

Why Monarchy Survived in Spain but Failed in Italy

A comparative literature study on post-authoritarian restoration, constitutional legitimacy, and political positioning

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Core argument

The central difference between Italy and Spain was not simply that one society liked monarchy and the other did not. The decisive difference was political location. In Italy, the monarchy had already been compromised by its association with Fascism, war, racial laws, national defeat, and the House of Savoy's failure to act as a credible constitutional barrier against Mussolini. After the 1946 referendum, the republican settlement became constitutionally entrenched, and later monarchist currents were increasingly marginal, nostalgic, southern, conservative, or absorbed into anti-communist right-wing politics.

In Spain, by contrast, monarchy was not restored as a reactionary counter-revolution after Franco. It was first installed through Francoist legality, but then it was re-legitimated by democratic transformation. Juan Carlos I and the reformist coalition around Adolfo Suarez used the monarchy as an institutional bridge: from dictatorship to parliamentary democracy, from civil-war memory to constitutional consensus, and from ideological victory to national reconciliation. The Spanish Crown survived because it became a centrist container for democracy, not merely a symbol of anti-left resistance.

This confirms the hypothesis proposed in the prompt: monarchy succeeds politically when it can occupy the constitutional centre and function as a national institution above party competition. It fails when it is trapped inside one ideological camp, especially when that camp is associated with authoritarianism, defeat, or extremism.

1. Method and literature base

This paper is a narrative literature study rather than a statistical political-science model. It compares two post-authoritarian cases: Italy after Mussolini and Spain after Franco. The comparison is useful because both countries had experienced dictatorship, mass ideological conflict, a powerful left-right divide, and a monarchy associated in different ways with the previous regime. Yet the outcomes diverged. Italy became a republic in 1946 and later monarchist restoration remained politically marginal. Spain became a parliamentary monarchy in the 1978 Constitution and the Crown became one of the principal symbols of democratic transition.

The sources used include official constitutional texts, parliamentary and historical summaries, country studies, scholarship on Spain's transition, scholarship on Italian

monarchism and neo-fascism, and contemporary historical commentary. The paper distinguishes confirmed institutional facts from interpretive argument.

2. Italy: why the post-Fascist monarchy failed

2.1 The Savoy monarchy was not outside Fascism

The Italian monarchy's central weakness after 1943-46 was that it could not present itself as an innocent victim of Fascism. Victor Emmanuel III had appointed Mussolini prime minister in 1922 after the March on Rome. The monarchy remained formally in place during Fascism, the imperial adventure in Ethiopia, the Spanish Civil War intervention, the alliance with Nazi Germany, and the 1938 racial laws. Even when the king dismissed Mussolini in July 1943, many Italians saw the action as late, self-protective, and insufficient to cleanse the dynasty of responsibility.

The monarchy therefore entered the postwar transition with a legitimacy deficit. It could not credibly say: "we are the constitutional alternative to dictatorship." For many voters, especially in the industrial North and among anti-Fascist forces, the republic became the symbolic break with dictatorship, war, and dynastic failure.

2.2 The 1946 referendum converted the anti-monarchy mood into a constitutional fact

Italy held an institutional referendum on 2 June 1946, asking voters to choose between monarchy and republic. Official parliamentary material records a very high turnout of 89.1 percent, and that the referendum went in favour of the republic. The widely cited result was roughly 54.3 percent for the republic and 45.7 percent for the monarchy. The margin was not overwhelming, and the vote showed a deep regional divide, with stronger monarchist support in parts of the South. But the political consequence was decisive: Italy's new democratic foundation became republican.

The 1948 Constitution then made this settlement exceptionally difficult to reverse. Article 139 states that the republican form cannot be changed by constitutional amendment. In other words, the republic was not just an electoral outcome; it became a protected constitutional identity. A later restoration movement would therefore have had to challenge the founding grammar of the postwar state.

2.3 Postwar monarchism became a memory movement rather than a governing centre

Italian monarchists continued to exist after 1946, but they did not become the national centre of a broad democratic coalition. They were electorally and socially uneven, often stronger in southern areas and among voters attached to dynastic loyalty, Catholic conservatism, anti-communism, or nostalgia for pre-republican order. That base was real, but it was not sufficient to become the unifying framework of the entire nation.

The postwar Italian party system also left limited space for monarchist centrality. Christian Democracy became the principal anti-communist and Catholic-democratic governing force. The Italian Communist Party became the major left-wing mass party. The Socialists, Liberals, Republicans, and Social Democrats occupied additional democratic space. Monarchism had no unique function that the broader anti-communist centre could not perform more safely.

