

**Bringing Secessionism into the Mainstream:
The 2012 Regional Election in Catalonia**

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Abstract

Called two years ahead of schedule, the 2012 Catalan election was held in a context of economic recession, controversial austerity measures, growing political disaffection, and increasing popular support for Catalonia's independence. The election was mainly marked by the decision of the incumbent moderate nationalists to advocate for the region's secession from Spain, in the wake of a massive rally in support for the independence of Catalonia. In this article we report on the context, the campaign, and the results of the election, and assess the likely reasons why an unexpectedly high number of voters chose to defect from the incumbent. Additionally, we use survey data to investigate the rapid conversion of a substantial portion of the Catalan public to independence, formerly regarded as a rather extreme position, after the 2010 Constitutional Court controversial decision to curtail the region's reformed Statute of Autonomy

Keywords

Subnational elections, referendum, nationalism, identity, economic crisis, devolution, Spain

Introduction

The election to the Catalan parliament held on 25 November 2012 is arguably one of the most exciting elections in the region to date, if perhaps not as decisive as the next voting to come—whether an independence referendum or an election with a likely plebiscitary tone. The contest was extraordinary on several counts, and it possibly marks a turning point in the region's politics with significant yet still unpredictable consequences in both regional and national politics. Held in a context of ramping popular support for the region's secession from Spain, along with an enduring economic recession and growing popular dissatisfaction with politicians, the election most remarkably featured the first time that the major nationalist party, centre-right *Convergència i Unió* (Convergence and Union, CiU), campaigned for the independence of Catalonia. The voting rendered a parliament heavily polarised on the territorial issue, with traditionally minor parties gaining terrain over mainstream formations. Even if it was seriously punished at the polls, CiU managed to retain a minority government that stuck to its commitment to hold a referendum on independence in the following years, against the firm opposition of the main state-wide parties and their regional associates, while trying to cope with the tough state of the economy and public finances.

The head of the regional government, CiU's Artur Mas, called the election two years ahead of schedule. This rescheduling made the previous term the shortest of all Catalan parliamentary terms ever since the chamber was first elected in 1980. Although not totally unexpected, Mas' advancement caught many off-guard, for more reasons than its timing. The moderate nationalists used the call and the subsequent campaign to exhibit a major, rather sudden shift in its traditional stance on the controversial and potentially disruptive territorial question. The formation that has led Catalan government for longer finally abandoned its traditional ambivalence towards independence and, for the first time, embraced an overt secessionist position, pledging before voters to hold a referendum on the issue before the end of the following term while making a commitment to begin building the structures of the future Catalan state. This unprecedented move stirred the political debate and fuelled an intense electoral campaign. As expected, turnout at the election hit a record high, to the extent that it virtually attained "first order" levels.

The outcome, however, was fairly surprising, given the circumstances under which the election was called. Pre-election opinion polls failed to forecast that CiU, which aimed at increasing its parliamentary share to assure a less constrained government, would eventually suffer a remarkable setback by losing 12 of the 62 seats gained in the 2010 election, to render an even more exposed cabinet (see Table 2 below). Meanwhile, the parliament grew as fragmented and as polarised as ever. The long-established secessionist alternative, the left-wing *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC, Republican Left of Catalonia), more than doubled its number of seats and for the first time became the second largest group of the chamber, thus surpassing the *Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya* (Catalan Socialists' Party, PSC), which received its lowest score ever in a regional election only two years after being voted out of government. Support for minor parties continued to rise, particularly among young, unconventional formations placed at either extreme of the territorial dimension.

Claims for an independent Catalan state have gained momentum in recent times. This momentum picked up after the Constitutional Court's decision in 2010 to curtail significantly the region's new statute that had been approved four years earlier following a long and contentious process (see Rico 2012).¹ However, the rise of secessionism, along with the moderate nationalists' later repositioning, occurred in an unprecedented context of enduring economic depression, controversial austerity policies, and generalised political dissatisfaction. This raises questions about the sources and scope of the pro-independence tide. In the short run, one might wonder how the territorial preferences explain the volatility of the vote in the 2012 election and, more specifically, how those preferences compare to voters' evaluations of the regional government performance as a factor of the incumbent's losses at the polls. From a grander perspective, we might enquire about the weight of national identities on the increasing support for secessionism. Also relevant in this matter is the extent to which political elites are driving the changes in public opinion or whether public opinion is conditioning the shifts in party positions.

In what follows, we review the 2012 election and provide a preliminary account of voting patterns and the underlying dynamics of public opinion. In the first three sections, we establish the context in which the election took place, examine the

campaign, and briefly summarise its results. Using individual data, we then explore the flow of the vote by focusing on the likely reasons why such an unexpectedly high number of CiU's former followers chose to abandon the party this time. Next, we dissect the evolution of popular support for independence, and track some of its key correlates over time in an effort to start uncovering the nature and implications of such a seemingly critical trend. Our analyses draw on the 2012 post-election study from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) and the yearly regional surveys of the *Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials* (ICPS).²

Context

Following the 2010 regional election, CiU managed to form a minority government after seven years in the opposition. Six seats short of the parliamentary majority, it sought to reach alternative agreements without forging a stable deal with any of the opposition parties. For the first few months, the conservative *Partido Popular* (Popular Party, PP) remained the preferential partner of CiU's government, but the situation changed radically after the PP attained an absolute majority in the Spanish general election of November of 2011 (see Martín and Urquizu-Sancho 2012). In the past, minority governments both in Madrid and in Barcelona had fostered CiU and the PP to reach agreements of mutual support in order to sustain their respective executives. However, CiU's leaders were well aware—after the ruinous precedent set by the absolute majority won by José María Aznar in 2000—of the harm that depending on the Spanish conservatives without the ability to condition their policies had done to the party's reputation as the advocate of regional interests (Rico 2012). The new scenario thus worked against this agreement, forcing the moderate nationalists to look elsewhere for the parliamentary support that they needed in a context of economic downturn and extensive public spending cuts.

The story of the Spanish economic recession is already well-known. The world financial crisis that started in 2008 put an end to a decade of economic growth driven by low interest rates introduced by the new European currency and the gigantic expansion of the real-estate investments and the housing sector. In a context of huge debts acquired by the private sector, the burst of the housing bubble drove unemployment to above a quarter of the country's workforce. The subsequent collapse of mass consumption just

added to a dramatic increase of public deficit and a fast growth of Spanish debt. Facing skyrocketing borrowing costs, in June 2012 Spain was forced to request the European Union a 100 billion euro loan to inject capital into its damaged banking sector.

The economic and financial situation was nearly as dramatic in Catalonia. Its GDP declined 1.3 per cent in 2012, while Spain's overall economy contracted 1.6 per cent. By the end of the year, the regional rate of unemployment had climbed to 24 per cent, just two points below the figure for the whole country. Regional executives also faced severe liquidity problems as a consequence of the loss of government revenues that were caused by diminished economic activity and rising unemployment as well as by the strict measures imposed by the European Union to fight the deficit. In this context, the Catalan government lost all access to financial markets that could have supported its debt. By the summer of 2012, when tension was growing between regional and central authorities over how much of the imposed deficit cuts should be carried out by every level of government, the regional executive had no option but to ask the central government for financial resources.

The economic picture severely conditioned the Catalan regional government's leverage over public policy. Indeed, policies mainly focused on austerity and deficit control measures. Given that the regional governments in Spain are responsible for substantial parts of the welfare state (mainly, health services and education), the budgetary targets entailed substantial cuts in public spending in sensitive social areas within the context of a deep recession. Indeed, the Catalan executive was the first to be elected after May 2010, when the Spanish government of socialist José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, under heavy international pressures, started to implement a harsh austerity package involving drastic reductions in civil servants' salaries, public investment, pensions, and social benefits. CiU's government—elected in November 2010—was the first regional executive to implement a systematic agenda of cuts in public expenditure, standing out as a champion of austerity measures that would be later introduced elsewhere. Government action was thus marked by largely unpopular, restrictive spending policies, including cuts in public employees' salaries, requiring co-payments for drug prescriptions, closing health facilities, and significant increases in university tuition fees (Ricomà & Muñoz 2013).

