

The case of Catalonia: understanding the political use of de facto independence referendums

*Independence referendums are comparatively rare – and even more so when conducted without the approval of the relevant central government. **Jaume López** and **Marc Sanjaume-Calvet** assess the case of Catalonia in 2017, and how the differing strategic priorities and culture of Spanish and Catalan governments led to the referendum, repressive counter-measures and resulting stalemate.*



Picture: [Beverly Yuen Thompson](#) / (CC BY-NC 2.0) licence

On 1 October 2017, a referendum on independence took place in Catalonia despite the opposition of Spanish central authorities and the lack of constitutional support. The Yes option won by 90% of the votes and the turnout was 43%. More than three years later, Catalan leaders remain in jail or in exile and members of the former Catalan government and leaders of civil society have been convicted to serve several years in prison, while many civil servants and citizens are still awaiting trial. A pro-independence government remains in place in Catalonia, but in Madrid the conservative government of Mariano Rajoy was replaced by a leftist coalition of Socialists and Podemos. While the 2017 vote on independence was a major landmark of Catalan secessionist movement, it did not produce an independent state nor a change in the inflexible approach to the territorial question by the central government. Recently, the new executive led by Pedro Sánchez has slightly opened the door to an eventual negotiation on the Catalan issue in a 'table of dialogue', but this has not yet borne fruit.

Referendums on independence in liberal democracies are rare, even more so when held without the agreement of the central government. In [our research](#) we attempt to answer several questions: how can we explain the decisions of the political actors involved to hold a referendum and of others to repress it? And was this referendum comparable to other cases? We consider both strategic culture and rationality as relevant factors for explaining the political actors' behaviour. Although the political use of popular mobilisation through a referendum to strengthen legitimacy is common among this type of referendum, the Catalan case presents some peculiarities since it occurred in a liberal democracy, civil society actors were instrumental in making the vote possible, and central authorities repressed both the organisation of the vote and the voters themselves.

Why did Catalan and Spanish governments act as they did?

Using [Qvortrup's](#) (2014) *competition proximity model* applied to the rationality of referendums we argue that in the Catalan case calling for an independence referendum was a rational strategy of secessionist actors. According to this model, when competition is high and the preferences of most voters align with the policy to be carried out, referendums occur. The Catalan government was in strong competition against the central Spanish government in 2017, after several failed attempts to negotiate on the political status of Catalonia. Moreover, there was internal competition among pro-independence political parties too at two levels: among pro-independence forces composing the heterogeneous ruling platform (Junts pel Sí) and within the broader pro-independence parliamentary majority. The pro-independence parties had already obtained a parliamentary majority in the last regional elections without any change in the attitude of the central government regarding self-determination, and Madrid remained against the possibility of a negotiation on independence or on the right to decide based on the Catalan democratic mandate. From the point of view of the Catalan government, the referendum implied delivering 'the right to decide' and legitimising independence vis-à-vis the central state and international actors. In September 2017 a poll published by *El País* found that 82% of the Catalans supported a legal and agreed referendum. Later on, several polls found a consistent majority of Catalans supporting a referendum on independence (between 70 and 75%).

The reverse calculations can be applied to the central government. In this case, competition was exceptionally low on this territorial policy since both the ruling party (PP) and main opposition party (PSOE) opposed the referendum in Catalonia, as did the main judiciary institutions. Moreover, the Catalan government did not represent a challenging competition to central government. Public opinion was more divided on the issue than political elites but still against a referendum. According to the polls less than 50% of Spaniards supported a referendum on independence in Catalonia. Therefore, opposing the referendum was somewhat expected according to the *competition proximity model*.

The role of strategic culture

Beyond such rational, competition-based motives, strategic culture played a relevant role too. In Catalonia, the framing of a 'right to decide' had been shaping the demand for self-determination since the Statute of Autonomy reform in 2005. The beginning of this popular public demand can be traced back to when the *Platform for the right to decide* was formed at that time by around 700 civic associations. Since then, several mobilisations were inspired by the idea of applying the democratic principle, such as the grassroots local consultations on independence that took place between 2009 and 2013. In fact, the 2017 1 October referendum was executed by an underground civil society network.

Strategic culture also shaped the response to this territorial challenge from central government. The constitutional and political response to the Basque precedent had already shaped a legalistic defence against independence referendums in Spain. Despite criticisms of the narrow legal doctrine on this issue from constitutional law experts, the Spanish government remained inflexible to the Catalan demands and repressed the pro-independence movement and leaders to avoid the 2017 referendum. The Spanish government used several legal and coercive measures to stop the 1 October referendum. These included arrests of civil servants and politicians, the deployment of more than 10,000 extra police from the rest of Spain in Catalan territory, opening criminal law cases against MPs, government officials and 700 mayors, police searches in various Catalan ministries and private businesses, the censorship of websites including official sites and apps, bans on public events on the referendum, and the infringement of postal privacy by the public mail service in order to block the distribution of electoral propaganda, among other actions.

A comparative view

Was the 2017 referendum in Catalonia a rare case? The Catalan case presents some similarities with other experiences of unilateral referendums organised by pro-independence movements in the past but also important differences. The use of unilateral referendums, either *de jure* or *de facto*, might not lead to independence, but can have political and legal consequences and do not end up as a zero-sum game. Cases of referendums held in other territories and contexts such as Quebec, Aaland Islands, Kurdistan or Kosovo in which *de facto* or *de jure* referendums were used to advance the secessionist cause bear some resemblance with the Catalan experience.

However, at least three features make the 2017 this case a *rare phenomenon*. First, the 2017 referendum was a *de facto* independence referendum; this kind of referendum generally does not occur in liberal democracies. Second, the referendum was executed by civil society, although it was coordinated by regional authorities. Finally, the turnout was less successful than other unilateral experiences from a comparative perspective. All these peculiarities are partially explained by the clash of rationalities and strategic cultures we have detailed.

The Catalan referendum on independence and its repression was a rare event in a liberal democracy but it obeyed a specific rationality and strategic culture of actors involved. Our research sheds light on this case-study and might be used as a material in comparative analysis on the use of referendums of independence in secessionist conflicts.

This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position Democratic Audit. It draws on their article, '[The Political Use of de facto Referendums of Independence The Case of Catalonia](#)', published in Representation.

About the authors

Jaume López is Lecturer in Political Science at Universitat Pompeu Fabra and Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. His main areas of research are: democratic innovation, right to self-determination, collective action, philosophy of social sciences.

Marc Sanjaume-Calvet is Lecturer in Political Science at Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. His main areas of research are: democracy, federalism, nationalism, political theory.

Similar Posts

- [Without a change in leadership in Madrid or Catalonia, further conflict looks inevitable](#)
- [Be careful what you wish for: Brexit and the call for another referendum](#)
- [Referendums can be more effective if voters can choose from several options](#)
- [Do populist-leaning citizens support direct democracy?](#)
- [Lessons from Ireland's recent referendums: how deliberation helps inform voters](#)