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The plebiscitary moment in Catalonia: Voters and parties through the independence challenge (2012-2017)

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ABSTRACT

The referendum of 1 October 2017 was the dramatic peak of a five-year process whereby the Catalan government and secessionist political parties and civil society organisations gradually coordinated with the aim of holding a vote on the issue of independence. This paper provides the international reader with a condensed picture of this convoluted period and advances a preliminary assessment of its consequences for Catalan politics. We first describe the key developments of the secessionist challenge, from its inception in late 2012 to the holding of the 2017 regional election after the imposition of direct rule. Next, we examine over-time changes in political parties and public opinion in the wake of the conflict. The independence debate has triggered grassroots mobilisation and heightened tensions not only between parties but also within them, leading to a more polarised and fragmented regional party system. Trends in public opinion show that voters' positions on the issue, which are largely conditioned by ethnonational identities, have become increasingly influential for explaining political attitudes and behaviour on multiple domains.

INTRODUCTION

On 1 October 2017, Catalan voters were called to vote in a binding referendum to decide on the region's separation from Spain. Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy had insisted that the consultation, which had been suspended by the Constitutional Court, would not take place, and put forth all efforts to stop it. Yet, the vote did take place. Days before the designated date, hundreds of anonymous people secretly coordinated with the Catalan government to hide and then distribute ballot boxes and other election material. Thousands of activists and ordinary voters camped overnight inside the designated polling stations all over the region to make sure they would be open for voting while an online electoral register was devised to allow people to vote at any of them. Despite dramatic scenes of Spanish police forces charging citizens trying to cast their ballots and defend the voting centres, more than two million voters participated in the referendum. The count showed that 90 per cent of participants favoured breaking away from Spain. Accordingly, on 27 October, the regional parliament passed a resolution declaring the independence of Catalonia, and just a few hours later, Prime Minister Rajoy dismissed the regional government and called for fresh elections—where the secessionist parties would retain a majority of seats.

A massive act of civil disobedience, the 1-O referendum was the peak of a five-year process that embarked Catalan citizens on an emotional rollercoaster of hope, polarisation, delusion and resentment, leading the region to a divisive clash of legitimacies and Spain to its most notable constitutional crisis since the restoration of democracy. How did Catalonia get here?

The secessionist bid and the events of October 2017 will entertain scholarly research for years. An account of the contemporary antecedents of the rapid growth in support for independence should go back at least to the turn of the millennium, when changes in the balance of power among parties at different levels of government triggered a process of outbidding competition between the major Catalan nationalist forces. It should consider the consequences of the Constitutional Court's ruling on the reform of the Catalan statute of autonomy, which was viewed by many as the ultimate demonstration that independence was a more feasible plan to enhance self-government than any further attempt to negotiate a more satisfactory accommodation of the region's aspirations within the Spanish state. It would also require weighing how the wave of discontent stirred up by the economic and political crisis that hit the country in the late 2000s might have contributed to the pro-independence momentum.

The goal here is not to provide a comprehensive account of the origins of such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, but rather to concentrate on its most recent and visible episode, characterised by the Catalan government's struggle to hold a referendum on independence. We may set the 2012 elections as the starting shot of what soon came to be popularly known as the procés—the process by which Catalonia was supposed to 'disconnect' from Spain and eventually become an independent nation state. The process was plagued with recurrent ups and downs, tight

deadlines, self-proclaimed historic milestones and last-minute strategic turns. It might be hard for the international reader not to get lost in the convoluted sequence of events that would eventually lead to the declaration of independence and the intervention of regional autonomy.

This paper hence seeks to provide a condensed picture of the procés and a preliminary assessment of its consequences on the region's political parties and public opinion. We first examine the key developments of the secessionist challenge, from the 2012 to the 2017 regional elections (a detailed chronology is presented in the Appendix). Next, we describe the changes occurred in parties and the party system. After briefly reviewing the role of social society organisations, we examine the evolution, of citizens' attitudes on independence, as well as its main correlates and effects. The final section discusses the conflict's broader implications.

THE QUEST FOR A REFERENDUM

During the period from November 2012 to October 2017, the Catalan government, separatist political parties and civil society organisations gradually coordinated with the aim of holding a vote on the issue of independence. These efforts materialised in three consecutive attempts: the nonbinding consultation of 9 November 2014, the plebiscitary election of 27 September 2015 and the referendum of 1 October 2017, and culminated in the declaration of independence by the Catalan parliament on 27 October 2017. Despite the persistence on the endeavour, it is often difficult to recognise a common distinct plan behind this immediate shared purpose—which is hardly surprising, given the profound political differences among the actors involved. For some, a vote in support of independence was indeed expected to leave seamlessly to the automatic implementation of such mandate. Others might have rather viewed the holding of a vote as a strategic move to push the Spanish authorities to negotiate either the terms of a legal referendum or a substantial strengthening of self-rule. In either case, it was taken for granted that the plebiscitary demonstration would bear its fruit not so much by directly persuading the Spanish state—perceived as non-reformable by itself—but by prompting the international community, and particularly the European Union, to force it to concede to the Catalan demands.

As the issue moved to the centre of the agenda, the debate revolved mainly around dogmatic, irreconcilable positions on the viability of independence and the legality of a referendum and related procedural matters, rather than digging into the relationship of Catalonia with Spain and the accommodation of aspirations for enhanced self-government. The response of the Spanish government, controlled by the PP after winning an absolute majority in the 2011 election, was one of absolute closure. Throughout the conflict, Prime Minister Rajoy not only disregarded all demands to hold a consultation on independence (as only central institutions have the legal power to call for such a referendum) but also failed to put forward other devolving measures that would moderate the secessionists' stances, thus narrowing the room for compromise. The Spanish government would just let the judicial system deal with any challenge to the legal order, while actively promoting the involvement of the Constitutional Court to stop the independence process. The court, which had already been involved in the resolution of the statutory affair, was again assigned a primary role in this crisis, thus giving it a constitutional nature (Bayona 2017). All this only served to accentuate the sense of grievance and the radicalisation of the independence movement, which quickly evolved towards a strategy of disobedience and unilateralism. There always was a declamatory dimension to the procés, but its actors often found themselves trapped in their own rhetoric. Ultimately, the outbidding dynamics appeared to push them forward, if only for fear of being accused of stepping down before the pro-independence electorate.

The centre-right CiU (Convergence and Union), the dominant actor in Catalan politics for more than three decades, campaigned the 2012 election on the promise to hold a referendum

on independence and to begin to set up the structures of a future Catalan nation state (Rico & Liñeira 2014). The incumbent coalition not only failed to get the 'extraordinary majority' it had sought to attain but also saw its representation drop substantially, which forced it to rely on external parliamentary support (see Table 1). Such support would come from the secessionist centre-left ERC (Republican Left of Catalonia), who would hence impose strict monitoring of the minority government's compliance with the referendum plan. In January 2013, the regional parliament passed a resolution declaring the sovereign nature of the people of Catalonia and the intention to start a process whereby they could exercise the right to decide their own future. In an unprecedented move, the Spanish government challenged the resolution in the Constitutional Court, despite the non-regulatory character of the parliamentary act. According to Spanish law, appeals to autonomous community regulations challenged by the central government are automatically suspended while the court decides whether to confirm or lift the suspension. The court would later deem the declaration of sovereignty unconstitutional, while also acknowledging that the 'right to decide' could be legitimately promoted provided this was done in accordance with the established constitutional mandates and reform procedures. The ruling hence also established that legal effects could be derived from non-regulatory parliamentary resolutions, implying that the court could use judgment enforcement proceedings on acts considered to be a continuation of resolutions that had been previously declared unconstitutional.

