as buried as Franco, as the latest eruption of memory struggles shows.

The discourse of *Desecrated Democracy* is comparable to the *Flawed Democracy* discourse in its consistency and pessimism, but offers an entirely different prescription. The Francoist past is just that, the past, and the reformers of the negotiated transition got the transitional pact right—a Pact which, implicitly, is memorialized and glorified. Here Renan's (2018) observation that forgetfulness is as vital as remembrance in the creation of a nation once again rings true: forget the Francoist past, remember the transition. The future, however, is full of uncertainties: *El Mundo* and *ABC* view the socialists as having recklessly indulged the left's anti-Francoist fixation at a time of crisis. Here lies another reason why the *Desecrated Democracy* discourse insists on remembrance of the transition, rather than of Francoism: just as the stability of Spanish democracy was threatened in its infancy by far-left and separatist violence, as well as a military coup, Podemos and the Catalan separatists now constitute a similar existential threat. The future thus requires protecting Spain's “exemplary” democracy from its many enemies, something which takes clear precedence over comforting Franco's victims.

The discourse of *Vindicated Democracy* strikes a more delicate balancing act: remembrance has a time and place, and the time to focus on the Francoist past ends with the exhumation. Implicitly, however, it does articulate an injunction to remember the “Pact of Silence” in a positive light which, by extension, implies an embracement of the institutional amnesia that led to the “anomaly” of the Valley of the Fallen in the first place. This contradiction is palpable in the somewhat ambiguous message it leaves for the future: Spanish democracy is finally normal, and most of the work was done in 1978. In this sense, *El País*, and most likely PSOE, emerge as two of the institutions more closely aligned with the Spanish state and its recent evolution. What the discourse does not extensively address is how the reburial is linked to the immense polarization and legitimacy crisis facing Spanish institutions. Perhaps the only conclusion to draw from this discursive deficit from the center-left is that the reburial should somehow both satisfy and silence the more indignant sectors of the left, and through it temper the fears of the right, in the hope that Spain moves past the exhumation—a small, albeit delicate chapter in its history.

As in much of Europe, these mnemonic frameworks increasingly circulate within fragmented media audiences: Spanish journalists are thus part and parcel of the construction of veritable “memory silos” (Edy, 2019: 70) that perfectly reflect the climate of political polarization engulfing much of Europe. Such polarization not only undermines the notion of a consensual regime of remembrance, but also considerably hampers elites' ability to work out political compromises (Edy, 2019: 75). In other words, the intense disagreement over the role of memory in Spanish society seems to both reflect and contribute to a larger crisis of regime legitimacy in Spain. Memory politics, as expressed in media discourse, can thus powerfully symbolize and, at the same time, reproduce democratic anxieties through and in their perpetual constitution of political identities.

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Note

1. A small fraction of this was allocated to projects depicting the memory of the winners.

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