

Catalonia has taken the first step toward becoming a new nation in the EU

*What does the result of the Catalan elections on 27 September mean for the future of Catalonia and Spain? **Montserrat Guibernau** argues that the election result grants the legitimacy required for pro-independence parties to bring about a legally binding referendum on Catalan independence. Nevertheless she writes that the independence movement will face a number of challenges in implementing their roadmap for secession from Spain, including the need to maintain unity between pro-independence parties and the rise of Ciudadanos.*



The pro-independence coalition has obtained a majority in the Catalan Parliament. This grants them legitimacy to initiate a process leading towards a legally binding referendum to decide upon the political future of Catalonia as a new nation in the European Union.

The Catalan Parliament will have a majority of pro-independence MPs in the newly elected Government of Catalonia. This situation is unprecedented and responds to a process of mass mobilisation of the Catalan people, unhappy with the lack of response of the Spanish government to longstanding demands for greater democratisation within Spain; demands that, from the outset, have included the recognition of Catalonia as a nation and a fair financial arrangement that would end the annual deficit of 8 per cent of Catalan GDP generated by the conditions set up by the Spanish state.

There has been a lack of dialogue and inability or unwillingness to acknowledge the demands of a Catalan citizenry that since 2012 every year – on Catalonia's National Day, 11 September – have taken to the streets and mobilised over 1.5 million people demanding the right to decide upon their political future. Turnout has reached 77.5 per cent, this is an unprecedented record in the history of Catalan democracy; since the first democratic elections after Franco's dictatorship in 1980, never before has such a high turnout been experienced.

Catalonia: a new nation in the EU

The outcome of the elections to the Catalan Parliament can be read in two ways. First, by noting that according to the Spanish Constitution, Catalan elections are 'regional elections'. Second, they can be viewed, as the pro-independence movement in Catalonia regards the elections, as a plebiscite on independence.

The latter interpretation is the view of the 'Together for Yes' (*Junts pel Sí*) coalition, led by a grouping that includes social-democrats, the Catalan Republican Left, centrists, centre-right actors, and democratic nationalist political parties in favour of Independence. At the head of Together for Yes are the leaders of the coalition's two key parties, Artur Mas of the **Democratic Convergence of Catalonia** (CDC), and Oriol Junqueras of the **Republican Left of Catalonia** (ERC).



Catalan independence protest in New York, 2013. Credit: Liz Castro / Flickr (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

In order to obtain an overall majority (68 seats), Together for Yes (who hold 62 seats) will require the support of the **CUP**: a small radical party in favour of independence, which defines itself as anti-capitalist and feminist (the party holds 10 seats).

Immediately after the election results, it became clear that negotiation, dialogue and a genuine democratic outlook are necessary to move forward. The Spanish Constitution was drafted under duress, at a time when the army was present and decisive: a time when only incipient steps towards a transition to democracy began to emerge.

Since then Catalonia's position and role within Spain has been defined by a lack of trust, also by the tension between a core, enjoying political power, and the advantages associated with it, and the rest. It is out of frustration that Catalans shifted from 'political autonomy' to supporting 'independence'. It is through peaceful civilised political mobilisation that Catalans are now demanding the right to decide upon their political future and strongly defend the values and founding principles of the European Union.

The key challenges faced by Catalonia's quest for recognition are: First, maintaining unity and avoiding a battle of divided leadership at the top. Second, it will be crucial whether the **Popular Party** (PP), currently in office, is to remain silent, avoiding the confrontation with a nightmare scenario similar to the debacle they have just witnessed in the Catalan election; where support has dropped from 19 seats in 2012 to 11 seats in 2015.

The prospect of a similar drop in electoral support for the PP, if reproduced in the Spanish general election to be held by the end of December, could severely damage the PP and completely transform the electoral political landscape in Catalonia and Spain. Third, there is the rise of '**Ciudadanos**' (which holds 25 seats) – a populist, Spanish nationalist party, that is anti-Catalan independence.

It is important to witness and understand that the above challenges take place at a time when authoritarian politics are ripe. This is a delicate moment in the life of the European Union, where demands for tough leadership, order and populism have made it to the core of European politics.

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