TABLE 1. RESULTS OF MOST RECENT REGIONAL ELECTIONS

	2012			2015			2017		
		%	seats		%	seats		%	seats
CiU	1,116,259	30.7	(50)						
ERC	498,124	13.7	(21)				935,861	21.4	(32)
JxSí						(62)			
JxCat							948,233	21.7	(34)
CUP	126,435	3.5	(3)			(10)	195,246	4.5	(4)
PSC	524,707	14.4	(20)			(16)	606,659	13.9	(17)
ICV/Podem a	359,705	9.9	(13)	367,613	8.9	(11)	326,360	7.5	(8)
C's	275,007	7.6	(9)	736,364	17.9	(25)	1,109,732	25.4	(36)
PP	471,681	13.0	(19)	349,193	8.5	(11)	185,670	4.2	(4)
Valid	3,635,170	100.0		4,114,244	100.0		4,376,799	100.0	
Turnout	3,668,310	67.8		4,130,196	75.0		4,392,891	79.1	
Census	5,413,868			5,510,853			5,554,455		

[a] ICV-EUiA in 2012, CSQEP in 2015, CatEC-Podem in 2017.

Source: Generalitat de Catalunya and Junta Electoral Central.

In December 2013, Catalan President Artur Mas announced an agreement between the pro-independence forces and the eco-socialist ICV (Initiative for Catalonia-Greens) to call for a nonbinding referendum. As the Spanish parliament rejected the request made by the Catalan parliament to transfer the authority to organise it, the regional assembly passed its own bill, the Non-Referendum Popular Consultations Act, and the Catalan government called for such a vote. Both the act and the decree convening the consultation were appealed to the Constitutional Court by the Spanish government, and hence automatically suspended. Faced with this situation, separatist political parties devised an alternative consultation with the collaboration of volunteers and civil associations. This 'participatory process' took place on 9 November 2014, even though it was also appealed to and suspended by the Constitutional Court. The Spanish government did not adopt any measure to prevent the vote, leaving the courts to hear the cases against President Mas and members of his government, in which they were accused of disobedience and misuse of public funds, among other charges.

TABLE 2. RESULTS OF THE 2014 AND 2017 INDEPENDENCE CONSULTATIONS

9 November 2014			1 October 2017		
		%			%
Do you want Catalonia to be a state?			*Do you want Catalonia to be an independent country in the form of a republic?*		
Yes	2,154,877	91.9	**Yes**	2,044,038	90.2
No	105,245	4.5	**No**	177,547	7.8
Blank	13,201	0.6	**Blank**	44,913	2.0
Other	71,505	3.0			
If so, do you want that state to be independent?					
Yes	1,897,274	80.9			
No	234,848	10.0			
Blank	22,755	1.0			
			Valid	2,266,498	
Turnout a	2,344,828	37.2	Turnout	2,286,217	43.0
Census a	6,300,000		Census	5,313,564	
Census	5,413,868			5,510,853	

[a] Unlike regular elections, non-nationals and young residents between 16 and 17 years old were also entitled to vote in the 2014 consultation. The participation figure is an estimate, as official census data have not been published (see www.gesop.net/images/pdf/ca/BREUS%20DE%20DADES/22.%20BreuDades_9NProcesParticipatiu.pdf)
Source: Generalitat de Catalunya (www.participa2014.cat, premsa.gencat.cat/pres_fsvp/AppJava/notapremsavw/303541/ca/govern-trasllada-resultats-definitius-referendum-l1-doctubre-parlament-catalunya.do)

The 9 November vote brought more than 2.3 million voters to the polls, approximately 40 per cent of the eligible population (see Table 2). This was seen as a success by its promoters, even if the results of the consultation made it clear that it had failed to mobilise opponents of independence. In view of the difficulties in carrying out a legal consultation, the idea of turning a new regional election into a de-facto plebiscite on independence gradually gained ground among the secessionist movement. The election, to be held in September, was announced by President Mas as early as January 2015. With the alleged intention of reinforcing the plebiscitary nature of the vote, CDC (Democratic Convergence of Catalonia, CiU's major partner) persuaded ERC to form an electoral coalition jointly with prominent activists from civil society organisations and other minor political groupings—but not the separatist radical left CUP (Popular Unit Candidacy), which ran on its own list. Tellingly named Together for Yes (JxSí), the electoral coalition committed to a roadmap to the separation from Spain that would lead to the proclamation of independence and the calling of constituent elections within 18 months (Orriols & Rodon 2016).

JxSí won nearly 40 per cent of the valid vote in the election of September 2015, which together with CUP share brought the total for the secessionist forces to 47.8 per cent (see Table 1). With 62 seats, JxSí fell short of the necessary majority to re-elect Artur Mas on its own. However, CUP had made it clear during the campaign that it would not provide support to the former president, whose image was seen as tainted by CiU's many corruption scandals and the regional government's austerity measures during the economic crisis. In the first act of the newly elected parliament, the pro-independence groups passed a resolution declaring that the election results gave the assembly a democratic 'mandate' to launch a 'non-subordinate' process to create an independent state— i.e., one not subject 'to the decisions of the Spanish State, particularly those of the Constitutional Court'—and urging the Catalan executive to 'comply exclusively with the laws and mandates of the [regional] Parliament'. This categorical commitment to unilateralism was yet insufficient to gain CUP's support to the candidate of JxSí. After two failed attempts, and just within the time limit set in the Statute before a new election was automatically convened, Mas conceded to step aside and support was granted for the election of Carles Puigdemont, also a member of CDC and at that time mayor of Girona.

The appointment of President Puigdemont, however, did not alter CUP's opposition to the social policies promoted by his government. When the anti-capitalists refused to endorse the regional budget, Puigdemont decided to call for a vote of confidence, which he secured after committing to hold, with or without the agreement with the Spanish government, a binding referendum on the independence of Catalonia before the end of September 2017—eventually on 1 October. While clearly contravening JxSí's roadmap, this shift in the independence plan reflected growing doubts about whether the alleged democratic 'mandate' could be legitimately claimed based on the results of the plebiscitary election, as well as the equally growing control imposed by the Constitutional Court and the gradual realisation of the risks involved. In the interim, the parliamentary resolution expressing the will to initiate 'non-subordinate' route to independence

had been declared unconstitutional. The Constitutional Court, whose powers to ensure compliance with its own decisions had been just reinforced in the Spanish parliament, had also warned various Catalan public authorities (including the president, several senior government officials and the chamber's governing bodies) that they had the duty to comply with the court's rulings and prevent future actions that might entail ignoring them, with the resulting criminal responsibilities. In March 2017, former President Mas was barred from holding public office after being found guilty for disobeying the Constitutional Court's order to suspend the 2014 consultation.

An uneasy calm preceded the long-awaited 'train crash', which began to unfold on 6 and 7 September, when the regional assembly passed the two bills that were supposed to govern the creation of the Catalan Republic. The Self-Determination Referendum Act contained all regulations relevant to the referendum itself (this time, specifying a clear question with a binary response) and established that the parliament would declare independence within two days after the publication of the official results if the number of "yes" votes surpassed the number of "no" votes. This would bring into force the Legal Transition and Foundational Act, which provided for a temporary legal regime and established the process to adopt a new constitution. The bills, blatantly opposed to the Statute and the Constitution, passed with great controversy with the support of JxSí and CUP, in two bitter sessions where the members of the non-secessionist groups refused to participate in the votes and left the chamber, believing that their rights were being violated. The laws were immediately challenged by the Spanish government and suspended by the Constitutional Court. The suspension did not prevent the Catalan government from continuing with the preparation of the referendum. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Rajoy, who had faced fierce criticism from right-wing sectors for tolerating the 2014 consultation, emphatically ensured that the vote would not take place. The referendum became increasingly under the siege of Spanish authorities: vote material was seized, regional accounts were put under more stringent auditing procedures, government offices were raided and police forces (including around thousands of reinforcements brought from other parts of the country) were ordered to prevent the opening of voting centres on the day of the vote.

Notwithstanding all the preventive measures, and despite the many technical and logistical issues and the efforts of Spanish police officers to intimidate participants, nearly 2.3 million voters went to the polls on 1 October (see Table 2). Official results, with a turnout of 43 per cent and support for independence above 90 per cent, once again indicated that the vote was massively boycotted by those opposed to secession. However, the dramatic circumstances in which the referendum took place had a huge impact for the 'internationalisation' of the pro-independence cause, eliciting sympathy toward the movement as well as an outrage against the Spanish government, which was left in an awkward position both at home and abroad.

