



From mutual need to growing rift: Catalan nationalism and the Spanish government

A Policy Network Paper

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Introduction

The snap general election that will take place in Spain on April 28 2019 is, in many ways, a new departure for Spanish democracy. The context in the European Union is one marked by uncertainty over the UK's withdrawal from the bloc and regarding increasing political fragmentation. In Spain, the election campaign has been marked by a high degree of polarisation between the main parties, which is not expected to recede after the elections. For the first time in more than thirty years, a far-right party, Vox, will almost certainly enter the Spanish Parliament (polls give them around 11 per cent of the votes). The general feeling is that two separate blocs, representing the left and the right, will confront one another, without any obvious chance of compromise. Beyond the main topics discussed in most European countries (such as regarding economic redistribution, the role of the state in the economy, climate policies, immigration and gender equality) the debate on the unity of Spain and secessionism has been particularly salient during the campaign. The unity question is possibly the biggest challenge Spain has faced since the financial crisis that was unleashed in 2008, and provides a source of sharp division in political opinions across the country. In this general elections, a majority in parliament seems a distant (if not impossible) outcome for any party, hence the aftermath of the elections will likely be characterised by tough negotiations, in which Catalonia will play a key, but potentially paralyzing, role.

Ten years ago, few commentators thought that a unilateral declaration of independence would come from the prosperous Spanish region of Catalonia. Similarly, a scenario in which prominent and mostly elected Catalan pro-independence leaders have either fled Spanish courts or have been imprisoned did not seem plausible or likely. The fact that Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution would be applied to impose direct rule on Catalonia between the 28 October 2017 and the 2 June 2018 as a response to a unilateral declaration of independence by the Catalan government on 27 October 2017, a move that was deemed illegal by Spain's Constitutional Court, was also not predicted. Today, each of these elements have become a reality, and showcase the heady political reality that the country now faces.

In this article, we shed light on the dynamics of Catalan nationalism and the influence this has on the governance of Spain. In Section 1, we offer a historical overview of the interrelation between Catalan nationalism and the government of Spain. This is followed by Section 2, which reviews the electoral history of Catalonia. We argue that the relationship between Catalan nationalism and the government of Spain has been complex since the very beginning of the Spanish democracy, and that structural changes that have occurred in the last years in Catalonia have hindered any possibility of compromise. Section 3 analyses changes in public opinion in Catalonia and Spain around the political situation and the territorial model. In Section 4 we explore the implications of all this for Spain's political landscape, and we conclude in Section 5 by highlighting some patterns that can be observed in the portrayal of these issue in the media.

The independence of Catalonia has become one of the most salient topics in Spanish politics and contributes to an increase in the political fragmentation and polarization of the country. The current situation is the result of a tense historic relationship, and a complicated political landscape in which the political identity of Catalonia has been the subject of conflict between the Catalan nationalist elite and its followers, and pro-union Catalans with the support of the central Spanish government. The nationalistic governments of Catalonia, and the central Spanish government, have needed one another to govern in the democratic decades of Spanish history, in the context of a decentralized territorial model in which competences are shared between the central government, and regions. The economic and political crisis in Spain in the 2000s triggered a rise in support for secessionism, which had its origin in economic matters but has shifted to identity and "democratic" arguments

in recent years. Since 2012, the Catalan government has increasingly focused on defending the so-called “right of self-determination” which helps to frame the current political scenario. Differing views on the territorial model for the country abound which presents important challenges for the next governments. Thus far dialogue and conciliation have been unsuccessful, which has led to the current impasse.

1. Catalan nationalism and the government of Spain

After Franco's dictatorship, one of the challenges in Spain's transition to democracy was the question of how to accommodate the demands of the so-called "historical nationalities": those territories in the country, such as Galicia, the Basque Country, and Catalonia, in which it was considered that their inhabitants had a historically constituted identity. The word "nationality" was first used in Spanish law in the Constitution of 1978 (which is still in force), and it did not specify the number of nationalities. The term was somehow an empty signifier, as every political force gave it a different meaning. One of the so-called "Fathers" of the Spanish Constitution, Miquel Roca, considered that Spain was a "Nation of nations" meanwhile members of the Union of the Democratic Centre ("UCD" in Spanish), a Christian Democratic, centre-right political party, contended that these nationalities were "an expression of historical and cultural identities [...] in the superior unity of Spain". This ambiguous term is currently used to refer to most of the Spanish autonomous communities in their Statutes of Autonomy, although the meaning of the term "nationality" is clearly understood differently across Spain.

The process of integrating the Catalan nationalist parties and voters into Spanish democracy was a challenging one. There were many issues that needed to be solved regarding the situation in Catalonia, where the Catalan language was not granted any official status and the repression against parts of Catalan cultural heritage had been brutal during the dictatorship. However, at least when compared to the Basque country, where the situation was more complicated due to the terrorism of ETA, the transition and subsequent years in Catalonia were more relaxed. The Spanish Constitution was eventually overwhelmingly approved by Catalan society (90.5 per cent of voters supporting the bill on a turnout of 67.9 per cent) and had the support of the main Catalan nationalist party (Democratic Convergence of Catalonia) while only the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), a left-wing and Catalan nationalist party, was against it. From that moment on, Catalan (and Basque) nationalist parties have been crucial for the governability of Spain as their parliamentary support was needed by different PP and PSOE minority governments. In exchange for their support, Catalonia's self-government increased with the acquiescence of different Spanish administrations led either by PP or PSOE (see, for instance, "Pacto del Majestic" between PP and Convergence and Union (Convergència i Unió in Catalan / CiU) in 1996).

Although Catalan nationalist parties often had a (strategic) cooperative stance in the Spanish Parliament, political friction between the Spanish and Catalan governments were also common. These tensions skyrocketed due to the negotiations of the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia, a law that defines the rights and obligations of Catalan citizens under the Spanish Constitution.

In 2003, the Catalan government started negotiations with the government in Madrid, which led to the proposal of a new Statute of Autonomy which was supported by 90 per cent of the Catalan parliament. After a debate and some reforms in the Spanish Congress, the Spanish parliament approved Catalonia's new Statute of Autonomy. In June 2006 a referendum took place in Catalonia regarding the ratification of the statute, which resulted in a majority vote in favour of the referendum (73.90 per cent) with turnout below 50 per cent. While three political parties with representation in the Catalan regional parliament campaigned for a yes' vote (the Socialists' Party of Catalonia – the Catalan branch of PSOE, CiU and ICV-EUiA – Initiative for Catalonia Greens–United and Alternative Left), two other parties (ERC and PP) campaigned for a negative vote, although the rationale behind their opposition to the statute was substantively different.

In a controversial decision, the PP challenged the Statute and started a legal process via the Constitutional Court claiming that some articles of the statute were against the Spanish

Constitution. Motivated by the fear that the statute would be struck down or that certain articles of the statute would be curtailed, a joint editorial by the main Catalan newspapers pointed out that the “dignity of Catalonia” and the project of a “plural Spain” were at risk if the statute was not respected. Although this move was praised by most of the Catalan political parties, the main newspapers in Spain criticized the Catalan joint editorial, as they argued that it sought to exert pressure on the Constitutional Court. The fact that the Spanish Constitutional Court declared some articles of the new statute to be unconstitutional has been claimed as one of the triggers of the current levels of support for independence in Catalonia. Although most of the content remained intact, the court struck down 14 and curtailed another 27 of the Statute’s 223 articles – including, the article stating that “Catalonia is a nation” The demonstration against the determination of the Constitutional Court regarding the statute was the biggest in the history of Catalonia up to that point. However, the numbers of participants in Catalan nationalist demonstrations would be far exceeded in the following years (which will be considered in Section 5).

