



Debate on possible independence of Catalonia: key issues

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Author: Rob Page

Section International Affairs and Defence Section

Catalonia, a prosperous region in north-eastern Spain, has an autonomous Parliament. At present, parties in favour of Catalan independence have a majority in this Parliament, and earlier this year the regional administration requested Madrid's permission to hold a binding referendum on independence. The Parliament of Spain rejected this proposal, and the replacement "popular consultation" which was due to take place on 9 November has been effectively blocked by the Constitutional Court. The Catalan Government still hopes to hold some form of vote on 9 November, but it is unclear whether this will go ahead. This note provides an overview of recent developments and key issues in the debate.

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1 Introduction

Catalonia, a prosperous region in north-eastern Spain, has an autonomous Parliament. At present, parties in favour of Catalan independence have a majority in this Parliament, and earlier this year the regional administration requested Madrid's permission to hold a binding referendum on independence. The Parliament of Spain rejected this proposal, and the replacement "popular consultation" which was due to take place on 9 November has been effectively blocked by the Constitutional Court. The Catalan Government still hopes to hold some form of vote on 9 November, but it is unclear whether this will go ahead. This note provides an overview of recent developments and key issues in the debate.

2 History of Catalan Parliament

The process of devolution to Catalonia began in 1980 with the establishment of the autonomous regional Parliament. In recent years it has been granted greater powers; Europa World Plus provides a good overview of these developments:

In September 2005 the Catalan Parliament overwhelmingly approved the draft of a revised Statute of Autonomy, to replace the existing document which had been in force since 1979. The proposed statute provoked considerable controversy elsewhere in the country over its definition of Catalonia as a 'nation' and its provision for greater fiscal and judicial independence. In March 2006 the Congress of Deputies approved a revised version of the statute that significantly reduced the extent of financial independence that would be granted to Catalonia, despite the opposition of ERC, which favoured full independence, and the PP, which claimed that the statute violated the Constitution. The new Statute of Autonomy was approved by 73.2% of voters in a referendum held in Catalonia in June, and came into force in August. Meanwhile, in July the PP submitted an appeal to the Constitutional Court alleging that a number of the statute's articles were unconstitutional, in particular the definition of Catalonia as a 'nation', the privileged status afforded to the Catalan language and the provisions for judicial independence. In its ruling of July 2010 the Constitutional Court upheld the majority of the statute, although it declared unconstitutional or ordered the reinterpretation of some 41 articles; notably, it allowed the use of the term 'nation' to refer to the region's historical and cultural identity but ruled that it could have no constitutional meaning. On the following day more than 1m. people attended a demonstration in Barcelona in favour of Catalan autonomy and against the court's decision.¹

3 Elections in 2010 and 2012: towards a secessionist majority

The main political parties in Catalonia are as follows:

- Parties exclusively or predominantly in favour of Catalan independence
 - Convergence and Union (coalition of the liberal Democratic Convergence of Catalonia and the centre-right Democratic Union of Catalonia)
 - Republican Left of Catalonia (left-wing party)
 - Popular Unity Candidates
- Parties exclusively or predominantly opposed to Catalan independence
 - Socialist Party of Catalonia (allied to Spain's main centre-left party)
 - Popular Party of Catalonia (allied to Spain's main centre-right party)

¹ "The Autonomous Communities", *Europa World Plus* [accessed 10 July 2014]

- Initiative for Catalonia Greens – United and Alternative Left (generally opposed to independence but in favour of a referendum on the issue, and of further devolution)
- Citizens – Party of the Citizenry (Spanish nationalist party, strongly opposed to Catalan independence)²

Some parties are explicitly pro-independence (such as the Republican Left of Catalonia), some are explicitly anti-independence (such as the Citizens – Party of the Citizenry), but many others hold a position which is more ambiguous. As an example, Artur Mas, the leader of Convergence and Union and President of the *Generalitat* (Head of Government) of Catalonia, is a fairly recent convert to the cause of Catalan independence. Historically he had stopped short of supporting full independence, preferring greater devolution.³

Elections to the Catalan Parliament were held in 2010 and 2012. In 2010, a Convergence and Union minority administration took office, replacing the previous administration led by the Socialist Party of Catalonia. In 2012, Convergence and Union lost seats but remained the largest party, forming another minority administration. In addition, smaller pro-independence parties gained seats. As a consequence the total number of seats held by pro-independence parties increased. The table below provides an overview of 2012 the election result.⁴

