

Sample Article: In Spain, Implications of Catalan Elections Summary



David Ramos/Getty Images

A supporter of the Catalan Convergence and Union party on Nov. 25 Elections held Nov. 25 in Catalonia showed that the pro-independence movement in the autonomous region is strong but complex and contradictory. Although the ruling Convergence and Union party won the elections, it now controls just 50 of 135 seats -- 12 fewer than in 2010. The emergence of a weaker Catalan government will exacerbate political tensions across Spain, likely hindering Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's attempts to combat the country's economic crisis. Moreover, disagreements among Catalan separatist parties will complicate negotiations for a possible referendum on independence, which is unlikely to occur in the medium term.

Analysis

In calling for the early elections, Catalonian President Artur Mas hoped to obtain a political majority that would allow his Convergence and Union party to organize a referendum on the independence of Catalonia. However, austerity measures implemented in 2012 by the Catalan government were similar to those applied by the central government in Madrid, and the voters expressed their discontent with them and punished the ruling party at the Nov. 25 polls.

Catalans leaned instead toward a mix of left-wing parties that support secession but reject austerity. The biggest winner of the election was the Republican Left, the oldest Catalan pro-independence party, which jumped from 10 to 21 seats. The Catalonia Greens-United and Alternative Left, a left-wing pro-referendum coalition, also made gains, from 10 to 13 seats. Notably, the Popular Unity Candidacy, a pro-independence and anti-capitalist party, will debut in the regional parliament after winning three seats; the party previously was represented only at the municipal level.

A Strong but Divided Movement

The elections highlighted several trends, the most notable of which was that secessionist sentiment remains strong and steady in Catalonia. The region's four pro-independence parties collectively control 87 seats in the 135-seat Catalonian parliament, one more than they did after the 2010 vote. However, the weakening of the Convergence and Union party has changed the balance of power within the pro-independence movement. Across Spain, moderate pro-European parties have been losing support -- a trend reflected in other European countries, including Italy and Greece, where left-leaning and anti-system parties have gained momentum. Convergence and Union, for example, had a strong pro-European agenda, promising that an independent Catalonia would remain within the European Union and the eurozone. But with Catalonians feeling the effects of the austerity measures requested by Brussels and applied by Madrid and Catalonia, support for the ruling party has waned.

In contrast, the Republican Left has also pledged to remain within the European Union, while strongly criticizing the austerity measures. The Catalonia Greens-United and Alternative Left, in turn, identifies with SYRIZA -- the party that strongly opposes the austerity measures in Greece. Despite broad similarities, Catalonia's pro-independence parties lack a shared vision about the conditions under which an independent Catalonia would be established. Thus, negotiations over a

referendum will likely be tortuous.

Possibilities and Constraints

While the parties discuss if and when they should call for a referendum, several developments can be expected. Artur Mas will continue to lead Catalonia, but he will be forced to seek an alliance with smaller parties to form a government. Such a partnership would be very delicate, since the other secessionist parties oppose austerity measures and will likely push the regional president to reject the measures designed by Madrid. Compliance with these demands, however, would add to Catalonia's financial problems. Catalonia is Spain's wealthiest region, but it is also the most indebted -- it asked Madrid for a bailout in August. Despite its separatist rhetoric, Catalonia cannot afford to sever ties with Madrid completely.

Even if the Catalan political parties reach an agreement concerning the referendum, the subsequent legal process of pursuing independence would be long and complicated. The Spanish constitution forbids secession by autonomous regions, so an independence referendum would be considered illegal. Catalonia could instead call for a non-binding referendum with hopes of gaining political leverage in its push for formal negotiations with Madrid. But this too could be declared illegal. Catalonia will likely seek political support for its cause from elsewhere in Europe, but the region is unlikely to find it. The European Commission supports Madrid and has stated that an independent Catalonia would not automatically be admitted into the European Union. This worries the Catalan economic elite, who fear that independence would limit their access to markets in Spain and the rest of Europe.

VIDEO: Spain's Geographic Challenge The political situation in Catalonia could harm the Spanish central government, which has been struggling to reduce the country's deficit and the debts of autonomous regions. The formation of an unstable government in Catalonia will make it more difficult for Madrid to negotiate budgetary goals with the region. Even if Catalonia does not call for a referendum, the region will still be a source of political and economic tension in Spain. In 2013, Madrid will be saddled with the consequences of the region's political instability while seeking to calm international markets and negotiate budgetary goals with the European Union. This will complicate Madrid's efforts to address Spain's economic crisis as the government is forced instead to devote energy to soothing political instability at home.