

Spain's local elections underlined the profound changes taking place in the Spanish party system

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Spain held regional and local elections on 24 May. [Anwen Elias](#) assesses what the results of the elections mean for Spain ahead of the upcoming general election, and for Catalonia in the lead up to regional elections in September that have been billed by some parties as a de facto vote on independence. She writes that the capacity of new and old parties to respond to the changing circumstances in Spanish politics will determine whether the country's traditional two-party system can definitively be said to be over.



Pronouncements that Spain's two-party system has come to an end have abounded since the 2014 European elections, a contest that saw the vote-share of Spain's two largest parties – the [Partido Popular](#) (PP) and [Partido Socialista Obrero Español](#) (PSOE) – fall below 50 per cent for the first time since democratic elections in 1977, and the electoral breakthrough of the anti-austerity party [Podemos](#).

The regional and local elections held in Spain on 24 May 2015 confirm that the Spanish party system is undergoing profound changes. New political parties and electoral alliances have mobilised voters thoroughly disillusioned with the big parties' inadequate solutions for Spain's economic crisis, and their implication in the country's institutional crisis (as a result of widespread corruption scandals).

The results of the local elections in Barcelona illustrate many of the shifting electoral patterns that are evident across Spain, with the added complication that here electoral politics is also shaped by a third crisis: Spain's territorial crisis. This campaign pitted those who wanted to talk about social inequalities and corruption, against those who preferred to focus on Catalan independence.

In the end, the former narrowly won the electoral battle in Spain's second largest city. [Barcelona en Comú](#), an alliance of left-wing parties and civil society organisations led by Ada Colau, replaced the nationalist [Convergència i Unió](#) (CiU) as the largest party on Barcelona's local council. Barcelona en Comú aims to "take back the city for its people". Among its priorities are tighter controls on mortgage lenders, transforming Catalonia's transport system, investing in public childcare facilities, better management of Barcelona's tourism industry, and greater transparency in public finances.



But the euphoria of election night will very quickly have to give way to the realities of being in government. Barcelona en Comú's 11 seats do not give it the absolute majority it needed to govern alone. This isn't a new occurrence in the history of local government in Barcelona; no party has enjoyed a governing majority on the council since 1979. But this time round, the challenge of governing is arguably far greater: the distribution of seats among the other six parties represented on the council means that securing such a majority is likely to require negotiating with three or four different parties.

Such multi-party discussions are always difficult, and Colau will be leading these talks as leader of her own relatively new alliance of parties with different histories and dynamics. Her capacity to deliver on her electoral promises will depend on her ability to manage these complex inter-party, as well as intra-party, pressures.

Colau's room for manoeuvre will be further constrained by the territorial priorities of some of her potential allies. [Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya](#) (CDC), the largest party in the CiU federation that still governs in the Catalan parliament, approached these elections as a test of the public's support for Catalan independence. In doing so, it is thinking ahead to the Catalan regional elections scheduled for 27 September 2015, which have been billed as a *de facto* referendum on Catalonia's relationship with Spain.

Earlier this year, CDC, [Esquerra Republicana Catalunya](#) (ERC) and other civil society organisations formally agreed that the election of a pro-independence majority to the Catalan Parliament on this date would trigger the creation of an independent Catalan state within 18 months. Viewed in the context of this larger strategic plan, CiU's loss of control of Barcelona's local government is a blow (although in Catalonia as a whole the vote-share of independentist parties increased slightly).

But the more immediate threat to CDC's pro-independence ambitions comes from the governing alliances that will have to be formed in places like Barcelona. Colau has already indicated her desire to work with left-wing parties such as ERC to deliver her policy agenda. But ERC is constrained by its agreement with CDC to build pro-independence majorities at all levels of government; collaboration with Barcelona en Comú (who have so far said very little about Catalonia's relationship with the rest of Spain) would jeopardise this agreement, and de-rail the entire independence process. Other threats to the independence process may materialise in the coming months, as CDC waits to see if other parties (including, crucially, its partner within the CiU federation, [Unió Democràtica de Catalunya](#)) sign up to its plans for achieving Catalan statehood.

The local elections in Barcelona, like local and regional elections elsewhere in Spain, have provided a platform for new actors to demand a new kind of politics. But the fragmentation of party politics also means that this will inevitably be a more complex politics, requiring new alliances and difficult compromises in an effort to resolve Spain's economic, institutional and territorial crises.

And there is little time for those in government for the first time, or those that find themselves out of government and struggling to retain their electoral appeal, to adjust to the new political landscape. With Catalan regional elections in September, and a general election expected in November, the capacity of new and old parties to respond to their changed circumstances will dictate whether the era of Spain's two-party system can be definitively said to be over.

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

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