	Seats	Change from 2010
Parties exclusively or predominantly in favour of Catalan independence		
Convergence and Union	50	-12
Republican Left of Catalonia	21	+11
Popular Unity Candidates	3	+3
Parties exclusively or predominantly opposed to Catalan independence		
Socialist Party of Catalonia	20	-8
Popular Party of Catalonia	19	+1
Initiative for Catalonia Greens - United and Alternative Left	13	+3
Citizens - Party of the Citizenry	9	+6

Source: adapted from Generalitat of Catalonia, *Eleccions al Parlament de Catalunya 2012* and *2010*

In general, Catalonia has seen support for independence surge in recent years. Economic arguments feature prominently in the pro-independence movement: as one of Spain's wealthiest regions, Catalonia is often seen to be "footing the bill" for the profligacy of other regions. In 2008-09, the Spanish Government's decision to sell Spain's state electricity company to an Italian corporation, rather than a rival Catalan bidder, provoked considerable resentment in Catalonia.⁵ The extent of pro-independence feeling became apparent on 11 September 2012, when a large-scale march took place on the streets of Barcelona. The march was described as "a feel-good and positive project, purging traditional pro-

² Generalitat of Catalonia, *Eleccions al Parlament de Catalunya 2012* [accessed 10 July 2014]

³ "Exclusive - Catalan leader says independence vote must go ahead", *Reuters*, 4 June 2014.

⁴ "The Autonomous Communities", *Europa World Plus* [accessed 10 July 2014]

⁵ "The nuclear options of Catalonia", *openDemocracy*, 20 September 2012.

independence of its most strident anti-Spanish elements.”⁶ Shortly before this march, an opinion poll showed a majority of Catalans in favour of independence for the first time.⁷

4 The view from Madrid

Both of Spain’s main parties are opposed to Catalan independence, though the opposition Socialists are more open to further devolution than are the governing, centre-right Popular Party. As Reuters has recently explained:

In the white paper [...] last year, Socialists argued a new constitution should change Spain's territorial model into a federal state that explicitly recognises the historical, cultural and linguistic differences of Catalonia, the Basque country and Galicia.

The idea is to address weaknesses in the 1978 Constitution, which critics say diluted self-rule for Catalonia and the Basques by trying to treat all 17 autonomous regions equally, even those with no historical quest for nationhood.

It also proposes making the Senate - one of Spain's most criticized institutions - into a body that represents the interests of 17 regions - another way to address Catalonia's grievances.

[...]

Rajoy is resisting debate on reform. Officials close to him say his view is that a new constitution wouldn't satisfy Catalans who want to secede.⁸

5 Attempts to hold a vote on independence

5.1 Attempt to hold a binding referendum

Following the 2012 election, the Republican Left of Catalonia agreed to support the proposals of the Convergence and Union minority administration for a referendum on Catalan independence.⁹ On 12 December 2013, Artur Mas proposed that the referendum would take place on 9 November 2014, comprising the following two questions:

- Do you want Catalonia to become a state?
- [if yes] Do you want that state to be independent?¹⁰

The Catalan Parliament duly voted in favour of Catalan self-determination on 23 January 2013.¹¹ However, on 26 March 2014, Spain’s constitutional court declared the proposed referendum to be unconstitutional.¹² Subsequently, on 8 April 2014, the Spanish Parliament voted to reject the Catalan Parliament’s petition to allow a binding referendum.¹³

⁶ "Separatism in times of crisis in Spain: the search for a future", *openDemocracy*, 18 September 2012.

⁷ "Homage to Catalonia (revisited)", *openDemocracy*, 14 September 2012.

⁸ "Spain's popular prince must charm Catalonia as king", *Reuters*, 18 June 2014.

⁹ "Catalonia referendum set for 2014", *Financial Times*, 19 December 2012.

¹⁰ "Political parties announce date for vote on Catalonia independence", *CNN*, 12 December 2013.

¹¹ "Catalan parliament declaration pushes self-determination", *CNN*, 23 January 2014.

¹² "Spain Says Catalonia Can't Vote for Independence, But Catalans Will Go Ahead Anyway", *TIME Magazine*, 26 March 2014.

¹³ "Spain's parliament rejects Catalan independence bid", *The Telegraph*, 9 April 2014.

5.2 Attempt to hold a non-binding ‘popular consultation’

Following the Spanish Parliament’s decision, Reuters reported that:

[Artur Mas] said in the coming weeks the Catalanian regional parliament would pass a law setting rules for a popular consultation to be held instead.