The spending cuts and structural reforms introduced at all levels were highly contested in the streets. General strikes occurred on 29 May 2012, against the labour reform introduced by Mariano Rajoy's conservative government, and on 14 November of the same year, against austerity policies. Sectorial mobilisations to protest the consequences of austerity measures in specific areas, such as public education and health services, were also ubiquitous throughout the country.

Indeed, the early 2010s witnessed a sharp surge of social unrest. As the economy declined, so did the citizens' trust in government. Public dissatisfaction focused primarily on incumbents but swiftly expanded to the political elite and the political system as a whole. Survey indicators describe a persistent decrease in generic approval during this period, which plummeted to unseen levels since the advent of democracy in Spain (Orriols and Rico, forthcoming). An overarching downward trend is also visible in Catalans' judgements of political institutions. As of December 2012, political parties obtained a mean evaluation of 2.4 on a scale from zero to ten, only above banks among a series of social, economic, and political actors—all of them at their lowest levels since the ICPS annual survey was first made available in 1991. At the same time, 76 per cent of Catalans reported being unsatisfied with the way democracy works, more than twice the level recorded in 2007 (Medina 2013). The most prominent expression of this popular discontent took place in May 2011, a few days before the local elections, when tens of thousands of protesters gathered in Madrid and other Spanish cities to voice their rejection of welfare cuts, corruption, and the established parties' alleged lack of political responsiveness, in what was known as the *indignados* (the outraged) movement (Barreiro & Sánchez-Cuenca 2012).

Alongside economic downturn and public discontent, the territorial question provided an additional source of political tension in Catalonia. A longstanding cleavage in Catalan politics, controversy on the issue escalated visibly by the turn of the millennium and seemed to have reached a peak in the fall of 2012. As the Spanish 'state of the autonomies' appeared to complete its constitutional development in the mid-nineties with the final transfers of powers to the regions, the decentralisation debate entered a new stage. For José María Aznar's conservative executive, that moment marked an endpoint in the decentralisation process. Re-elected with a comfortable majority in the 2000 general elections, the ruling PP displayed a marked nationalistic rhetoric against

peripheral nationalists' demands that alienated substantial parts of the Catalan electorate and heightened territorial disputes (Balfour and Quiroga 2007).

Catalan nationalists yet felt it was time for a new step in the devolution process. Following the 2003 regional elections, the new government coalition between the PSC, ERC, and the leftist *Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds–Esquerra Unida i Alternativa* (Initiative for Catalonia Greens–United and Alternative Left, ICV) initiated the drafting of a new statute of autonomy—the regional charter governing all aspects of political life in the region. The statutory reform sponsored by the ruling tripartite placed the issue of the territorial organisation of the state at the top of the Spanish political agenda, bringing about a climate of increasing political polarisation between and within the main state-wide parties and the regions (Balfour & Quiroga 2007). A modified, already diminished version of the chart was passed by the Spanish parliament with the necessary support of the incumbent socialists (brought back to office in 2004) and the fierce opposition of the conservatives, and was finally ratified in referendum in 2006. The new statute was legally contested by the PP and other actors, which led to a long and controversial process of deliberation. In its final decision, announced in June 2010, the Constitutional Court amended the text to decrease further the powers granted by the approved version. Largely interpretive, the ruling lessened some of the most ambitious purposes of the new chart, while qualifying long-established regional policies that were intended to be conferred statutory status (Barceló, Bernadí & Vintró 2010).

The outcome of the statutory reform was taken as an offense by its promoters, frustrated as the law that was so painstakingly passed in the Spanish parliament and later ratified by the Catalan voters ended up being substantially diminished by the judges. Along these lines, a feeling appeared to be spreading among nationalists and the like that demands for enhanced self-government and recognition of national distinctiveness had no realistic chance of being fulfilled within existing state of constitutional and political affairs—a perception that might have been accentuated by the PP's ample victory at the general elections of 2011. Meanwhile, the secessionist movement became increasingly visible under the demand for the Catalan people's 'right to decide' its collective future. As will be shown below, during this time public opinions surveys registered a marked growth in Catalans' support for independence.

In spite of the lack of a clear parliamentary majority in support of the Catalan government in such a convoluted context, there was no election apparently in sight by the end of summer of 2012. However, the events would soon cause the ruling nationalists to suddenly change their plans. CiU had managed to pass in parliament a proposal for a new fiscal arrangement for the region, which president Mas was scheduled to negotiate with the Spanish President in late September. Demands for a more beneficial financial treatment that would repair the existing fiscal imbalance between the region and the state was presented as the party's top priority at the 2010 election campaign. Yet triumphant return of the conservatives to central government made it clear that no substantial advancement was to be attained on this issue. CiU's leaders had expected the march traditionally held on the 11 September to become a popular expression of support for the proposal before Mas meeting with Rajoy. The *Onze de Setembre* is Catalonia's national day, or *Diada*, commemorating the surrender of Barcelona to the Bourbon army in 1714, during the Spanish War of Succession, which resulted in the loss of the Catalan constitutions. The rally, organised by civil society groups (though endorsed by CiU and other political parties), eventually grew into a massive claim for independence. Hundreds of thousands marched in the streets of Barcelona under the unmistakable slogan, 'Catalonia: a new European state'. The secessionists' tour de force encouraged president Mas to pursue a more radical course. After the foreseeable fail to reach an agreement with the central government on the fiscal issue, the Catalan premier called an election for 25 November, as CiU pledged before the public to struggle for the early holding of an independence referendum, in which it would support a vote in favour of the region's secession from the Spanish state.

The campaign

Given the relatively sudden turn of events, the opposition had little more than two months to prepare for the election, which allowed CiU to gain a crucial strategic advantage. Indeed, CiU managed to capitalise the campaign around its novel, secessionist platform against the background of harsh economic troubles and increasing political dissatisfaction. As noted above, CiU's new stance was nonetheless substantiated on already known grievances, both economic and political. It has long been argued that Catalonia suffers a fiscal deficit with the Spanish state, as the region allegedly has been contributing far more than it receives after central government's

transfers to satisfy the inter-territorial solidarity criteria. In the nationalists' opinion, the latest failure at reaching a more balanced fiscal agreement, along with the recent and still hurting experience of the statutory reform, would prove the whole Spanish political establishment's overall insensitivity to the Catalans' interests and preferences; independence would thus become the sole alternative. Along these lines, CiU's campaign aimed at presenting the coalition as the force that might actually lead Catalonia towards independence. Toward this end, the formation's leader, Artur Mas, asked for 'an extraordinary majority for extraordinary times'—i.e., an absolute majority that would provide him the authority to take such a crucial leap while releasing the coalition from the need to rely on other formations' support. By virtue of the Catalan people's so-called 'right to decide' to become a sovereign state, the party committed to holding a self-determination referendum during the following term, while beginning to set up the structures of a new, independent state within the European Union.

The Catalan party system has commonly been depicted as being structured along two cross-cutting dimensions of competition: the ubiquitous left-right dimension and a centre-periphery dimension closely linked to voters' territorial identities (see for example Botella 1984; Padró-Solanet & Colomer 1992; Riba 2000). Parallel to the distinctive prevalence of the latter dimension, the party system is marked by the presence of a number of relevant non-state-wide parties (Pallarés & Keating 2003; Pallarés, Montero & Llera 1997). Besides the longstanding CiU and ERC, new regional formations were established with considerable success in the last decade, mostly on the wake of the polarisation along the identity cleavage. Such was the case of *Ciutadans* (Citizens), a party born to respond the perceived dominance of Catalan nationalism, which entered parliament for the first time in 2006; and of the pro-independence *Solidaritat Catalana per la Independència* (Catalan Solidarity for Independence, SI), which did so in 2010. Although both ideology and nationalism chronically pervade party competition, the circumstances under which the election was called appeared to push the territorial cleavage to centre stage, shaking up the whole political scenario.

