

Catalan elections: three possible scenarios that could shape Catalonia's future

Catalonia will hold elections on 27 September which have been framed by pro-independence parties as a de facto vote on Catalan independence. [Daniel Cetrà](#) writes that while the polling suggests the pro-independence parties will win the election, it remains unclear whether they will secure a majority of votes. He outlines three potential scenarios that could emerge from the election: a majority for the main pro-independence list 'Together for Yes', which would allow them to set in motion their plan for secession; a situation where Together for Yes relies on other pro-independence parties for a majority; and a defeat for Together for Yes, which could ultimately spell the end for the independence movement's campaign for secession.



This Sunday's regional election in Catalonia is exceptional as the pro-independence camp aims to turn it into a de facto plebiscite on independence. The two main nationalist parties, the [Democratic Convergence of Catalonia](#) (CDC) and [Republican Left of Catalonia](#) (ERC), will run together under the pro-independence list 'Together for Yes', and their roadmap includes declaring independence within 18 months if the election delivers an overall majority of pro-independence seats.

Together for Yes cuts across the left-right dimension of party competition, and it also has pro-independence figures from sovereigntist civil society organisations. Former Green MEP Raül Romeva heads the coalition's list, but in the event of victory the President would be Artur Mas (CDC) again. It is the pro-independence agenda, and not a shared vision of society, which brings together the parties and members of this coalition.

The other parties, with the exception of the far-left and also pro-independence [Popular Unity Candidates](#) (CUP), which is running separately, disagree with framing the election as a proxy for a referendum. However, they are having difficulties setting the agenda around other issues. One of the reasons is precisely the formation of Together for Yes, which concentrates the secessionist course into one main option on the ballot paper and conveys the idea of exceptionality to the electorate.



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These agenda-setting problems are evident in the leftist coalition 'Catalonia Yes We Can', which brings together the [Catalan Greens](#) (ICV), the Catalan branch of [Podemos](#), and [United and Alternative Left](#) (EUiA). This coalition supports the holding of a referendum, but opposes the unilateral independence process promoted by the pro-independence camp. They focus on the left-right dimension of party competition and want to make Artur Mas accountable for the government's austerity measures during the past term. However, the low profile of their candidate, Lluís Rabell, and the 'plebiscitary' dynamic set by Together for Yes are posing serious challenges to the success of their campaign strategy.

Paradoxically, parties that oppose Catalan independence, like [Ciutadans](#) (Ciudadanos/Citizens) and the ruling [People's Party](#) (PP), with their emphasis on the unconstitutionality of the Catalan secessionist process and the dramatic consequences of independence, are contributing to making the election exactly the plebiscite on independence that both Together for Yes and the CUP desire. In turn, the [Catalan Socialist Party](#), which stands for

federalism and an end to the budgetary cuts, has lost most of its traditional Catalanist voters and competes electorally with Ciutadans and the PP.

The campaign: focused on independence

Together for Yes defends the plebiscitary election as the only way left to channel the demand for a referendum, given the Spanish government's refusal to follow the 'Scottish model'. Their case for independence is made up of political arguments (e.g. avoiding the recentralisation process taking place in Spain) and economic arguments (e.g. stopping the excessive fiscal deficit and disposing of greater resources to address social needs in Catalonia). Emotive remarks about the vote being a once in a lifetime opportunity to recover political freedom for Catalonia also play a role. On the other hand, the CUP sees independence as a deep transformative process to get rid of corrupted elites and dysfunctional practices, and to progressively achieve social justice.

The rest of the parties put in question the desirability of independence and the feasibility of the roadmap to independence designed by Together for Yes. They focus fundamentally on the costs of leaving the EU (such as the potential loss of European citizenship and the effects on trade) and the risk independence would pose for pensions.

In a similar vein, the Bank of Spain has warned that independence could put access to deposits in danger, while the main banks suggest that in the case of independence they would consider relocating. The pro-independence camp counters that an independent Catalonia would not automatically leave the EU and would be in a better position than Spain to pay pensions. They also accuse unionists of talking only the language of fear and threats. Readers who followed the Scottish referendum debate last year will be very familiar with these arguments.

What is significantly different from the Scottish referendum debate is the extent to which the implications of independence are being discussed. There is a complete lack of any informed debate about the issue, and the campaign is more focused on mobilising the voters from each respective side than on contrasting views about the benefits and costs of independence.

In terms of political actors, there is a clear discontinuity between the parties and candidates which have run in the previous Catalan election (November 2012) and the ones who will run in this Sunday's election. The federation of CiU, which was traditionally dominant in Catalan nationalism, has broken up due to disagreements about independence: the CDC will run under Together for Yes, while the UDC will run separately and hopes to gather votes from moderate nationalists preoccupied with plans for a unilateral process of independence. The ERC will also run under Together for Yes, even though polls suggested that the party was likely to win the next Catalan election. Finally, the Catalan Greens run under Catalonia Yes We Can.

Remarkably, none of the six candidates heading the lists in the 2012 Catalan election are candidates this year. In addition, some top of the list candidates such as the candidate for Catalonia Yes We Can, Lluís Rabell, are not professional politicians but long-term activists. The leaders of the CDC and ERC, which were the two main parties in the Catalan parliament in the previous term, are represented by Raül Romeva, who was an MEP for the Greens. And the president of the Catalan government for the past five years, Artur Mas, who is also the presidential candidate of Together for Yes, does not head the electoral list and is rather absent in the campaign. This makes the picture complex.

The results: three possible scenarios

The pro-independence camp is highly mobilised and opinion polls suggest that Together for Yes will win the election, but it is not clear whether they will obtain a majority. The two pro-independence lists could win a majority of seats but not of votes due to the electoral system, which would result in a contested mandate for secession.

In the first scenario, Together for Yes obtains a majority. This means they would not be dependent on the parliamentary support of the CUP to implement their roadmap to independence. But this does not necessarily imply that they would rule out negotiating with Madrid: achieving unilateral independence is extremely complex, and they

might use the victory to try to negotiate one last time with the Spanish government from a position of strength. Paradoxically, this scenario might increase the chances of the PP staying in power in Madrid after this December's general election. They would run as the only party that guarantees the unity of Spain.

In the second scenario, Together for Yes wins the election but needs the parliamentary support of the CUP. The far-left party would then have to make a difficult decision over whether to support Artur Mas, with whom they have deep ideological disagreements, for President.

Finally, in the third scenario, the least likely according to opinion polls, Together for Yes and the CUP do not obtain a parliamentary majority. This could be the result of a very high turnout caused by an unexpected mobilisation of the non-secessionist camp. This would cause internal divisions in the pro-independence camp and would most likely mean the end of the Catalan secessionist process.

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About the author

Daniel Cetrà – *Centre on Constitutional Change/University of Edinburgh*

Daniel Cetrà is a Research Fellow at the Centre on Constitutional Change and a Doctoral Researcher at the University of Edinburgh.



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