

TOWARDS A NEW CATALAN PARTY SYSTEM

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In the last few years the political preferences of the Catalan society have experienced intense and continuous changes. Large popular demonstrations and the results of many different polls are the evidence of such changes. Increasing spread over the population of the desire for an independent state has become the main issue of political debates. Political parties have been forced to adapt their positions on the political arena to the new preferences of the society. The party system, that had been a stable system for over two decades, is bound to give rise to a new party constellation.

The Catalan political debate has always been spread over two policy dimensions: the economic dimension and the sovereignty dimension. The economic dimension is considered to represent the main, and sometimes unique, issue of the political debates in many countries. On this dimension policy positions are defined as rightist or leftist depending on the amount of government intervention in the economy. The sovereignty dimension is specific of countries with different levels of government (central, regional, municipal, etc...). On this dimension policy positions are defined according to the degree of decentralization of decision power among the different levels of government. Policy positions on the sovereignty issue range from full centralization (concentration of all the decision power on a unique level of government) to full decentralization (allocation of all the decision power to each one of the regional governments).

Until the first decade of the twenty first century political preferences of the Catalan society on the economic dimension covered most of its range: from extreme right to extreme left. However on the sovereignty dimension political preferences were rather moderate. There were claims for different degrees of decentralization but on the extremes these claims were very weak: demands for policies close to full centralization or to full independence were supported by a very small part of the population. Accordingly, the chosen policy positions of the political parties over these two issues were moderate on the sovereignty issue and covered the full range of policies on the economic issue.

Over the first decade of the democratic period (1980-1990), the Catalan party system was taking shape and during the following two decades (1990-2010) it appears as a stable system that contained five political parties. *Convergència i Unió* (CIU), a Catalan center-right coalition that stood for increasing decentralization had the largest electoral support. *Partit Socialista de Catalunya* (PSC), a Catalan center-left party with different decentralization claims over time had the second largest electoral support. Two other parties had smaller electoral supports, but they play significant roles in the governing coalitions that formed during the period: a Spanish rightist and centralist party, *Partido Popular* (PP) and a Catalan leftist and independentist party, *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC). Finally,

Iniciativa per Catalunya-Verds (ICV) a leftist green party that mildly stood for decentralization had the smallest electoral support.

Given the size of ICV in the parliament, its relevance to build governing coalitions was so small that basically its only chance was to join forces with its closest ideological neighbor, PSC. If we assume that PSC and ICV will always form a *de facto* coalition, the possible governing coalitions in this environment were characterized by two possible scenarios: a dominant party scenario and a dominated party scenario.

If the number of seats won by CIU (the party with the largest electoral support) was large enough and such that CIU could form a majoritarian coalition with any other party, then we can say that CIU held a dominant position: CIU could indeed choose any partner to form government. In this case, given CIU ideological affinities the reasonable prediction for a governing coalition would be either with ERC or with PP.

Otherwise, if CIU could not form a majoritarian coalition with at least one of the other parties, then the party with the smallest support could not be part of any two party majoritarian coalition. In this case we can say that this party held a dominated position. In the case we are analyzing the role of the dominated party could either be played by PP or by ERC. In the dominated party scenario the second smallest party is the one that has the best chances to form government: this party can form a majoritarian coalition with any of its ideological neighbors. If ERC was the dominated party reasonable predictions for governing coalitions would be PP and CIU or PP and PSC+ICV. Similarly if PP was the dominated party reasonable predictions for governing coalitions would be ERC and CIU or ERC and PSC+ICV.

Given the features of the party system described above, the possibilities of majoritarian coalitions involve all kinds of cross ideological agreements among parties on both issues. However, the governments that actually formed during this period (1990-2010) were defined by the parties' position on the economic issue. Some of these governments were minority governments supported by external parties, some were governments with absolute majority, and others were proper coalition governments. But on the ideological front we only observe two kinds of governments: those supported by rightist parties (CIU and PP) and those supported by leftist parties (PSC, ERC, and ICV). There was never a government formed or supported by parties that shared the same political views on the sovereignty issue.

(Figure 1 about here)

This observation leads us to conclude that it was more costly for political parties to compromise their positions on the economic issue than on the sovereignty issue. They were willing to give up their ideological views on decentralization in order to become part of the governing coalition. This seemed to apply to all parties: rightist, leftist, centralist, independentist, ... This fact could be explained either by a lower relative ideological cost of the parties' position on the sovereignty issue or because of electoral reasons: voters exhibited a lower preference intensity on the

sovereignty issue and this implied a lower relative electoral cost for the parties that compromise their positions on the sovereignty issue. Be it as it may, the implication of this observation is that the salience of the sovereignty issue was clearly dominated by the salience of the economic issue during this first period.

The numerous grassroots movements that have taken place repeatedly in the last few years and the results of the recent polls are the signs that the stability that this party system has exhibited for over twenty years cannot survive. Recent events have shown that the political preferences of the Catalan society have changed. In particular, increasing support for a position of full independence in numbers and in intensity of preferences is an obvious result in all recent polls. This fact implies that the relevant policy space that parties should cover has been enlarged: now it contains extreme decentralization positions that are supported by increasing number of voters. The same events show that the intensity of voters' preferences for extreme policy positions on the sovereignty issue has also increased. Thus the relative salience of the two issues has changed dramatically with the sovereignty issue becoming much more salient than the economic issue.