This is a non-binding vote which will not lead to a unilateral declaration of independence.¹⁴

The ‘popular consultation’ was to go ahead on the same date as the originally-planned referendum, and was to consist of the same two questions.¹⁵ On 19 September 2014, the Catalan Parliament passed a law giving President Mas the power to call this ‘popular consultation.’¹⁶ Mas did so on 27 September, but the Spanish Government immediately called on the Constitutional Court to block the consultation.¹⁷

On 29 September, the Court agreed to hear the Spanish Government’s case, meaning that the consultation – and the law giving President Mas the power to call it – were to be suspended for five months pending a final decision.¹⁸ So whilst the Court has not formally issued a decision, it has in effect – by agreeing to hear the Spanish Government’s case – ruled that the consultation scheduled for 9 November cannot take place. On 13 October, following these developments, President Mas officially announced that the planned consultation would no longer take place. In doing so he incurred the wrath of Republican Left of Catalonia, whose representatives urged the Catalan Government to press ahead with the consultation in defiance of the Constitutional Court.¹⁹

5.3 The third attempt

On 14 October, the day after the planned consultation was officially cancelled, Mas announced that a form of consultation would still take place, albeit “in a different form from what we had planned.” It was announced that the referendum would be organised by volunteers rather than the Catalan Government’s civil servants, and that it would be conducted without a formal electoral roll.²⁰

On 31 October, the Spanish Government once again called on the Constitutional Court to block the consultation. The Court has not yet decided whether to hear the Spanish Government’s case, but a decision is expected on 4 November. As before, if the Court agrees to hear the case, the consultation will have to be suspended pending a final decision.²¹

¹⁴ "Exclusive - Catalan leader says independence vote must go ahead", *Reuters*, 4 June 2014.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "Catalonia's parliament paves the way for November vote on independence", *Guardian*, 19 September 2014

¹⁷ "Spanish government asks court to block Catalan referendum", *Guardian*, 29 September 2014

¹⁸ "Catalonia independence referendum halted by Spain's constitutional court", *Guardian*, 29 September 2014

¹⁹ "Catalonia looks for alternatives after cancelling independence referendum", *Guardian*, 14 October 2014

²⁰ "Catalonia to hold unofficial poll instead of independence referendum", *Guardian*, 14 October 2014

²¹ "Rajoy finally takes Catalonia's alternative and non-binding vote on independence to Constitutional Court", *Catalan News Agency*, 31 October 2014

6 Polling

Until recently the pro-independence campaign was ahead in the polls. However, a poll published in *El Mundo* in September 2014 indicated that momentum had shifted away from the independence movement. The table below shows the results of this recent poll, together with a poll from February 2014 (for the '8 al dia' programme) which showed the pro-independence campaign ahead:²²

	Sep 2014	Feb 2014
Yes to statehood; yes to independence	34.6%	40.7%
Yes to statehood; no to independence	4.5%	3.8%
Yes to statehood; undecided on independence	2.3%	3.5%
No to statehood	39.5%	24.4%
Undecided/Abstention	19.2%	27.5%

Various local referendums have taken place in towns and cities across Catalonia in recent years. In one such referendum on 10 April 2011, 90% of voters in Barcelona backed statehood – though turnout was only 21%. Other local referendums have had similar results.²³

7 The European question

Most supporters of Catalan independence are also strongly pro-European: the September 2012 march took place under the banner: "Catalonia, a State of Europe."²⁴ Underlying the marchers' sentiments was the fear that an independent Catalonia might not be admitted to the EU: Catalan accession would require modification of the Lisbon Treaty, which would in turn require unanimous approval by all member States (including Spain).²⁵ On 16 September 2013, the Spanish Vice-President of the European Commission, Joaquin Almunia, stated that an independent Catalonia would not automatically become an EU member.²⁶

According to Reuters:

Mas said that if a large majority of Catalans show they want independence, Europe and the euro zone have to be practical and allow them to stay in the EU and the single currency.

[...]

"If Catalonia ended up outside the euro and the EU that would be because Spain wanted to take revenge and block them out of everything," he said.²⁷

²² "Un 48% quiere que Catalunya sea un Estado y sube el número de indecisos hasta casi un tercio", *La Vanguardia*, 6 February 2014; "La secesión divide a los catalanes...", *El Mundo*, 1 September 2014

²³ "Catalan independence boost after Barcelona vote", *The Guardian*, 11 April 2011.

²⁴ "The nuclear options of Catalonia", *openDemocracy*, 20 September 2012.

²⁵ "Catalonia-Spain: Deadlock", *openDemocracy*, 14 September 2012.

²⁶ "EU commission: Catalonia must leave EU if it leaves Spain", *EU Observer*, 17 September 2013.

²⁷ "Exclusive - Catalan leader says independence vote must go ahead", *Reuters*, 4 June 2014.