

CATALONIA BACKGROUND INFORMATION
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THE CATALAN REFERENDUM AND SPANISH PUBLIC OPINION

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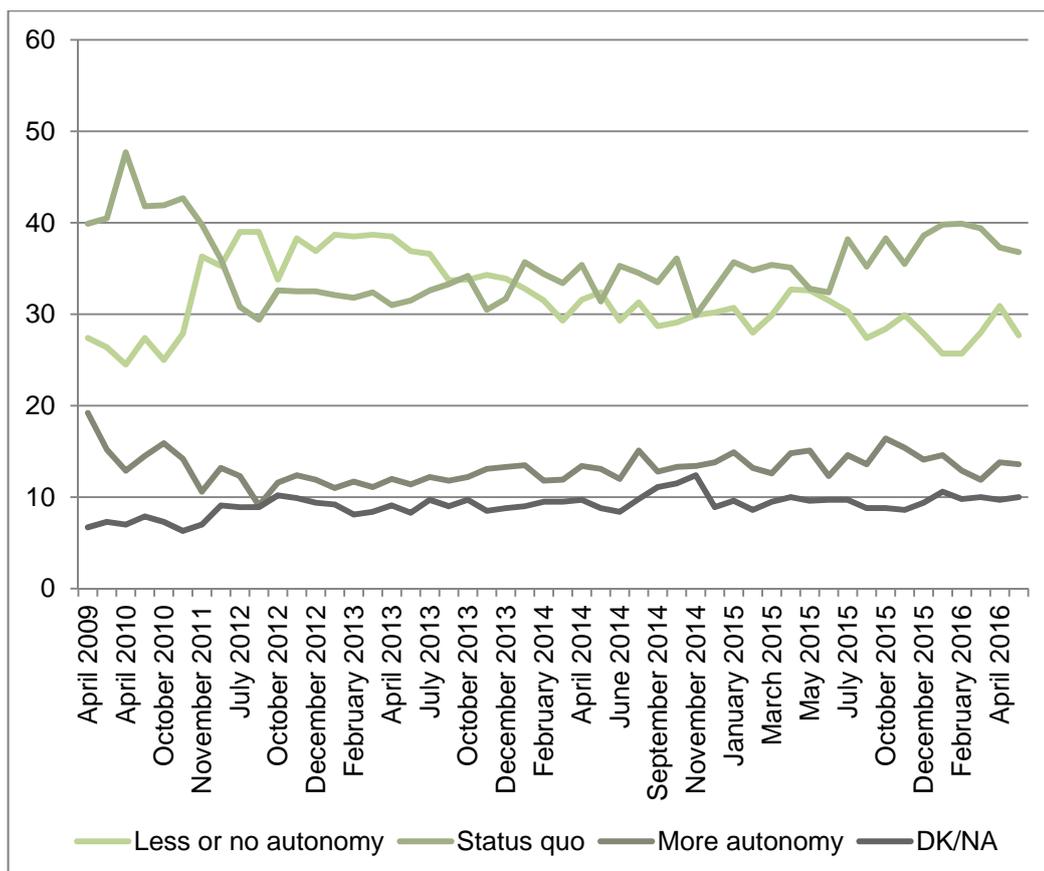
Centralist preferences of the Spanish public opinion?

Ever since the start of the present economic and political crisis in Spain, many public opinion observers have noted an increasing dissatisfaction with the decentralized self-government political system of Spain based on autonomous communities. Most areas of Spain have seen an increase in the amount of citizens in favour of reversing decentralization policies and strengthening central government.

This new Spanish centralism is based on two arguments, whose origins can be found partly in the ideas of the FAES think-tank which is closely linked to the Partido Popular (PP, the People's Party – the party currently in power in Spain). The first argument claims that a significant part of the economic crisis is down to the inefficiencies supposedly created by the decentralization of the public sector. According to this line of thinking, the existence of seventeen autonomous communities with powers and responsibilities for key elements of public activity generates excessive expense which could be rationalized by recentralization. This is a new ideological argument as the concept of centralism in Spain had traditionally been linked to nationalistic justifications but now this has been joined by the idea of economic rationalization and public sector efficiency. A second argument feeding this new Spanish centralism is linked, paradoxically, to an anti-politics populist feeling. It claims that there is a “political caste” in Spain, artificially enlarged by the system of autonomous communities which has created places of power for local elites, thus multiplying the number of professional politicians and opportunities for corruption.

These two ideas have fuelled a growing public opinion in favour of increased centralism in Spain. Data from the Sociological Research Centre of Spain (CIS) shows that between 2007 and 2012, the percentage of respondents in favour of reducing self-government powers for autonomous communities, or even in favour of the outright abolition of regional governments, rose from 10% to almost

40% before stabilizing around the 30% mark in 2014.¹ The graph shows the evolution of centralist opinions between 2009 and 2016. Following the first signs of economic recovery and, above all, the emergence of a different explanation for the crisis thanks to the growth of the Podemos party (a recently-formed left-wing party), public opinion moved slightly towards support for the status quo once again. However, the centralist supporters still obtain a consistent support.



Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas

Opposed visions in Catalonia

In Catalonia, though, the evolution of public opinion has been in the opposite direction. A huge majority of Catalans are in favour of holding a referendum on independence, and a significant amount are directly in favour of independence. This difference in opinions between Catalan and Spanish public opinion has created a situation which is apparently difficult to solve: while preferences for centralization and a resistance to more decentralization were gaining ground in Spain, the independence movement in Catalonia obtained more support than ever and a clear parliamentary majority.

¹In 2009 the CIS introduced a change in its question, adding the option of keeping autonomous communities but with reduced powers. This led to the jump in centralist preferences. A significant change was observed up to 2012 as seen in the graph.

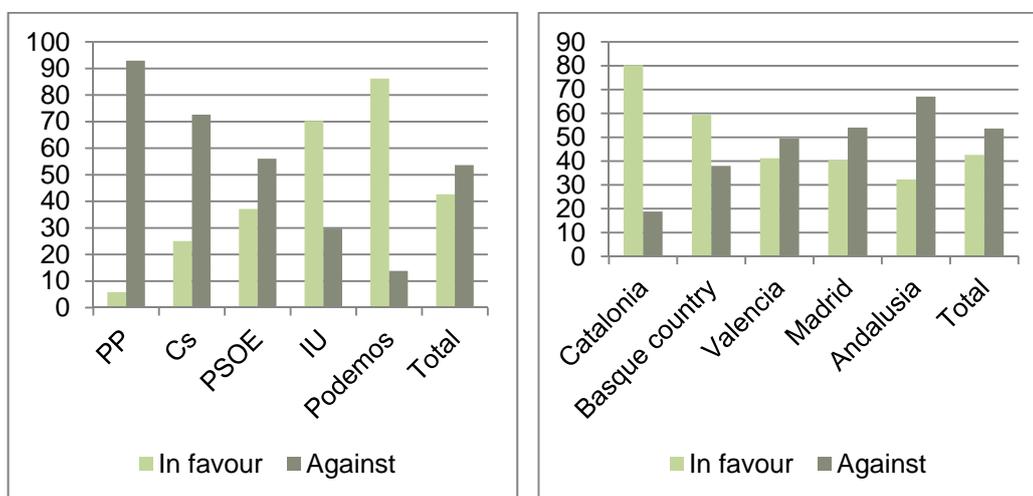
Support of a Referendum in Catalonia within the Spanish public opinion

Having said that, the most recent survey results indicate that Spanish public opinion regarding decentralization or recentralization of power in Spain and regarding the question of a referendum for Catalonia are different. Voters may hold a more centralist view on the political organization of Spain, but at the same time share the view that the solution for the Catalan question should be the one applied in the Scottish case – a referendum on independence. In fact,

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the few surveys which have specifically asked about support for such a referendum offer results in the region of 40%. Most IU (United Left party) and Podemos voters are in favour as well as a

sizeable proportion of Socialist (PSOE) party voters (37% according to the data published in the Ara newspaper in 2015). There is a clear majority of support for a referendum among citizens in Catalonia and the Basque country, while opinions are relatively balanced in areas like Valencia or even Madrid. The south of Spain is the area which more clearly (led by Andalusia) rejects the chance of holding a referendum.



Source: Acceso election talks, published in the Ara newspaper on 31/1/2016

Divergences between the public opinion and the political parties on the Catalan referendum

It can be seen, then, that for a certain time the idea of a referendum in Catalonia had wider support amongst the Spanish society than was seen in the position of Spanish political parties. The number of MPs in the Spanish Parliament in favour of a referendum as a solution for the Catalan question was almost non-existent outside of Catalan and Basque parties. We can say, given this, that the

political (and media) elite in Spain are much more nationalistic than public opinion is, as there is a significant proportion of citizens more willing to find a democratic solution for Catalan independence claims. This lack of connection between the elites and citizens, together with Spanish nationalism's capacity for media influence which does not accept Catalonia's ability to decide on the question of independence via a referendum, has emerged as the principal blockage to an agreed solution for the political crisis between Catalonia and Spain.

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Notwithstanding this, the deep transformation experienced by the Spanish political party system in the last two years has changed this situation. The appearance on the political scene of Podemos, openly in favour of a referendum for Catalonia, has given political

visibility to the part of Spanish public opinion who are in favour of one too. The number of MPs in Spanish parties who defend the holding of a referendum has risen from 11 in 2015, to 71 now. This is a significant change in matters, which shows that, contrary to the dominant media viewpoint, the option of a referendum is not merely the preferred option of Catalan independence supporters but also has a lot more support both in Catalonia and in Spain.

These 71 MPs, together with the 17 Catalan pro-independence MPs and 7 Basque ones, make up 27% of the Spanish Parliament. This is clearly not enough to unblock the current situation – especially if we bear in mind that two of the other largest four parties in Spain, the Socialist Party and Ciudadanos (Cs - Citizens' Party), have both stated that they refuse to even talk about this question in any negotiations to form an alternative government in Spain. Thus, it looks like the next Spanish government will either not have the question of a referendum on its political agenda or if it does have it, it will be to explicitly refuse the possibility of holding one.

Given the lack of other alternatives currently available, then, it seems likely that the Catalan Parliament should make use of the fact that 70-80% of Catalan citizens, and 40% of Spanish, are in favour of holding a referendum. At present it is difficult to imagine other solutions for the current situation.

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