2.4 The far-right problem: anti-communism without constitutional universality

The user's hypothesis is strongest here. A successful constitutional monarchy must be able to say that it belongs to all citizens, including those who do not vote for monarchist parties. In Italy, monarchist politics became increasingly entangled with the wider anti-communist right, and in 1972 the Italian Democratic Party of Monarchist Unity was absorbed into the Italian Social Movement-National Right, a party rooted in neo-fascist political traditions. This did not mean that every monarchist was a fascist, but it did mean that organised monarchism lost the ability to occupy the neutral national centre.

Once the monarchy is perceived as a weapon of one side in a left-right civil conflict, it ceases to be a crown and becomes a factional emblem. Italy's postwar monarchism could defend tradition, anti-communism, religion, and national memory, but it could not convincingly become the democratic referee. The republic, despite its own instability, became the common constitutional arena.

3. Spain: why the restored monarchy succeeded

3.1 The paradox: Franco restored monarchy, but democracy legitimised it

Spain appears paradoxical. Franco designated Juan Carlos as successor in 1969, and when Franco died in November 1975 Juan Carlos became king. This meant the Crown initially carried the burden of Francoist origin. For the democratic left and for many republicans, this was the monarchy's original sin: the king seemed to be Franco's chosen heir.

However, the political meaning of the monarchy changed during the transition. Juan Carlos did not preserve the Francoist system. He encouraged reform, appointed Adolfo Suarez, and accepted the legal dismantling of the dictatorship from within. Spain's transition is often described as a process of negotiated or gradual reform: the old legality was used to create new democratic legality. The monarchy became useful precisely because it could reassure the army and conservative sectors while allowing democratic parties, trade unions, regional actors, and the left to enter the constitutional game.

3.2 The Crown as a centrist bridge

The Spanish monarchy was successful because it acted as a bridge institution. To Francoists and the army, it represented continuity, order, national unity, and the avoidance of revolutionary rupture. To democratic forces, it increasingly represented legal opening, elections, party pluralism, and constitutional negotiation. This dual function was politically

powerful. It allowed Spain to move from dictatorship to democracy without requiring one side to surrender all symbols immediately.

The 1978 Constitution formalised this role. Article 56 defines the King as head of state, symbol of the unity and permanence of the state, and an institution that arbitrates and moderates the regular functioning of institutions. This constitutional language deliberately placed the monarch above ordinary party conflict. The Crown's legitimacy came not only from dynastic restoration but from being embedded in a democratic constitutional settlement approved by referendum.

3.3 The left accepted the monarchy in exchange for democracy

The Spanish transition required compromise. Many socialists, communists, republicans, and regionalists did not love monarchy as an abstract principle. But they accepted the parliamentary monarchy as part of a wider settlement: legalisation of parties, elections, civil liberties, decentralisation, amnesty politics, and the avoidance of military confrontation. Monarchy was therefore not imposed as pure ideological victory for the right; it was negotiated as an institutional price of peaceful democratisation.

This is the opposite of the Italian monarchist failure. In Italy, monarchy became associated with a defeated past and then with marginal right-wing restorationism. In Spain, monarchy survived because enough of the democratic left accepted it as a framework within which they could compete and govern. When Felipe Gonzalez's Socialists later governed Spain, they did so within the parliamentary monarchy rather than by immediately seeking to abolish it.

3.4 23-F and the democratic myth of the Crown

The attempted coup of 23 February 1981 became a decisive moment in the monarchy's democratic mythology. Juan Carlos's televised opposition to the coup strengthened the idea that the king was not the protector of authoritarian restoration but the guarantor of the constitutional order. Later scandals damaged Juan Carlos's personal reputation, but the 23-F episode remains central to the historical explanation of why the monarchy gained broad legitimacy during the transition.

A monarchy survives modern politics when it can provide a story of service to democracy. Spain had such a story. Italy did not. Italy's monarchy could point to belated dismissal of Mussolini, but not to a founding democratic act equivalent to defending the constitution against a military coup.

4. Comparative matrix

Variable	Italy after Mussolini	Spain after Franco
Initial legitimacy	Compromised by the Savoy monarchy's association with Mussolini, Fascism, war, and racial laws.	Compromised by Franco's designation of Juan Carlos, but capable of being transformed through

Variable	Italy after Mussolini	Spain after Franco
Mechanism of decision	1946 referendum abolished monarchy; 1948 Constitution entrenched the republic.	democratic reform. Francoist succession placed Juan Carlos on the throne; 1978 democratic constitution re-legitimated the monarchy.
Position in political spectrum	Increasingly marginal and often linked to anti-communist right-wing or nostalgic politics.	Moved toward the political centre as a referee and bridge between right, centre, and parts of the left.
Relationship to democracy	Could not convincingly claim to have saved democracy from Fascism.	Became associated with democratisation, constitutionalism, and resistance to the 1981 coup.
Relationship to the left	Rejected by much of the anti-Fascist left as a symbol of old order.	Reluctantly accepted by much of the left as part of the democratic settlement.
Strategic function	No longer necessary: Christian Democracy and the republic could organise anti-communist constitutional politics.	Highly useful: reassured conservative institutions while opening space for democratic pluralism.
Outcome	Monarchist restoration remained marginal and constitutionally blocked.	Parliamentary monarchy became a central pillar of the 1978 constitutional order.

