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Catalonia: A Stateless Nation with Deep Social Divisions

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Taken in isolation, Catalonia's collective voting record at the regional, state, and supranational levels is indicative of a united region. Indeed, the now autonomy-less region of Spain has repeatedly signaled its desire for full independence from the greater Spanish state at the ballot. And based on current polling data, this seems likely to continue into December's upcoming regional snap election.

However, lost in the frenetic course plotted since the region's October 1 independence referendum are the wide and deep fissures present within Catalonia itself. While Catalan nationalists maintain broad support in the region, despite Spanish national opposition, the overwhelming complexity of the Catalan identity makes concretely predicting the region's future a perilous task.

History of Catalan Culture

To understand the myriad Catalan perspectives on their own independence, it's imperative to understand the process that led the region to develop a highly distinctive identity. Catalan, the language, is the basis for Catalan nationality. Along with the Basque, Galician, and Aranese languages, the Catalan language is one of

four languages officially recognized by the Spanish state. As of 2013, 80.4 percent of Catalans spoke Catalan, while about 98 percent spoke Spanish, according to the Catalan government. The strength of Catalan bilingualism speaks volumes to the strength of the region's national identity.

Catalonia is located in the northeastern corner of Spain, bordering France. The region has been controlled, successively, by the Romans, Visigoths, the Umayyads, the Franks, the Aragonese, and finally the Spanish. Two specific periods of Spanish control demonstrate the resilience of the Catalan identity. Following the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714) and during the Franco dictatorship (1939-1978), the Catalan language and culture was actively oppressed by the Spanish government.

After each repressive period eventually passed, the Catalan identity rose in full force, with the region obtaining autonomy from 1931-1939 under the 2nd Spanish Republic and from 1978 - October 2017 under the current democratic regime. Despite near permanent foreign control, the Catalan identity remains immensely strong.

Recent Background

In 2015, Catalan citizens voted into power a pro-Catalan independence Parliament, signaling that the Catalan nationalist movement had reached its peak. After two years of protracted debate, regional President Carles Puigdemont and his allies held a popular referendum on Catalan independence from Spain on October 1. The Spanish government, in concordance with the Constitutional Court of Spain, declared the referendum illegal, and the national police attempted to prevent voting, blocking more than half of the region from casting their ballots. Nevertheless, of those that did vote, more than 90 percent voted in favor independence. On October 27, Catalonia declared its independence from Spain.

That same day, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy exercised Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, firing Puigdemont, dissolving the Catalan Parliament, and calling for new elections to be held December 21. Puigdemont is currently in Brussels, having surrendered himself to the Belgian police after failing to gain European Union support for his cause.

Recent Elections: Catalonia, Spain, and the European Parliament

As Catalonia is a politically distinct region, its electoral record can be grouped into the three distinct categories listed in the subheading. This brief summary will be

used later in this paper to draw tentative conclusion about the electoral future of Catalonia.

Catalonia 2015

At the Catalan level, six parties were represented in the Parliament of Catalonia prior to Rajoy's invocation of Article 155. *Junts pel Sí*, a coalition of pro-independence center-right and left wing politicians, held 62 seats, while the far-left pro-independence party *Popular Unity Candidacy* held 10 seats. The two parties combined to form an absolute majority in favor of Catalan independence. In direct opposition, *Citizens* (center-right), the *People's Party of Catalonia* (Christian-democratic and conservative), and the *Catalan Socialist party* (social democrat) formed an uneasy group of parties allied against independence. *Catalonia Yes, We Can* (populist left) held 11 seats and supports a referendum only with the backing of the international community.

Spain 2016

At the national level, left wing parties hold the majority in Catalonia; however, this significantly diverges from the national vote share. At the national level, three parties won a significant seat share. The *People's Party* won 137 seats, the Spanish *Socialist Workers Party* won 85 seats, and *Podemos* (populist left) won 71 seats. The *People's Party* was allowed to form

a minority government due to the failure of any party to successfully form a coalition. *Podemos* is the only national party to at least partially back a referendum, which they say they will acquiesce to if Catalonia receives international support. Representing Catalonia at the national level, the *Podemos* backed coalition *En Comú Podem* hold 12 seats, the *Republican Left of Catalonia* (left) hold 9 seats, and the *Socialists* hold 7 seats. The strongest right-wing party, the *Democratic Convergence of Catalonia*, is also a very pro-Catalan independence party and hold 8 seats.

European Parliament 2014

Like with the Spanish national vote, the Catalan specific vote share differs significantly from the full Spanish vote. At the national level, the *People's Party* and the *Socialist Workers Party* won 16 and 14 seats respectively, while *Podemos* only won 5 seats. At the Catalan level, the pro-independence *Republican Left* and *Convergence and Union* (center-right) parties received the greatest percentage of votes.

Catalan Regional Splits

Catalonia is not, in any manner, homogenous. The region exhibits broad opinion trends, certainly, but the region is highly divided. Let's use the October 1 referendum vote to clarify regional opinion trends. Keep in mind that no Catalan municipality registered lower than a 64

percent pro-independence vote share—as previously stated, the referendum's legality was highly questionable and the pro-independence vote will likely change substantially in a more controlled future election.

However, it is possible to make some generalizations. Rural areas registered the highest percentage of yes votes, while the lowest percentage of yes votes came from the suburbs of Barcelona and the Val d'Aran. The Aranese people speak a completely separate language from the rest of Catalonia—Aranese—and are separated from the rest of Catalonia by the Pyrenees Mountains. Voter turnout reflects these same splits. Turnout was the highest in Catalonia's rural interior, and lowest near Barcelona and in the Val d'Aran.

Conclusions and December 21

December 21 will play a monumental role in determining the course of the Catalan nationalist movement going forward. And in some sense, the result seems quite obvious. Catalonia, since 2014, has always voted into power pro-independence groups, almost all of which have some sort of leftist bent.

However, and this is quite shocking based on all aforementioned evidence, opinion polls on Catalan independence have never existed in harmony with electoral results. Support for independence, according to Catalonia's own Center for Opinion

Studies, peaked at 48.5 percent, and currently sits 40.2 percent. And the candidates for the Parliament of Catalonia will differ significantly than in 2015. Last election, Puigdemont's *Catalan European Democratic party* ran on a coalition ticket with his former vice-president Oriol Junqueras' *Republican Left party*. This time, they will likely run on separate tickets. Both parties, however, are still pro-independence. *Citizens*, the *Catalan Socialist party*, and the *People's Party* will all run against independence, as they did in 2015. On the far-left, the *Podemos* backed coalition *En Comú Podem* and the *Popular Unity Candidacy* will run as well.

A recent poll in Barcelona-based newspaper *La Vanguardia* suggested the *Catalan European Democratic party* will win around 45 seats and the *Republic Left* will win around 15. This will likely force the *Popular Unity Candidacy* into the same kingmaker role in played in 2015.

All of this being said, Catalonia's regional splits, and the potential for voter suppression by Spanish authorities—in the same manner as in October—mean nothing can truly be predicted at this point. Catalonia is divided, and no amount of time will likely ever heal its wounds.

Resources

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