Overwhelmed by its own success, the Catalan government appeared indecisive in this critical moment as events snowballed. In the evening of 3 October, the same day that hundreds of thousands marched in Catalonia to protest police repression during the referendum, King Felipe delivered a harsh television speech accusing the Catalan government of attempting to break the constitutional order and having divided Catalan society. This was a clear indication that the Spanish executive would not compromise. The region's largest banks and many prominent companies announced that they were moving their registered offices to other parts of the country. Even though some concerns were raised about police violence and the overall way Prime Minister Rajoy had handled the situation, EU officials continued to consider the issue an 'internal Spanish matter' with no space for the intervention of European institutions and insisted that an independent Catalonia would no longer be part of the Union. Only one week after the referendum, hundreds of thousands marched on the streets of Barcelona in an unprecedented anti-independence rally.

Amid this highly charged political environment, on 10 October, President Puigdemont solemnly declared the independence of Catalonia before the regional parliament to immediately 'suspend its effects' awaiting negotiations with the Spanish government. Following this ambiguous statement, Prime Minister Rajoy threatened with invoking Article 155 of the Constitution. Taken almost verbatim from the German Basic Law, this provision establishes a coercive mechanism that allows the central government to intervene regional powers if an autonomous community fails to fulfil its constitutional or legal obligations or seriously threatens Spain's 'general interest'. The application of Article 155, which had never been triggered before, requires a series of preliminary steps before the final approval in the Senate of the measures proposed by the government. In the meantime, a judge ordered the preventive detention without bail of the leaders of the two largest pro-independence grassroots organisations, pending an investigation on alleged sedition for their role in the protests that occurred on 20 September, when Spanish police officers were trapped by a crowd as they searched a regional government's building. On 27 October, just a few hours before the Senate authorised the activation of Article 155, the Catalan parliament passed a resolution declaring independence from Spain. The regional government, however, abstained from taking any executive measure to implement the historic motion. Once with the parliamentary approval, Prime Minister Rajoy dismissed the entire Catalan government, removed the head of the regional police (who had been criticised for not complying with the judge's orders on the referendum day), shut down most of the region's diplomatic services and eliminated a number of other offices and entities. Finally, although the ratified measures provided for a much more extensive intervention, the Spanish Prime Minister dissolved the Catalan parliament and called for fresh regional elections at the earliest date. These decisions, which were agreed upon with PSOE and C's, included a commitment to lift direct rule as soon as a new regional government was elected and to establish a parliamentary commission on constitutional reform in the Spanish congress.

The election of 21 December was extraordinary in many aspects, particularly for the secessionist forces. The procés had ended abruptly, and the goal that during the preceding years appeared to be around the corner seemed now hardly attainable in the short term. Rather than exercising the 'right to decide', Catalan voters were being called to the polls, by the Spanish government, to return the region to constitutional order. Puigdemont and some members of the deposed cabinet had fled to Brussels, whereas the former vice-president, ERC's Oriol Junqueras, and other ministers had been sent to jail on charges of rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds. These unusual circumstances did not prevent many of them from being on the electoral lists. Indeed, Junqueras remained as ERC's candidate for the presidency, while Puigdemont was the leading candidate of JxCat (Together for Catalonia), a new coalition that brought the PDECat (Catalan European Democratic Party, the successor of CDC) together with independents close to the ousted president. Albeit along with rhetorical invocations to the 'Catalan Republic', both ERC and JxCat toned down their demands, placing the emphasis on the restoration of Catalan autonomy, the release of the 'political prisoners' and the requirement for bilateral negotiations with the Spanish government. Only CUP advocated openly for continuing the unilateral path.

With nearly 80 per cent of eligible voters showing up at the polls, the election of 2017 registered a record turnout for a regional contest in Catalonia (see Table 1). Although C's was, for the first time, the most voted party, the three pro-independence parties retained their majority in parliament with 70 seats—down only two from the 2015 election. JxCat's performance was the greatest surprise, as it managed, against most forecasts, to stay ahead of ERC, if only by a few thousand votes. Notwithstanding all these novelties, the relative difference in support between secessionists and non-secessionists remained nearly unchanged compared to the two preceding elections—that is, since the onset of the procés.

A PARTY SYSTEM IN FLUX

By pushing the issue of independence to the top of the political agenda, the secessionist movement forced parties to take sides on a matter that was framed in either-or terms, leaving little room for moderation and compromise along the national cleavage. The related issue about the 'right to decide' and the opportunity of holding a referendum, which, in principle, allowed for more nuanced positions, was also reduced to nearly binary standings, as it clashed with the blanket opposition of the Spanish government. This did not affect regional parties closer to either of the national extremes. Both ERC and CUP have historically favoured independence, while the conservative PP (Popular Party) and C's (Citizens) have been strongly opposed to Catalan nationalism. However, the salience of independence put those parties that had traditionally occupied more moderate positions under heavy internal strain, leading to disagreement and significant defections within CiU and PSC (Catalan Socialists' Party), as well as among the ICV and its associates. Ultimately, two irreconcilable party blocs clashed against each other, with CDC (in its various versions), ERC and CUP passing the unilateral declaration of independence, and then C's, PSC and PP backing the imposition of direct rule under Article 155. Table 3 summarises the parties' positions on the conflict, along with party and leadership changes over the 2012-2017 period. In the following, we first examine the most prominent cases of intra-party division and then assess party system change.

Facing a loss of reputation as the champion of Catalan interests, CiU was engaged in an outbidding competition with ERC for the hegemony of the Catalan nationalist electorate (Barrio & Rodríguez-Teruel 2017; Colomer 2017; Elias 2015). The adoption of an increasingly confrontational strategy, at odds with CiU's record of pragmatism, sparked dissent between the coalition's partners and eventually led it to split on the eve of the 'plebiscitary' election of 2015, when the Christian democratic UDC (Democratic Union of Catalonia) opposed embracing the unilateral roadmap in alliance with ERC and withdrew its members from the regional government. The decision caused a split within UDC itself, as some prominent party cadres left the party and created Demòcrates (Democrats of Catalonia), which would join the JxSí list. UDC ran on its own but failed to attract enough support to win a seat in parliament; in the 2017 election, its successors associated with the PSC. While the JxSí experience allowed CDC to save the day in the regional vote, results in the local and general elections continued showing a declining trend in support. In an attempt to fight ERC's credibility advantage in the issue of independence and shed CDC's reputation of corrupt practices, the new PDECat was founded in 2016 to replace the defunct CDC. Apart from adopting an unequivocal pro-independence stance, PDECat granted more influence to the party base than had been the case in CDC, which caused the old elite headed by Artur Mas to lose the party's chief coordination to a younger generation of cadres (Barrio 2017). In the 2017 election, PDECat agreed, not without reservations, to join the JxCat 'country list' promoted by Puigdemont, which failed to add ERC but nonetheless managed to involve a group prominent figures with close ties to the deposed president. After having prompted the declaration of independence and leading a nonconformist

TABLE 3. PARTY POSITIONS ON THE INDEPENDENCE ISSUE

Party (as of 2012)	Later party changes and electoral lists (main successor)	Leader/leading candidate (party/list and election year)	Position on independence	Position on independence referendum	Position on unilateral declaration	Position on Article 155
CiU	2015: CDC-UDC split, UDC-Demòcrates split. CDC and Demòcrates in JxSí list 2016: CDC 'replaced' by PDECat 2017: PDECat in JxCat list, Demòcrates in ERC list	Artur Mas (CiU 2012, CDC 2015) Carles Puigdemont (JxCat 2017)	In favour	In favour	In favour	Against
ERC	2015: JxSí list	Oriol Junqueras	In favour	In favour	In favour	Against
CUP		David Fernández (2012) Antonio Baños (2015) Carles Riera (2017)	In favour	In favour	In favour	Against
C's		Albert Rivera (2012) Inés Arrimadas (2015-)	Against	Against	Against	In favour
PSC		Pere Navarro (2012) Miquel Iceta (2015-)	Against	2012: If legally accepted by Spanish government Since 2014: against	Against	In favour
PP		Alicia Sánchez-Camacho (2012) Xavier García Albiol (2015-)	Against	Against	Against	In favour
ICV-EUiA	2015: CSQEP list (with Podem) 2017: CatEC-Podem list	Joan Herrera (ICV 2012) Lluís Rabell (CSQEP 2015) Xavier Domènech (CatEC-Podem 2017)	Ambivalent	If legally accepted by Spanish government, but exact formula unclear. Illegal ref. viewed as 'legitimate' form of protest.	Against	Against

list from Brussels, Puigdemont got CDC's successors to temporarily bridge the reputation gap in its struggle with ERC for the leadership of Catalan nationalism. Yet, differences persisted between the PDECat leadership and a group of MPs loyal to the former president, hence raising doubts about the future development of the centre-right nationalist space.