Unsurprisingly, the 'right to decide' and the relationship between Catalonia and Spain soon became the most visible issues of the campaign. The mass rally, the commitment to holding a referendum, and the incumbent's search for a new popular mandate were all elements that fed each other to make the issues of the referendum and the

independence of Catalonia the main drivers of the political debate. CiU's secessionist turn had the effect of forcing its opponents to take sides. Perhaps for the first time, the main parties' positions on these matters were clear-cut (see Table 1). Independence was openly advocated by ERC, SI, and now CiU. The anti-nationalist PP, Ciutadans and the socialists opposed independence and, albeit to varied extents, urged new arrangements for the region to attain a more favourable position within Spain, whereas ICV avoided taking an official stance. The parties aligned similarly on the related issue of the 'right to decide'. Pro-independence forces and ICV unambiguously endorsed it and called for a rapid referendum on independence, while the anti-nationalists categorically rejected that possibility, arguing that the 'right to decide' is ultimately entitled to all Spaniards, not just the Catalan people. The PSC adopted a more nuanced position, reflecting the fact that the issue is internally controversial and highly divisive. Against the position of their own partners at the state level—the Spanish socialists being aligned with the anti-nationalists on this matter—the Catalan socialists announced that they would support only a lawful referendum, that is, one that has been previously sanctioned by the central government.

[TABLE 1 NEAR HERE]

Despite the paramount salience of the secession debate, the severe austerity policies that were implemented by the regional government in the wake of the economic recession were also hotly discussed during the campaign. Indeed, opinion surveys invariably signalled the economic crisis and the measures to address it as the major concerns of the public. To give further visibility to the issue, a workers' general strike, the second after the PP entered office in the central government, was held on November 14, in the midst of the election campaign. Most critical of the spending cuts were the parties on the left, particularly PSC, ICV, and ERC. Yet the territorial cleavage often overlapped this debate and eventually overshadowed it. Hence, both CiU and ERC argued that independence would provide Catalonia with the power and the resources to overcome the crisis. Nevertheless, economic policy differences also divided the secessionist camp along the traditional left-right dimension. Most remarkably, and in opposition to some voices on the left, the moderate nationalists declared public austerity as a value worth defending and one that should not be avoided if the country eventually became independent. Likewise, the self-determination debate frequently revolved around

economic matters, such as whether a Catalan state would be economically viable or the extent to which it would be better off without Spain.

The election also posed a strong test for some of the parties' newly elected leaderships. Along with the incumbent president, Alicia Sánchez Camacho (PP), Joan Herrera (ICV), and Albert Rivera (Ciutadans) again led their respective parties' candidacies, but other parties had undergone significant leadership changes since the 2010 elections. Most harmed by the early call was the Socialists' Party, which was caught in the midst of a debate on the opportunity of holding primary elections to elect a new leader. The new circumstances forced the party to postpone the internal clear-out and to rely on the secretary general of the party, Pere Navarro, to run as the leading candidate at the election. Navarro had become the PSC leader in December 2011, shortly after the Catalan socialists obtained their worst share ever in a general election and lost, for the first time, their status of largest party in the region in a vote to the Spanish congress. His recent nomination to the party's leadership in addition to his not yet being a member of the Catalan parliament (i.e., he could not act as the head of the opposition in the chamber) made him hardly visible to the public. Weeks before the election, Navarro was less well known than one would expect given the socialists' traditional status in the region.³

Also ERC and SI presented new candidates for president. After the resignation of the former direction due to the poor results in previous races, ERC had chosen Oriol Junqueras, at that time a member of the European Parliament, as the new president of the party in the fall of 2011. SI had witnessed its starring candidate Joan Laporta join ERC in a coalition list for the local elections, and was now headed by Alfons López Tena, who—in stark contrast with his predecessor—held the lowest position in name recognition of all the candidates of parties with representation in the parliament.⁴

The campaign had noticeable effects on public opinion, as well. Faced with an unexpected election in the context of a deep economic crisis and social turmoil, the public was forced to adapt to an unprecedented scenario that introduced substantial changes in the agenda and in traditional party stances. As a consequence, the outcome of the election was rather uncertain, if not as far as who was going to get the first place (CiU's edge being safe enough) but as to how the other parties would fare and, above

all, whether the moderate nationalists would achieve the absolute majority for which they had explicitly asked.

The results

As usual, news headlines on the election night did not focus as much on the results themselves as they did on the extent to which parties' fortunes departed from expectations. In this sense, CiU not only failed to get the 'extraordinary majority' that its leaders had been craving but also receded in terms of both popular support and parliamentary representation. Consequently, if the self-imposed target by the governing party was to break its 62 seats (with a total of 135 seats in the Catalan chamber, the majority is set at 68), then the mere 50 seats that it did earn was read as a major fiasco for the nationalist coalition. Thus, even if CiU more than doubled the number of votes for the second largest party and was able to get a plurality in nearly every county and municipality of the region, the media's dominant interpretation was the incumbent government's defeat.

[TABLE 2 NEAR HERE]

The other net loser was the PSC. As shown in Table 2, the party that led the regional government for two terms before the nationalists won it back in 2010 saw its already diminished vote share decrease eight percentage points and lost up to eight seats. This was its worst result ever in a regional election. Further, for the first time the socialists placed third in parliamentary representation, if they still ranked second in terms of the total votes received. The under-representation of the socialist vote is the result of malapportionment, namely, the fact that the highly populated district of Barcelona—where the party has traditionally fared best—elects a lower share of legislative seats (63 per cent) than currently is its share of voters (75 per cent in the 2012 election).

The main beneficiary was the pro-independence ERC, which managed to more than double its vote share and to increase its seats in parliament from ten to 21, thus becoming the chamber's second largest group. Unlike the socialists, the nationalists tend to do better in the over-represented districts of Girona, Lleida, and Tarragona—where they emerged as the second largest party after CiU—than in the district of

Barcelona—where they ranked fourth in popular support. Similarly impressive was the electoral performance of the formation at the opposite extreme of the identity cleavage, Ciutadans, which gathered more than twice the vote share than it had gathered from the previous election as well as three times its previous parliamentary representation. ICV and the PP experienced relatively moderate increases, winning respectively three and one more seats than they had held in 2010. By contrast, the secessionist SI registered a severe loss in support and was left with none of its four seats.

One of the most remarkable results of the election was the arrival of a new party to parliament: the radical-left, pan-Catalan, pro-independence *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular* (Popular Unity Candidacy, CUP). A grassroots movement organised in autonomous local assemblies, the CUP attained an increasingly active role in local electoral politics since the early 2000s, but had never run for a regional election before 2012. Its sudden move was allegedly motivated by 'the situation of social emergency and historical turning point' the country was facing, upon the belief that 'national liberation is impossible without social liberation'.⁵

This was the third time in a row that a novel party earned representation in the Catalan parliament after Ciutadans had done so in 2006 and SI in 2010. The recent minor party phenomenon in the Catalan regional elections signals the growing polarisation along the territorial issue, because all three parties are clearly placed on either extreme of that dimension. Yet it also points to the public's increasing disaffection towards mainstream parties, particularly the moderate nationalists and the socialists. Both CiU and the PSC decreased their figures in absolute terms within a context of generalised mobilisation, which reveals a particularly bad performance. A remarkable result, then, is that the two parties that have dominated the Catalan electoral scene for three decades lost votes compared to the 2010 elections, whereas all other parties in parliament with the exception of the tiny SI increased their support in both percentage shares and absolute numbers. This appears to be the last expression of a long-noted trend: 76 per cent of voters chose either CiU or PSC in the 1999 election, yet their joint support has gradually decreased to a mere 46 of the votes in 2012. The decline in support for the socialists (both at the regional and the state-wide levels) and the competition from new forces has eroded the concentration of the votes around the two largest parties.

