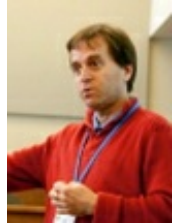


The Spanish government should offer Catalonia a referendum on federalism, not independence

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Catalonia held a non-binding consultation on independence on 9 November. [Francesc Trillas](#) assesses the argument that the Spanish government should now seek to address the Catalan independence debate by proposing a formal referendum on the issue. He argues that while there are benefits to holding a referendum, there are also a number of costs in the Catalan case, and that offering a binding vote on federalism would be a far better option for Catalonia, Spain and Europe as a whole.



The current conflict in Spain over the constitutional future of Catalonia cannot be resolved without reference to our European reality. The leaders of the Catalan and Spanish governments are essentially fighting over something which no longer exists in Europe: national sovereignty. The controversy over how to democratically decide the future of Catalonia illustrates the difficulties of engaging in this debate without recognising the world of complex and overlapping sovereignty that now exists, and which has to some extent left the nation state behind.

Antoni Zabalza, Professor of Economics at Valencia University, argued in an [article](#) in the Spanish newspaper *El País* on 21 November that projecting the data of participants in the 'consultation' of 9 November (where everybody who wanted to vote could do it) on a legal referendum with high turnout, the yes vote would reach 44 per cent of the electorate. The figure is similar to what could be projected from the vote of pro-independence parties in past regional elections.

The question is whether these sources of information should be complemented with an official, decisive referendum on independence like the one that took place in Scotland. *The Economist's* [editorial](#) proposing such a referendum, in their words to defeat independence in Catalonia, gives me the opportunity to express my opinion once more about this issue.

Should the Spanish government use a referendum to counter the Catalan independence movement?

A referendum on independence, with a clear question and clear rules, has advantages for those, like myself, who view Catalan secession as a negative development for Catalonia, Spain and Europe. Moreover, it is a democratic way of making a choice. But it is not the only way to do so. An independence referendum also has disadvantages, which at least include the following.

First, any form of democracy which presents two extreme options to the electorate provides a platform for extreme groups who practice intolerance and could even bring about a situation approximating 'mob rule' (of which we have already had some examples in both Catalonia and Spain). According to all available evidence, the anti-secession camp is diverse, but disproportionately Spanish speaking, working class and lacking in power given they are scarcely seen in the civil society groups that dominate the political debate in Catalonia.



Credit: Josep Puigdemont (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The preferences of those with multiple identities that favour some form of federal alternative (who are probably in a majority in Catalonia) would not be represented in a 'yes/no' referendum. [Most voters support](#) an alternative along the lines of a federal administrative organisation. On what basis should this majority be deprived of the right for their option to appear on the ballot paper? Of course, on the other hand, presenting more than two options would make the question less clear, which is why, if we are to establish a federal alternative, the referendum should still be limited to two choices: a choice between federalism and the status quo.

Second, a 'yes/no' referendum on independence would have wider implications beyond Spain: which *The Economist* has [noted](#) before, even if it appears to have forgotten the argument recently. An independence referendum incurs a whole raft of [commitment problems](#). There would be cascading effects, both internal and external: offering a path for referendums to be held in parts of Catalonia which think they belong to Spain and to other European regions who would object to being denied a choice already offered to Catalonia and Scotland. This carries the real danger of creating economic and political uncertainty, undermining any unity within Europe in the long-run and triggering a financial crisis in the Eurozone in the short-run. A united Europe will not be built one independence referendum at a time: at a certain point the 'domino effect' must come to an end.

Third, the very nature of a referendum campaign ensures that both sides would be focused exclusively on 'winning' the contest rather than attempting to find an agreement which is acceptable to each party. In Catalonia and Spain we share enough common values to make such an agreement possible, which would benefit everyone in the eyes of most external observers. But there are few incentives to reach this kind of compromise and, if there are any, they would disappear in a referendum campaign.

Fourth, on a practical level there would be serious difficulties faced in organising a coherent 'no' campaign – far more serious than those faced in Scotland. The anti-secessionists are diverse, including democratic federalists, fascists and many people in between. It is difficult to see why democratic federalists should be driven to campaigning alongside Mariano Rajoy's People's Party (or even more right-wing groups): a party that still refuses to condemn the Franco dictatorship.

Finally, a clear 'yes/no' question on the ballot paper does not equate with a clear option in reality. Here we must ask what independence really means in the 21st century to a territory that lies both within the European Union and the Eurozone. Will the 28 member states communicate to the Catalan electorate prior to the referendum their position on the membership of an independent Catalonia within the EU? The victory of the 'yes' vote would trigger negotiations: the final agreement would be different from the initial position of the secessionists. What happens then if a majority does not like the agreement: should we have another referendum?

A vote on federalism

When these points are made, they are frequently answered with only partial arguments, such as presenting an independence referendum as the only option to defeat the secessionist movement, or justifying a referendum by citing the freedom of citizens (or a similar generic conception). But it is necessary to receive a response which considers seriously all of the arguments above, or at least a fraction of them. Certain phenomena have multiple causes and multiple consequences: a referendum on independence, no matter how clearly it may be framed, would have multiple consequences – not all of them desirable.

Unlike the UK, Spain has a written Constitution, and it had a 40 year dictatorship in the middle of the 20th Century. Unlike Canada (another potential example), Spain belongs to the European Union and the Eurozone. This introduces binding constraints that are often forgotten by well-intentioned contributors to this debate. I would certainly not make the prediction that an independence referendum will never take place in Catalonia: if it does, I would vote 'no' to independence, but I would prefer to vote 'yes' to federalism. It would be more coherent for observers such as *The Economist* to advocate a vote in favour of the option they think would be best for Catalonia, rather than a vote against independence.

The United Nations does not recognise the unrestricted right of peoples to self-determination – interpreted as the right to secede. Even in the UK this is clear, with the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats currently showing little appetite for a referendum on Britain’s EU membership in 2017, as demanded by UKIP and Eurosceptic members of the Conservatives. In France, political parties do not show much sympathy for Marine Le Pen’s proposal to hold a referendum on a French withdrawal from the EU, despite it undoubtedly being democratic in its formulation.

A referendum on a better federalism should be based on a previous agreement, accepted by the European Union, and make progress towards a better federal architecture for Catalonia, Spain and Europe. The current Spanish Constitution was based on a large agreement, and supported by a hegemonic majority of the Catalan and Spanish populations: a new agreement should have similar support. Otherwise, reforming the status quo would not be legitimate.

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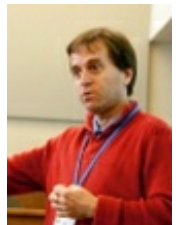
Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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