

Catalonia's election result reflects the fragmented and divided nature of the pro-independence majority.

by Blog Admin

Elections to the Catalan Parliament this weekend produced a majority for parties that support independence for Catalonia. [Jonathan Hopkin](#) writes, however, that divisions between the pro-independence parties on social and economic policy mean that a referendum on independence for Catalonia is by no means a certainty.



The results of the elections to the Catalan Parliament on Sunday can be read in different ways, as a glance at the headlines reveals. The BBC's online news claimed '[Catalonia: Separatists Win Majority](#)', and the FT reported that Catalonia '[Takes Step Toward Break-Up Vote](#)'. Inside Catalonia, most media told a different story: the pro-independence Catalan paper *El Punt Avui* reported '[First Battle: Spain Wins](#)', while the headline of the Barcelona daily *El Periódico* was simply '[flop](#)'. So was the election result a humiliation for the pro-independence movement, or a first step towards a Catalan state?

Perhaps the most accurate answer is: neither. The [elections](#) certainly confirmed majority support in the Catalan electorate for parties supporting a referendum vote on independence. The centre-right nationalist party Convergence and Union (CiU), the party of the incumbent president of the Catalan government (*Generalitat*) Artur Mas, won almost a third of the vote and 50 of the 135 seats in the Catalan Parliament. Added to the other pro-referendum parties – Catalan Republican Left (ERC), with 21 seats, the radical left Initiative for Catalonia (ICV) with 13, and 3 seats for the small left nationalist CUP party – this amounts to a substantial majority of the Catalan legislature supporting a vote on statehood.

Moreover, the circumstances in which the elections were called made the vote an unambiguous test of popular support for a referendum. Although CiU has only adopted a pro-independence position quite recently, Mas's decision to call an early election only two years into his mandate marked a decisive shift in his party's identity. The massive pro-independence demonstration in Barcelona on 11th September – around 1.5 million people took part in a march on Catalonia's national day (the *diada*) – was [widely seen as a challenge to the constitutional status quo](#). The elections were presented to the public as a first step towards 'self-determination', marking the translation of the massive support for independence on the *diada* into a new majority in the Catalan Parliament. Voters were fully aware that Sunday's vote was a prelude to a referendum on independence.

But the elections also made clear the obstacles in the path of independence. First, the pro-independence majority is extremely fragmented. CiU is a party of the centre-right, representing the Catalan middle classes and with close connections to business interests, while all the other pro-independence parties are on the more or less radical left. Despite sharing a common view on statehood, they are deeply divided on economic and social policy, and in the desperate economic conditions facing Catalonia and the rest of Spain, the *Generalitat's* budgetary policy pits CiU against the others. Worse, CiU itself comes out of these elections weakened both numerically (losing 12



Artur Mas, incumbent president of the Catalan government Credit: iSabadell (Creative Commons BY NC SA)

seats) and politically, with Mas widely seen as having suffered a humiliating personal defeat after aiming to renew his mandate with an absolute majority. Any moves towards such a dramatic change as an independence referendum will be difficult for CiU to control given the fragmented and divided nature of the pro-independence majority.

The elections also confirmed that a substantial minority of Catalans are neither in favour of independence, nor support Catalan nationalist parties. The traditional party of the Castilian-speaking working class in the metropolitan area of Barcelona, the Catalan Socialists (PSC), suffered a clear defeat, but with the strong showing of the Catalan branch of Mariano Rajoy's Popular Party and the growing support for the anti-nationalist party Citizens of Catalunya (*Ciutadans*), anti-referendum parties represent 35 per cent of the electorate, and have 48 seats in the Parliament. Although this is not enough to block a vote on a referendum, it is important for several reasons. First, Mas may struggle to form any coalition capable of taking decisions on economic policy without drawing on the support of either the PSC or the PP (whom CiU has worked with in the past both in Catalonia and in the Spanish Congress). This support will not necessarily be forthcoming in the context of a push towards a referendum. Second, the unexpectedly high level of turnout amongst non-nationalist voters – many of whom usually vote in Spanish general elections but abstain in Catalan elections – suggests that a clear win in a putative referendum may not be a certainty.

Perhaps most important, the presence of a sizeable anti-referendum vote will have ramifications for the position taken by the Spanish central government and the Congress of Deputies in Madrid. The 1978 Constitution made a point of not recognising the right to self-determination, as a result of which the main Basque nationalist parties, alone amongst those represented in the constituent Congress, refused to back it, with devastating consequences for the political conflict in the Basque Country. The Constitution also reserves the right to call referenda to the King and the Spanish Congress, in which Rajoy's PP and the Spanish Socialists (PSOE), both opposed to Catalan independence, hold the vast majority of seats. The divisions between nationalists and non-nationalists in Catalonia, the deep political divisions within the nationalist camp, and the unexpected personal defeat suffered by the Catalan President Mas, all make the task of blocking a popular vote on independence far easier.

So what can we expect now? It is worth recalling that Mas's gamble is not the first time a political leader in a Spanish Autonomous Community has declared the intention to hold a referendum on independence. The [Ibarretxe Plan](#) launched by the then President (*Iehendakari*) of the Basque Government in 2001 also proposed the right to self-determination and mooted a referendum to create a Basque state. Although there were many other reasons for the Plan's ultimate shelving, the restrictions placed on national claims by the Spanish constitution and the sovereignty held by the Spanish Congress and, ultimately, the Constitutional Court, effectively acted as a triple lock on Basque moves towards independence. These institutions represent the majority wishes of Spain, not Catalonia or the Basque Country, and the balance of forces in central government is currently deeply unfavourable to constitutional reforms to facilitate bids for independence. In a context of deep economic crisis other parts of Spain, most of them poorer than Catalonia, are unlikely to show any greater willingness to contemplate changes to the state than was the case in the 2000s. The demand for self-determination will not go away, but neither does it have immediate prospects of fulfilment.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPPE – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/UpDqif>

About the author

Jonathan Hopkin – *London School of Economics*

Jonathan Hopkin is a Reader at the Department of Government at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). He is mainly interested in political parties, elections, redistribution and inequality, corruption, decentralisation and the politics of Great Britain, Italy and Spain. His work has appeared in a range of journals including



the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *European Journal of Political Research*, the *Review of International Political Economy*, and *West European Politics*.



Related posts:

1. [Calls for independence in Catalonia are part of an evolution of Spain's democracy that the country's constitution may have to come to accommodate. \(18.9\)](#)
2. [Basque nationalists are taking inspiration from Scotland and Northern Ireland by using politics as a vehicle for independence. \(17.2\)](#)
3. [The rise of secessionism in Catalonia has emerged out of the will to decide the region's political destiny as a nation \(15.4\)](#)