

Experts react: Catalan elections

Catalonia held elections on 27 September, with the poll being framed by several parties as a de facto vote on Catalan independence. The final result produced a majority of seats in the Catalan Parliament for pro-independence parties, with these parties securing 47.8 per cent of the votes cast. We asked some of EUROPP's contributors for their reaction to the result and what it means for Catalonia and Spain going forward.

- **Jonathan Hopkin:** “**The elections have produced a very complex outcome**”
- **Luis Moreno:** “**The Spanish elections in December will be crucial in determining what happens next**”
- **Alejandro Quiroga:** “**Artur Mas might have more pressing issues than the declaration of independence in the short term**”
- **Jose Javier Olivas:** “**Unilateral solutions, even when they seek to impose the ‘will of the majority’, are unlikely to deliver satisfactory results in the long run**”
- **Karlo Basta:** “**All sides have at least some leverage, and the true commitments of none are fully known, confounding any reliable predictions**”
- **Joan Costa Font:** “**The independence cause has attained an exceptional result, now it is time to either negotiate a referendum or, failing this, prepare for an orderly break up**”
- **Mireia Borrell Porta:** “**A referendum has now become unavoidable**”

Jonathan Hopkin: “The elections have produced a very complex outcome”

The complex outcome of the elections will prove difficult to manage both for the pro-independence movement and for the Spanish government. The main pro-independence list could only muster just under 40 per cent of the vote, insufficient to claim any legitimacy for Artur Mas's ‘roadmap to independence’. The real winners are the radical anti-capitalist and pro-independence **CUP**, which is now an indispensable part of the pro-independence coalition, but unlikely to cooperate with Mas. On the anti-independence side, the big winners are the centrist **Ciudadanos**, who won votes from both Rajoy's **Popular Party** and the Catalan Socialists, affiliated with the main statewide opposition **PSOE**. This sets them up nicely for the general elections at the end of the year.



The overall picture is one of fragmentation, polarisation, and the absence of any clear unequivocal expression of the Catalan popular will. Support for independence is very strong, yet fails to conclusively outnumber support for remaining within Spain. Underneath this balance of forces there are deep divisions within each camp, and a steady erosion of the support bases of all the main established political parties. With elections to the Spanish Congress coming up, it is hard to see any greater clarity very soon. Skillful and responsible leadership is going to be needed if the situation is not to degenerate into serious social and institutional tension.

Jonathan Hopkin – LSE Government

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Luis Moreno: “The Spanish elections in December will be crucial in determining what happens next”



The elections have resulted in a majority of parliamentarians in favour of independence within the *Parlament* composed of 135 seats. They have been elected under the candidatures of *Junts pel Sí* (Together for Yes), with 62 MPs, and CUP (Popular Unity Candidature of the Catalan Countries), with 10 MPs (both combined have lost 2 seats compared to the previous 2012 Catalan elections).

The plebiscite nature that Artur Mas, the President of the Catalan Government, *Generalitat*, wanted for these elections has resulted in a minority of popular votes (47.8 per cent) for the secessionist lists. The emergent pro-unity of Spain party, *Ciutadans*, has achieved the largest parliamentary group among the non-independentist parties, ahead of the Socialist Party and conservative Popular Party, the two main political formations in the Spanish Parliament.

The support of the anti-EU CUP for Artur Mas and the *Junts pel Sí* coalition remains to be seen. This variable is important to realize whether the aggregate of secessionist MPs would proceed with their announced DUI (Declaration of Unilateral Independence). The coming Spanish elections in December will be crucial in determining whether any eventual reform of the Spanish Constitution could now possibly accommodate the political claims for deeper self-government in Catalonia within Spain, or to work out a constitutional process for a possible referendum of independence.

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Alejandro Quiroga: “Artur Mas might have more pressing issues than the declaration of independence in the short term”



Uncertainty is likely to dominate Catalan politics in the next months. The pro-independence coalition *Junts pel Sí* has clearly won the elections, obtaining 62 MPs. If the coalition is able to gain the support of the anti-capitalist, pro-independence CUP, it would reach 72 MPs and could pass a unilateral declaration of independence in the Catalan Parliament. However, *Junts pel Sí* presented the elections as a quasi-referendum for Catalans to decide over an eventual secession and the pro-independence parties have got 48 per cent of the vote all together. For those opposing independence, this means that a majority of Catalans (52 per cent) voted against secession.