These joint trends render the Catalan party system more fragmented and polarised than ever. The effective number of parties (Laakso & Taagepera 1979) for the 2012 elections at both the electoral (votes) and parliamentary (seats) levels is 5.8 and 4.6, respectively. Although CiU support is more than twice that of the second largest party, the current party system is even more fragmented than the one that emerged after the founding elections of 1980. The region thus falls under a system with a single large party and a diverse group of smaller forces where a government majority is hardly feasible without the moderate nationalists. Furthermore, the rise of new minor parties yields a more polarised parliament along the left-right dimension and the territorial dimension. On the one hand, the ascent of the rightist PP and the leftist ICV and CUP, together with the collapse of the centre-right CiU and the centre-left PSC, has polarised the parliament along the ideological dimension. On the other hand, the rise of pro-independence parties such as ERC or CUP, together with the rise of forces opposing decentralisation such as PP and Ciutadans, has polarised the parliament in terms of the national question.

Further adding to the exceptional character of the 2012 vote, the election featured an all-time high of participation in a Catalan regional voting. In view of the high levels of intensity and polarisation surrounding the electoral campaign, it should not come as a surprise that turnout was nine percentage points higher than had been in the previous election, with half a million more voters attending the polls. At 68 per cent, the rate of turnout was truly extraordinary, the highest of the ten elections to the Catalan Parliament that have been held since the founding election of 1980. As shown in Figure 1, regional elections are usually less mobilising than general elections. And even if this pattern is visible across all autonomous communities, Catalonia traditionally had among the highest levels of differential abstention in the country (Font, Contreras & Rico 1998, Liñeira & Vallès 2014). This time, however, turnout exceeded the rate registered in the previous general election—if only by a few points and standing still far from the levels typically achieved in high-turnout general elections, such as the not-so-distant 2004 contest.

[FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE]

Differential levels of turnout have been extensively scrutinised in Catalonia because of their magnitude and political consequences: CiU, and more generally non-state-wide

parties, tend to perform better in regional elections, whereas national parties usually improve their numbers in general elections. This swing is the by-product of both party switchers (who systematically support a state-wide party in general elections and a non-state-wide party in regional elections) and regional voting demobilisation (voters who participate in first-order general elections but do not participate in regional elections) (see for example Riba 2000; Liñeira 2011; Riera 2013). The net effect of this movement has usually favoured CiU in regional elections and the PSC in general elections. Yet the high degree of electoral mobilisation in the regional contest of 2012 did not correlate with a good performance by the PSC. Indeed, just the opposite occurred, which runs against the conventional wisdom that increased levels of turnout benefit the socialists. The change in the Catalan party system and the continued decline in support for the socialists are seemingly changing the dynamics and consequences of differential non-voting.

Exploring CiU's reversal

It would have been difficult to explain why president Mas called an early election if he did not expect a decisive increase in CiU's parliamentary representation. Two opposing, but ultimately complementary, views emerged as soon as the decision was announced. According to the romantic interpretation advanced by the nationalists, CiU's leader was acting in response to the demands of a large part of the Catalan population, as expressed in the massive rally on the *Onze the Setembre*. A more cynical interpretation, at the time voiced by the forces opposed to secession, held that the call was a move to distract voters' attention from the unpopular austerity policies implemented by the regional government, in order to avoid being punished at the polls and hence to secure a more comfortable majority.

Yet, regardless the true motivation behind the president's decision, the end result was not only a failure to grow but also a substantial drop in support. As noted above, CiU lost votes in raw numbers in spite of a nine-point increase in turnout levels. Consequently, the drop in CiU's support was not simply a matter of its rivals performing better in a high mobilisation context; the loss of support was also a loss of votes in real terms. Where did its former voters go, and why did they switch?

CiU's vote decline was not equally spread. Geographically, the losses concentrated around the metropolitan area of Barcelona, a traditional socialist stronghold where CiU registered an outstanding advance in the previous election by virtue of the unpopularity of the socialist incumbents both in Madrid and Barcelona. However, CiU did not simply lose votes to one party. On the contrary, the CIS post-election study shows that the party's defectors had rather varied fates. Although ERC benefited the most (getting ten per cent of all 2010 CiU's voters), nontrivial numbers appear to have distributed among forces as diverse as ICV and Ciutadans.

As pointed out above, right after the results were known, political pundits set forth two likely motivations behind the defectors' decision to flee from CiU: (1) disapproval of the strict austerity policies implemented by the incumbent government and (2) CiU's espousal of the pro-independence cause. According to our data, both factors appear to have considerably contributed to the incumbent's losses. Column 1 of Table 3 reports the results of a simple model that regresses defection from CiU (to other parties or to non-voting) on preference for independence and evaluations of the regional government's performance, controlling for respondents' national identity and perceived ideological distance from CiU.⁶ Despite the reduced number of observations available, the estimated coefficients of both variables are statistically significant. According to the estimates, and holding all other variables at their observed values, as evaluations improve, the likelihood of defection notably decreases, from an average probability of 47 per cent for the lowest mark to one of 17 per cent for the highest. Also as expected, pro-independence voters are less likely to abandon CiU (24 per cent) than are voters who want Catalonia to remain part of Spain (38 per cent).

[TABLE 3 NEAR HERE]

As noted above, it has been suggested that CiU's raising of the independence issue tried to refocus the election off the unpopular austerity measures implemented by the regional government (relatedly, see Aguilar & Sánchez-Cuenca 2007). The model displayed in column 2 of Table 3 allows the effect of performance assessments to vary by respondents' attitude towards independence. The estimated interaction term indicates that the weight of performance considerations is significantly reduced among supporters of self-determination. Indeed, the results imply that the marginal effect of regional

government evaluations, albeit still in the expected direction, is not significantly different from zero among pro-independence CiU's voters ($b=-0.48$; $se=0.921$; $p=0.598$) while it emerges as highly consequential among those embracing more conservative territorial arrangements (as denoted by the coefficient for evaluations). Among the latter, the likelihood of switching their vote increases from 13 per cent to 69 per cent as voters' views of government performance change from the most positive to the most negative evaluation. An equivalent shift among the pro-independence hardly affects their probability of defecting CiU, which remains as low as 26 per cent among those holding the most negative assessment. Although the moderate nationalists' move did not certainly offset performance considerations, our estimates suggest that it could have considerably weakened their impact at least within the pro-independence segment of CiU's electorate.

This analysis, though, fails to discriminate among the defectors, who had rather varied fates. Depending on the voter's final destination, some reasons for defecting seem sounder than others. Figure 2 reports vote choice in 2012 of former CiU voters by (collapsed) performance evaluations and preference for independence. For the sake of clarity, bars are not shown for voters who stayed loyal to CiU (their size being the remaining up to one hundred per cent within each graph). Although the number of observations on which these estimates are based is rather small, some revealing patterns emerge. First, defection to ERC—which unsurprisingly is more prevalent among the pro-independent—does not appear to be mainly driven by government performance, since it is almost as likely among those giving positive evaluations as among those giving negative evaluations. Hence their motivations must lie elsewhere. Performance judgments do not discernibly affect defection to the socialists or to ICV, which on the other hand concentrate among those who favour territorial arrangements other than independence. In contrast, both government evaluations and the territorial issue appear to have a role in explaining defections to the PP and Ciutadans, as well as the demobilisation of former CiU voters. All three choices would have been driven by disagreement with the moderate nationalists' secessionist move as well as by dissatisfaction with the overall performance of the regional government.

[FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE]

The above patterns defy some common interpretations of the changes produced in the 2012 election. Indeed, the analysis suggests that voters who switched from CiU to ERC certainly did not switch out of performance concerns. Yet it is unreasonable to expect that voters switching to ERC were, on the face of it, motivated by CiU's adoption of secessionism, given ERC's own well-established pro-independence record. However, we should not rule out the possibility that some former CiU voters chose to turn to ERC's already proven and undisputable secessionism as a way to force the CiU-led government to uphold its promised referendum. Given that the independence of Catalonia seemed to be truly at stake for the first time, pro-independence voters could have engaged in a 'compensational strategy' in order to get the desired outcome (see Kedar 2005). It has been shown that policy shifts in 'principled issues' are often perceived as a sign of unreliability, which might dampen the party's credibility (Tavits 2007). That is, by raising an issue—independence—that they never 'owned' (Budge & Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996), CiU's leaders ended up pushing some of their supporters into the arms of the party that had the most credible record of all the parties. Unfortunately, such a hypothesis can hardly be tested with the available data.

Given the centrality of austerity policies in the performance of the CiU government, it comes as a surprise that switching to parties generally perceived to the left of the moderate nationalists—i.e., the parties that more overtly opposed the cuts—tends to be unrelated to evaluations of the regional executive.⁷ Also rather paradoxically, the data do show such an association for the converted to the conservative PP, in spite of the latter was among the few to support the austerity measures and the party itself was at the time implementing similar policies from the central government.

The rise of Catalan secessionism

While the question of self-determination is far from new in Catalan politics, a Catalan independent state did not transform from a remote option to a real (albeit highly controversial) possibility until the last decade, particularly after the regional election of 2010. Support for secession has recently grown to levels that even the most fervent nationalists could have hardly anticipated just a few years ago. However, the reasons for the rapid conversion of a substantial portion of the Catalan public to a formerly rather extreme position, if already widely discussed, are yet to be established empirically.

Figure 3 shows the evolution of support for independence according to slightly different survey measures taken from the CIS, the ICPS and the *Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió* (CEO) studies. All measures ask respondents about their preferred constitutional arrangement, and include as an option an independent Catalan state or a (Spanish) state in which regions would be granted the right to self-determination.⁸ Although the support for independence has remained around twenty per cent for most of the period covered, it has more than doubled since the late 2000s. The path from steady state to exponential increase is most apparent in the ICPS series, which is available for a longer interval on a yearly basis. In 1991, 19 per cent expressed a preference for an independent Catalan state; by October 2010, the figure was 22 per cent; only two years later, right after the 2012 election, secessionists already added up to 41 per cent of the electorate. Other measures deliver even brighter prospects for the pro-independence camp. Highly publicised by the media over the months previous to the election, surveys asking about respondents' behaviour in a hypothetical referendum on independence showed the 'yes' vote beating the 'no' by a large margin.

[FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE]

The increase in support for independence shown in Figure 3 is usually understood as the direct consequence of the last decade's failed attempts to enable the region to achieve higher levels of self-government. The statutory reform in the summer of 2010 seems to be a major cause of this increase in support. The exhausting and highly polarising process of statutory reform, and particularly the Constitutional Court's final say on the text, appear to have affected the distribution of preferences for the territorial organisation of the state, particularly (but not exclusively) in Catalonia, where the whole affair gave rise to a growing sense of frustration among a majority of voters endorsing enhanced self-government arrangements. The massive pro-independence rally that took place on 11 September 2012 would have been but the logical expression of these thwarted aspirations, as if a sizeable part of the electorate realised that the process of devolution would hardly go further within the Spanish state. Indeed, the timeline depicted in Figure 2 supports such a narrative. Levels of support for independence remained basically unmoved until the new Catalan statute was ratified; a moderate

increase was visible afterwards, but the boost arose from the restrictive ruling of the Constitutional Court.

Other widely circulated interpretations emphasise the corrosive impact of the weakened national economy on the citizens' political satisfaction and trust. As noted above, the profound and sustained economic crisis not only damaged the popularity of incumbent governments at all levels but also fuelled the public's discontent with institutions and the political system as a whole. In the context of traditional resentment towards Spanish political institutions, the rise of Catalan secessionism might thus be a particularised manifestation of the growing political dissatisfaction that was ultimately produced by the economic crisis. According to this reasoning, the pro-independence tide will therefore probably recede as the economy recovers.

It is hard to adjudicate between these competing narratives. The increase in support for independence has been following the spread of economic pessimism that skyrocketed in 2008, the same year when this support seems to have responded to polarisation over the new statute and the anticipation of the Court's setback for self-government. There are good reasons to think that these processes may have been feeding each other. Indeed, the rhetoric of Catalan nationalism has become increasingly explicit in its use of economic arguments in favour of an eventual independence while the decaying state of the economy has rendered economic considerations more salient and appealing to the public.

As for the relative weight of voters' sense of territorial belonging, the aggregate distribution of national identities in Catalonia has not undergone major changes since the early nineties, though some remarkable movement has been registered since 2010 (see Hierro 2012). As shown in Figure 4, voters have slightly shifted towards predominantly Catalan identities in recent years, a trend that is most visible in the growing share of exclusively Catalan identifiers as well as in the decline of the exclusively Spanish and, particularly, of those feeling 'as much Spanish as Catalan'. Although this shift is sizeable, it cannot fully account for the massive increase in support for self-determination. Rather, the two series are moving to a large extent in parallel, suggesting that both are responding to the same underlying forces.

[FIGURE 4 NEAR HERE]

Another key debate has been attempting to determine whether the growing popularity of the secessionist movement is bottom-up or top-down nature. Was mainstream nationalism drawn to secessionism by an unstoppable popular demand (as often claimed by CiU's officials) or did the nationalist elite's embrace of secessionism push its many supporters to follow the lead? Anecdotal evidence exists in support of both hypotheses. On the one hand, the once-marginal and rather dispersed grassroots pro-independence movement has gained cohesiveness and momentum while becoming increasingly active over the last decade. Among its most remarkable achievements is the arrangement of unofficial (but widely exposed and controversial) referenda on independence in more than one half of the Catalan municipalities between 2009 and 2011 (see Muñoz & Guinjoan 2013) and the organisation of the successful demonstration of September 11 that appears to have incited the conversion of the moderate nationalists and the call of early elections. On the other hand, the fact that CiU, the flagship of Catalan nationalism and the party in government at the time, embraced the pro-independence position gave extraordinary saliency to the issue, laying it at the centre of the public debate. Its shift also radically transformed perceptions of the viability of independence in the eyes of the voters. More importantly, this shift put to an end to decades of CiU's ambiguous stance on independence and to its strategy of pragmatic negotiations for incremental increases of autonomy within the Spanish state, thus sending its numerous supporters a clear cue on the party's position on the matter.

Even if settling these debates is far beyond the scope of this paper due to the empirical complexities involved, we can shed some light on them by tracking the relationship between the support for independence and some key individual correlates over time.⁹ Drawing on the ICPS annual surveys from 2001 to 2012, Figure 5 reports the percentage of support for independence (vs. alternative territorial arrangements) by voters' territorial identity and vote choice in the previous regional election.¹⁰

[FIGURE 5 NEAR HERE]

The results show preference for secession to be strongly related to voters' territorial identities over the whole period, with those feeling 'only Catalan' or 'more Catalan than

Spanish' displaying levels of support well above those holding balanced and predominantly Spanish identities. An increase in support is discernable since late 2009, but the major shift appears in 2012. It is in 2012 when the independence first becomes the preferred choice for a majority of voters feeling 'more Catalan than Spanish'. Moreover, the increase is mostly restricted to the predominantly or exclusively Catalan, whereas is barely perceptible among the remaining groups. As a result, the distance between identity groups is getting larger, particularly after the regional election of 2012. Hence, despite the latest diffusion of secessionism, public opinion on the issue is growing ever more polarised along identity lines.

