

# Catalan elections of December 21: pre (and post) electoral anxiety

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**1.** The political importance of the Catalan elections of December 21 (21D) and the polarization which underlies it, coexists with an electoral campaign that seems an epilogue halfway through the acceleration experienced in the days of September and October. An epilogue that, in reality, is also a decisive preamble to a stage to come. Three great riddles will be resolved at the polls: the absolute and relative strength of each of the two major blocs in conflict (the pro-independence bloc and the defenders of Article 155); the internal leadership on both sides; and the degree of strength or weakness, in terms of absolute support and arithmetical relevance in the Parliament, of the self-postulated third space, represented by Catalunya en Comú-Podem. It is impossible, in any case, to make any prognosis, beyond the data offered by the surveys that, in these times, are not only an instrument to gauge popular opinion but also to shape it. The future of Catalan politics, of the independence movement and of the left, whether pro-independence or not, will depend on what happens on 21D. Until then, the specific challenges for all cannot be specified in detail. However, the balance sheet of what happened in September and October already allows us to point out some inescapable substantive issues.

**2.** In the elections the future is at stake, but before some unclear roadmaps (except on the misnamed “constitutionalist” side), it is likely that the result will be largely resolved based on the balance sheet that the electorate makes of the recent past and of the five years of the independence process. That is to say, of the capacity of each of the electoral options to offer a narrative and a coherent interpretative frame of what has happened and the point at which we are. The reality is that all the hypotheses of political change (also conceived as a lever for a social transformation) that galvanized the political imagination of a large part of Catalan society come into this election in an open strategic crisis. Neither the state-wide majority for change (Catalunya en Comú-Podem), nor the panacea of easy independence (ERC and PDCAT), nor being the honest and combative guarantor that the break with the state will go all the way (CUP), are now credible as plausible and concrete projects of realization. Although they work as legitimate proposals for affirming a political-social space of their own and as a long-term hypothesis.

**3.** From 2011 and 2012, two great stories and proposals for the future have coexisted in Catalan society. The first, the horizon marked by 15M and its political derivatives, Podem and Catalunya en Comú. The second, the independence movement. Both were successful in articulating two projects of defined change and perceived as easy and painless: a new majority in the Spanish state and the independence of Catalonia, respectively. But both hypotheses have collapsed, at least temporarily, and need a second breath to hit back. On the one hand, the possibility of a new government bloc at the Spanish state level, anti-austerity and defending an agreed referendum in Catalonia, has disappeared for now from the map. There is no short-term vision, neither in its original version (a majority around Unidos Podemos), nor in its caricatural reformulation adopted by Podemos since the summer of 2016 (an alliance between the PSOE of Sánchez and Unidos Podemos). In this sense, the “key” to unblocking the situation alluded to by spokespersons for Catalunya en Comú-Podem seems more the affirmation of a pretence than a positive capacity. If at the right moment the Comunes, instead of passively betting on the independence movement having crashed, had adopted an active and offensive policy in favour of a constitutional rupture linked with a social emergency plan, it is

probable that today they would not be so sandwiched in a debate in which they have always been uneasy. Meanwhile, the hypothesis of quiet independence, as a result of a slow citizens' mobilization, of the civic exercise of the right to vote, of the transition from one legality to another and of progressive disconnection from the Spanish state, was abruptly denied. The strategic horizon (really that of placid independence or that of the search for a negotiation with the Spanish state through citizen mobilization), and the public narrative of PDCAT, ERC and the ANC have broken down. And the CUP's policy of sustaining the process by pushing it to the end, was also weakened, since there is no longer a mainstream independence bloc with a crystalline road map to press for compliance. At the same time, the insufficiencies shown by the ruling pro-independence bloc highlight the limits of the CUP's policy of playing exclusively within the process and lacking a strategy directed at (the social base of) the non-independentista left.

**4.** The possibility of making a horizon of democratic political change plausible depends on two different but partly interrelated dynamics: the ability of the independence movement to redefine itself and reorient towards a "constituent" and "anti-austerity" turn and the capacity of the left, whether pro-independence or not, to play an important role in the new scenario, causing a shift in the centre of gravity of Catalan politics. Although collective balance sheets are for the moment conspicuous only in their absence, the challenges are there. For the independence flank, two old issues are now inescapable: expanding their influence in Catalonia and making alliances in the rest of the Spanish state. This can only be done through two combined processes that would imply burying the foundational paradigm of the movement, "first independence and then everything else", reformulating its strategic objectives, and displacing the PDCAT (and Puigdemont's new list, Junts x Catalunya) from the centre of the government of the Generalitat: linking the independence agenda to anti-austerity policies and defending a constituent process compatible with a separatist and confederal destiny. Catalunya en Comú-Podem, for its part, urgently needs to recover its constituent and pro-rupture drive, to have a Catalan agenda that is not subordinated to statewide vicissitudes, and to become a force with social roots and an activist culture, which would involve retracing a large part of what has been done in the path of rapid and dizzying institutionalization that the Comunes have gone through in their short existence.

**5.** Deep strategic reformulations don't mix very well with the immediacy of electoral politics and with the illusions and longings of an immediate political and social transformation, and it is necessary to recognize that it does not seem that neither independentism in its plurality nor the Comunes go in the direction stated here. But, a clear challenge for all is on the table, whether or not it is taken up: to avoid the triple danger of locking in an illusory proposal of imaginary change, of entrenching in a purely resistance-based approach or of accommodating to the narrow institutional framework of the possible. A successful completion of this triple dribble would open the door to tracing a path and an offensive-defensive strategy, short-long, unilateral-bilateral, national-social, democratizing, constituent and anti-austerity. Difficult? Undoubtedly. But in the history of popular movements it is frequently the case that the arduous is also the necessary.

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