Yet Artur Mas might have more pressing issues than the declaration of independence in the short term. The CUP has announced that it would not vote for the conservative Artur Mas to remain as President of Catalonia, so *Junts pel Sí* could have to find a new leader to run the pro-independence process. On top of this, it is unclear at this stage whether *Junts pel Sí* would be happy to form a minority government or would invite the CUP to take part in a secessionist cabinet.

There is also a great deal of uncertainty about what may come from the Spanish government in the near future. It is not unlikely that the December 2015 general elections would bring a new government to Madrid. A left-wing government would probably facilitate negotiations with Barcelona. But it could well be too late by then.

Alejandro Quiroga – *Newcastle University*

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Jose Javier Olivas: “Unilateral solutions, even when they seek to impose the ‘will of the majority’, are unlikely to deliver satisfactory results in the long run”



This time the polls got it right. The nationalist pro-independence coalition *Junts pel Sí* ('Together for Yes') won the elections. But arguably this has been a bitter victory. Their 62 seats are insufficient to rule the *Generalitat* and less than the sum of the seats obtained by CiU (50) and ERC (21) in 2012. *Junts pel Sí* needs the support of the other secessionist party, CUP ('Popular Unity Candidacy') to form a government. However, CUP's leader, Antonio Baños, has already stated that they won't vote Artur Mas for President. CUP will also likely request that *Junts pel Sí* ignore Spanish and European law and make at some point a unilateral declaration of independence if a referendum is not agreed soon. These two conditions will make the negotiations for the next government difficult. New Catalan regional elections are a likely scenario after the Spanish national elections.

Secondly, the pro-independence parties claimed that these elections were a 'de facto referendum' on the independence of Catalonia. They have demonstrated great strength but have felt short of the majority of the votes. Together, *Junts pel Sí* and CUP, have obtained more than 1.9 million votes but 'only' 47.8 per cent of the total votes (37 per cent of the electoral census). The results should push the Spanish government to address seriously the 'Catalan problem', but at the same time clearly delegitimise a potential unilateral declaration of independence.

Cat Sí que es Pot (11 seats), the PP (11) and the UDC (0) have been the main losers of the elections. The poor results of the left-wing coalition *Cat Sí que es Pot* are very bad news for *Podemos* and Pablo Iglesias, who was heavily invested in the campaign. This can be interpreted as a sign that *Podemos* does not have the strength required to overtake PSOE as the main left-wing party in Spain.

On the other hand, the centrist *Ciudadanos* (25 seats, 9 in 2012) emerges as a clear winner from these elections. *Ciudadanos* will lead the opposition to the next nationalist government in Catalonia. But most importantly, these good results reinforce the credibility of Albert Rivera and *Ciudadanos* as alternative to PP and PSOE in the upcoming general elections.

These elections confirm that Catalonia is deeply divided in two halves. Unilateral solutions, even when they seek to impose the 'will of the majority', are unlikely to deliver satisfactory results in the long run. In cleavage societies such as the Spanish and Catalan ones, respect for minorities and consensus decision-making are usually considered more effective and democratic. After the 27S Catalan elections, more than ever, dialogue and negotiation across these well entrenched camps now seems unavoidable.

Jose Javier Olivas – LSE

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Karlo Basta: “All sides have at least some leverage, and the true commitments of none are fully known, confounding any reliable predictions”



The victory for the separatist parties was not a surprise if we take into account recent polls. What was surprising was that it came on such a high turnout, generally thought to favour the non-separatist options. In this sense, this is a separatist victory, though players opposed to secession point to the fact that the pro-independence vote share fell short of 50 per cent.

