

The rise of Podemos poses a challenge for pro-independence parties ahead of the 2015 Catalan elections

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On 15 January, early parliamentary elections were called in Catalonia, with the vote set to be held in September. [Anwen Elias](#) writes on how the elections will shape the on-going debates over Catalan independence. She notes that one of the main challenges pro-independence parties will face is the rise of Podemos, which supports Catalonia's 'right to decide' over the issue, but not its secession from Spain. Ultimately it remains far from clear whether the elections will provide the independence movement with the support it would like from Catalan voters.



After months of uncertainty about the next step for Catalonia's pro-independence movement, there is at last some progress: new elections for the Catalan parliament are to be held on 27 September 2015. The date is significant, because it marks a year exactly from the formal announcement of a referendum on Catalan independence (a referendum which was subsequently declared illegal by Spain's Constitutional Court, but which still took place unofficially).

The official election campaign will start on 11 September 2015, to coincide with Catalonia's National Day (*Diada*) which in recent years has brought thousands of Catalans onto the streets in support of the nation's 'right to decide' on its constitutional future. Catalonia's pro-sovereignty movement clearly hopes to reap electoral benefits from the nationalist symbolism of these key dates in the on-going struggle to re-define Catalonia's relationship with the Spanish state.

But the outcome of these elections is unlikely to be so straight forward. There are several factors – including party politics, the effects of the economic crisis, and on-going corruption investigations – that will have a decisive impact on the outcome of the Catalan elections, and consequently on Catalonia's future relationship with Spain. It is still far from clear, however, in what way these will play out over the next eight months.

The independence question and the 2015 Catalan elections

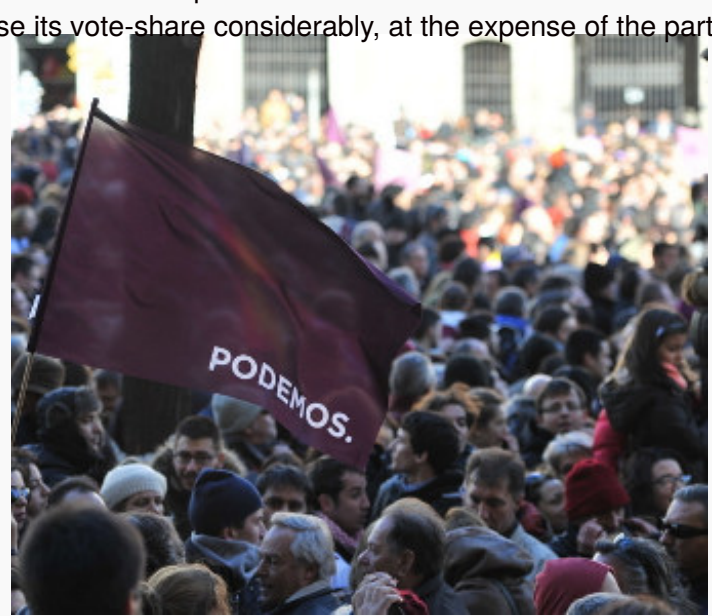
To begin with, the calling of elections is the result of a new agreement between different political parties and civil society organisations on how to push forward with the independence campaign. Following the 'yes' result of the unofficial referendum held on 9 November 2014, the Spanish state's flat refusal to negotiate on constitutional reform provoked deep divisions within the pro-sovereignty movement on questions of political and electoral strategy. The agreement to call elections has, for now, set these divisions aside.

But sustaining this renewed unity will not be easy. Whilst there is talk of a commonly agreed 'roadmap' for achieving independence in the run-up to, and after, the election, the details still need to be pinned down. The two principal political parties supporting independence – [Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya](#) (CDC) and [Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya](#) (ERC) – have also agreed to compete on separate electoral lists.

Both parties have different track records on the independence question: whilst ERC has long been committed to achieving an independent Catalonia, CDC is a much more recent convert to the secessionist cause. In an election that looks likely to hinge on who voters trust most to deliver radical constitutional change, parties' credibility on this key issue will matter. As the campaign gathers momentum, the parties may find it difficult to resist asserting their own secessionist credentials and undermining those of their nationalist rival, and this would make sticking to a shared game-plan very difficult indeed.

A first sense of the electoral balance of power within the nationalist camp will come at the local elections to be held in May. Opinion polls so far suggest that ERC will increase its vote-share considerably, at the expense of the party federation to which CDC belongs, *Convergència i Unió* (CiU). But both parties' electoral standing is also likely to be challenged by the left-wing anti-corruption party *Podemos* that performed so spectacularly in last year's European elections.

Whilst supportive of Catalonia's 'right to decide', *Podemos* opposes its secession from Spain. But a strong showing from *Podemos* in May would introduce other issues into the campaign running up to 27 September. This, in turn, would undermine the attempts of the pro-sovereignty parties to make this election a *de facto* referendum on Catalonia's future relationship with Spain. *Podemos* could also threaten the goal of securing a clear pro-sovereignty majority in the Catalan parliament after the September elections.



March organised by Podemos in Madrid on 31 January, Credit: [bloco](#) (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The threat from *Podemos* is particularly acute for CiU, for two reasons. Firstly, the historic leader of CiU, Jordi Pujol, is the subject of an on-going [corruption investigation](#). This makes the party extremely vulnerable to attacks on its trustworthiness as a future party of government. Secondly, the anti-austerity discourse of *Podemos* appeals to the large number of voters directly affected by Spain's economic crisis, the impact of which has been felt just as acutely in Catalonia as elsewhere in the country. As the party of Catalan government since 2010, CiU is in the line of fire for an economic recovery that is both slow and painful.

Finally, CiU must contend with tensions within its own party organisation on the issue of Catalan independence. Whilst the CDC, the largest party within the federation, has come to embrace this constitutional goal, its smaller partner *Unió Democràtica de Catalunya* (UDC) is divided on the issue. There will be delicate negotiations over coming months to decide whether or not UDC will contest the September elections under the CiU banner. The manner in which these negotiations progress matter, because voters don't like political parties that are divided. But also at stake is the future of a political organisation (CiU) that has been an extremely successful political force in Catalan politics since it was established in 1978.

There is little doubt that in the coming months, Catalan and Spanish politics will be dominated by the constitutional question. What is less clear is the extent to which the pro-sovereignty movement will be able to secure the response it wants from Catalan voters on 27 September 2015. Whatever the outcome, Catalans look set to have to endure yet another year of wrangling over the future governance of their nation.

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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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