

A tale of changing destinies: Why the Catalans are pushing for independence rather than the Basques



While all eyes are currently on Catalonia, it was the Basque Country that first sought a degree of sovereignty from Spain over a decade ago, when then Basque President, Juan José Ibarretxe, proposed redefining the Basque relationship with Spain as one of 'free association'. But why did Madrid's refusal of Ibarretxe's proposals result in a return to moderation, whereas deposed Catalan President Carles Puigdemont and his allies decided to defy Madrid and proceed with their plans?

[**Caroline Gray**](#) explains the different responses.



Palace of Ajuria Enea, the official residence of the Lehendakari (President of the Government) of the Basque Country,
Credit: [Basotxerri \(CC BY-SA 4.0\)](#)

Traditionally, it is the Basques who have shown more inclination to seek sovereignty and fundamental constitutional change than the Catalans. The mainstream Catalan nationalist party did not explicitly shift towards a pro-sovereignty agenda until 2012, following tentative developments in this direction from around 2008. Why is it, then, that a strong independence movement has ended up developing in Catalonia rather than the Basque Country?

For decades, the Catalan nationalists' behaviour suggested they felt able to realise their ambitions via accommodationist tactics. This involved making gradual decentralisation gains within existing legal and political frameworks and by working with Spanish political actors. Not only that, but they clearly wanted Catalonia to play a leading role in Spain, in contrast to the Basque nationalists, who were not interested in engaging with wider Spain beyond the bare necessities.

Not surprisingly, it was the Basque nationalists who first devised a pro-sovereignty agenda. This took the form of the '[Ibarretxe Plan](#)', thus named after the Basque regional president at the time, Juan José Ibarretxe, which was first presented in 2003. The Plan proposed a revised autonomy statute which would have redefined the Basque relationship with Spain as one of '[free association](#)' and opened the door to a self-determination referendum.

The proposal was essentially for a confederal solution rather than full independence, but it would have left the Basque Country with a much looser connection to Spain, going well beyond its already extensive fiscal and policy competences to reconceptualise the region as a nation on an equal footing to the Spanish one and to establish a bilateral relationship of equals sharing sovereignty between them. Importantly, under this proposal, the Basques would also have had their own representation in the EU.

The Plan, having been approved (albeit only just) in the Basque parliament in 2004, was then resoundingly rejected by the Spanish parliament as unconstitutional, for the same reasons that Madrid has consistently rejected Catalan attempts to hold a referendum. Under the Spanish Constitution, Spain is one indissoluble nation and sovereignty lies with all the Spanish people, making self-determination in one part of the territory impossible.

Ibarretxe then tried a different tack, proposing the holding of an official vote in the Basque region to ask citizens whether Basque parties should initiate negotiations to reach an agreement on exercising the 'right to decide' of the Basque people – subject to ETA definitively renouncing violence beforehand. The Basque parliament approved a Consultation Law to this effect in 2008, but once again it was rejected, this time by the Constitutional Court.

Basque and Catalan responses

While Madrid's response to Basque and Catalan attempts to seek sovereignty has been one of defiant rejection in both cases, it is interesting that Basque and Catalan nationalist political agendas have evolved in different ways in consequence. In the Basque Country, politicians kept within the parameters of Spanish law at all times and the failure of Ibarretxe's proposals eventually resulted in a return to a more moderate agenda under current Basque regional president Iñigo Urkullu, Ibarretxe's successor at the helm of the Basque Nationalist Party. In contrast, deposed Catalan president Carles Puigdemont and his team decided to defy Madrid, hold an illegal referendum and proclaim independence anyway, for which they now face legal action.

What explains these differences? Several contributing factors can be identified, including: 1) much higher civil society mobilisation in Catalonia than in the Basque Country; 2) the history of terrorism in the Basque Country but not in Catalonia; 3) the different levels of fiscal devolution in the two regions; and 4) the different political relationships and alliances that the traditional Basque and Catalan nationalist parties have had with other parties in their regions.

Different levels of mobilisation

First and foremost, the existence of highly mobilised pro-independence civil society groups in Catalonia, but not in the Basque Country, explains a lot. When Ibarretxe returned from Madrid following the Spanish parliament's defiant 'no', he called early elections in April 2005 expecting a strong victory. Instead, the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) suffered [electoral decline](#), winning again, but with fewer seats than before.

By then, there was widespread feeling even within the PNV itself that the timing had not been right and the plan had been too divisive, for it was pushed through parliament with a narrow majority consisting of the PNV's votes and those of three politicians from the radical secessionist party Batasuna, which had still not managed to sever links with Basque terrorist group ETA. In 2009, the PNV then [lost power](#) in the Basque region for the first (and so far only) time despite winning the most seats, since a highly unusual coalition between the conservatives and the socialists forced it into opposition, upon which Ibarretxe retired from political life.

PNV politicians I have interviewed are the first to admit that they feel Ibarretxe's attempts were too heavily party-led without sufficient backing from society, a mistake for which the party ultimately suffered. Nowadays, they are reluctant to take any similar projects forward without the backing of not only the Basque radical secessionist left (grouped together under the coalition EH Bildu) but also the Basque Socialists, a federation of the Spanish Socialist party. They wish to secure cross-party support which spans the nationalist-statewide divide, as well as sufficiently clear support from society, neither of which are currently forthcoming.

This is in stark contrast to the situation in Catalonia. There, despite the parliamentary majority held by the pro-independence forces being equally fragile, pro-independence civil society groups – particularly the Catalan National Assembly and Òmnium Cultural – have been very [heavily mobilised](#) and have at times ended up appearing to force the hand of politicians.