At the same time three new parties have entered the political area. Ciutadans-Ciudadanos (C) claims no position on the economic issue but a strong position on the sovereignty issue for extreme centralization. Candidatura d'Unitat Popular (CUP) has a strong independentist and leftist position. And more recently, Podemos (P) holding a strong centralist leftist position has broken in with great success in the latest European elections.

Parties policy positions have had to adapt to the new political environment. It is interesting to notice how different parties have used very different strategies to deal with the new preferences of the constituency. On the one hand, we observe that a few parties have adapted in a very easy and natural way. C has not moved from his initial position of extreme centralization, PP has moved slightly its position from moderate to more extreme claims of centralization, in order to defend its constituency from the emerging party C. ERC has moved its position from moderate claims of decentralization to claim full independence. This is an easy move since this party platform had always contained desires of full independence. However, other parties have had a harder time to adapt to the new environment. PSC has suffered severe internal party tensions that have driven it to break into several small factions that became new small parties holding leftist-independentist positions and a larger faction holding a leftist-centralist position. The strategy chosen by ICV on the sovereignty issue has been of full ambiguity: they have openly declared that the party defended no position on this issue. Finally, CIU has solved its internal tensions using two of its leaders to deliver two different claims: one that calls for full independence and another one that maintains its initial moderate decentralization position. This strategy was of easy implementation because CIU is in fact a long lasting coalition of two different parties: *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* and *Unió Democràtica de Catalunya*. In this case, each one of the parties of the coalition held a different position on the sovereignty issue.

(Figure 2 about here)

It is obvious, that the current scenario is different from the stable party system described above for the period 1990-2010. Notice that the number of parties with possibility of relevant roles has basically doubled. From their newly chosen positions we observe strong competition on the extreme centralization axis: C and PP are competing for the rightist votes, and ICV, P and PSC are competing for the leftist votes. We also observe strong competition on the leftist axis. Here CUP, ERC, ICV and the independentist factions of PSC are competing for the independentist votes, and ICV, PSC, and P are competing for the centralist votes. Things are much calmer on the rightist axis: CIU's support has been decreasing recently, but it is still much larger than its main opponent PP. Finally, on the independentist axis is where we find the two parties with the largest expected support, CIU and ERC, besides some smaller parties. This implies that the outcome of the competition on this axis will be determinant for the overall electoral outcome.

It is clear that the current scenario is only the reflection of a transitional period that will lead to a new party system that is bound to be stable in the coming years. It is difficult to foresee the features of this new party system. The results of the polls are not helpful in times of big changes in the voters' political preferences, and we had a very clear evidence of that during the last Catalan electoral campaign of 2012. Thus, only the results from the coming elections will help us to guess the shape of the new party system. However, there are some claims that one can entertain from the previous analysis.

Due to the strong competition that will have to suffer the extreme centralist parties, some of them may not survive or may become irrelevant coalition wise in the new party system. It is reasonable to expect that at most a rightist and a leftist party will remain on this axis.

Since the largest stakes are expected from the competition on the independentist axis, it is reasonable to think that the small independentist parties that have appeared from the PSC factions will have incentives to unite with the larger moderate leftist option ERC.

Given the small initial size of ICV and the amount of alternatives available to voters that are its close substitutes, the strategy chosen by ICV of not taking a position on the hottest electoral issue is bound to be a losing strategy, that may drive ICV out of the new party system.

These initial predictions seem to lead to a party system that resembles very much the original one. In fact, if after the transition period the policy space maintains its two dimensions, it seems reasonable to think that this will be the case because political stability in two dimensions requires that kind of party constellation.

However, if the pro-independence movement succeeds, then the Catalan political debate may lose one of its until now typical dimensions and the policy space may be reduced to the economic dimension. In this case, the number of parties that will become insignificant coalition wise will be even larger.

