

Catalonia: A fight within a nation



The Spanish government has stated that the planned referendum on Catalan independence on 1 October will not take place, but it remains to be seen what will occur and how the Catalan government will react. [Roger Senserrich](#) argues that the crisis is not first and foremost a standoff between Catalonia and Spain, but rather a conflict that stems from deep divisions within Catalonia. He writes that even if the dispute between the two governments can be settled, it will be necessary to heal these divisions before Catalonia can move forward.



Credit: [Ramon de cal Benido \(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)

For some commentators, the images of demonstrators on the streets of Barcelona clamouring for a vote to secede from Spain are simply the latest instalment in a centuries-old struggle. It is a clash between two nations, Spain, as an extension of old Castile's authoritarian values, and Catalonia, the independent-minded traders and doers long oppressed under their rule. The current mess is just the final stage of this fight, with the Catalan minority, now self-assured and empowered, seeking a new dawn of justice and freedom outside the old Spanish state.

The Catalan debate, thankfully, has largely avoided nativist or cultural tropes, as inclusion and diversity have long been part of the Catalan nationalists' ethos. There is talk of struggle and oppression, but politicians have largely stuck to pragmatic arguments when calling for a vote. The conversation, instead, has been centred around self-determination, democracy, and a certain idea of fairness.

The pro-secession parties' argument is simple: there is a clear majority of Catalans that want to be able to vote in a referendum asking if the region should break away from Spain. It is only fair, then, that the Spanish government should allow a vote. The country's constitution, as is the norm in Western democracies, clearly bars any Spanish government from even entertaining the idea of holding such a vote, so their response has been predictably dismissive. Catalan nationalists have responded by labelling the central government authoritarian, the constitution outdated, and by passing legislation in the regional parliament that would explicitly repeal or void the constitution and call for a referendum.

It cannot be stressed enough the level of legislative acrobatics that secessionist parties have engaged in over recent months to justify the vote. Catalan nationalists gained a razor-thin majority in the regional parliament, after a disappointing result in a 2015 snap election when they failed to get more than 50% of the vote. Backed with this relatively small mandate, an often-contentious three-party coalition demanded the Madrid government agree to hold a secession vote in less than two years, otherwise they would call it and follow through with the results on their own. Mariano Rajoy's government patiently explained over and over again that he couldn't ditch the constitution, so a secession vote was simply beyond what he could negotiate at all.

The secessionist parties' reaction has been to use their small majority in the Catalan parliament to pass a law that makes the constitution null and void. This is not an exaggeration; it is there in the legislative language. Courts immediately blocked the legislation; Catalan authorities have continued to implement it; the Spanish government has enforced the court mandate; protests have ensued.

Behind all this noise, however, is the fact that this is not really a fight between Spain and Catalonia, or a dispute between their governments. At its core, the Catalan conflict is about deep divisions *within* Catalonia, with both sides divided along somewhat familiar political fault lines.

Favouring secession is far from a majority opinion in Catalonia. Polls have consistently placed support for secession close but under the 50% mark. Voters that favour a clean break with Spain tend to live in rural areas, outside the dominant Barcelona metro area where more than half of Catalans live. These are areas with low immigration from outside Catalonia (either from the rest of Spain or beyond), where the Catalan language is far more prevalent than Spanish. Pro-secession voters, however, are not those left behind by globalisation; they tend to be more educated and have higher incomes than average. Unionists, meanwhile, tend to be more urban, live in more diverse communities, speak Spanish at home instead of Catalan, and have less education, as well as lower incomes.

Although voters are evenly divided, the Catalan institutions are not. A combination of gerrymandering, effective political organisation, exclusionary policies, and mobilisation has meant that civic life and politics in Catalonia has come to be dominated by nationalist parties. This split is visible also outside of politics, as Spanish speakers have consistently lower incomes and access to fewer opportunities. Politics-wise, Catalonia is a place where half the electorate is incredibly engaged, constantly mobilised and aggressively pursuing its goals, while the other half is nowhere to be seen. The past few weeks have put this on full display, with the frantic efforts of secessionist parties at the forefront, and no one protesting on the other side.

As usual, the Regional Government has claimed, over and over, that they are speaking for all Catalans and that this is a conflict between two nations. The truth, however, is far more nuanced, as there is no clear majority in Catalonia on how the region should relate to Spain. To solve the Catalan Gordian knot it will not be enough to settle the dispute between governments, but also to fully appreciate that half of Catalans want to remain in Spain and have been actively excluded throughout this entire process.

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About the author



Roger Senserrich

Roger Senserrich is a political scientist and a contributor to [Politikon](#). He is on Twitter [@Egocrata](#)