2. The electoral history of Catalonia

Catalonia, like each of the 17 regions (“Comunidades Autónomas”) that constitute Spain, has its own regional parliament and holds elections every four years. The first democratic election in Catalonia took place in 1980 and was won by CiU, a centre-right nationalist party. In fact, CiU would receive the most support in electoral terms in the next four regional elections and held power under the presidency of Jordi Pujol for 23 years without interruption. In the last term of office of Jordi Pujol, he was invested as president with the support of Partido Popular (PP) – CiU had been cooperating with PP for three years at the national level and had voted in favour of Jose Maria Aznar as Prime Minister in 1996. In today’s polarized political context, it is nearly impossible to think that these two parties could now enter a similar dynamic of political cooperation.

In November 2003, the tripartite coalition government was formed between PSC, ERC and ICV, under the promise of a reform of the Statute of Autonomy. A few months later, in March 2004, the PSOE would also win the election at the national level and José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero would become Prime Minister. It is also hard to imagine today a government in Catalonia where unionist and secessionist parties could enter such a coalition. The tripartite coalition was formed again after the 2006 election. A few months earlier, the Spanish parliament had amended some articles of Catalonia’s Statute of Autonomy, as mentioned above, which was met with strong opposition by ERC who ultimately campaigned for a “no” vote in the ensuing referendum. Consequently, ERC regional ministers were expelled from the cabinet, which triggered an early regional election in Catalonia.

The 2010 Catalan regional election, where CiU returned to power under the leadership of Artur Mas, initiated a new (and much more turbulent) period of induced confrontation in the relationship between Catalan nationalist government and the central government. Nationalist parties started putting the focus much more on economic issues, accusing Spain’s central administration of ‘fiscal robbery’,¹ arguing that Catalonia had contributed 8 per cent of their annual GDP during the last 26 years towards the Spanish solidarity fund, a “rate that has never been applied before or since by any other European State”. This was followed by claims such as “each Catalan pays 2.251€ more than they should”, although, these figures have been contested by those who oppose independence, and by various academics.^{2,3} CiU’s administration set out to reach a new fiscal agreement with the central government similar to the Basque Economic Agreement (“Concierto Económico”) in force in the Basque Country and Navarra.

Between 2010 and 2017, four regional elections were held in Catalonia (2010, 2012, 2015, and 2017). It was during this period that major political developments unfolded that would lead to the current political crisis. First, a separatist turn emerged in the discourse of the party of Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (“Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya”) led by Artur Mas amid growing economic and political crisis in Spain and the Constitutional Court’s judgement that some articles of the new statute were unconstitutional. Second, a concomitant rise in support for independence in Catalonia also took place during this period. According to survey data from the Catalan Government’s Survey Institute (CEO), in 2006 only around 13 per cent of Catalans wanted Catalonia to be an independent state, whereas after the election of Artur Mas as the Catalan president in 2010 and the Constitutional Court’s determination regarding the Statute of Autonomy, support for independence had increased to 25 per cent. Support continued to rise following the victory of the PP in the November 2011 general election in Spain and in early 2014, when around 47 per cent of Catalans thought that Catalonia should be an independent state. Support for independence has fluctuated between 40 and 45 per cent in Catalonia ever since. Third, the upsurge in support for an independent Catalonia cannot be understood without highlighting the political crisis in Spain and the institutional distrust towards

1. An example of this kind of arguments can be found in this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJQkmRnLjeE>

2. De La Fuente, Angel. 2014. “Is Catalonia being fiscally mistreated? Barcelona GSE Working Paper Series Working Paper nº 766

3. Borrell, Josep, and Joan Llorach. 2015. Las cuentas y los cuentos de la independencia. Los Libros de la Catarata.

the Central government which emerged during this time. Politicians in the pro-independence side usually stated that a Catalonia outside of Spain would have stronger institutions, and a richer and less corrupt country which would allow for the provision of better-functioning public services. This framework could even make independence attractive to those voters who never voted for pro-independence parties before, but who had grown unhappy with political elites in Madrid and the way the Central government was dealing with the territorial issue in Catalonia. Fourth, the decision of Rajoy's government to drastically limit the level of indebtedness of the autonomous communities was approved in the summer of 2012. According to Lluís Orriols,⁴ an assistant professor of political science at Universidad Carlos III of Madrid, this debt crisis substantially eroded the perceived feeling of self-government among many Catalan citizens, which ultimately led to a particularly pronounced surge in support for independence after the summer of 2012.

Finally, even though the economic crisis may have acted as a trigger in support for independence (along with many other factors), those who have suffered most from the crisis are not necessarily those who support independence.⁵ Moreover, unlike what happens in Scotland, individuals with lower income and levels of education remain more favourably disposed to the parties that defend the permanence of Catalonia in Spain.⁶ However, it is also possible that the economic crisis was a trigger that allowed pro-independence political entrepreneurs to capture a larger portion of voters who, a priori, in terms of identity at least, were not inclined to support independence.⁷

4. Orriols, Lluís (2014). "El termostato de la independencia". https://elpais.com/ccaa/2014/03/21/catalunya/1395429691_167054.html

5. Cuadras-Morató, Xavier, and Toni Rodon. "The dog that didn't bark: on the effect of the Great Recession on the surge of secessionism." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2018): 1-20

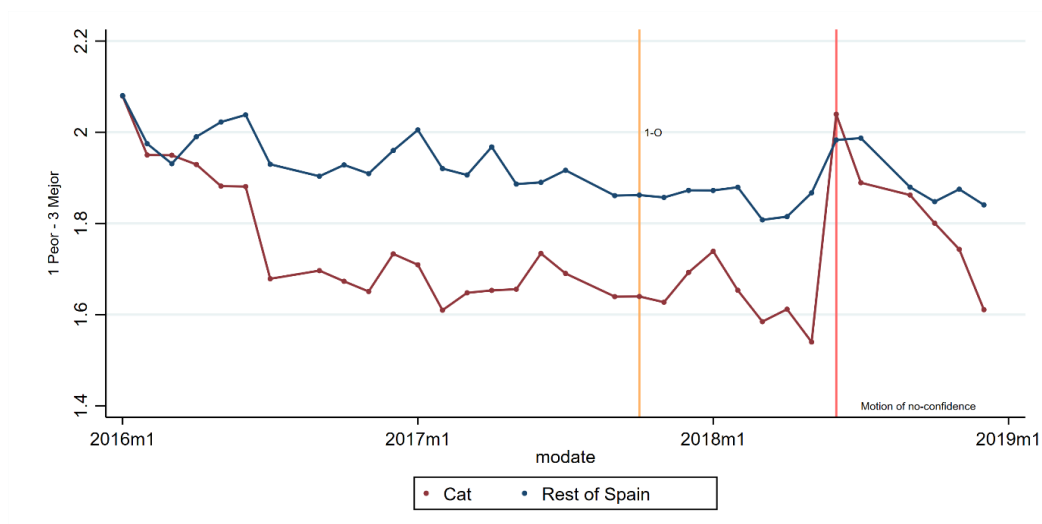
6. Llaneras, Kiko (2017). "Income and origins sway support for independence". https://elpais.com/elpais/2017/09/29/inenglish/1506691641_240457.html

7. This idea was exposed by Sandra León, a Senior Lecturer at University of York, at a conference celebrated at the London School of Economics in February 2018 (see the summary here: Spain and Catalonia: Is There a Way Out of the Impasse?)

