

Why political uncertainty will continue in Catalonia despite the decision to alter the proposed independence referendum

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The President of Catalonia's government, Artur Mas, announced on 14 October that the proposed referendum on Catalan independence, scheduled for 9 November, will no longer be held. However a non-binding consultation, under a different legal framework, will take place instead. [Juan Rodríguez-Teruel](#) writes on why it has proven impossible to come to a similar agreement in Catalonia to that which occurred in Scotland. He notes that despite the original referendum plan appearing to be off the table, the political uncertainty in Catalonia is far from over, with the leader of the ERC, which has until now supported Artur Mas' Catalan government, poised to use the situation to push harder for secession.



The political challenge of Catalonia's claim for secession raises interesting, unavoidable parallels with the Scottish case. Many Anglo-Saxon commentators and newspapers have been quite astonished by the attitude of the Spanish government in dealing with Catalan demands for a referendum on secession, and have advocated a step forwards in order to halt the increasing risk of instability in Spain.

Certainly, secession is still not an impossible scenario. Compared with the decision of David Cameron's government to sign a deal over holding a referendum in Scotland, the Spanish government has been absolutely reluctant to agree any kind of concession on this point, which may be viewed as an attitude of political stubbornness. However, while Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has been deeply criticised in Catalonia for this approach, he may have good reasons for this strategy. These reasons are related to the substantive differences between the Catalan and Scottish cases.

Why have the Spanish and Catalan governments failed to agree a referendum?

First, the Constitutional rules at play make Spanish agreement a bit more complicated formally, since they clearly set the procedures for reforming the political system. Although legal constraints should not prohibit politics from resolving the accommodation of secession claims in multinational states, Catalan political parties may ultimately suffer if they ignore the law by forcing illegal votes or encouraging civil disobedience.

Second, although it is not an easy subject to measure, the degree of self-government in Catalonia is much higher than it is in Scotland (according to the [Regional Authority Index](#)) and even higher than it was ten years ago in Catalonia itself. Indeed, Catalonia had its last referendum on self-government only seven years ago, when a substantial reform was approved in June 2006. Granted, a decision by the Constitutional Court invalidated a small number of the articles contained in the reform, but it is nevertheless a major paradox that the push for secession has increased at the point when Catalonia has obtained its highest level of self-government for centuries.

Third, the proposal for a vote on secession had not been clearly formulated by the current ruling party in Catalonia until very recently. As late as the summer of 2012, Catalan President Artur Mas was reluctant to define precisely how the so called 'right to decide' would be implemented in practice. In this context, the decision to call an [early election](#) in September 2012, seeking a large majority which finally fell away, and the agreement to form a minority government with the support of the [Republican Left of Catalonia](#) (ERC) which included a commitment to call a referendum, forced Mas to go further than he probably expected to go only two years ago.

Fourth, Mariano Rajoy is not alone, given that Spanish politics is no longer a 'two player game'. While Catalan

nationalists have attempted to define the situation as a struggle between Catalonia and the national government, the current multilevel, almost federal system that rules Spain, is composed of a divergent range of political actors who may ultimately disagree with the result of the secession debate, whatever it might be.

Every Spanish Prime Minister since the 1990s (González, Aznar, Zapatero) has experienced criticism among their own party members when they have tried to unilaterally set an agreement with Catalonia. Acting effectively as a group of ‘party veto players’, regional leaders have become powerful actors in national politics, and the main intra-party political crises are linked to territorial factions within the two main parties, the [PSOE](#) and [PP](#). Moreover, some new parties have even made strong demands for centralisation, such as the [UPD](#), an anti-devolution, centrist party, created only seven years ago. These internal and external party constraints carry the potential to act as barriers not only to Catalan aspirations, but even to Rajoy’s scope for action. While this excess of veto players can obstruct efficient political choices, it would be unwise simply to ignore them.



Artur Mas, Credit: La Veu del País Valencià (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Fifth, Artur Mas is not alone either. In contrast to the SNP’s prevailing position as the ‘secessionist party’ in the Scottish party system, Catalan support for an independence referendum is highly fragmented among several parties, from conservatives to the far-left. Even the [Convergence and Union](#) (CiU), which Artur Mas leads, is not a single party, but rather a coalition between two organisations which have very different perspectives on how to deal with demands for secession.

Indeed, party fragmentation has increased in Catalonia over the last decade, fuelling a ‘bidding war’ between the two main nationalist parties, CDC (the larger part of the CiU) and the ERC. This competition was visible when Catalan parties attempted to reform the Statute of Autonomy in 2004. This tendency toward ‘maximalism’ on the independence issue makes any ratification of the status quo, or a moderate compromise, complicated for both parties.

Where now for Catalonia?

All of these factors help us to understand the difficulties in agreeing to the 9 November referendum. While Catalan leaders attempted to persuade their voters that the vote was certain to go ahead, the legal constraints have proved much more dissuasive.

On the other hand, the scenario of a no-vote in Catalonia could have become far more complicated than it was in Scotland. An early election would most likely have taken place at the beginning of 2015. The outcome of this election could have then led to an even more fragmented parliament, where the secessionist ERC may have been the first party electorally, but would have been unable to form a coalition with the centre-nationalist CiU, led by Mas. One of the most immediate consequences of an early election along these lines might be that the Catalan parliament would fail to pass a budget for the next year (the second time this would have happened in three years). If more fragmentation damaged the traditional Catalan parties, the Catalan party system would be at risk of collapse.

Under the present circumstances, Rajoy might hesitate between taking the risk of launching a constitutional reform to accommodate Catalan demands (which could only have been announced after the referendum issue had been solved), or pushing harder against Catalan nationalism, fearing that any concession given to Catalonia could

damage his own electoral prospects in the local, regional and general elections scheduled for 2015.

Similarly, Artur Mas will keep searching for an exit to the political situation he finds himself in, although one assumes that his government's political survival has already expired. Faced with these two hesitating political leaders, Oriol Junqueras, the ERC's charismatic leader, will foster stronger pressure for secession, pushing further instability and uncertainty into Catalan politics over the next year. Might Junqueras learn something from the experience of Alex Salmond?



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