The lower graph in Figure 5 concerns differences in support for independence by respondents' previous vote choice. This measure provides a tentative test for the short-term influence of the parties' cues, and particularly CiU's, on their supporters.¹¹ Results show that secession was the overwhelming preference of ERC voters over the last 20 years but only a minor one among the remaining parties' electorates. Remarkably, only a quarter of CiU voters had on average embraced this option before 2012. Again, support for independence begins to gradually increase by the late 2000s, most markedly among the electorates of the two nationalist parties. But it was in 2012, once president Mas had unambiguously switched to secessionism, when this for the first time became the preferred status for the largest part of CiU's supporters. Whereas only 36 per cent of the 2010 CiU voters favoured independence in 2011, 67 per cent of them did so in 2012. That the proportion of secessionists almost doubled in barely one year is revealing of the nationalist elite's leadership.

The analysis thus suggests the drastic consequences of CiU's shift on the territorial issue. Given the party's enormous pool of followers, the potential impact of this shift on the aggregate distribution of opinions should not be understated. The reported evidence does not provide a full account of the recent rise of popular support for independence, since CiU's shift occurred once the change in mass opinions was already underway. But it certainly helps explain its latest, and most impressive, upsurge. The data also illustrate how attitudes towards self-determination are becoming increasingly polarised along party lines. As parties clarify their positions, voters tend to sort accordingly (see Levendusky 2009). Our analysis suggests that moderate nationalist voters adjusted their stances on independence to fit their partisanship, but others might have adjusted their

partisanship to fit a deep-seated national position. Either way, the elections of 2012 render the issue of secession more divisive than ever in the current democratic era.

Conclusion

Rather than stability, the 2012 election brought amplified uncertainty. CiU reached a parliamentary agreement with ERC, which committed itself to vesting in Artur Mas the position of head of the new regional executive and to supporting the minority government during the legislature period. In exchange, in addition to some limited tax increases, CiU compromised to hold a vote on the independence of Catalonia at some point in 2014. Additionally, the parties submitted to the Catalan parliament a ‘declaration of sovereignty’, which was approved in January 2013. In December 2013, CiU and ERC, along with ICV and the CUP, had agreed on a date and a question for the independence vote. The Spanish government swiftly announced that it would block the secessionist plan, arguing that such a consultation could not be allowed on constitutional grounds. Yet the secessionists’ resolution to challenge the constitutional order persists despite the adamant opposition of the main state-wide parties. President Mas threatened to turn the next regional election into a plebiscite on independence in the likely event that a non-binding consultation was not allowed.

The new context of uncertainty is also affecting the internal lives of the parties. The territorial issue has given rise to tensions within parties, mainly inside CiU and the PSC. Among the moderate nationalists, the confrontation most often emerges between the larger partner of the coalition (*Convergència*) and the Christian-democrats (*Unió*), with the former showing a stronger commitment to the secessionist platform. As for the socialists, disagreements are visible both within the PSC and between the PSC and its Spanish counterpart. Although the Catalan socialists explicitly advocate against the independence of Catalonia, they positioned themselves in favour of holding a (lawful) referendum on the question during the campaign. While this shift in their traditional stance was judged by some party officials to be insufficient, the move nevertheless clashed with the Spanish socialists’ view, which openly opposes any kind of popular consultation on the matter.

Public opinion is in turmoil, as well. From an electoral point of view, the movements evidenced in this past election appear to be growing, as polls currently point to ERC as the frontrunner in a hypothetical election. Even if further changes are likely to occur in public opinion before the next regional vote, these trends signal considerable volatility. Although our data limitations precluded a more nuanced analysis, our results suggest that both the territorial question and popular dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the economic crisis are, indeed, behind some of these dynamics.

As for the question of Catalonia's accommodation within (or beyond) Spain, survey data show no clear sign yet that popular support for independence is receding. According to the latest CEO barometer, for example, independence was the preferred territorial arrangement for 48.5 per cent of Catalans in November 2013. Our analysis suggests that national identity became a stronger correlate of citizens' territorial preferences as the issue's saliency increased and as independence gained viability in the eyes of the public. Yet an ever-more visible change has to do with party politics. CiU supporters are much more enthusiastic about independence today than they were in the past. The repositioning of the once-champions of 'pactist' (i.e., compromising) politics has seemingly caused a substantial part of their legion of followers to bring their views in line with their partisan preferences—which ultimately suggests that the public's positions on the issue are liable to adjust to the vagaries of an uncertain process. The next steps of the key actors involved are still unclear, but these will be crucial to discerning the evolution of the secessionist wave and the parties' electoral fates.

Notes

¹ The ‘statutes of autonomy’ are the special laws that define the powers and the institutional organisation of each of the 17 Spanish regions, or ‘autonomous communities’.

² The CIS post-election study was conducted face-to-face on a representative sample of the Catalan eligible population between November 2012 and February 2013 (N=1,873). Also administered by personal interview (but in 2003 and 2004, when telephone interviews were used), the ICPS studies are based on regionally representative samples of adult residents (Ns range between 1,200 and 2,000; for details, see <http://www.icps.cat>); accordingly, non-nationals have been removed from the analyses.

³ The CIS pre-election survey indicates that 28 per cent of respondents failed to recognise Navarro, and up to 12 per cent did not manage to rate him. These figures are above those of all other major candidates with the exception of SI’s and ERC’s candidates.

⁴ According to the CIS pre-election survey (N=2,983), López Tena was unknown for 52 per cent of voters, while 14 per cent failed to make an assessment of him.

⁵ ‘La CUP irá a las urnas para dar voz a los movimientos sociales’, *eldiario.es*, 18 October 2012 [http://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/opinions/izquierda-independentista-salta-escenario-electoral_6_59554053.html].

⁶ Support for independence is measured as a dichotomous variable, with one indicating that the respondent’s preferred territorial arrangement for Spain is a state that grants autonomous communities the right to become independent states. Regional government evaluations are measured on a five-point scale from ‘very bad’ to ‘very good’. National identity identifies respondents as feeling ‘only Spanish’, ‘more Spanish than Catalan’, ‘as much Catalan as Spanish’, ‘more Catalan than Spanish’, or ‘only Catalan’. Ideological distance is measured as the absolute difference between the respondent’s self-placement on a ten-point left-right scale and CiU’s perceived position on the same scale. All variables are coded on a scale ranging from zero to one.

⁷ Among the left-wing options, only switching to the CUP appears to be associated with (negative) assessments of the regional government.

⁸ The response options of these four measures are largely comparable, even though they are far from identical. The CIS’s version of the question provides four options: (1) a unitary state; (2) the ‘state of the autonomies’ in its current form; (3) enhanced

powers for autonomous communities; (4) the possibility of independence. To these options, a newer version of this question adds the choice of autonomous communities being deprived of some of their current powers. One remarkable difference is that, while the CIS's questions ask about Spain's territorial organisation and make no explicit reference to Catalonia, the questions administered by both the ICPS and CEO ask about the status of Catalonia regarding its relationship with the Spanish state: (1) a region; (2) an autonomous community; (3) a state within the Spanish federation; (4) an independent state.

⁹ For detailed, cross-sectional accounts of the factors affecting recent support for independence in Catalonia, see for example Muñoz & Tormos (2012) and Serrano (2013).

¹⁰ By 'previous election' is meant the last to be held at the time of the survey, with the only exception of the 2012 study, for which the 2010 election is used. The fieldwork for the 2012 study was carried out after the election of 25 November, specifically between 27 November and 20 December.