Despite its firm commitment to a united Spain, the Catalan socialists struggled to find a position that could accommodate a highly heterogeneous membership without alienating their Spanish partners (PSOE). PSC did not oppose the 'right to decide' when it came to the foreground and supported the idea of a consultation if it agreed with the central government, but finally ended up refusing any possibility of holding a vote on the independence of Catalonia. Along the way, a significant number of high-profile officials left the party, and some of them would eventually join a secessionist list. The independence issue was a persistent source of tension with PSC's counterpart at the national level, which was far less willing to compromise with the secessionist parties. For the first time since the restoration of democracy, in 2013, the Catalan socialists broke the socialist group unity in the Spanish parliament in votes related to the consultation and the 'right to decide'. PSC also had a distinct role in the divisive debate about the group's position in the investiture vote after the general election of 2016. Aligned with the PSOE leader, Pedro Sánchez, the Catalan socialists refused to abstain in order to facilitate the formation of a PP government and encouraged the group to search an alternative agreement with Podemos and, if required, the support of the pro-independence parties. Following Sánchez's resignation, and against the instruction of the socialist group, the PSC MPs again failed to abstain in the vote that eventually elected Rajoy as prime minister. The socialists supported the implementation of Article 155 but put pressure on Prime Minister Rajoy to limit its scope.

The political space traditionally occupied by ICV experienced a profound rearrangement, as the independence challenge was underway. The growth and vitality of new social and political movements at the national and local level persuaded the eco-socialists to join efforts with various emerging forces, entering an intricate ongoing process towards a more stable organisation (Rodríguez-Teruel 2017). This process was hardly related to the issue of independence, but the matter ended up affecting the relationships among the groups involved and hindered efforts to provide a unitary response. The election of 2012 was the last regional vote that ICV contended under its own mark. In 2015, the party run in coalition with Podem (the Catalan branch of Podemos – We Can) and other minor formations as CSQEP (Catalonia Yes We Can). By 2017, ICV had already diluted within CatEC (Catalonia in Common, the new formation promoted by the mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau), which, again, ran in alliance with Podem. As the issue was highly divisive among its members and potential supporters, this mixture of groups avoided taking a clear stance on the separation from Spain and took every opportunity to denounce how the territorial debate helped to postpone the discussion of more pressing social concerns. They supported the idea of the 'right to decide', but tried to reframe it in terms of broader democratic regeneration. The group's position on the independence referendum, as devised by the secessionists, remained deliberately ambivalent and

unspecific. ICV backed off from the organisation of the 2014 consultation after it was declared illegal, but still encouraged voters to participate in it. Similarly, CSQEP advocated for a legal independence vote agreed with the Spanish government (although was unclear about the formula it preferred) and refused the allegedly binding character of the 2017 referendum, but viewed it as a legitimate mobilisation for the 'right to decide'. At the same time, it joined the pro-independence parties in their disobedience to Constitutional Court's orders that prevented the parliamentary debate to take place, through its vote in the regional chamber's bureau. In the run up to 1 October, harsh disagreements emerged between the members of the coalition about the opportunity to support voters' participation in the illegal referendum, leading Podemos to force the resignation of Podem's leadership. In the 2017 election, CatEC-Podem was the only party to criticise both the declaration of independence and the imposition of direct rule under Article 155.

Apart from intra-party division, the independence challenge reinforced ongoing changes in the overall partisan supply and the pattern of interaction between parties. To begin with, it fundamentally contributed to increases in levels of party system fragmentation and polarisation along the national dimension (see Table 4). On the one hand, the sudden adoption of independence as a short-term goal by Catalan nationalist parties automatically enlarged the ideological spread of the party system. On the other, the gradual erosion of the two parties that had traditionally dominated the regional arena, i.e. CiU and PSC, came together with the growth in support for alternatives, old and new, with more extreme positions on the territorial dimension. Thus, C's first entered the regional parliament in 2006, the short-lived SI (Solidarity for Independence) did so in 2010, and then CUP has secured representation since 2012. ERC became the second strongest party in the 2012 election and surpassed CiU for the first time in the 2014 European elections. In 2017, C's became the first non-Catalan nationalist party to 'win' a regional election in both votes and seats—although with the lowest share ever registered in such a competition. It is worth noting how these changes in the regional party system occurred without major variations in the relative share of national party blocks. Over the last decade (indeed, since the mid-1980s), the total vote going to Catalan nationalist parties stayed remarkably stable, and the aggregate level of inter-block volatility remained low, which suggests that vote switching across the national divide was rare.

Do these trends add to a change to the type of party system, i.e. from one of moderate pluralism to one of polarised pluralism? Going beyond the numbers, a crucial factor to distinguish between multiparty categories is the character and direction of party competition and the related presence of relevant anti-system parties (Sartori 1976). Competition clearly became centrifugal during the procés, as is typical of polarised systems. Parties, particularly those in the Catalan nationalist camp, did not compete mainly for votes in the centre, instead outbidding each other with increasingly extreme proposals (Colomer 2017). Centrifugal competition was enhanced by the presence of the admittedly anti-system CUP, which first managed to influence party interaction by virtue of its reputation of integrity and selflessness, and then exercised its blackmail potential to force Artur Mas to step aside in favour of Carles Puigdemont.

With the party system in apparent process of transformation, there were no signs of a stable pattern of alternation in government (Mair 2002). The advent of the tripartite government after more than two decades of CiU's single-party governments signified a shift from a pattern of non-alternation to one of wholesale alternation where competition seemed to be structured mainly along the left-right dimension and direct access to the executive was open to all parties but PP. Although this pattern temporarily resumed when the 2010 elections took CiU back to government, the independence challenge significantly changed the shape of interactions between parties, restructuring competition along the national axis and opening the system to innovative governing formulae. During the process launched in 2012, the control of the executive was characterised by minority governments with support from the pro-independence parties in varying levels of involvement. Given the current level of polarisation, it is difficult to envision any plausible governing alternative to an alliance between ERC and the conservative Catalan nationalists. Recent precedents would suggest a left-wing coalition in the style of the tripartite, which would configure a pattern of partial alternation with ERC as the pivotal actor and an unclear dimension of competition. Another scenario is a non-secessionist coalition encompassing C's, PSC and PP, which would configure a polarised two-bloc system with wholesale alternation. None of these alternatives are feasible with the results of the 2017 election at hand. Yet, the evolution of Catalan politics will fundamentally depend on which of them, if any, becomes thinkable in the future.

TABLE 4. EVOLUTION OF THE REGIONAL PARTY SYSTEM

Regional election	Polarisation		Effective no. parties		Winner % vote	Catalan nationalists	Inter-bloc volatility
	National	Left-right	Electoral	Parliamentary			
2006	4.1	4.1	4.5	4.1	31.5	45.6	1.1
2010	4.5	3.9	4.5	3.5	38.4	48.7	5.8
2012	5.7	4.5	5.8	4.6	30.7	49.2	1.9
2015	6.7	4.0	4.3	3.6	39.6	50.3	2.2
2017	6.5	4.2	5.3	4.7	25.4	47.5	2.8

Polarisation is measured using Dalton's (2008) 0-10 index, based on the electorate's perceived placements of parties in the post-election surveys of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (because survey data for 2017 are not available, for that year we use the party placements in the previous election). Effective number of parties is Laakso & Taagepera's (1979) index. The Catalan nationalist bloc includes ERC, CiU, CDC, PDECat, UDC, CUP and SI.

