

THE DEBATES



PSOE's Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero/ EFE

Zapatero v Rajoy

Candidates must try to bond with voters

BRADEN PHILLIPS

● The Spanish public is hungrily awaiting the debates between Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and the conservative Partido Popular challenger Mariano Rajoy. The first is set for February 25, followed by rematch on March 3, six days before the election. It's been 12 years since the nation has seen a debate between candidates for the nation's leadership. Recent proposals by Rajoy on immigration—making it a major issue for the first time in a Spanish election—has shifted some momentum to the PP, which has also profited from a spate of bad economic news. But Rajoy has alienated voters, too, by playing an almost blindly adversarial role that seems focused only on destabilising Zapatero and regaining power rather than moving the nation forward. The net result is a large group of undecided voters, putting a spotlight on the these debates. The latest polls show that 24% of the electorate is undecided. If the 10.2% who chose not answer the survey is included, the total is 34.%. But in a debate, it's not always the issues that decide, as the experts below make clear. "In the end it's the impression the candidate makes: is he calm, tense, confident, angry," says Daniel Ureña, partner in Mas Consulting Group, a political communications firm. "And can he arouse empathy in the spectator? That's the most important factor of all."



PP leader and challenger Mariano Rajoy/ EFE

ANTONI GUTIERREZ-RUBI. Communications specialist

No more fence-sitters

● **Influential?** There are a lot of undecided voters. After a debate of this kind there can be no draw. Either they both lose or one of them wins. Afterwards it is extremely difficult not to side with one or the other.

Keys for Rajoy? Recently Rajoy has been constantly rebuilding and reinventing his image as a leader, with the aim of reducing the distance between the candidates. Beyond his response to issues such as health, immigration and so on, Rajoy could win if he convincingly shows that he is a more human, renewed leader.

Keys for Zapatero? He has remained defensive as far as his image is concerned but he could gain ground if he is able to show that Zapatero is not the same thing as Rajoy, and that the latter is basically still the interim leader subordinate to Acebes, Zaplana or Aznar.

Who will gain the most? Whoever respects the rules most and shows himself capable of mastering the technical aspects of a debate of this kind will be the one to get the most out of it. Everything will be picked over and whoever has most control over his communication skills will benefit most.

ORIOL BARTOMEUS. Political analyst

A powerful instrument

● **Influential?** Since the general elections of 1996 the trend in Spanish politics is towards a draw between the two main parties. It is normal that these elections should show the same tendency towards a draw. This makes any element with the power to mobilise voters potentially decisive. Debates have been shown to be a very powerful instrument in this sense.

Keys for Rajoy? Rajoy considers the two debates as an opportunity to show that he is less radical than PSOE make him out to be and at the same time a chance to characterise Prime Minister

Zapatero as frivolous and inconsistent.

Keys for Zapatero? For his part, Zapatero will try to portray the Partido Popular as a danger to the welfare system and the achievements in social policy gained by the actions of his government.

Who will gain the most? The debate will be won by whoever manages to get his message across to the audience-electorate, above all those who are still undecided, which are the ones who can tip the balance on way or the other in the elections of March 9.

DANIEL RAVENTOS PAÑELLA. Sociologist, Universitat de Barcelona

Highlight the differences

● **Influential?** It will be hard for the debates to be decisive unless one of them performs disastrously and the other is totally lucky. However, everything is too closely controlled for a situation of that kind to occur.

The keys for Rajoy? In the last four years Rajoy and his party have politically exploited various issues, such as defending reactionary positions in the Catholic Church, hysteria over the "flood" of immigrants, Eta, Spanish nationalism and the danger of Spain's "rupture." In the last few days, the PP's language has been toned down out of

pure calculation. But it will be difficult for these issues not to come up.

The keys for Zapatero? What will count is that in PSOE there are many that sympathise more with the PP than with Zapatero because of its Spanish nationalism. There will be a need to highlight that the differences between the PP and PSOE are generally wide.

Who will gain the most? There is no difference between the PP and the PSOE in terms of the current economic situation. Naturally, the debates will not touch upon this issue.

JOAN FOGUET I FERRER. Journalist

Richard Nixon revisited?

● **Influential?** The Spanish electorate is an avid consumer of political debates. What's more, a debate at this level has not been seen for years. The sense of neck-and-neck also leads to closer media coverage.

The keys for Rajoy? Rajoy has to make the first move and the strategy he will almost certainly follow is to paint a negative picture of the economy, and touch on such issues as terrorism, international politics and so on, which are issues that can make Zapatero feel uncomfortable. Rajoy must appear relaxed and avoid the Aznar style.

The keys for Zapatero? The prime minister has the easiest job of it, as the popularity rating of each man shows. Moreover, in Catalonia Zapatero has a special attraction, as well as the fact that PSOE has 21 Catalan deputies compared with the PP's six.

Who will gain the most? The PP has the most to gain from the debates, which is why we will see a Zapatero on the attack and at the same time very comfortable, while Rajoy needs to be patient if he does not want to appear like a bad replica of Richard Nixon against John F. Kennedy.