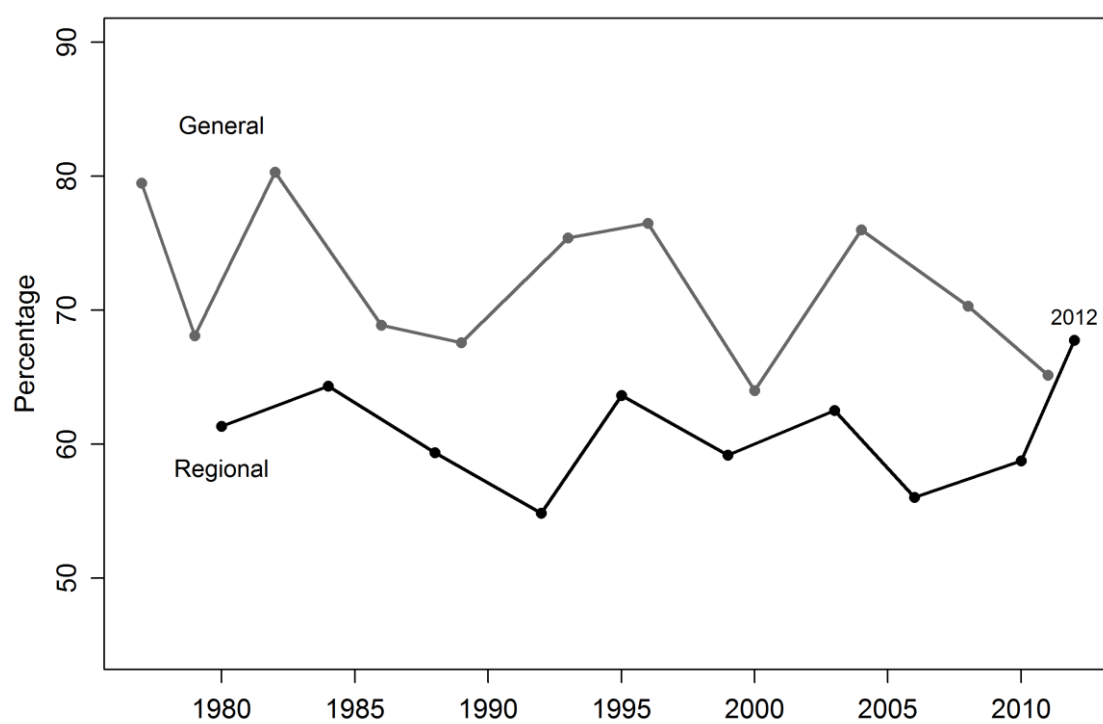
¹¹ Compared to others available, this measure is less likely to be contaminated by reverse contemporary influences, as opinion changes are tracked for presumably the *same* group of voters across a few years before the next election.

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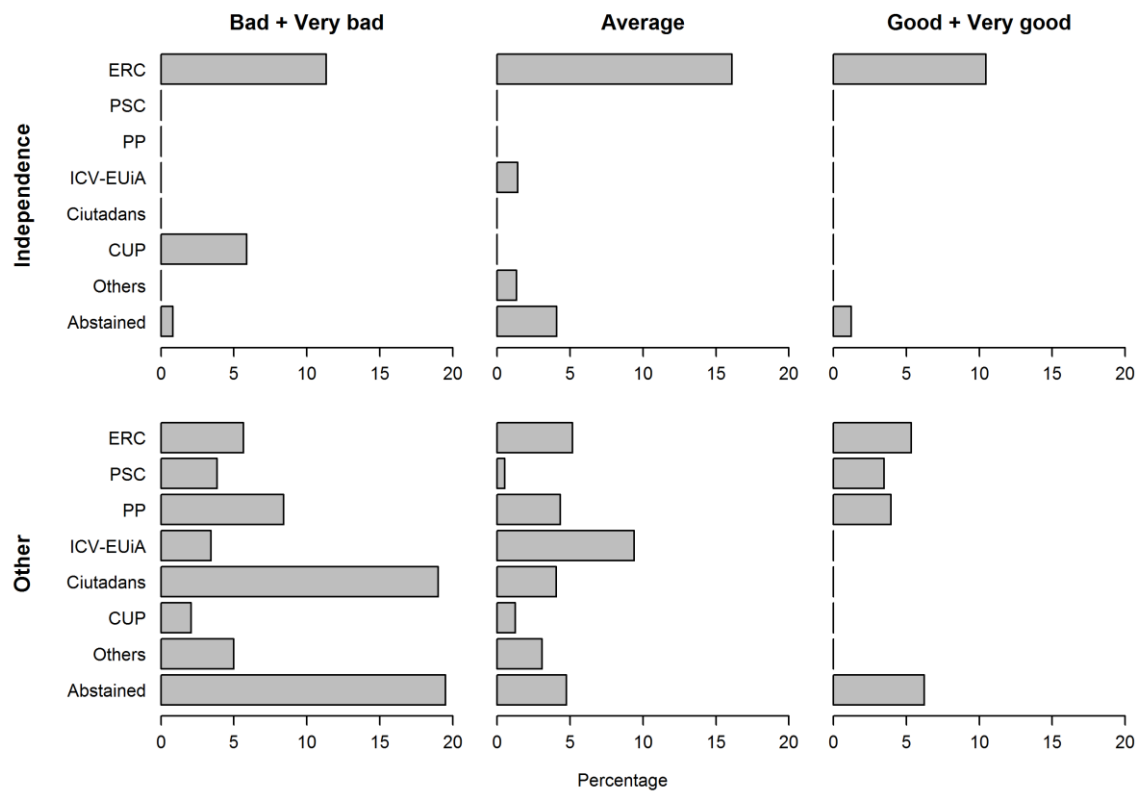
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Figure 1. Turnout levels in general and regional elections in Catalonia



Source: Spanish Ministerio del Interior and Departament de Governació i Relacions Institucionals of the Generalitat de Catalunya.

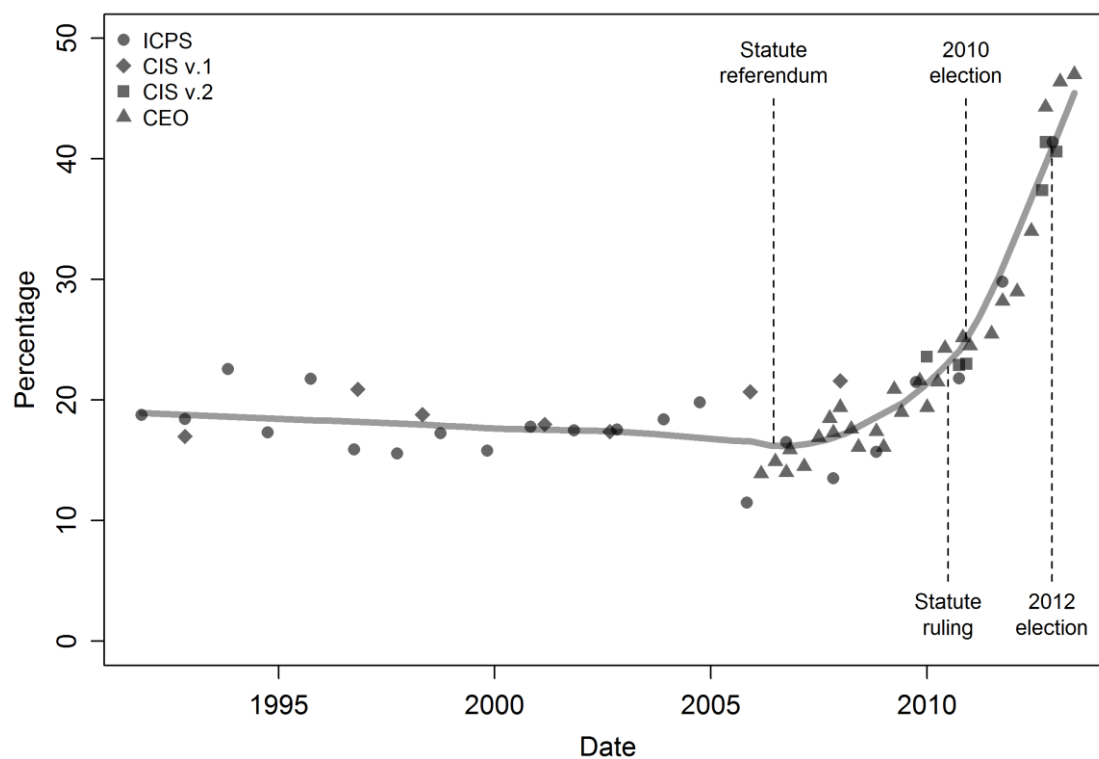
Figure 2. Vote choice in 2012 of former CiU voters, by evaluation of regional government performance (columns) and preference for independence (rows)



Bars for voters who stay loyal to CiU are omitted.