3. Public opinion on the political situation and the territorial model in Catalonia and in the rest of Spain

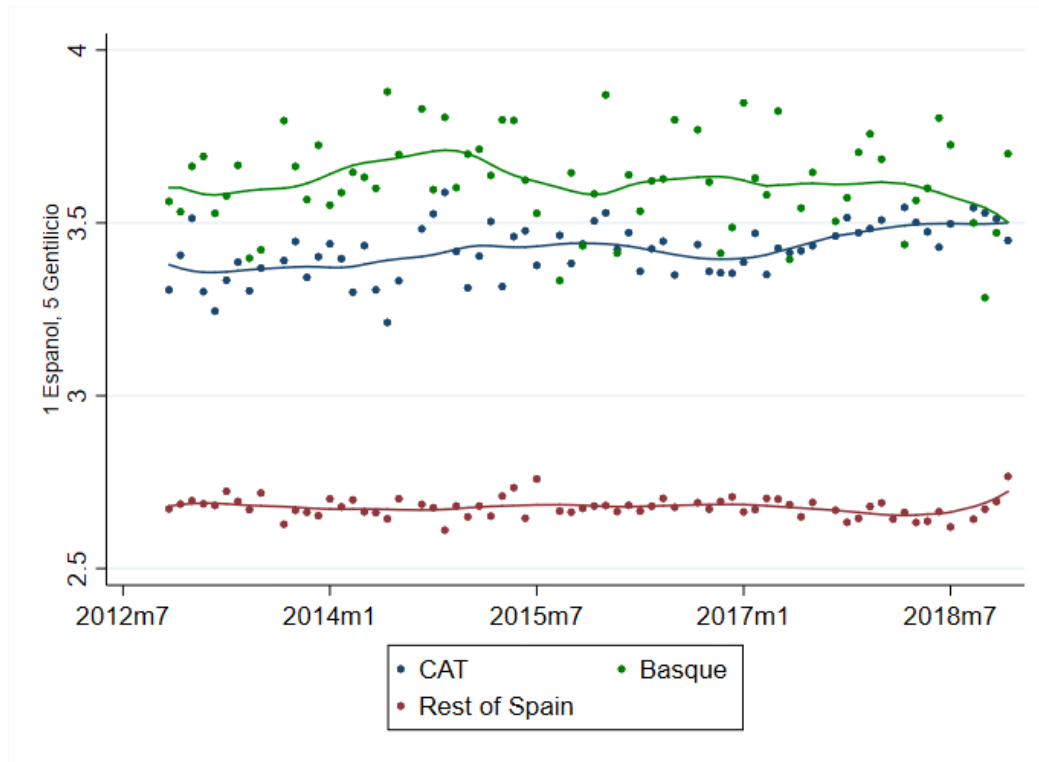
The political tension as reflected in public opinion in recent years is displayed in the graphs below which are based on data from the Center of Sociological Research (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, hereafter referred to as CIS). Figure 1 shows the monthly survey responses to the question “Do you think the political situation in Spain will stay as is, be better, or worse?” in the period 2016-2018. It is put to respondents immediately after a question regarding the current political situation, and thus can be taken to reflect future expectations. The trend throughout the sample shows a general feeling of the political situation becoming worse, seen in values on the vertical axis going from 1 (negative expectation) to 3 (positive expectation). Notably, pessimism appears to be higher in Catalonia than in the other regions. There is a remarkable increase in confidence in the political situation in June 2018, around the time the motion of no confidence in the government of Mr Rajoy took place.

Figure 1: Monthly average answers to the CIS question on the prospective political situation



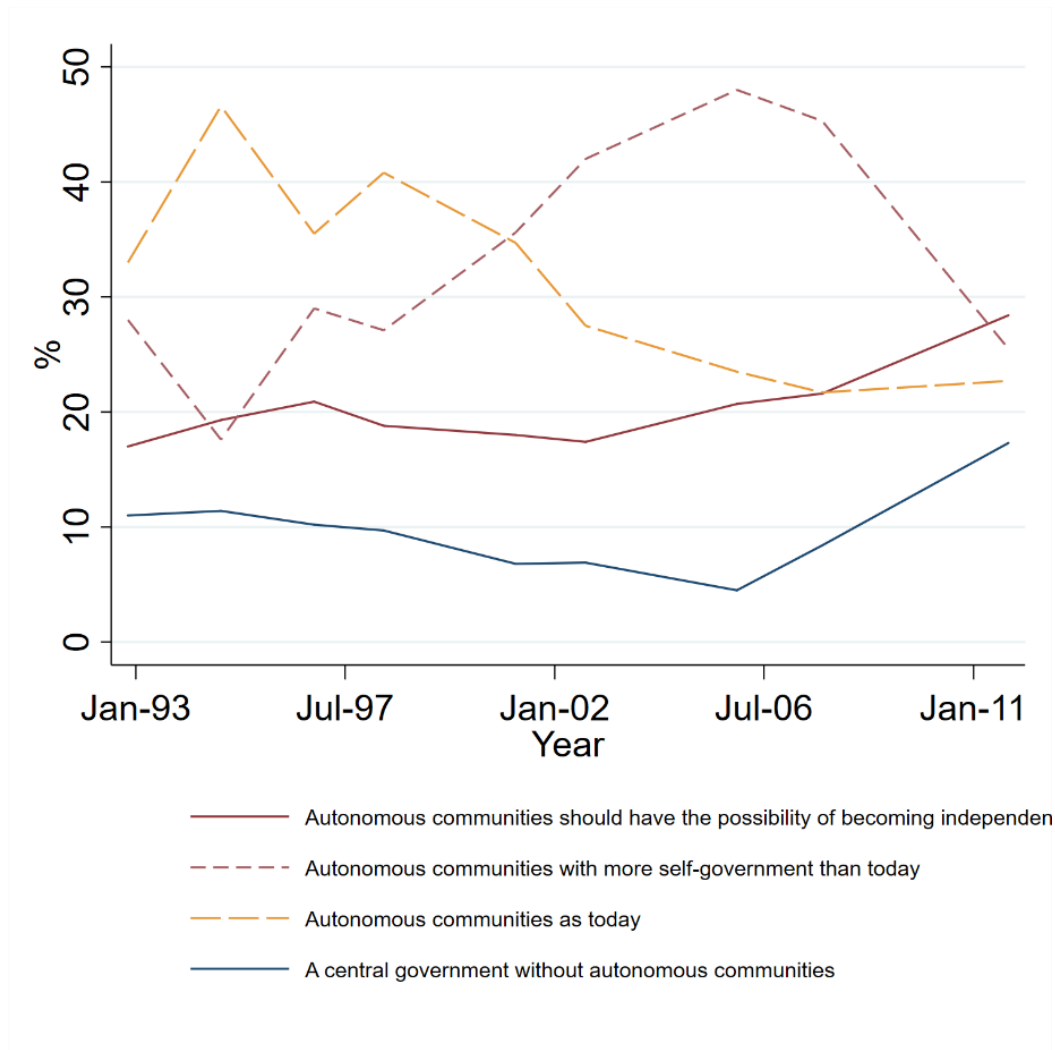
In Figure 2, we look at nationalistic feelings in both Catalonia and in the rest of Spain throughout this period. Answers range from 1 to 5, where 1 shows the person interviewed feels mainly “Spanish”, and 5 shows the person identifies as feeling mainly from their province. Unsurprisingly the level of nationalistic feeling is much higher in Catalonia than in the rest of Spain. These feelings increase throughout the sample and catch up with the levels recorded in the Basque Country. Nationalistic feelings seem fairly consistent in Spain, although there is a slight upward trend in recent months towards feeling less “Spanish” (although it is probably too early to tell whether this will represent an actual change or is simply ‘noise’ in the data). In Catalonia there is also a significant increase in nationalistic sentiment after the 1-O, with the inflection point occurring around April 2016.

