



The rising demand for Catalan independence

*Although the demand for independence has dominated Catalan politics since 2010, it had previously been very much a minority position. Recent events have changed that, seemingly irrevocably, writes **Jaume Muñoz Jofre**
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Catalonia played a leading role in the Regenerationist movement in Spanish politics from the late 19th century onwards. Differences arose among the parties of the left, with positions ranging from outright rejection of Catalan autonomy to enthusiasm depending on whether they were branches of a Spanish party, like the Socialists, or essentially Catalan, such as the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC).

In 1898, the loss of Spain's last colonies in Cuba, the Philippines and Puerto Rico opened a deep crisis. As Regeneracionismo spread across the country, the



Catalan regionalists decided to protect their own interests by fighting the centralism of what they saw as decadent Spain.



Early successes included the Solidaritat Catalana candidacy in the elections of 1907 and the creation of the first attempt at self-government, the Mancomunitat de Catalunya (1914–1925).

The Primo de Rivera dictatorship (1923–1930) relegated Catalan culture to a folkloric role and left Catalonia without even the limited self-government of the mancomunitat. However, the ERC victory in the April 1931 municipal elections in Barcelona inspired its leader, Francesc Macià, to make a public declaration for a Catalan republic in an Iberian confederation.

The negotiations with the republican-socialist government of the Spanish second republic (1931–1939) brought a less (but still) radical status for Catalonia: its autonomy, unique in Spain at the time. In late 1933, Macià's successor, Lluís Companys, was proclaimed president of the Generalitat de Catalunya (the governing body) and tried to introduce some important social reforms, especially concerning rural leases. This led to conflict with the central Spanish government. The generalitat was suspended and its ministers imprisoned after they supported the failed attempt to create an independent Catalonia within the revolutionary events of October 1934. The popular front electoral victory in February 1936 returned self-government to Catalonia, only for it to be lost again after the defeat of the republic in the Spanish civil war in 1939.

Franco's dictatorship (1939–1976) saw the abolition of the generalitat, and the persecution of the Catalan language and culture. The generalitat was restored in November 1977 by the first democratic government in Spain, led by Adolfo Suárez, even before the adoption of a democratic constitution, which was finally approved in December 1978. The restoration was designed to calm the popular Catalan claims, reflected in the June 1977 electoral results, and to give a democratic legitimacy to Spain's new political reality. The generalitat was ruled from 1980 to 2003 by Jordi Pujol, a conservative Catalanist politician who developed a strategy of

giving parliamentary support to the Spanish governments in return for more powers for Catalonia.

The victory of the Socialist Party, led by Pasqual Maragall, in the 2003 Catalan elections gave Catalonia its first progressive government since the second republic in coalition with the ERC and the Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds (ICV), the Catalan Greens. Maragall pushed for the drafting of a new constitution for Catalonia, approved by the Catalan population in 2006. This new estatut d'autonomia defined Catalonia as a nation, establishing a deeper level of self-government.

The ultra-conservative Partido Popular, in opposition at the time, pursued a constitutional challenge to the 2006 estatut as a part of its anti-Catalanism strategy. The verdict of the constitutional court was delivered four years later, in July 2010, and annulled the core articles of the estatut. A massive demonstration took place in Barcelona a few days later and support for full independence, which had been marginal until then, skyrocketed, as subsequent demonstrations have shown. Around 1.2 million people participated in a pro-independence demonstration in Barcelona in September 2012, and the following year a human chain crowded along the 400 kilometres of the Catalan coast. Catalonia has 7.5 million inhabitants.

These rallies were organised by the Assemblea Nacional de Catalunya (ANC), independently of any political party. But the Catalan parties adapted to the new mood quickly, with a significant shift towards the independentism of the Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya, led by Pujol's successor, Artur Mas, president of the generalitat since November 2010. In the 2012 elections, the parties that supported a Catalan independence referendum received 80 per cent of the vote. In December 2013 they agreed on a referendum for 9 November 2014. Although rejected by the central government, the demands for a vote on independence will not be going away any time soon.

Left parties and the referendum

Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC)

The only Catalan party with parliamentary representation that has always backed independence, the ERC suffered a heavy defeat in the 2010 Catalan elections due to the chaotic image presented during the two tripartite governments (2003–2010). Oriol Junqueras, a Catalan historian recently turned politician, was elected ERC president in September 2011 to reorganise the party. His simple message is focused on securing Catalan independence and improving the Catalan economy and social situation. The ERC won the second highest number of MPs in the 2012 elections. From this powerful position, it bargained with the Catalan government, supporting its austerity measures in exchange for an undertaking to go ahead with the referendum.

Socialist parties

The Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) lost control of the government in November 2011. Its socialist credentials were left in tatters after May 2010, when the Rodríguez Zapatero administration applied harsh social expenditure cuts to comply with the conditions for the secretive economic bailout by the troika of the International Monetary Fund, European Central Bank, and European Commission. In relation to the Catalan question, relations between the PSOE and its Catalan wing, the PSC, have become increasingly fraught, with the PSC voting against the PSOE party line for the first time in its history in 2013 in support of a resolution for Catalonia's 'right to decide' presented in the Spanish parliament.

The then PSOE general secretary Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba declared in April that 'the right to decide doesn't exist'. Instead the PSOE is clinging to the 'Granada declaration' agreed with the PSC last year, which proposes a federal system while maintaining the roles of national institutions. The PSOE leaders have done little to elaborate

on what this constitutional reform would entail. They have argued that a national consensus is needed to establish federalism, but the Partido Popular (in government since November 2011 with an absolute majority in parliament) is resolutely opposed. The federalist option does not enjoy majority support among either the Spanish or Catalan populations.

Meanwhile, the pro-referendum faction of the PSC has been removed from leadership positions, and some abandoned the party altogether. Both the PSC and the PSOE suffered serious defeats in the European elections in May and their general secretaries resigned. On the basis of the statements made by the candidates for the succession, a change of the Socialist position on the Catalan issue seems unlikely.

Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds (ICV) and Izquierda Unida (IU)

The decomposition of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) in the early 1980s saw many former members realigning themselves with the green and feminist agenda in Spain – as in other parts of Europe. The ICV, the Catalan outcome of this process, represented the leftist option in the Catalan Parliament until 2012. It supported the Catalan right to decide as soon as its popularity became clear and forced its equivalent party in Spain, the IU, to adopt this position in the Spanish parliament. The ICV and IU have never made a clear statement for or against Catalan independence but are firm supporters of a referendum.

Candidatures d'Unitat Popular (CUP) and Podemos

On 15 May 2011, a large and spontaneous popular movement occupied the most important squares in Spain. This massive expression of discontent finally found two political forces that shared its anti-capitalist aspirations: the Candidatures d'Unitat Popular (CUP) in Catalonia, which until 2012 operated only in the municipal sphere; and Podemos in Spain, created a few weeks before the May 2014 European elections.

The CUP, with three MPs in the Catalan parliament, has become, with the ICV, the main force against social inequality, and proposes the independence of the Països Catalans (Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands), as a way to improve the social situation of the region. Thanks to the charisma and parliamentary work of its leaders, David Fernández and Quim Arrufat, the CUP is a key player in all aspects of the independence campaign, from the National Pact for the Right to Decide to the call for the referendum. The presence of the CUP is helping to widen the Catalan political spectrum, giving it a leftist colour.

Podemos, the fourth political party in terms of European MPs in the last elections, declared its support for the Catalan referendum to be held on 9 November, in spite of its position against Catalonia's independence.

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