Source: CIS post-election survey.

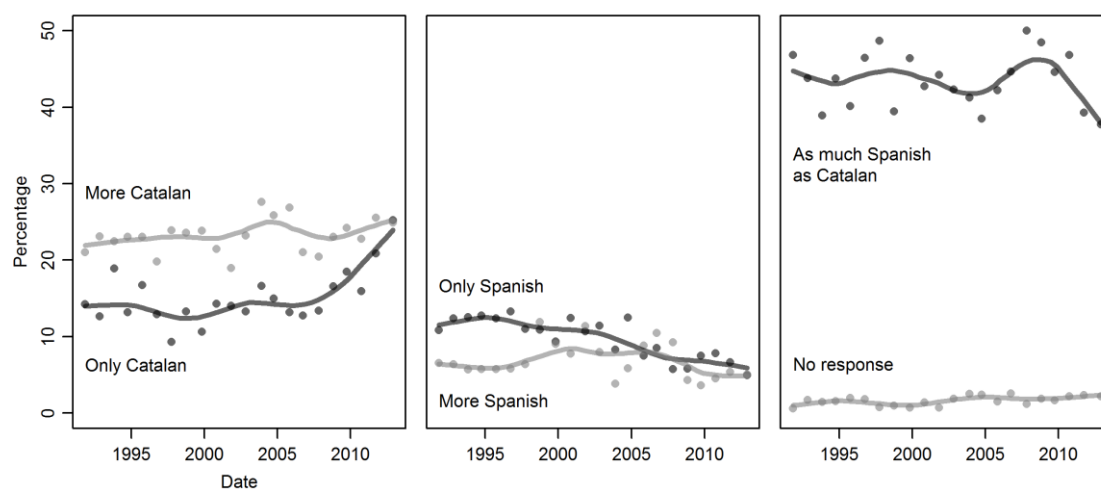
Figure 3. Support for independence as the preferred constitutional arrangement from 1991 to 2013



The trend line is estimated using local polynomial regression (loess).

Source: ICPS yearly surveys; CIS survey databank; CEO barometers.

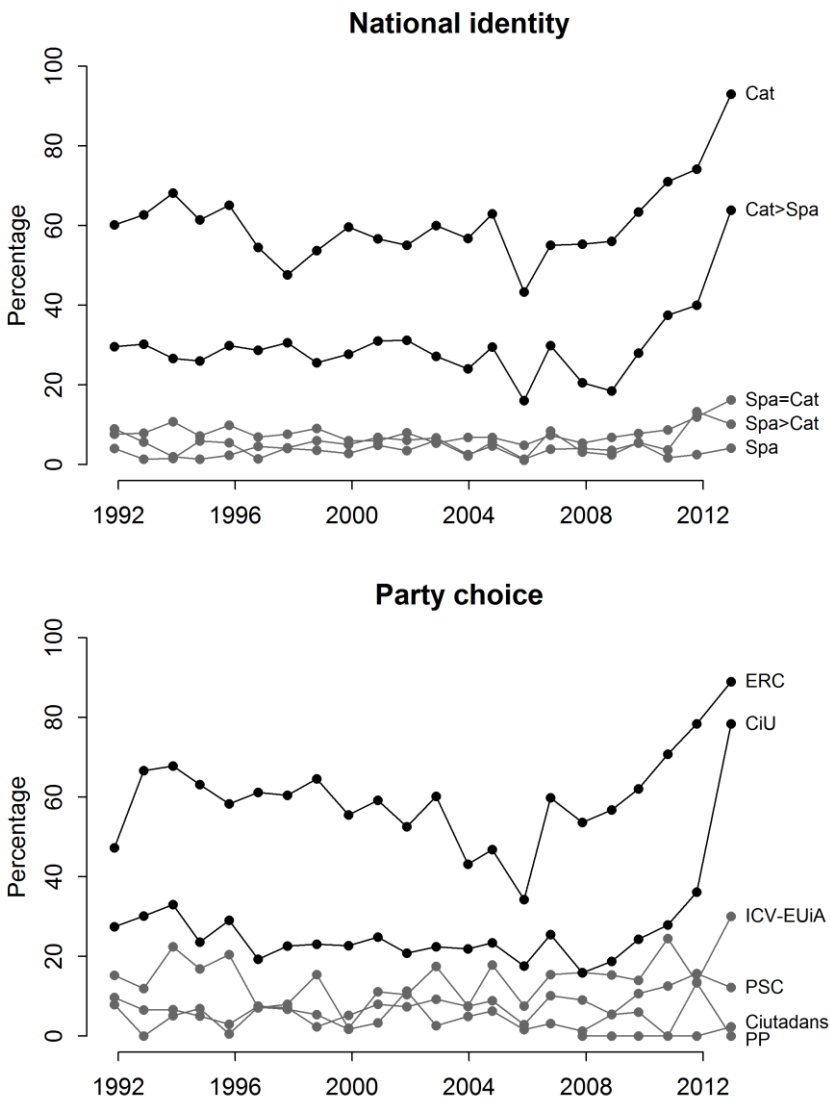
Figure 4. Distribution of territorial identities in Catalonia from 1991 to 2012



Trend lines are estimated using local polynomial regression (loess).

Source: ICPS yearly surveys.

Figure 5. Evolution of support for independence from 1991 to 2012, by national identity and party choice in regional elections



Source: ICPS yearly surveys.

Table 1. Parties' stances on the opportunity of calling an independence referendum and on the independence of Catalonia

	Referendum	Independence
CiU	In favour	In favour
ERC	In favour	In favour
PSC	In favour of a lawful referendum previously agreed with the Spanish institutions	Against
ICV	In favour	Undefined
PP	Against	Against
Ciutadans	Against	Against
CUP	In favour	In favour

Source: party manifestos

Table 2. Results of the 2012 and 2010 Catalan regional elections

	2012			2010		
	Votes	%	Seats	Votes	%	Seats
CiU	1,116,259	31.2	50	1,202,830	39.6	62
PSC	524,707	14.6	20	575,233	18.9	28
ERC	498,124	13.9	21	219,173	7.2	10
PP	471,681	13.2	19	387,066	12.7	18
ICV-EUiA	359,705	10.0	13	230,824	7.6	10
Ciutadans	275,007	7.7	9	106,154	3.5	3
CUP	126,435	3.5	3	—	—	—
SI	46,838	1.3		102,921	3.4	4
Other	163,516	4.6		214,444	7.1	
Blank	52,898	1.4		91,631	2.9	
Null	33,140	0.9		22,354	0.7	
Abstention	1,745,558	32.2		2,211,058	41.2	
Total	5,413,868			5,363,688		

Party percentages are calculated over total valid votes to candidacies; blank and null over total votes; abstention over census.

Source: Departament de Governació i Relacions Institucionals (Generalitat de Catalunya).

Table 3. Explaining defection from CiU in the 2012 election

	(1)	(2)
Ideological distance	5,018*** (0,754)	5,160*** (0,762)
National identity	-2,087** (0,727)	-1,859* (0,732)
Pro-independence	-0,861** (0,319)	-2,261** (0,719)
Regional government evaluation	-1,978** (0,609)	-3,308*** (0,892)
Government evaluation \times pro-independence		2,823* (1,281)
Constant	1,090* (0,523)	1,487** (0,568)
Pseudo R ²	0,265	0,275
N	434	434

Entries are logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in the parentheses. The dependent variable identifies CiU voters in 2010 that do not support CiU in 2012 (vs. those who support CiU on both occasions). All variables are scaled from 0 to 1.

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Source: CIS post-election survey.