A MOBILISED CIVIL SOCIETY

Nationalist parties have not been alone in the pursuit of independence. Prior and during the process started in 2012, many different social and political actors outside the electoral arena have joined the secessionist movement, mobilising hundreds of thousands of citizens in marches, rallies and other non-institutionalised forms of collective action. By the early 2010s, economic recession and recurrent political scandals had driven public trust in parties and institutions to historic low records, dramatically widening the gap between citizens and their representatives (Muro & Vidal 2016). The high and sustained level of mobilisation attained over the period is, thus, hardly conceivable without the lively involvement of civil society organisations, which came to play a key role in bringing the nationalist parties to a common path (Guinjoan & Rodon 2016).

Throughout the 2000s, the tense debate around the reform of the statute of autonomy spurred the mobilisation of organised civil society groups in favour of independence and more generally the 'right to decide'. It was the involvement of two far-reaching organisations, Òmnium Cultural and ANC (Catalan National Assembly), that led the independence movement to its highest levels of mobilisation. Òmnium was formed during the Francoist regime to defend and promote Catalan language and culture. Over the years, it adopted a more decidedly political stance, gaining prominence with its active role in the organisation of the demonstration held in 2010 against the Constitutional Court's decision on the statutory reform. ANC was officially constituted in March 2012, largely drawing on the committees created to organise the many local unofficial consultations on independence held between 2009 and 2011 and other smaller existing associations, hence bringing together a hitherto highly fragmented movement. In 2012, ANC led the organisation of the first massive march for independence, which anticipated CiU's secessionist turn and marked the starting shot of the procés.

ANC and Òmnium eventually joined efforts with the goal of spreading support for secessionism among Catalan citizens and putting pressure on politicians to hold a referendum on independence. They soon became the civil face of the pro-independence movement, and their leaders acquired great visibility. Both organisations have been firmly established all over the regional geography, with local and sectoral branches and multiple connections with other, mainly cultural associations. Besides the gigantic demonstrations held on 11 September every year since 2012, they displayed an endless and innovative political action repertoire, encompassing merchandising and canvassing campaigns and a myriad of cultural, recreational and sports activities—which, combined with a highly effective use of new technologies and the social networks, managed to draw large attention from the media. Despite size and scope and the professed non-abidance to (certain) legal rules, protest actions were remarkably disciplined and non-violent, which soon became a distinctive feature of the movement.

A symbiotic relationship developed between the organisations and the actors operating at the institutional level, by which discredited politicians sought the backing of organisations to obtain the public's support and organisations sought the cooperation of politicians in office to move their goals forward (Castan Pinos 2018). Neither ANC nor Òmnium have formal linkages with the secessionist parties, and have endorsed them indistinctively in elections. In an environment of ramping political cynicism, this non-partisan character conferred them a credibility advantage. While the parties might have had strategic, non-policy considerations in mind, organisations came to be viewed as the guardians of the people's will. This moral patina enhanced their influence on parties and facilitated their efforts to provide a common ground, ensuring that parties did not deviate from the agreed track, which ultimately helped voters to overcome their reluctance over parties.

Over time, the deeds and fates of the secessionist organisations and parties became increasingly intertwined, as illustrated by the organisations' involvement in the arrangement of the 9-N and 1-O referenda and the participation of their leaders in the JxSí list in the 2015 elections. This convergence gave way, in the two years preceding the October consultation, to a rather unique political creature: a loose coalition of civil activists and political parties that (at least temporarily) sacrificed broader programmatic coherence for a single-issue appeal, while combining formal electoral competition with extra-institutional mobilisation practices. The formula somehow resembled that of a 'movement party' (Kitschelt 2006), except that the regional government, along with a large number of city councils, were also involved in protest activities. The process of convergence, however, ended up compromising the organisations' independence and significantly reducing their capacity to exert pressure on the pro-independence parties.

The effervescence of the secessionist movement remained unparalleled on the opposite camp. Efforts to mobilise citizens in favour of the region's remaining in Spain met with limited success until the events surrounding the 1-O referendum suddenly took hundreds of thousands to the streets. That is, only the perceived threat of imminent secession managed to motivate massive protest action among anti-independence voters.

A DIVIDED ELECTORATE

The independence challenge has been fundamentally sustained by the enduring support of a substantial part of Catalan citizens. As shown by the evolution of territorial preferences in ICPS yearly surveys, support for independence registered a sharp increase in the early 2010s and soon became voters' most preferred arrangement, only receding slightly by the 2015 regional elections to thereafter stabilise (note that the 2017 data were collected immediately after the declaration of independence but before the December election). The secessionists thus appear to have consolidated an undisputable plurality over the last decade, but even at their highest peak, they fell short of a simple majority. Opponents, however, have been far from united around a common alternative. They are split mainly between those who stick to the present status of Catalonia as an autonomous community and those who advocate for a federated state, with support for re-centralisation lagging far behind. Somewhat paradoxically, the surge of secessionism appears to have come at the expense of support for the current arrangement, while the less popular federal option has remained nearly unmoved.

FIGURE 1. PREFERRED TERRITORIAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR CATALONIA
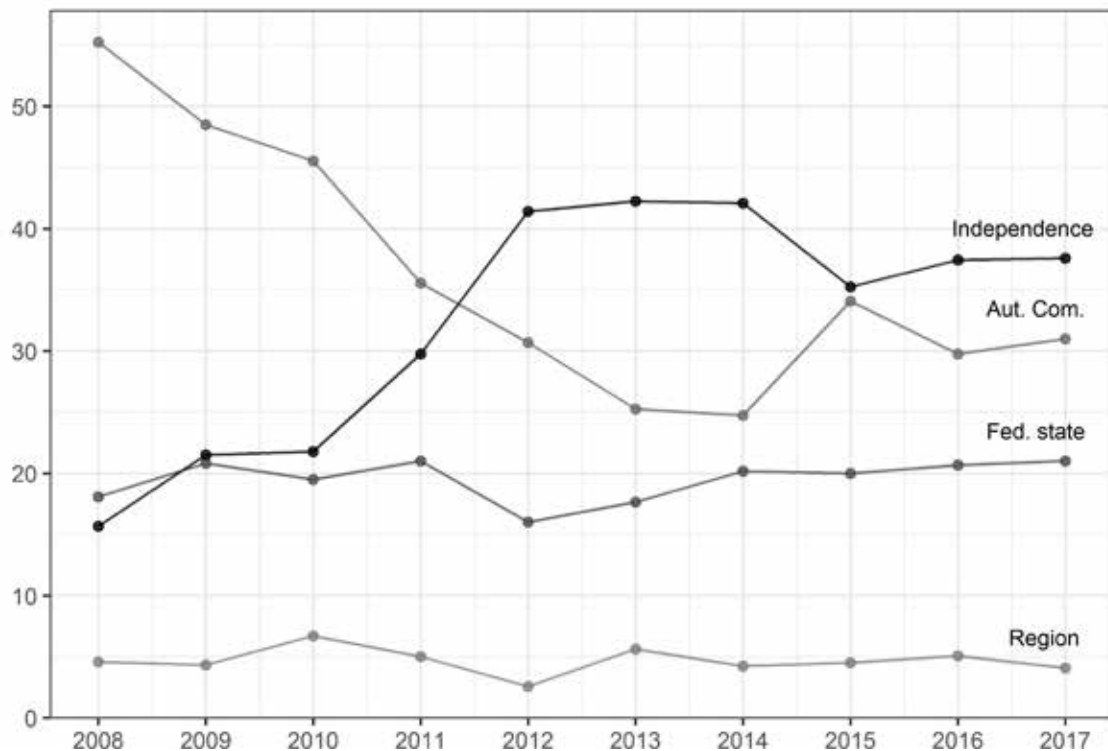
Source: ICPS yearly surveys. Response options are: 'an independent nation state', 'a state within a federal Spain', 'an autonomous community' (i.e., the current arrangement) and 'a region' (i.e., no devolved powers). DK/NA omitted.