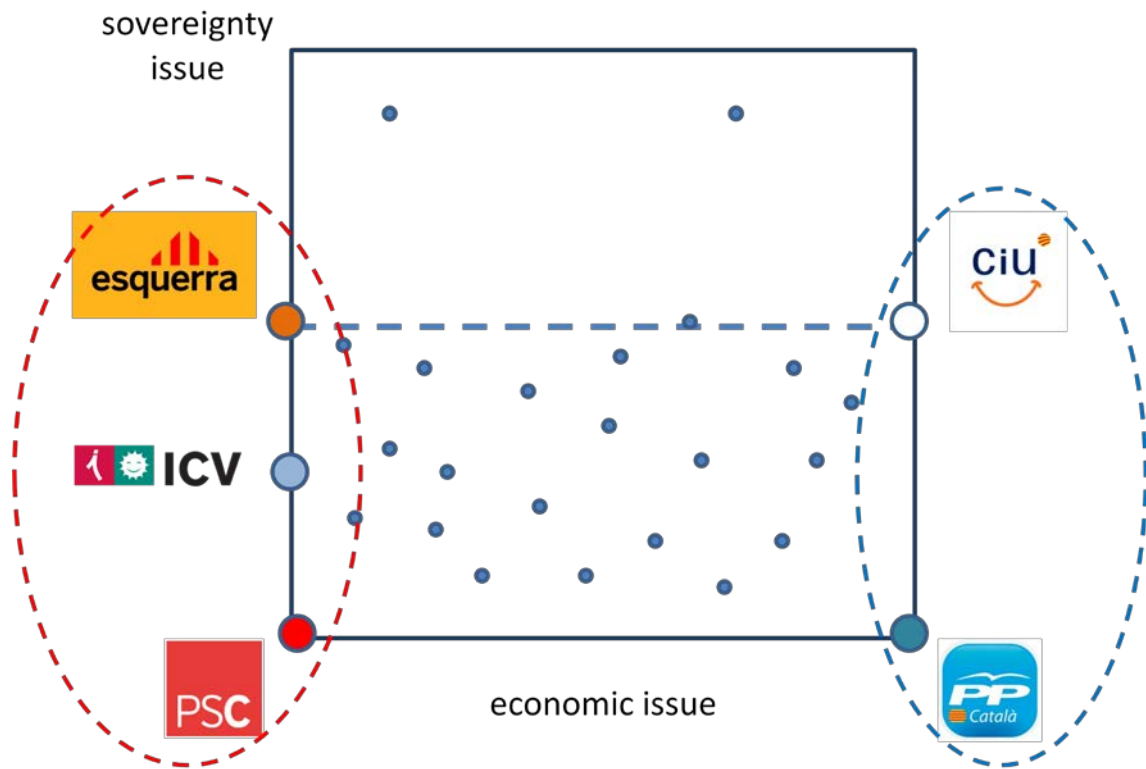


Figure 1: Stable party system (1990-2010)

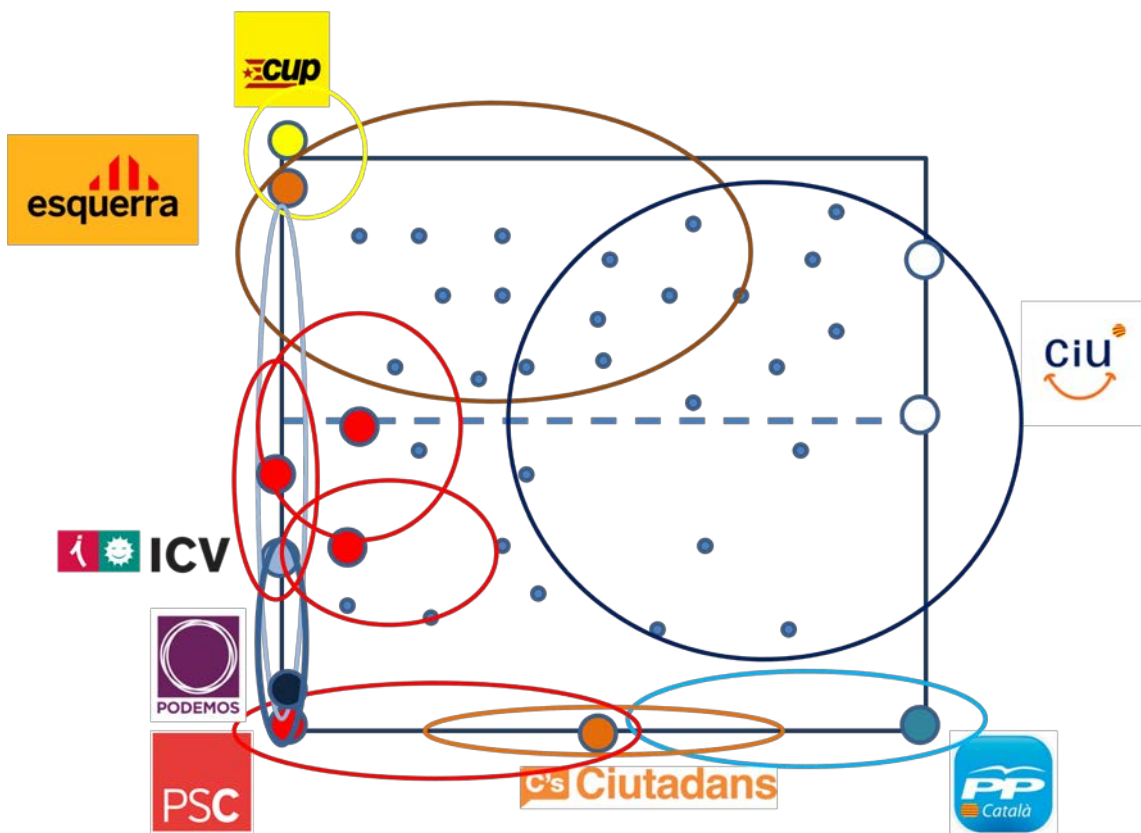


Figure 2: Transition towards a new party system (2014)