

**New in Foreign Policy from Oxford**

**"A masterful job making sense of policies that may not be obvious to the outside world."**

-Clint Williamson, Former US Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues

OXFORD

Get Ahead of the News:

**The World Next Week Podcast**

SUBSCRIBE NOW



Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

Home | International Editions | Digital Newsstand | Job Board | Account Management | RSS | Newsletters

SEARCH

Login | Register | (o) My Cart

# The View from Catalonia

## The Ins and Outs of the Independence Movement

By Carles Boix and J.C. Major

SEPTEMBER 11, 2014



People hold Catalan separatist flags during a gathering to mark the Catalonia day "Diada" in Barcelona, September 11, 2014. (Albert Gea / Courtesy Reuters)

Over the past few years, the number of Catalans who wish for independence from Spain has skyrocketed. Until the early 2000s, a steady 10–15 percent supported independence; now, according to recent opinion polls, that percentage is closer to 50 (with 30 percent opposing and the rest either abstaining or offering no opinion). Support for independence does not wane even when those surveyed are told that it could result in exclusion from the European Union. And even those who don't necessarily prefer a separate Catalonia agree that the question should be put to a vote: Four out of five Catalans favor holding a referendum, as do trade unions, most business associations, and hundreds of civil society organizations.

Many cite the global financial crisis as the proximate cause of Catalan discontent. From that point of view, the drive for independence is simply another manifestation of the populist movements sweeping across Europe. To be sure, the economic grievances that come from being a part of Spain may have persuaded many to support independence. But this is not their main motive. Instead, the desire to break away is a symptom of deep-rooted flaws in the configuration of the Spanish state.

For starters, Spaniards and Catalans disagree on the basic terms of the debate. Spain views itself as a pre-ordained historical enterprise, of which Catalonia is a mere appendage -- one of several parts of an unquestionable whole. Catalans, on the other hand, have always defined themselves as a nation, one with a long and successful run as an independent polity until it was absorbed by a more powerful state with substantially different cultural mores and structures of governance.

When Catalonia came under the rule of Spanish monarchs at the turn of the sixteenth century, an uneasy balance was established between the Catalan tradition of self-governance

and the crown's desire to wield absolute power over its possessions. What began as a political confederation among equals gave way to a gradual takeover of Catalonia by Spain. In 1714, as a result of war and occupation, all Catalan institutions were finally suppressed and Catalonia became, for all practical purposes, just another dependency of a global empire run from Madrid. Rather than building a multinational community in which diverse peoples could share a political structure while freely developing and enforcing their own rules -- as was the case, for example, in nineteenth-century Austria-Hungary, or as is the case in Switzerland today -- Spain has always chosen to pin its survival on a policy of imposition and uniformity. This has meant playing down, and ultimately denying, the national identity of Catalans.

#### SUBORDINATE TO SPAIN

Having struggled to preserve their collective identity against a relentless effort to water it down -- and, at some critical points in history, wipe it out -- Catalans' place in Spain has never been a comfortable one. Conflicting interests and worldviews have been permanent features of this relationship. Following each of the two transitions to democracy that took place in twentieth-century Spain, Catalans hoped that it would be possible to work out an arrangement that would respect their interests and cultural identity. The establishment of a republican regime in 1931 involved the creation of an autonomous Catalan region. But that was cut short by Franco's military coup in 1936. With Franco's death and Spain's second transition to democracy in the late 1970s, Catalans and Spaniards struck a deal that gave the former a degree of self-governance with respect to culture, language, and education. On paper, it sounded reasonable. But in practice, old tensions quickly reappeared: Catalan services, relying on resources allocated by Madrid, remained systematically underfunded, and the central government kept infringing on the powers that had been nominally transferred to Barcelona.

In 2005, the Catalan regional parliament, with the support of 88 percent of its members, put forward a revised self-government charter to better spell out the terms of its relationship with Spain and to protect the region's political powers against the central government's repeated encroachments. What Catalans saw as a carefully balanced proposal was heavily amended by the Spanish legislature and then ungraciously struck down by Spain's politicized constitutional court. Worse, the charter provoked a fierce campaign in the Spanish media against so-called Catalan "insolidarity."

In light of Spain's reaction to this quasi-federal proposal, many Catalans gave up hope of reaching a mutually beneficial arrangement with Spain and began to seek new political alternatives. Beginning in fall 2009, Catalans started organizing, at the grassroots level, local referenda on independence. These were largely symbolic but nonetheless involved more than 800,000 voters, and would be followed by massive pro-independence demonstrations in July 2010, September 2012, and September 2013. With opinion polls consistently revealing a shift toward self-determination, Catalan politicians agreed to schedule a referendum for November 9, 2014, to find out the exact measure of support for secession.

International opinion tends to support this referendum, just as it has supported the one that will be held in Scotland this September or those that took place in Quebec a few years ago. Indeed, finding out where everyone stands would appear to be a necessary step to make an informed decision on how to proceed. And yet the Spanish government has not granted the Catalan authorities the power to conduct what would be a non-binding referendum -- something that would be perfectly legal according to articles 92 and 150.2 of the Spanish constitution. The Catalan government has nevertheless decided to press ahead and organize a vote anyway, since Catalonia's self-government charter grants the regional authorities the right to organize "popular consultations." The Spanish government has vowed to take that decision to the constitutional court. If the constitutional court were to block Catalonia's vote, the Catalan government would have two choices: to go ahead with the consultation on November 9, or to call for parliamentary elections, which would become a *de facto* referendum on independence.

#### A WAY FORWARD

In Catalonia, the pros and cons of independence have been and continue to be thoroughly debated by politicians, academics, the media, and the public. Studies produced by international institutions have attested to the strength and viability of the Catalan economy, and Catalonia can already count on a solid and effective institutional structure that could be put to work immediately.

By contrast, the Spanish government, backed by much of the political opposition, not only denies Catalans the possibility of a vote, it also refuses to present a proposal that could

make Catalans and Spaniards more comfortable with each other. Except for a minority of Spanish nationalist diehards, maintaining the status quo is not an option in Catalonia. As for the rest of the unionist camp, some proposal from Madrid would have the virtue of reaching out to those who want to vote against independence but would also like to know what they are voting for. A proposal from Madrid would also introduce balance into the current political debate. Refusing to engage the Catalans is a poor way to deal with a problem that won't simply go away. Even if the independence movement could be defused one way or another, it would eventually resurface again, and likely more forcefully.

If at the end of the day Catalans do indeed choose independence, either because they believe it is the best solution or simply because no other option has been put forward, it would be in the interests of all -- Catalonia, Spain, and Europe -- to ensure that the transition is swift and smooth. A referendum would make possible an orderly process of separation, agreed to by Spain and monitored by the international community, which should not cause undue disruption. Not allowing Catalans to express themselves, on the other hand, would create a chronic source of unrest in a part of the world -- the south of Europe -- that is in serious need of stability.

---

#### LATEST COMMENTARY & NEWS ANALYSIS

More from the publisher  
of *Foreign Affairs*

#### *Newsletters*

Get the latest commentary and analysis delivered  
straight to your inbox.:

SIGN UP

---