

## Catalonia torn in two

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Catalan *independentismo* won last Sunday's regional elections. But it lost the so-called plebiscite on secession. As a result, Catalonia now faces a difficult future with its society divided and the links with the rest of Spain deeply eroded.

To understand the “**Catalan question**” it is important to bear in mind that until recently Catalanian society was roughly split into three parts.

One-third was formed by the communion of the rural population and the urban middle and upper classes who feel that Catalonia is a stand-alone nation due to its own language and culture, and greater prosperity than the rest of Spain.

The second third, which is sociologically less cohesive, was formed by descendants of immigrants from other Spanish regions who retain a predominantly Spanish identity and have Castilian as their mother tongue.

The last third has traditionally been made up of those with a shared Spanish-Catalan identity who tend to be truly bilingual. This mixed and complex sociological structure resulted in the dominance in Catalonia of two big moderate parties: the Catalan branch of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE-PSC) on the center-left and the regionalist *Convergència i Unió* (CiU) on the center-right – which was in office for most of the period 1980-2010.

The political status quo changed around 2010 for a number of reasons. CiU has been successful in using the regional administrative apparatus for a Catalan nation-building process and many citizens with a shared identity have become predominantly Catalan.

From 2009 onward, Catalonia, like the rest of Spain, experienced its biggest economic crisis since the Civil War. Austerity started to bite. In addition, in 2010 the Spanish Constitutional Court accepted the suit presented by the Spanish center-right People's Party (PP) and partially outlawed the new home rule (Estatut) that the Catalanian parliament had agreed with the then socialist prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. In parallel, in 2011 the Scottish National Party won a majority in Edinburgh and started negotiations with London to celebrate a binding referendum for independence, which eventually took place in 2014, showing a plausible precedent for democratic secession within Europe.

All these elements have radicalized Catalan nationalism—both on the left, which despises the conservative PP government in Madrid (as Scottish nationalists do the Tories in London), and on the increasingly populist center-right, which strives for full fiscal autonomy.

This increased polarization is apparent in the results of last Sunday's elections. Most of the pro-independence camp, with the exception of the anti-capitalist CUP, had united to create a single list (Junts Pel Sí, or JPS, "Together for Yes") and had announced that they would present a unilateral declaration of independence if they achieved a majority of seats (68 out of 135 seats).

Once the ballots were counted, it was clear that the parties campaigning for a single identity—either Catalanian (JPS or the CUP) or predominantly Spanish (such as Ciudadanos)—did well, with the exception of the PP, which is increasingly a minor actor in Catalonia. Those that favor more mixed identity politics, such as the PSC, Uni<sup>3</sup> (the moderate flank of the former CiU) and the coalition around Podemos, performed disappointingly.

In other words, these elections have accentuated the identity split, not only because of the results, but also because the campaign was not based on a rational debate on whether it makes economic sense to have full fiscal autonomy or leave the EU, the eurozone or NATO. Rather, it pandered to nationalistic feelings and prejudices, particularly on the secessionist side.

The PP central government in Madrid is partially responsible for the rise of **Catalan separatism**. It has shown scant political flexibility, little sensitivity towards Catalan identity, especially on the language dimension, and has attempted to re-centralize power.

Its position is difficult. On the economic front, there is a desire by the business community to have a genuine single market in Spain, instead of 17 regional markets. On the political side, the Spanish Constitution says that Spain is a "nation with minor nationalities," not a nation of nations like the U.K. Furthermore, the current semi-federal devolved system empowers the other autonomous regions to veto any further transfer of fiscal autonomy from Madrid to Barcelona that would surely reduce the funding of the poorest ones.

It is therefore debatable that a solution can be found in a binding referendum. The U.K. is an exception and not the norm. Almost no other country in the world has legal provisions to undertake an independence referendum, particularly when there is a divided demographic for identity and ethno-linguistic reasons. A referendum in Catalonia would only exacerbate the polarization. In this regard, although Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy can be criticized for his inaction, his silences have at least not contributed to increasing social tension.

**So what will happen next?** Sunday's results cannot be understood as a democratic mandate for a unilateral declaration of independence. Although the pro-independence camp (JPS & CUP) got an absolute majority of seats (72 out of 135), they received only 48 percent of the vote. This is a significant increase on the pro-independence population of less than one-third 10 years ago, but far from an outright majority. It is even questionable whether the JPS leader **Artur Mas** will stay in power, since the CUP

has explicitly rejected offering him their support. Thus, the pro-independence camp has not only less power than is assumed – it would not even have enough seats to propose a reform of the Catalan Estatut – it is also ideologically split.

Ultimately, what happens in Catalonia will depend on the results of the Spanish elections in December. It is very likely that the new government in Madrid will be more open to negotiations with Barcelona on more symbolic recognition and fiscal powers. The Socialists, led by Pedro S  nchez, have already announced that they favor a federal “third way”; and even Rajoy has stated that while the current legislature was centered on tackling the economic crisis, the next one will focus on the reorganization of the Spanish state.

Although demonstrably difficult, this third way might be accepted by most Catalans, just as “devo-max” was by the Scots. Our prediction: Political tensions related to Catalonia will run for a very long time. But independence remains a remote possibility.