

Spain's Socialist Party must carefully balance competing pressures over its policy on Catalan independence

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Independence supporters within Catalonia have called for a referendum to be held in 2014 on the territory's independence from Spain. [Juan Rodríguez Teruel](#) writes on the dilemma Catalan independence poses for Spain's Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). He notes that opposing the referendum may damage the PSOE's relationship with its sister party in Catalonia, the PSC. Supporting calls for independence too strongly, however, could create internal friction for the party in other Spanish regions, and leave the PSOE open to criticism from Spain's centre-right parties.



During the last year, the 'Catalan question' (Catalonia's demands to be considered as a sovereign nation and to obtain secession or 'special status' from Spain) has erupted again onto the Spanish political agenda. Due to a combination of the disappointment felt after the partial Constitutional rejection of the new 2006 Statute of Autonomy (decided by the Constitutional Court in July 2010) and the damaging effects of the economic crisis, opinion polls now show strong support for independence (between 45-55 per cent), which has never been the case before. Despite the efforts of the Catalan nationalist parties to get an agreement from the Spanish government to call for a referendum in 2014, the only reaction from Madrid has been arguing that such a decision is absolutely unlawful.

Calls for an independence referendum in Catalonia not only add a new dimension to the economic and political crisis in Spain, but also represent a great challenge to the Spanish centre-left. In this sense, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) still remembers how the debate on territorial reform launched by ex-President Zapatero damaged his popular standing between 2004 and 2011. While initially Zapatero backed Catalan demands to reform the Statute (extending this schema for many other regions) and benefited from it during his first parliament, the regional controversy, fuelled by the People's Party (PP) in opposition, ultimately eroded PSOE support, even before the economic crisis hit.

In the current political situation, the Catalan question raises both an external and an internal challenge for the PSOE. On the one hand, while the continued presence of this issue on the agenda creates additional pressure on Mariano Rajoy's conservative government, at the same time it helps him to divert media attention away from other controversial issues, like the [party finance corruption affair](#) – linked to some former party leaders – or the management of the economic crisis.



Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, PSOE Secretary General

Conversely, the national issue poses difficulties for the PSOE as it is a divisive factor for the party's support base. The PSOE's Secretary General, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, has been forced to divert from the discourse on political morality and economic alternatives which he has been attempting to foster over the last year and a half. If this debate is not correctly addressed, there is a risk that the party could be caught between those supporters of the status quo, who are reluctant to make any concession to Catalan demands (the conservatives), and the nationalist opinion, which is currently focusing on the 'right to decide', a 'soft' expression which really means the right to self-

determination.

The PSOE reacted some months ago by proposing a Constitutional reform suggesting a transition towards a full federal system. Indeed, many intellectual and academic voices close to the PSOE have for decades advocated a constitutional evolution toward the complete federalisation of Spain. However the weak popular support for federalism among Spaniards, and the strong opposition of the PP to this idea, has prevented the Spanish centre-left from pushing stronger along this path.

On the other hand, the polarisation on the Catalan question has also produced a critical internal challenge for the PSOE because it has eroded the relationship with its Catalan partner, the Socialists' Party of Catalonia (PSC), putting at risk its electoral prospects for the medium-term. The unprecedented creation of a unified Catalan Socialist Party in 1978 – Catalan social democracy had remained divided amongst several groups from the 1920s until 1977 – led to an alliance between the PSC and the PSOE. Despite the absence of formal arrangements ruling this peculiar coalition (in some way, an alliance similar to the German coalition between the CDU and CSU), it successfully allowed the Socialists to be the first electoral party in every general and local election in Catalonia since then, contributing to the PSOE's national victories.

Indeed, the PSC has represented a combination of both Spanish and Catalan identities in the same party, reflecting the feelings of most Catalan people. Between 2003 and 2010, the PSC ruled the regional government, in coalition with the new left party (*Iniciativa*) and the Catalan secessionists (ERC.) However, this experience was ultimately disappointing, as the tensions between both Socialist regional and national governments and the polarisation of the Catalan political electorate around the identity cleavage (plus the consequences of the economic crisis during the left coalition government) eventually ended up producing a massive transfer of votes away from the PSC. Between 2003 and 2012 the PSC lost almost 50 per cent of its electorate and has become only the third largest parliamentary party in the regional parliament.

Simultaneously, the PSC suffered from an increasing factionalism based on the identity cleavage. These internal divisions alongside the external pressures have forced it to openly expose its policy differences with the PSOE. In February 2013, the PSOE and the PSC voted differently in the Spanish lower chamber for the first time. Since then, some Spanish Socialist leaders have asked to split up the party in order to directly present a PSOE candidacy in Catalan districts, separately from the PSC.

As a result of these challenges, the PSOE faces a critical trade-off. A movement towards supporting Catalan demands for self-government will immediately be followed by internal frictions in other regions and greater pressure from Spain's right-wing forces over the national issue. However, a PSOE without a strong PSC in Catalonia will seriously hinder their chances of once again becoming the largest parliamentary party in Spain. The contribution of a strong, united PSC in Catalonia has proved to be decisive for the prospects of the PSOE at the national level.

Consequently, the PSOE will be compelled in the coming months to play its cards well, dealing with the proposal for a Constitutional reform. It may appear as the key actor to bring the other parties together for a new Constitutional agreement on the territorial issue. In order to achieve this, it must set a new type of relationship with the PSC and recover again the confidence it has lost from many Catalan voters, who used to see the party as a champion for improved accommodation of Catalonia within Spain.



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