Figure 2: Monthly average to answers to the CIS question on nationalistic feelings



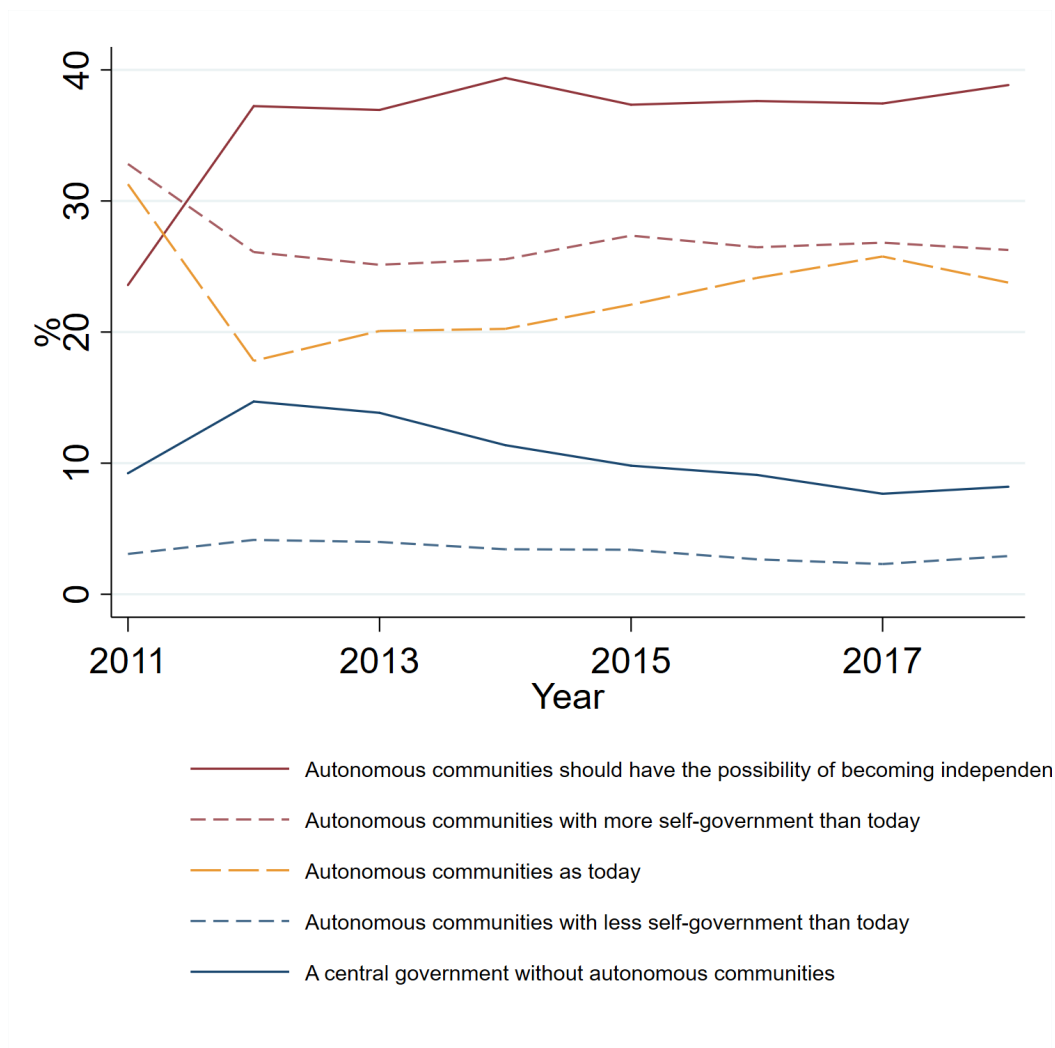
In the following graphs, we show the evolution in preferences regarding Spain's territorial model in Catalonia (that is, just among the Catalan population) between 1992 and 2017. This survey data is included in two different graphs, the first covering January 1993-October 2011, and the second from November 2011-June 2017.

Figure 3: Preferences on Spain's territorial model in Catalonia (January 1993-October 2011)



In Figure 3, taking a long-term historical perspective, we can appreciate some key changes in preferences. It is noticeable that the “status quo” (that is, keeping the decentralized model with autonomous communities as it exists today) was the preferred option among Catalans between November 1992 and March 2001. During that decade between 15 and 20 per cent of Catalans thought that autonomous communities should have the possibility of becoming independent countries. In the following years, between March 2001 and October 2007, support for the “status quo” shrunk in favor of the idea that autonomous communities should enjoy a higher level of self-government. However, the last survey, conducted just before the 2011 Spanish general election, shows an increase in support for the statement that autonomous communities should have the possibility of becoming independent states (28.4 per cent).

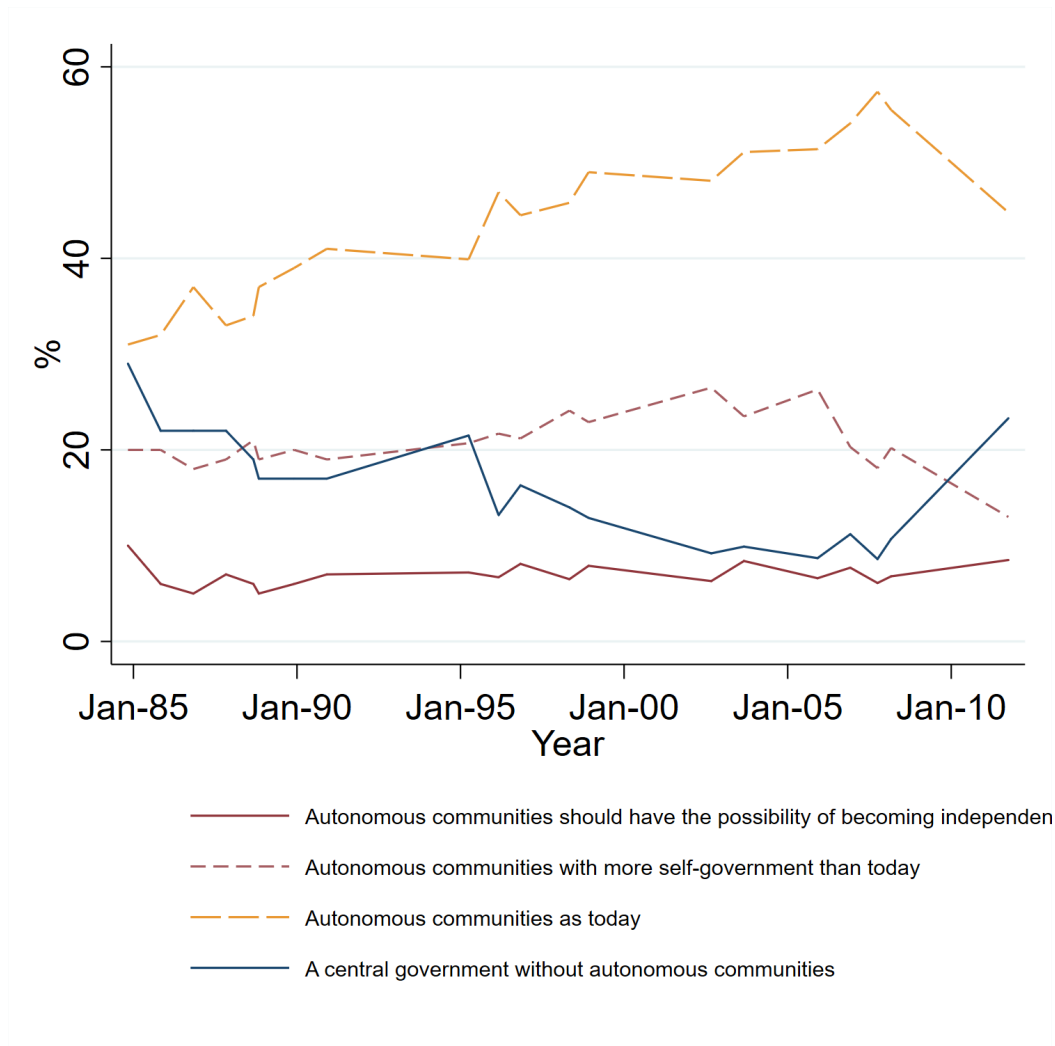
Figure 4: Preferences on Spain's territorial model in Catalonia (2011-2017)



In Figure 4 we show preferences regarding Spain's territorial model in Catalonia between January 2011 and December 2017. In December 2010, the idea that autonomous communities should enjoy a higher level of self-government was the most favoured option with 34 per cent, and with just 23 per cent supporting the view that the autonomous communities should have the possibility of becoming independent states. However, by September 2012 this had risen drastically to 37.4 per cent favouring the possibility for autonomous communities to become independent countries, which was also the most preferred out of the five options. It also worth noting that the number of Catalans opting for the status quo gradually decreased.