The increase of secessionism is far from being equally spread among social groups. Prior to the procés, territorial preferences in Catalonia were already strongly related to voters' ethnonational identities (Guinjoan & Rodon 2014). Even if not immune to change over the life course, these identities, in turn, remain largely informed by 'descent-based attributes' (Chandra & Wilkinson 2008), primarily family origin and the language spoken at home (Conversi 1997; Chernyha & Burg 2012). Rather than eroding these alignments, the pro-independence boost appeared to accentuate existing discrepancies, further polarising territorial preferences along ethnolinguistic lines. Compared to 2008 levels, support for independence increased by nearly 40 per cent among native Catalans born to native parents, nearly 30 per cent among natives with only one parent born in the region, 16 per cent among first-generation Catalans (i.e. natives born to Spanish parents), and 4 per cent among those born in other regions of the country (see Figure 2). Yet, differences are more striking in terms of the language usually spoken at home. Although knowledge of Catalan in the region has notably spread over the last decades, Spanish remains the habitual language for approximately 50 per cent of the people, while Catalan is for 36 per cent. Comparing the evolution of territorial preferences across these two linguistic groups reveals that the rise in support for independence stems mostly from Catalan speakers. As shown in Figure 2, the proportion of Catalan-speaking voters espousing secession grew from 25 per cent in 2008 to nearly 70 per cent in 2017. Among Spanish-speaking voters, support for secession grew from 9 per cent in 2012 to up to 20 per cent in 2013 and then decreased; by 2017, it remained at just 15 per cent.

As noted, the role of structural factors is ultimately explained by virtue of their ability to shape national identities. The distribution of Catalan vs. Spanish identities has not experienced much change over the last decade, other than a modest rise in exclusive identification with Catalonia that seems to follow changes in citizens' territorial preferences, rather than preceding them (Tormos, Muñoz & Hierro 2015). In any case, national identity and territorial preferences have become increasingly aligned. As shown in Figure 2, support for independence has boosted among those who identify only with Catalonia—who already had secession as their preferred choice—and, particularly, among those who identify with Catalonia more than with Spain—whose support for secession climbed from a mere 17 per cent in 2008 to around 60 per cent since 2012. Meanwhile, support for independence among those who identify as predominantly Spanish or equally Spanish and Catalan remains rather limited throughout the last decade.

Apart from the primordial role of national identities, citizens' views on the status of Catalonia also appear to be closely tied to their partisan identities. Of course, the association cannot be interpreted solely on the basis of cue-taking processes: Not only may voters be affecting their party's positions, they also may be switching parties in line with their territorial preferences (Muñoz & Tormos 2015). With all caveats, the upsurge of secessionism has come with a heightened alignment between partisanship and preferences for independence. As shown in Figure 2, supporters of the Catalan nationalist parties have overwhelmingly gravitated towards independence, whereas the vast majority of supporters of other parties have eventually stood against it. Most remarkable is the

shift in preferences among CiU/PDECat sympathisers, whose support for secession has increased almost fourfold in less than a decade—from 22 per cent in 2008 to 80 per cent in 2017. The only nonnegligible reserve of pro-independence sentiment at the end of the period was found among ICV/Podem sympathisers.

FIGURE 2. SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENCE ACROSS ETHNIC AND PARTISAN GROUPS
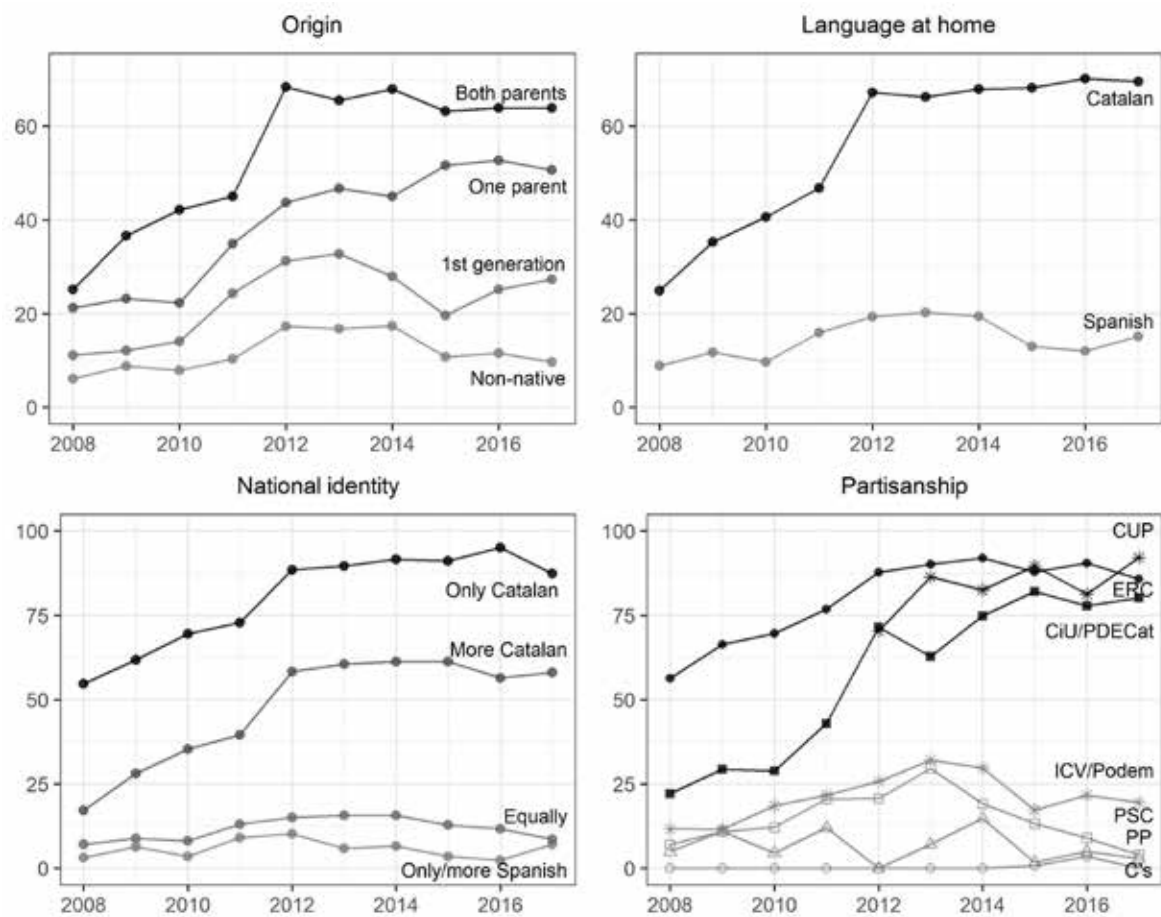
Note: Lines indicate the percentage of respondents within the category who have independence as their preferred arrangement for Catalonia. Origin: respondents born outside Spain are omitted. Language: respondents using both or other languages are omitted. Partisanship: the question asks respondents about the party they sympathise most with or feel closest to their ideas (ICV/Podem also includes IU/EUiA and CatEC; CiU/PDECat also includes CDC); sympathisers of other parties and independents are omitted.

Source: ICPS yearly surveys.

Two blocs with clearly distinct ethnic and partisan profiles have, thus, taken shape based on their stances on independence. These two blocs are far from being internally homogeneous on social or ideological grounds—although secessionists are more decidedly united around a common goal that appears to transcend any other political struggle over this period. Yet, the territorial debate has become so salient and divisive that any affair with even the slightest implication to it has been re-interpreted through its lens. As a result, preferences over secession have come to be increasingly influential for explaining citizens' political attitudes and behaviour on multiple domains. Figure 3 provides a snapshot from several selected indicators.

To begin with, vote choice is increasingly dependent on territorial preferences. This is most clearly seen in the share within each bloc that supports Catalan nationalist parties. According to ICPS data, up to 50 per cent of non-secessionists cast a vote for the nationalists in the 2010 regional elections. In the run-up to the 2017 elections, only 15 per cent of this group intended to do so. By contrast, support for nationalist parties among the pro-independence grew from 84 to 94 per cent over the same period. That is, whereas one group has reinforced its commitment to the Catalan nationalists, the other has been markedly pushed away from them.