The unpredictable period starts now. All sides have at least some leverage, and the true commitments of none are fully known, confounding any reliable predictions. Rajoy may not be in government for long, but playing up the Spanish nationalist card might just be his ticket back to Moncloa. While the central government does have the constitution on its side, how far will it go to enforce it? This is a critical issue because threatening Catalonia with

economic costs *after* it separates is not too credible. At that point, normalisation of mutual relations would probably be as much in Spain's interest as it would in Catalonia's. The most reasonable course of action Madrid could take to avoid this is to offer concessions to Catalonia and split the separatist coalition.

The separatists, for their part, are a disparate group whose weakest link is arguably Artur Mas' CDC. It is the party with the least appetite for unilateral action, but is now bound with formal and informal links to those that are less squeamish about it. They have the momentum and their plan is in place.

Karlo Basta – *Memorial University of Newfoundland*

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Joan Costa Font: “The independence cause has attained an exceptional result, now it is time to either negotiate a referendum or, failing this, prepare for an orderly break up”



Yesterday, Catalonia voted to support independence. With the highest turnout (77 per cent) figures ever – which could have been higher had the 200,000 Catalan residents abroad received their postal votes on time – the Catalan parliament now has an absolute majority of those who wish to break from Spain. This has risen from 24 to 72 seats and was backed by 47 per cent of the electorate, which compares to a unionist opposition of 52 seats backed by 37 per cent of voters, while 11 seats are held by an unaligned leftist coalition, [Catalonia Yes We Can](#). Right now, the unambiguous mandate of the parliament is “to disconnect Catalonia from Spain” over the next 18 months.

Without a doubt, these results are truly exceptional considering the sort of narrative put forward by the Spanish government during the campaign (Spain potentially defaulting on the payment of Catalan pensioners), some EU leaders (citing a potential exit from the EU, the UN, NATO and the euro), the governor of the Bank of Spain (predicting financial collapse), all major Banks (that announced they would exit Catalonia) as well as business leaders and even the football league president (FC Barcelona could exit the Spanish league). However, they show that any election is only an imperfect substitute for a referendum.

Considering that both Scotland and Quebec had far less support before their states set up a referendum, the main challenge of the Catalan parliament is to build a coalition to negotiate the terms of a final and binding independence referendum. In the absence of the latter, they can use the opportunity of a new Constitutional amendment, as a *de facto* independence referendum. If the latter takes longer than eighteen months, another regional election should justify a final orderly breakup.

Joan Costa Font – *LSE*

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Mireia Borrell Porta: “A referendum has now become unavoidable”



The Catalan elections have been followed by a myriad of plausible – and some implausible – interpretations, as it could not be otherwise. Some media outlets and politicians have suggested the elections have been a failure for the pro-independence movement. Others have instead claimed a landslide victory for the Yes side. The former will use the number of votes, the latter the number of seats. Commentators have been quick in positioning in favour or against independence those who did not choose either side and preferred to focus on another dimension, namely, the social one.

And yet, regardless of how you count the votes, the picture is clear and two main points emerge. The first one is that

Catalan society is divided with regard to the pro-independence issue. Anyone denying it or accusing Catalan politicians of brainwashing Catalans are in denial of the reality. This leads to the second point, also repeatedly dismissed by a sector of the Spanish political elite: Spain has a political and territorial problem. And doing curious calculations with votes will not take the problem away.

A majority of Catalan voters are profoundly unhappy about the status quo. Some of them – around half of them – ask for secession, others for a change within Spain. The difference between the two is about trust towards Spanish political elites. As Carles Boix [stated recently](#), some feel that “Catalonia can no longer take the Spanish government at its word. A contract, no matter what promises it contains, has no value if one of the parties has the exclusive power to interpret and execute its terms”.

The obvious reaction from the Spanish government and the rest of the parties should be to acknowledge the elephant in the room and to negotiate a solution. A referendum has now become unavoidable. If properly done, it should be preceded by a thorough debate on both sides. In this sense, the Spanish government should take example from the British one.

They should leave the politics of fear behind, and there is a very pragmatic reason for this: it just doesn't work. Catalans have been threatened with EU expulsion, bank runs, and major banks have even stated they would leave. And still, around half of the Catalan voters have voted for secession. Denying the problem, accusing Catalans of being selfish and Catalan elites of being manipulative won't make the problem disappear. It will only make it bigger.

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