In the two following graphs we present the preferences regarding Spain's territorial model in the country as a whole and not only among Catalans as was presented in the two previous graphs.

Figure 5: Preferences on Spain's territorial model in Spain as a whole (1984-2011)



As can be seen in the graph above (Figure 5), there is a clear pattern, with the steady increase in support for the status quo (that is, for maintaining the decentralized model with autonomous communities as it exists today), rising from 31 per cent in November 1984 to 57.4 per cent in October 2007. The opposite trend can be seen in the support for a central government without autonomous communities, which fell from 29 per cent in November 1984 to 8.6 per cent in October 2007. By October 2011, coinciding with one of the worst years of the economic (and political) crisis in Spain, these two trends seem to be reversed. We consider the most recent period in the following graph (Figure 6), which includes survey data for between April 2011 and February 2019.

Figure 6: Preferences on Spain's territorial model in Spain (2011-2018)

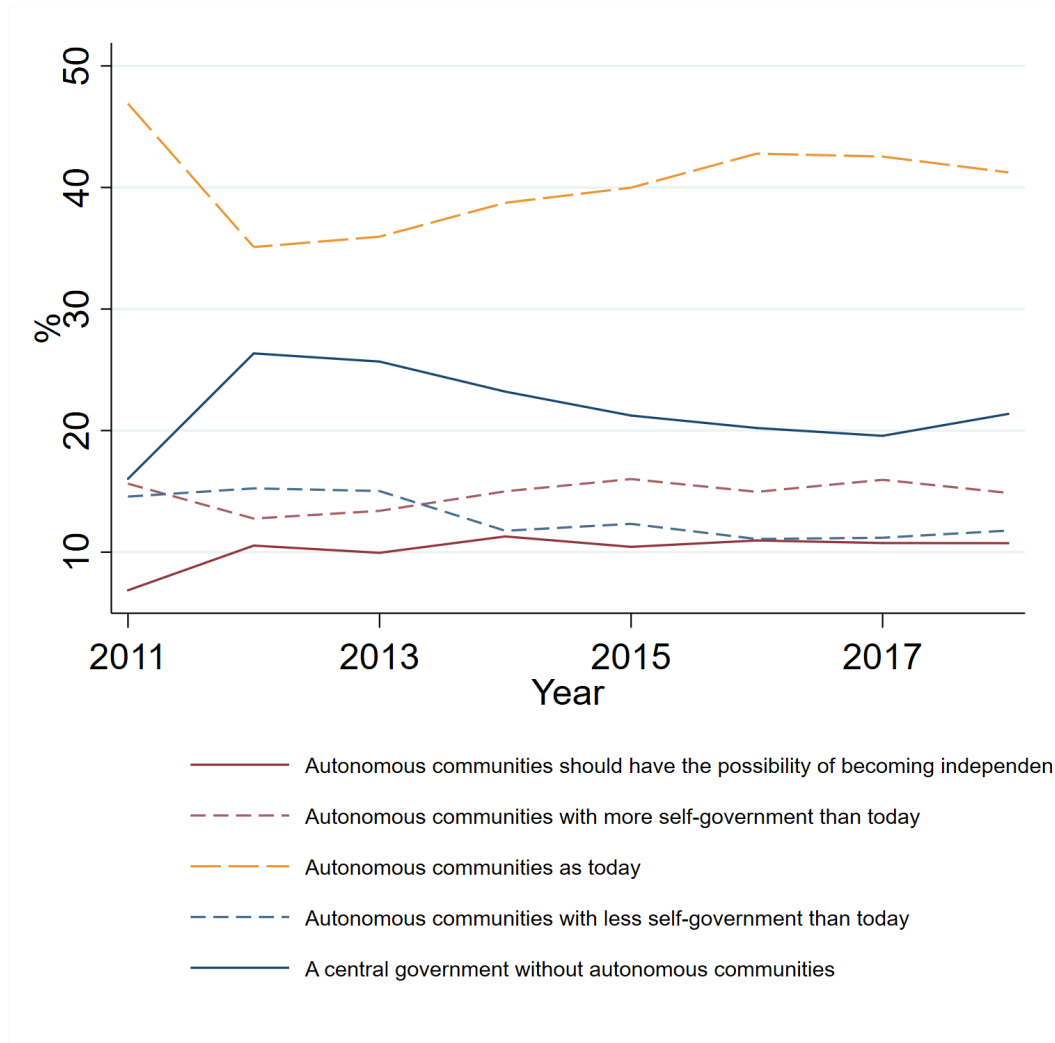


Figure 6 illustrates how support for the status quo in Spain fell by around 10 points between 2011 and 2012 while on the other hand, during the same period, the number of those supporting the suppression of autonomous communities also rose notably. Since 2012, public opinion in Spain regarding the territorial model has remained a bit more stable.

Therefore, comparing figures 3 and 4 (regarding public opinion in Catalonia) with figures 5 and 6 (public opinion in Spain), it can be observed that during the years of the economic crisis of 2012, which coincides with the separatist turn in the biggest nationalist party (Democratic Convergence of Catalonia, known as “Convergència”), public opinion in Catalonia followed the opposite trend when compared to Spain. The trigger moment in both cases is the year 2012. In Catalonia, support for the possibility of Catalonia becoming independent outnumbers the rest of the options ever since; while in contrast, in Spain support for a central government without autonomous communities was at its highest point during this period. Aside from these contrasting trends, ultimately, this survey data also shows the diversity in political preferences that exists both within Catalonia, and within Spain as whole.

Figure 7: Evolution of support for nationalist parties in Catalan regional elections (1980-2019). The last two data points refer to CEO polls from 14 November 2018 and 5 April 2019