Secondly, the conflict has also given rise to differentiated paths in terms of political engagement. As illustrated in Figure 3, since 2012, interest in politics has increased to a much larger extent among the pro-independence than among non-secessionists. Likewise, the bid for independence has strengthened the secessionists' attachment to political parties. The proportion feeling 'very close' to a party more than doubled with the 2012 elections and increased as high as 59 per cent in 2017, while the non-secessionists' figure remained below 20 per cent and only by the end of the period started to catch up. Relatedly, the gap in external political efficacy has also widened between the two groups. By placing the issue of independence at the top of the agenda, the Catalan government has substantively raised secessionists' perceived level of policy responsiveness. Moreover, the boost in efficacy registered at the closing of 2014, right after the first banned referendum, suggests that the pro-independence camp welcomed the turn towards unilateralism and confrontation.

Thirdly, the data also provide evidence of polarisation in attitudes towards key political institutions and the political system as a whole. Evaluations of the Catalan government have gradually diverged, decreasing abruptly among the non-secessionists while following an upward trend in the secessionist camp. The reversed pattern emerges also for non-partisan national institutions, as exemplified in Figure 3 by evaluations of the administration of justice. Still more remarkably, positions on independence have come to exert a dramatic influence on satisfaction with democracy. The proportion of secessionists saying they are 'not at all' satisfied with how democracy works in the country grew from 23 per cent in 2016 to 53 per cent in 2017, widening the gap with non-secessionists to an unprecedented mark of 31 points. The discontent of the pro-independence even appears to be spreading to their sentiment of European identity, as the percentage feeling close

FIGURE 3. THE POLARISATION OF ATTITUDES ALONG THE INDEPENDENCE ISSUE
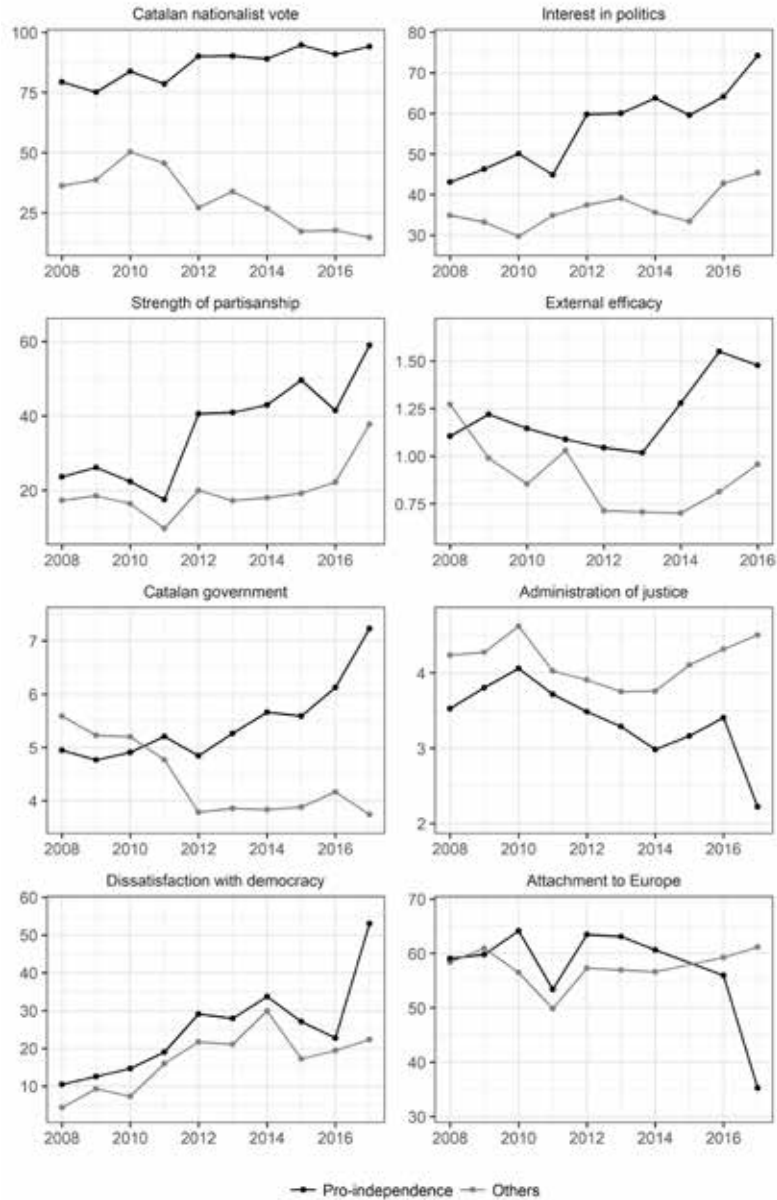
Note: Lines compare respondents that have independence as their preferred territorial arrangement for Catalonia (black) to all others (grey). Catalan nationalist vote: percentage reporting having voted (2010, 2012 and 2015) or intending to vote (all other years) for a Catalan nationalist party (CiU, ERC, CUP, SI, JxSí, PDECat, UDC). Interest in politics: percentage 'rather' or 'very' interested in politics. Strength of partisanship: percentage feeling 'very close' to any of the parties in parliament, based on individual questions about respondent's proximity to each of the parties. External efficacy: calculated as the number of statements, out of four, with which respondents disagree (e.g. 'Politicians don't care much what people like me think'); not included in 2017. Catalan government & Administration of justice: average evaluation on a 0-10 scale. Dissatisfaction with democracy: percentage 'not at all' satisfied with how democracy works. Attachment to Europe: percentage feeling 'rather' or 'very' close to Europe

Source: ICPS yearly surveys.

to Europe decreased by 21 points in 2017. In the latter cases, the true turning point occurred just after the declaration of independence, illustrating the catalysing effect of the October referendum and the ensuing events. Indeed, the recent evolution of these attitudinal indicators cannot be separated from the outcome of the secession attempt and the role of institutions therein—which have certainly mounted the sense of grievance on the part of secessionists. However, it also gives an idea of how far-reaching the polarisation can be brought about by the independence cleavage and its disruptive potential.

CONCLUSIONS

The late Peter Mair drew attention to the growing conflict between responsiveness and responsibility in today's democratic regimes, by which governments find it increasingly difficult to listen and respond to citizens' demands and concerns (Mair 2009). Mainstream political parties have become increasingly less effective in performing their representative role of aggregating and articulating collective preferences, whereas the room of manoeuvre of national executives has become increasingly more constrained by domestic constitutional obligations, independent agencies, supranational institutions and prior governments' policy commitments. By accepting those limits and acting responsibly, mainstream parties are becoming irresponsive to popular demands, thus paving the way for the rise of irresponsible politicians. There are obvious resemblances between this assessment and the Catalan independence challenge. Indeed, what might have originated from a situation of generalised public disaffection and party irresponsiveness resulted in years of sustained citizen political involvement and an ever-closer alignment between voters' demands and the actions of an increasingly adventurous elite. Just as the evolution of the Catalan nationalist government may be depicted as a crisis of representation turned into a crisis of responsibility, the response from Madrid may well be described as the shift from reckless oversight to overt repression. After disregarding the problem for years, Spanish authorities adopted the strategy of 'fighting fire with fire' (Rovira Kaltwasser 2017), portraying secessionist politicians as extremists and their supporters as fools. The violent repression of the referendum participants, the imposition of direct rule and the prosecution of Catalan nationalist leaders served only to strengthen secessionists' conviction that the Spanish state poses a threat to their national identity and to democracy itself.

In Catalonia, the independence issue has created a gulf between parties and polarised society to unprecedented levels in recent history. The dramatic events of October 2017, which will leave a lasting imprint on future generations, exacerbated division and entrenched positions, giving rise to a climate of political hostility, suspicion and resentment that will be hard to overcome. The procés signified the official conversion of mainstream Catalan nationalism to secessionism, and there are no signs that the firm commitment to independence by a large part of voters is going to recede any time soon. Yet, opposition to independence has remained barely unmoved since the challenge was raised in its current terms. The ever-stronger association between secessionism and ethnonational identities and their structural antecedents indicate that social division is likely to persist unless the terms of the debate are radically redefined.

Notes

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[1] ICPS annual surveys are administered face-to-face on samples of adult Catalan residents (Ns between 800 and 2,000). Detailed information can be found at https://www.icps.cat/recerca/sondeigs-i-dades/sondeigs/sondeigs-d-opinio-catalunya.

[2] Survey on Language Use 2013, key results available at http://llengua.gencat.cat/web/.content/documents/publicacions/altres/arxius/EULP2013_angles.pdf.