Catalan society is divided and [polls](#) have usually shown in recent years that, despite the rise in pro-independence sentiment, those against independence remain in the majority (though Madrid's recent heavy-handedness could yet tip the balance). This notwithstanding, given the extent of citizen mobilisation, the mainstream Catalan nationalist party, then led by Artur Mas, felt it had little option but to [ride the wave](#) and turn in favour of self-determination and then independence, after Madrid had once again refused devolving further fiscal powers to the region back in 2012. Otherwise, it risked becoming irrelevant.

Different histories

So why are the Catalans so mobilised but not the Basques? The different histories of the two regions are undoubtedly a contributing factor. For many Basques, the history of terrorist violence is all too recent – ETA only finally declared a [permanent ceasefire](#) in 2011 – and they are simply not interested in risking reigniting divisions.

Moreover, a lot of Basques are simply quite comfortable with the status quo and realise they've got a pretty good deal in Spain. Like everywhere, the Basque region has suffered in the aftermath of the financial crisis, but in comparative terms, it has fared better than most other Spanish regions. This is in part because construction was not a major sector in the Basque region, so it was not hit by the property crash that badly afflicted Spain elsewhere. Even more importantly, the system of fiscal autonomy in the region – named the [Basque Economic Agreement](#) – affords it far more resources per capita than what comparably wealthy regions (like Catalonia) get under the common financing system, due in part to the heavily redistributive nature of the latter system.

Securing a new status for the Basque Country has therefore not been an immediate priority in recent years for many within Basque society, nor indeed for many within the PNV itself. The Basque government has been concerned first and foremost with addressing the consequences of the financial crisis, for this is their responsibility and theirs alone. The fiscal autonomy model puts the onus on the Basque authorities to collect taxes, which means they cannot look to the Spanish government for additional financing or blame it for the region's financial woes – in contrast to what has happened in Catalonia.

Different political alliances

Last but not least, the question of different political alliances in the Basque and Catalan regions also explains a lot. In Catalonia, the centre-right Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (CDC/Convergència) party – now rebranded as the Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT) – and the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) reached a decision prior to the 2015 Catalan elections to subordinate their differences over left-right politics to their common position on territorial politics. Thus they combined forces on a joint platform and a [single electoral list](#) (Junts pel Sí – “Together for Yes”) to seek independence for Catalonia at the regional elections on 27 September 2015, following which they would also rely on support from the anti-capitalist CUP party to give the pro-independence parties a majority in the Catalan parliament.

Despite the somewhat tenuous unity between parties of radically different left-right orientation, an alliance of sorts has been possible, though it has resulted in Convergència, the once leading nationalist party, being overtaken in popularity by parties of left-wing inclination. Recent polls show very clearly that ERC would now win more votes if the parties ran separately.

This is the Basque Nationalist Party's idea of an absolute nightmare. It has looked on in horror as the once moderate centre-right nationalist party Convergència has been overtaken in popularity by left-wing pro-independence alternatives, and it has no desire to risk the same fate in the Basque Country. The PNV did briefly flirt with an alliance with left-wing secessionist forces back in the late 1990s when it signed the Lizarra Pact with them, but this was short-lived (since ETA broke its ceasefire on which the Pact depended), and the PNV has shown little inclination to become close bedfellows again with the radical secessionist left ever since. Far from seeking collaboration, the two forces are in competition with one another to lead the process of securing a new relationship for the Basque Country with Spain.

There is also another important reason why Convergència has ended up in a close alliance with pro-independence parties while the PNV has not. Convergència traditionally allied with the right-wing, centralist People's Party (PP) – which governs Spain – in Catalonia when it had a minority of seats and needed some extra support, as well as supporting the PP in Madrid. Such relationships ultimately proved too cosy for Catalan voters' liking, pushing many to switch to left-wing pro-independence alternatives, and making it untenable for Convergència to continue allying with the Spanish right. In contrast, the PNV's preferred ally in the Basque parliament (be it through formal coalitions or more informal parliamentary support arrangements) has almost always been, and continues to be, the Basque Socialist party – a much more palatable option to PNV voters.

Sights still set on sovereignty

Under Iñigo Urkullu, the PNV thus appears to have returned to a path of moderation, and the once similar Basque and Catalan nationalist parties are now following fundamentally different trajectories.

It is however important to note that accommodationist and pro-sovereignty politics are not necessarily entirely mutually exclusive. The Basque nationalists are still seeking to work more gradually towards a new political relationship with Madrid involving the possibility of self-determination and co-sovereignty. Indeed, the PNV sees its fiscal autonomy model, which is governed by bilateral relations between the Basque and Spanish governments under which both sides have equal veto power, as a prototype of the kind of '[bilateral relationship between equals](#)' that it seeks to achieve in wider Spanish-Basque political relations.

Catalonia may be at the forefront of everyone's attention right now, but the Basque nationalists still intend to take gradual steps themselves towards some form of shared sovereignty with Spain – even if not full independence – via slower, incremental change. Spain thus undeniably still faces territorial challenges in more than one corner.

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About the author



Caroline Gray – Aston University

Caroline Gray is a Lecturer in Politics and Spanish at Aston University in Birmingham. She is the author of [Nationalist Politics and Regional Financing Systems in the Basque Country and Catalonia](#) (Bilbao, 2016) and co-editor of [Contesting Spain? The Dynamics of Nationalist Movements in Catalonia and the Basque Country](#) (Routledge, 2015).