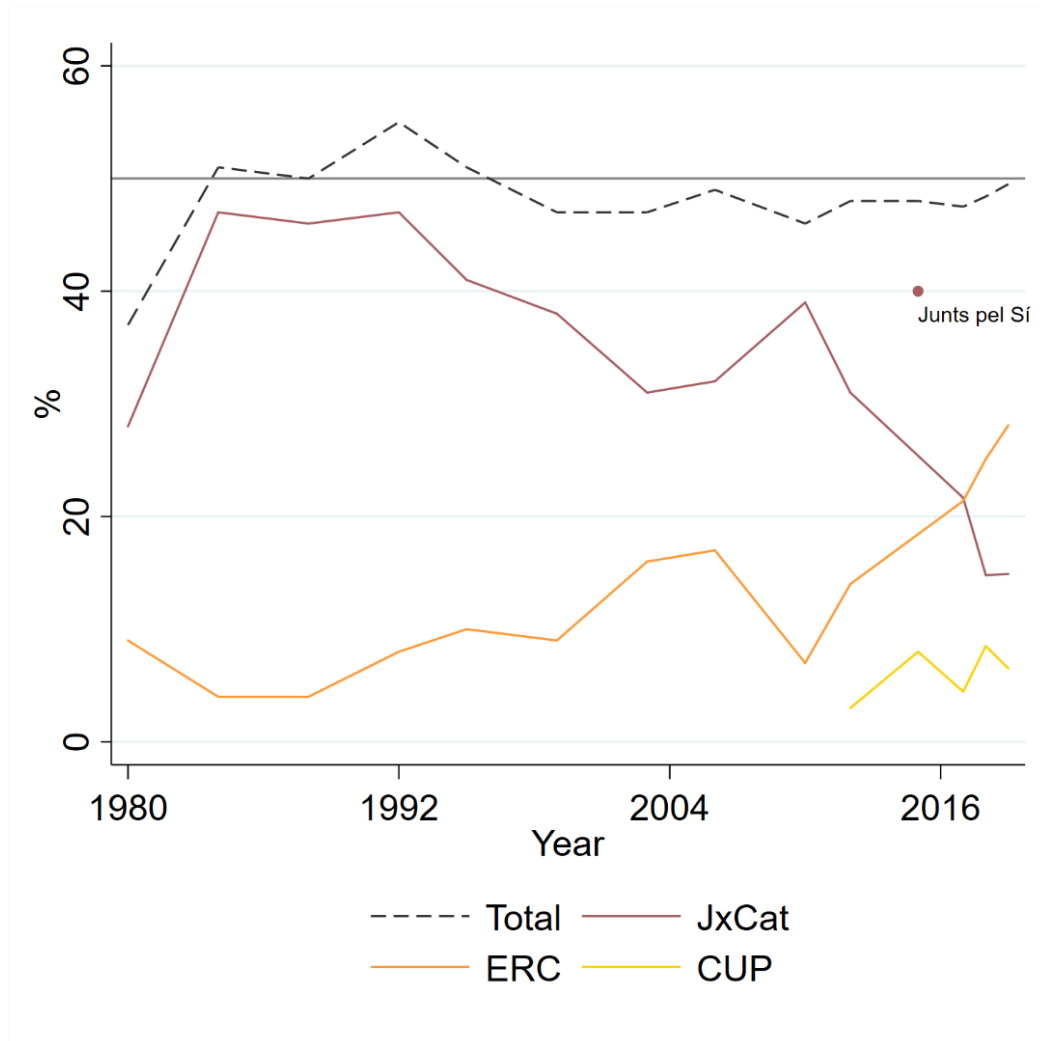


Figure 7 shows the support for nationalist parties in Catalonia. Notably, there is a rather stable pattern over time in terms of total support. In the last 40 years, there has only been one Catalan regional election, in 1992, when the total sum of nationalist parties exceeded 50 per cent of the total vote. That was the moment when CiU, known today as Junts Per Catalunya (JxCat), did not have a clear pro-independence stance and attracted voters from beyond secessionist lines.⁸ Moreover, the graph also reflects the changes in the electoral strength of the two main nationalist parties in Catalonia over the last ten years. Since President Artur Mas' decision to push for independence in 2011/2012, his party has lost strength in favour of ERC. Support for CiU/JxCat fell from 39 per cent in 2010 to 21.7 per cent in the last regional election in Catalonia in December of 2017. In fact, this ongoing competition for hegemony within the pro-independence bloc between ERC and JxCat tends to result in neither party daring to make concessions.

8. At a panel discussion at the London School of Economics (Spain and Catalonia: Is There a Way Out of the Impasse?), León suggested that the turning point for the voters of CiU -when they began to support more clearly pro-independence positions- took place in the fall of 2012, when the Generalitat demanded a reform of the regional financing system.

4. The implications for Spain's political landscape

There are two major changes in the current Spanish political landscape in relation to the Catalan issue. First, the recent actions of the Catalan independence movement have disrupted Spanish politics. Recent survey data shows that one of the main reasons for voters to support Vox, a radical right party, in the last Andalusian regional election in December 2018 was the situation in Catalonia and the perceived major challenge to the “unity of Spain” that this represents. Partially as a reaction to the push for independence led by Catalan nationalist parties, Ciudadanos, a liberal party which strongly opposes Catalan nationalism (and which came first in the 2017 regional election in Catalonia), and the conservative PP have turned to the right in the centre-periphery axis of political competition and compete fiercely among themselves for the hegemony of the centre-right in Spain – the emergence of Vox has also contributed to this dynamic of competitive outbidding.

Meanwhile, left wing parties in Spain are not comfortable with the country's territorial cleavages. That is mainly explained by the deep divisions within their electorates and between party elites on how to approach decentralisation in Spain (that is, the transferral of further powers and resources from the national to the regional level), whether or not a referendum on independence should be allowed and, most recently, regarding the type of sentence applicable to Catalan secessionist leaders.

Second, due to the radicalization of their demands and the controversy around the path followed by the Catalan nationalist parties in recent months, the cooperation between Catalan nationalist parties and national political parties at the national level is today more unlikely than ever. Moreover, the current ongoing trial has increased the cost of compromise between pro-independence parties and Spanish unionists. In fact, most recently, Catalan nationalist politicians who were critical of the unilateral strategy, such as Carles Campuzano (former spokesperson for PDeCAT in Spain's Parliament), have been removed from the electoral lists for the upcoming general election by their own parties., and leaders on both sides who take a conciliatory approach to the dispute are labelled as “traitors” by hard-liners who are unwilling to compromise.

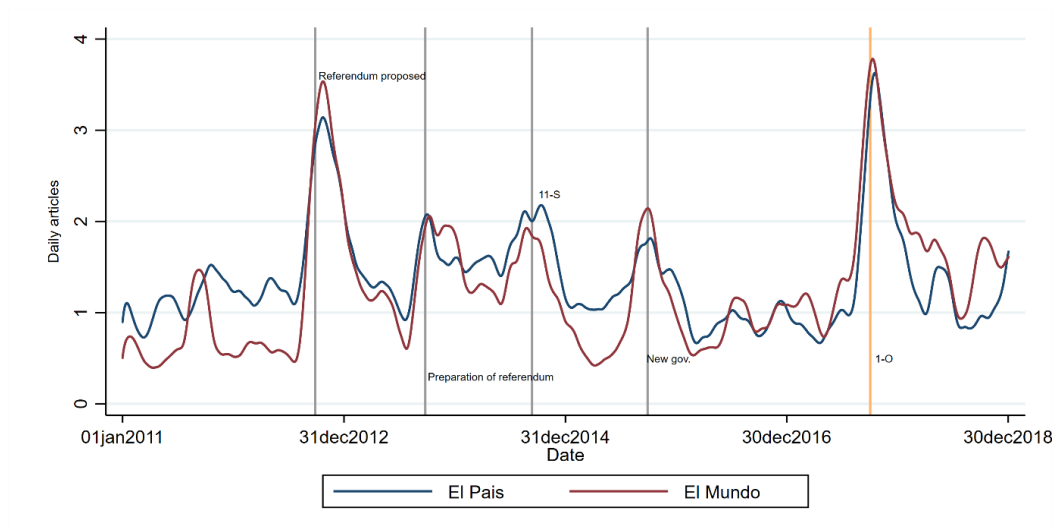
As shown in the previous section, paradoxically, the push for independence in Catalonia occurred in 2012 hand in hand with the rise in support for the recentralisation of competences to the national level of government in the rest of the country. This trend was particularly pronounced in central regions of Spain such as in Castilla León and Aragón. For instance, in September 2012 in Castilla León the most popular option regarding the territorial model was to remove autonomous communities and to have a fully centralized government, with 38.1 per cent of support, whereas not even 1 per cent favored the idea of autonomous communities becoming independent nation-states. In Catalonia, however, the opposite results are found, with 37.5 per cent of respondents supporting the possibility of autonomous communities becoming independent and just 9.6 support for a centralized government without autonomous communities.

Therefore, the division in public opinion regarding the territorial model does not only exist within Catalonia but also between Catalonia and the rest of Spain, which reduces the possibility of finding an optimum equilibrium.