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APPENDIX: CHRONOLOGY OF THE INDEPENDENCE PROCESS

2012

Sep. 11. Massive rally organised by grassroots movements in Barcelona in support for the independence of Catalonia.

Sep. 20. After Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy rejects negotiating a new fiscal arrangement for Catalonia, regional President Artur Mas calls for a snap election with the main aim of holding a vote on independence.

Sep. 27. The Catalan Parliament passes a resolution claiming the need to "start a new stage based on the right to decide".

Nov. 25. Catalan regional elections.

Dec. 21. Artur Mas is elected President of the Catalan Government with the votes of ERC, who commits to support CiU's minority government.

2013

Jan. 23. The Catalan Parliament passes a resolution declaring "the sovereignty and the right to decide of Catalan people" with the support of the secessionist forces (CiU, ERC, CUP) and ICV.

Mar. 1. The Spanish Government decides to challenge the sovereignty resolution of the Catalan Parliament before the Constitutional Court.

Dec. 12. President Mas announces agreement among the secessionist forces and ICV to hold a referendum on independence on 9 November 2014.

2014

Jan. 16. The Catalan Parliament approves requesting the Spanish Parliament to authorise a vote on independence, with the votes of the secessionist forces, ICV and several rebel members of PSC.

Mar. 25. Based on the challenge brought by the Spanish government, the Constitutional Court declares the Catalan Parliament's resolution of 2013 declaring the sovereignty of the Catalan people unconstitutional but indicates that the right to decide may be promoted if done in accordance with constitutional mandates.

Apr. 8. The Spanish Parliament rejects request from Catalan parliament to hold an independence referendum.

May 25. European elections.

Jun. 2. King Juan Carlos announces he is abdicating in favour of his son, Felipe.

Jul. 25. Former Catalan President and founder of CDC, Jordi Pujol, acknowledges his family had hidden money abroad for more than three decades.

Sep. 19. The Catalan Parliament, with the only opposition of C's and PP, passes a Non-Referendum Popular Consultations Act that would allow for the calling of a non-binding vote on the independence.

Sep. 27. President Mas officially calls a vote on independence for 9 November.

Sep. 29. The Constitutional Court suspends the Consultations Act and the consultation call upon the Spanish government appeal.

Oct. 14. The Catalan Government announces the consultation scheduled for 9 November to be replaced with a non-binding vote organised by volunteers.

Nov. 4. The Constitutional Court suspends the alternative vote.

Nov. 9. The vote on independence is held despite the Constitutional Court suspension.

Nov. 21. Spanish attorney general's office takes legal action against President Mas and members of his government for disobedience and misuse of public funds, among other charges.

2015

Jan. 14. President Mas announces snap regional elections for 27 September.

Mar. 30. CiU and ERC agree on a roadmap to achieve the independence of Catalonia in 18 months if they win the "plebiscitary" election.

May 24. Local elections.

Jun. 17. UDC, minor partner of the incumbent coalition CiU, refuses to join a pro-independence electoral list and withdraws its members from the Catalan government.

Jul. 13. CDC and ERC announce an agreement to form a secessionist electoral coalition along with other secessionist parties and civil society leaders.

Sep. 27. Catalan regional elections.

Oct. 1. The Spanish Congress passes a controversial law conferring the Constitutional Court with executive powers to ensure the effective enforcement of its decisions.

Nov. 9. JxSí and CUP pass a parliamentary resolution expressing the will to unilaterally create an independent Catalan state and commanding the Catalan government to comply exclusively with the mandates of the Catalan parliament.

Dec. 2. The Constitutional Court declares the resolution unconstitutional.

Dec. 20. General elections.

2016

Jan. 10. The Catalan Parliament elects Carles Puigdemont as head of the Catalan government, after Artur Mas failed to get the support of CUP.

Jun. 8. President Puigdemont announces he will ask parliament for a vote of confidence after CUP refuses to endorse the regional budget.

Jun. 26. General elections.

Jul. 10. PDECat is founded as successor of CDC.

Sep. 29. President Puigdemont passes the vote of confidence while committing to hold an independence referendum, in agreement with the Spanish State or unilaterally within a year.

Oct. 1. Pedro Sánchez resigns as leader of PSOE.

Oct. 25. The Catalonia's High Court of Justice indicts Carme Forcadell, speaker of the Catalan parliament, for disobeying the Constitutional Court after allowing a parliamentary vote on the process of independence.

Oct. 29. Mariano Rajoy is elected head of the Spanish government as PSOE chooses to abstain in the vote.

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Jan. 27. Former judge Santi Vidal resigns as senator for ERC after his statements about alleged illegalities being committed by the regional government are revealed. The case is shortly put under court investigation.

Mar. 13. The Catalonia's High Court of Justice bans former President Mas and other members of his government from holding public office over the 9N vote.

May 21. Pedro Sánchez is re-elected as leader of PSOE.

Jul. 14. President Puigdemont reshuffles his cabinet following doubts of some of its members about the celebration of the referendum.

Aug. 17. Terrorist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils.

Aug. 26. Anti-terrorist march in Barcelona where hundreds boo Spanish authorities and King Felipe, who joins a demonstration for first time since the restoration of monarchy.

Sep. 6-7. The Catalan Parliament passes the Catalan Self-Determination Referendum Act, which calls for the independence vote on 1 October, and the Legal Transition and Foundational Act. Both are suspended shortly after by the Constitutional Court.

Sep. 13. The Constitutional Court uses for the first time its new executive powers to impose fines on the electoral board created by the Referendum Act, forcing its members to resign.

Sep. 15. The Spanish government approves the intervention of the Catalan government's finances to ensure that public money is not used to fund the referendum.

Sep. 20. ´Spanish police search regional government premises and arrest 14 officials on charges related to the organisation of the banned referendum, as thousands gather in the streets to protest.

Sep. 22. The Spanish government deploys thousands of police officers in Catalonia to halt the banned referendum, while the regional police force is put under central control.

Sep. 27. Catalonia's High Court judge orders police forces to prevent the opening of voting centres on referendum day.

Oct. 1. Referendum of independence is held in most parts of the region despite the Constitutional Court ban and police efforts to block the vote.

Oct. 3. Regional lockout in protest over police violence on the referendum day. King Felipe delivers television speech accusing Catalonia's authorities of attempting to break the constitutional order.

Oct. 4. Major Catalan banks announce their decision to move their domicile elsewhere in Spain; hundreds of companies will relocate during the following weeks.

Oct. 8. Massive anti-independence rally in Barcelona, organised by Societat Civil Catalana.

Oct. 10. President Puigdemont declares independence before Parliament to immediately suspend its effects awaiting negotiations with the Spanish Government.

Oct. 11. Prime Minister Rajoy formally requests the Catalan Government to clarify whether it has declared independence.

Oct. 16. Spain's National Court orders the leaders of the grassroots organisations Catalan National Assembly, Jordi Sánchez, and Òmnium Cultural, Jordi Cuixart, to be jailed without bail pending trial on charges of sedition.

Oct. 21. Unsatisfied with the Catalan Government ambiguous response to requests on the declaration of independence, Prime Minister Rajoy invokes article 155 of the Constitution to suspend the region's autonomy pending Senate approval the following week.

Oct. 27. Catalan Parliament declares independence. Spanish Senate approves the Spanish Government's request to impose direct rule under article 155. Prime Minister Rajoy dismisses the Catalan Government, dissolves the regional parliament and calls regional elections to be held on Dec. 21.

Oct. 30. Spanish attorney general announces for charges to be brought against Puigdemont and other members of the dismissed regional government. Puigdemont and several of his deposed ministers turn up in Brussels, say will not return to Spain unless they receive guarantees of a fair trial.

Nov. 2. Spain's National Court orders former Vice-President Oriol Junqueras and seven other members of the deposed Catalan government to be jailed pending charges of sedition, rebellion and misuse of public funds.

Dec. 4. ´Spain's Supreme Court judge grants bail to six of the members of the deposed Catalan government but rules that former Vice-President, Oriol Junqueras, and former Minister of the Interior, Joaquim Forn, should remain in custody.

Dec. 21.
Catalan regional elections.

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