5. Theoretical explanation: monarchy as centre or faction

A modern constitutional monarchy can survive only if it is more than nostalgia. It must perform a constitutional function that citizens across ideological camps can recognise. That function may be symbolic unity, non-party headship of state, continuity during transition, protection of constitutional process, or a bridge between past and future. Spain's monarchy performed these functions during the transition. Italy's monarchy did not.

The difference can be stated in one sentence: Spain transformed monarchy from Francoist inheritance into democratic arbitration; Italy transformed monarchy from Fascist compromise into postwar marginality. The same institution therefore acquired opposite meanings.

In political terms, monarchy has three possible identities. First, it can be dynastic nostalgia: memory of a lost order. Second, it can be factional identity: a weapon of the right against

the left, or of one camp against another. Third, it can be constitutional continuity: an institution that allows the nation to change government while preserving the state. Italy's postwar monarchism remained largely in the first two categories. Spain's restored monarchy moved into the third.

6. Refining the hypothesis

The claim that Italian monarchism failed because it was too far right is broadly persuasive but incomplete. It must be combined with five additional factors. First, the monarchy was already damaged before the restoration campaign began. Second, Italians voted in 1946, and the republican result became a foundational legal fact. Third, the House of Savoy carried specific blame that could not easily be transferred away from the institution. Fourth, Italy's party system already offered anti-communist voters a powerful governing vehicle in Christian Democracy. Fifth, monarchist forces lacked a charismatic, democratising figure comparable to Juan Carlos during Spain's transition.

Likewise, the Spanish success should not be romanticised. The monarchy did not succeed because every Spaniard was monarchist. It succeeded because it became the least dangerous compromise among competing fears: fear of a return to civil conflict, fear of military intervention, fear of revolutionary rupture, fear of Francoist continuity, and fear of national fragmentation. Its legitimacy was pragmatic before it became emotional.

7. Lessons for contemporary monarchist or constitutional movements

1. A successful monarchy must be constitutional before it is dynastic. It must promise limits, law, parliament, and citizenship, not personal rule.
2. A restoration movement must avoid becoming the property of the far right. If it is perceived as an anti-left revenge project, it loses the national centre.
3. The movement must include people who are not monarchists by temperament but are willing to accept monarchy as a transitional or constitutional framework.
4. The monarchy must symbolise reconciliation, not restoration of old social hierarchies. The Spanish transition succeeded because it sold the Crown as a bridge to democracy, not as revenge for the republic.
5. The monarch or claimant must speak to the whole nation. He must address workers, women, minorities, secular citizens, religious citizens, conservatives, liberals, social democrats, and former opponents.
6. International credibility matters, but domestic legitimacy is decisive. Spain's monarchy was accepted because it solved a Spanish constitutional problem. Italy's monarchists could not solve Italy's postwar legitimacy problem.
7. The final form of government must be linked to free choice. A constitutional monarchy that fears democratic ratification weakens its own claim to national legitimacy.

8. Conclusion

The comparison between Italy and Spain shows that monarchy is not politically successful simply because it has history, flags, emotion, or loyal supporters. It succeeds when it becomes useful to the democratic future. Italy's monarchy failed because it was chained to a compromised past and then carried forward by a marginalised restorationist right. Spain's monarchy succeeded because Juan Carlos and the transition elites relocated the Crown into the constitutional centre and made it a mechanism for democratic transformation.

The Italian case warns that monarchism can become politically sterile if it becomes nostalgic, anti-communist, far-right, or anti-mainstream. The Spanish case shows that a monarchy can survive modernity if it becomes constitutional, inclusive, pragmatic, and nationally conciliatory. The decisive question is therefore not "monarchy or republic" in the abstract. The decisive question is whether a proposed monarchy can become the house of the whole nation.

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Executive one-page summary

Italy: the monarchy was defeated because it was perceived as part of the national catastrophe. The House of Savoy had failed to protect constitutional order against Mussolini and had remained tied to Fascism, war, and defeat. The 1946 referendum and Article 139 of the Constitution then made the republic the protected foundation of the postwar state.

Spain: the monarchy survived because it changed meaning. Although Juan Carlos came through Franco's succession plan, he became associated with democratic reform, constitutional compromise, and opposition to the 1981 coup. The Crown entered the centre of the new constitutional order.

Main lesson: monarchy can only be restored or preserved if it is perceived as a national constitutional instrument, not as a factional right-wing weapon. Spain had a centrist constitutional monarchy. Italy had a compromised dynasty and a restorationist movement increasingly tied to the anti-communist right.