5. The Catalan secessionist movement as portrayed in the national Spanish media

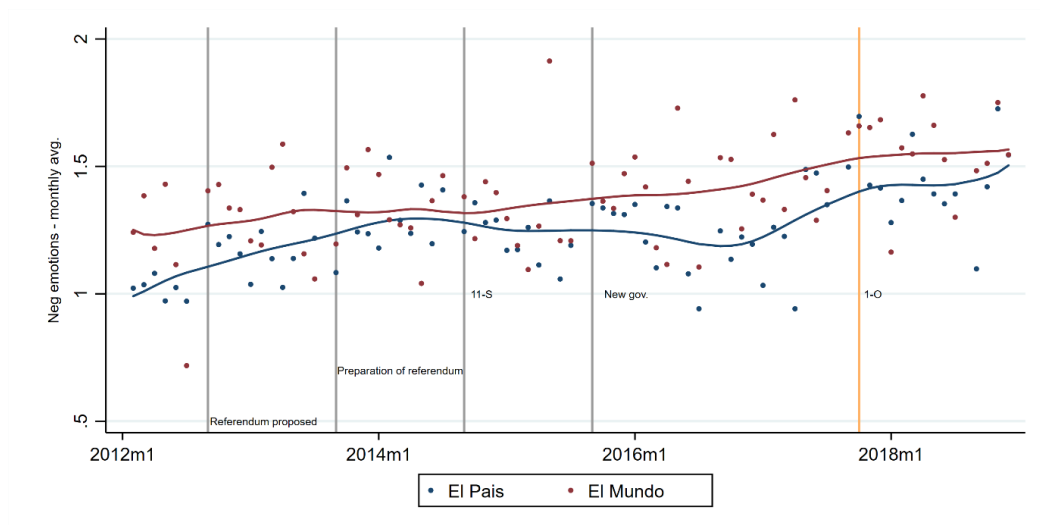
In order to show how the salience of various topics has evolved over time, we reflect on the Catalan issue through an analysis of the portrayal of the Catalan secessionist movement in the national Spanish media. The analysis includes articles about Catalonia that appeared in the two main Spanish newspapers: El País, a centre left newspaper, and El Mundo, a centre right newspaper. The importance of this media analysis is twofold. First, it gives an overview of some of the key events in the Catalan secessionist movement over the last decade. Second, showing the evolution of negative versus positive emotions, and regarding the number of times that certain key words appear in the media, give us a sense of how the conflict regarding Catalonia has evolved over time.

Figure 8: Locally weighted regression of daily articles in El País and El Mundo including the keywords Catal** and indepen**



In order to revisit the current state-of-play, Figure 8 depicts the total number of articles published in El País and El Mundo between 2011 and 2018 containing the keywords words Catalan (and related terms), and Independence (and related terms). The two show peaks around the same times in this period and provide an overview of some of the key events around the issue.

Figure 9: Locally weighted regression of index of negative emotions in articles related to Catalan secessionism



The first vertical line displayed in Figure 9 (labelled “Referendum proposed”) refers to the 27 September 2012, which was the day when the Catalan parliament approved to celebrate a referendum on independence.

The second line marked in the graph corresponds to early September 2013. Around that time, there were preparations being made for an independence referendum and a large demonstration on the 11th of September, the regional day of Catalonia. This was particularly notable for having a “human-chain” protest calling for the “right of self-determination”. In recent years, it has also been a key date to celebrate nationalist “rallies”. Hence, unsurprisingly, the next “key event” marked on the graph is, one year later, on the 11th of September 2014 (labelled as 11-S). On that day, there was another major demonstration, which put further pressure on the Catalan government to implement the promised independence referendum on the 9 November 2014.

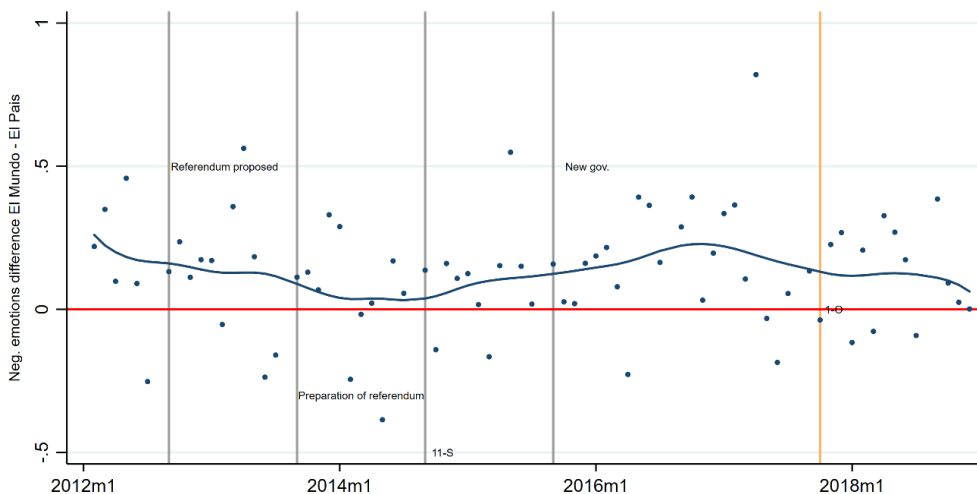
Moving away from demonstrations and rallies, the fourth event marked on the graph refers to the regional elections that took place on the 27 September 2015 (labelled “New gov.”). These elections were framed by secessionist parties as being equivalent to a plebiscite on independence from Spain. The pro-independence parties (the nationalist coalition Junts pel Sí and the far-left Popular Unity Candidacy) combined obtained 47.8 per cent of the votes. However, due to the anti-urban bias of the electoral system, which over-represents rural areas and small towns where pro-independence parties are stronger, secessionists’ parties won an absolute majority of seats in the Catalan parliament with the promise of calling for a referendum.

The joint candidacy of secessionist parties under the name “Junts Pel Si” led by Artur Mas won the elections obtaining 62 seats but falling six seats short of a parliamentary majority. In this situation, they needed the support of the far-left party, CUP (Popular Unity Candidacy) for the investiture of a new President. In exchange for support for that parliamentary term, the CUP demanded a different candidate for the Presidency. Finally, Artur Mas was succeeded by Carles Puigdemont, who was sworn in as president in the Catalan parliament on the 9 January 2016. The highest peaks in Figure 1, and the highlight of the political conflict, are the 1 and 27 October 2017.

On the 1 October 2017 the newly formed Catalan government led by Carles Puigdemont celebrated a referendum, which asked the question “Do you want Catalonia to be an independent state in the form of a Republic?” This was deemed illegal by the national Spanish judiciary and drew a great deal of media attention both nationally and internationally as the Spanish and Catalan police were instructed to interrupt any attempts to hold the vote. The second and highest peak (27 October 2017) was the day the Spanish government applied Article 155 of the Spanish constitution, which allows the national government to suspend all powers of the regional government. It was the first time this Article has been applied in the democratic history of Spain. In this context of growing “demands” for the holding of an independence referendum, the feelings in Spain were of outrage, and perceived “insolence”.

Figure 9 shows that the use of words with a negative emotional weight in articles relating to Catalan secessionism follows an increasing trend between 2012 and 2018 for both El País and El Mundo.⁹ El Mundo, a newspaper categorised as further to the right than El País, on average, uses wording with more negative emotions than the latter newspaper, when it comes to the Catalan question.¹⁰ The outlier observed (high negative emotions in El Mundo) corresponds to July 2015, month in which negotiations between secessionist parties took place to present a single candidacy for the forthcoming elections (Junts pel Si).

Figure 10: Locally weighted regression of the difference in index of negative emotions between El Mundo and El País in articles related to Catalan secessionism



The difference between the two newspapers is displayed in Figure 10. The zero line would represent the case in which the average negative emotions is the same in El País and El Mundo. The two trends get closer in the period from mid 2012-2016. This could perhaps be a sign of how the national (Spanish) view of the issue became slightly more homogeneous regardless the traditional political allegiances of these two major newspapers during that time. The negative emotions in each paper grow further apart around 2016, and then closer together after the 1 October 2017.

9. The index is computed by software LWIC which uses the “dictionary method”. It categorises words according to different emotions or characteristics. I use two indicators: negative emotions, and money-related. Negative emotion words include those related to anxiety, anger, and sadness. There are a total of 345 negative words in the LWIC dictionary. The index is built so that the higher the number of negative words, the higher the index. All the words related to rage, for example, fall within this category. Other examples are enemy, or pointless (“enemigo”, “sin sentido”, respectively in Spanish).

10. Due to database limitations we could not do a similar exercise with regional Catalan newspapers (such as La Vanguardia, El Periódico, or Ara), although the presumption is that a similar pattern would emerge.

Figure 11: Locally weighted regression of index of words related to economics in articles related to Catalan secessionism.

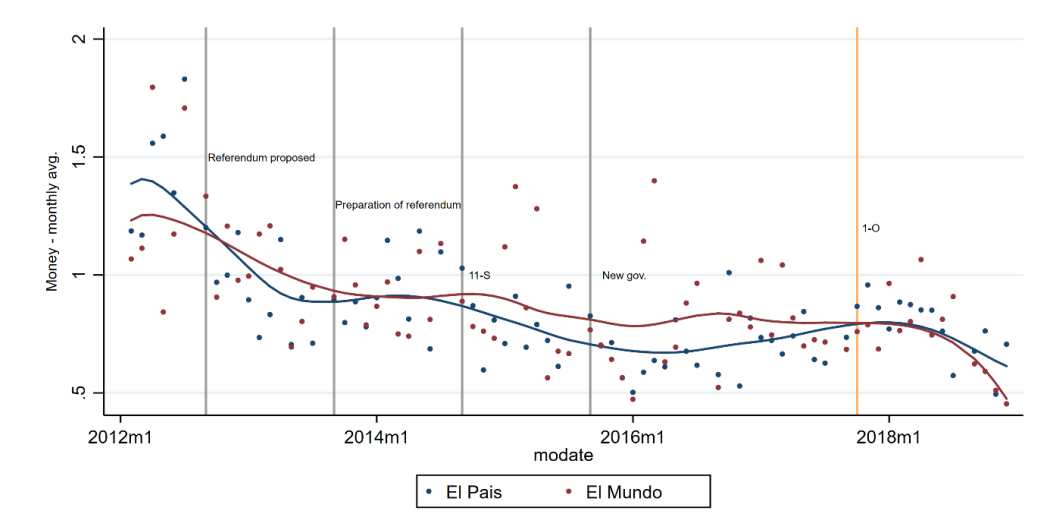
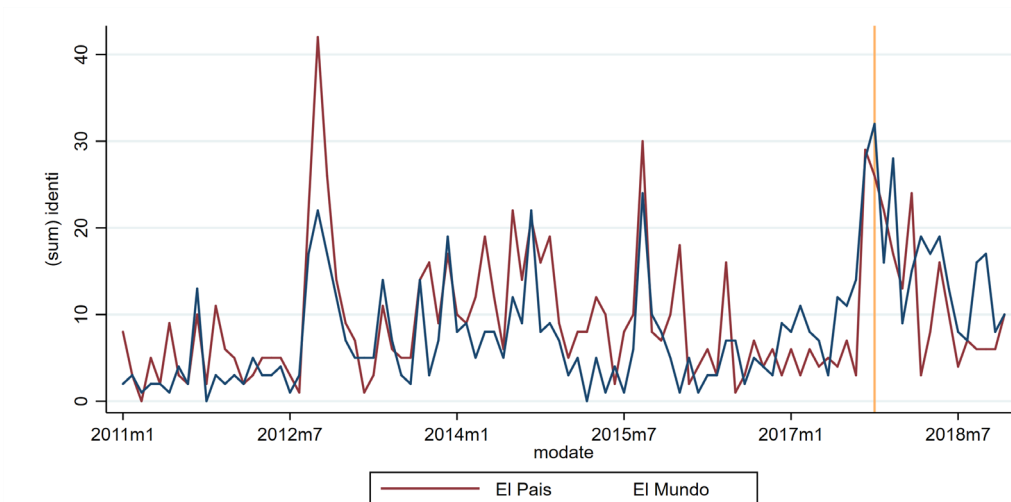


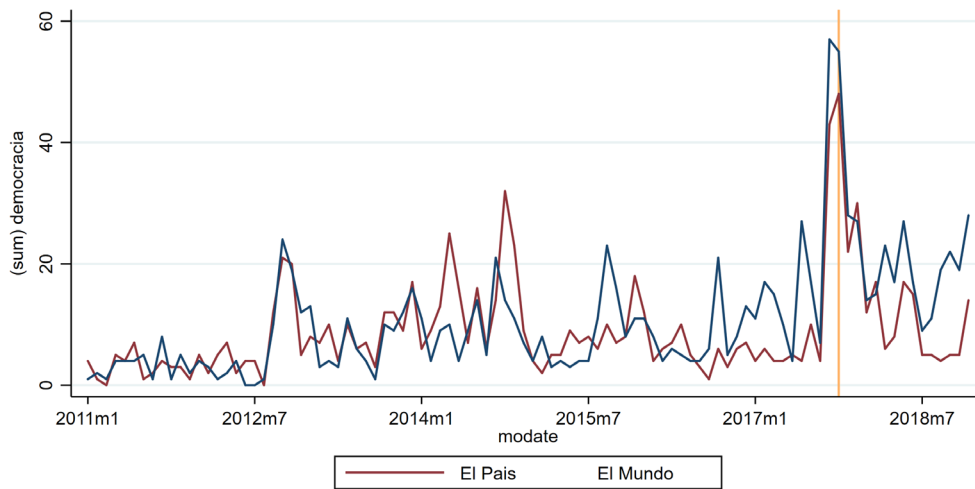
Figure 11 shows that the recurrence of references to economics (taxes, money, etc.) decrease in articles relating to Catalan independence throughout our sample in both newspapers.¹¹ This is perhaps an example of how the secessionist movement grew in support by appealing to identity, or “democratic” arguments, rather than to economic logic. The number of times the word “identity”, and “democracy” appears in these articles is reflected in Figures 12, and 13 respectively, and highlights the increased importance of the first term, and the increasing weight on the latter over recent years (particularly around the illegal referendum of the 1 October 2017).

Figure 12: Total number of times the stem “identi” appears in articles related to Catalan secessionism in El País and El Mundo



11. Examples of words related to money are 'taxes' or salary ('impuestos', 'salario', in Spanish). There are a total of 75 money-related words.

Figure 13: Total number of times the word “democracy” appears in articles related to Catalan secessionism in El País and El Mundo



Conclusion

First, in this article we have provided a historical and data-driven approach to the recent political history of Catalonia and its relationship with Spain. We have shown the evolution of support for Catalan nationalist parties, which has remained below 50 per cent in the last 25 years, and the ways that public opinion in Catalonia and the rest of Spain regarding Spain's territorial model have evolved in opposite directions over time. Whereas support for independence in Catalonia has increased and has remained relatively stable with between 40-45 per cent, in the rest of Spain, and particularly in central regions of the country, recentralization has become a more popular option, even though the status quo (that is, keeping the autonomous communities' model as it is today) is still the preferred option.

An overview of the media portrayal highlights the issue as an increasingly emotional one, as negative emotions in articles relating to Catalan independence increases over time, and are even relatively close together in newspapers with traditionally different political perspectives. Even though the economic issue was very important for a long time regarding Catalan nationalist demands, the decrease in use of words relating to economic matters over time suggests that other topics have become more relevant as questions of identity has become central to the secessionist issue since 2012, and as concepts of "democracy" have become key at certain points over recent years.

The complex political situation that frames the current relationship between Catalan nationalism and the Spanish national parliament is a result of complex historical and political processes. In recent years the tension between erstwhile allies has escalated and has led to previously unanticipated events such as major demonstrations from both the pro-union and pro-independence sides in Catalonia, the celebration of an illegal referendum, a unilateral declaration of independence, the application of Article 155, and the detention and trial of the nationalist leaders involved in the attempt at secession in 2017. Opinions around the issue are divided within Spain, and Catalonia, and have an important emotional weight on both sides. The upcoming elections are marked by two opposed sides which oppose one another, with the far right coming out in the defense of the "unity of Spain", and the independent movement coming out in defense of the so-called "right of self-determination". Whether the 14th general elections in the democratic history of Spain will be able to present a lasting resolution to the Catalan question remains to be seen.