**Catalonia's bid for independence from Spain explained**

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**Spain has imposed direct rule on Catalonia in response to the restive north-eastern region's most dramatic bid yet for independence.**

Catalan leaders have been remanded in prison or have fled into exile since the regional parliament declared an independent republic in October.

The sight of police beating voters and politicians being jailed revived disturbing memories, for some, of Spain's authoritarian past.

However, Madrid insists the roll-back of autonomy is only temporary, and much rides on an early election in the region on 21 December.

**How did we get here?**

Catalonia is one of Spain's wealthiest and most productive regions and has a distinct history dating back almost 1,000 years.

Before the Spanish Civil War it enjoyed broad autonomy but that was suppressed under Gen Francisco Franco's dictatorship from 1939-75.

When Franco died, the region was granted autonomy again under [**the 1978 constitution**](http://www.parliament.am/library/sahmanadrutyunner/ispania.pdf), and the region prospered along with the rest of the new, democratic Spain.

A 2006 statute granted even greater powers, boosting Catalonia's financial clout and describing it as a "nation", but Spain's Constitutional Court reversed much of this in 2010.

**Why some Catalans want independence**

Recession and cuts in public spending fuelled local resentment, which coalesced in a powerful secessionist movement.

Following a trial referendum in November 2014, outlawed by Spain, separatists won the 2015 regional election and went on to win a full referendum on 1 October 2017, which was also banned and boycotted by unionists.

When the Catalan parliament declared outright independence, Madrid cracked down hard, arguing that it was upholding the constitution, which states that Spain is indivisible.

With no international recognition and little sympathy among mainstream EU politicians for their cause, the secessionists have not been able to implement their breakaway.

**Do Catalans really want to leave?**

There was just one question on the 1 October ballot paper: *"Do you want Catalonia to become an independent state in the form of a republic?"*

With no proper monitoring of the vote, which saw riot police attempting to shut down polling stations by force, it is not possible to say with certainty how much support there really was for independence.

According to the Catalan authorities, some 90% voted to leave Spain but turnout was only 42%.

Given that unionist parties won 39% of the legal vote in 2015, it can be fairly assumed a substantial minority rejected independence by staying at home.

**Does Catalonia have a good claim to nationhood?**

It is certainly long-lived. It has its own language and distinctive traditions, and a population nearly as big as Switzerland's (7.5 million).

It also happens to be a vital part of the Spanish state, locked in since the 15th Century, and - according to supporters of independence - subjected periodically to repressive campaigns to make it "more Spanish".

**What does Catalonia mean to the rest of Spain?**

Depending on your view, Barcelona is primarily either Catalonia's capital or Spain's second city.

It has become one of the EU's best-loved city break destinations, famed for its 1992 Summer Olympics, trade fairs, football and tourism.

Catalonia is one of Spain's wealthiest regions, making up 16% of the national population and accounting for almost 19% of Spanish GDP.

Generations of people from poorer parts of Spain have moved there for work, forming strong family bonds with regions such as Andalusia.

**Does Madrid really milk Catalonia?**

There is a widespread feeling that the central government takes much more than it gives back although the complexity of budget transfers makes it hard to judge exactly how much more Catalans contribute in taxes than they get back from investment in services such as schools and hospitals.

According to 2014 figures, Catalonia paid about €10bn (£9bn; $12bn) more to Spain's tax authorities than it received in spending - the equivalent of 5% of its GDP.

Meanwhile, state investment in Catalonia has dropped: the 2015 draft national budget allocated 9.5% to Catalonia - compared with nearly 16% in 2003.

But some argue that is a natural state of affairs in a country with such regional economic disparities.

**Is there room for compromise?**

Some argue that concessions by Madrid, such as the restoration of the 2006 statute on autonomy, could take the wind out of the separatists' sails.

Both Spain's ruling and main opposition parties have agreed to study constitutional reform but remain implacably opposed to independence.

However, the Spanish state's reputation has been dented locally by the police crackdown at the referendum, which reportedly left nearly 800 people seeking medical assistance.

[**Tom Burridge**@TomBurridgebbc](https://twitter.com/TomBurridgebbc)

I CANNOT believe what I have just witnessed in neighbourhood of Barcelona. Spanish riot Police raided polling station. Then chased away [#1O](https://twitter.com/hashtag/1O?src=hash) [8:32 AM - Oct 1, 2017](https://twitter.com/TomBurridgebbc/status/914483069767340032)

**Why does the 21 December election matter so much?**

Despite the fact that Madrid called the vote, separatist parties have embraced it and essentially the same choices are on offer to voters as in 2015.

They can choose between separatist and unionist parties, and those attempting to stay neutral by campaigning on social issues instead.

What is more, the costs of actual independence have been illustrated vividly by the events of this autumn, from the cold shoulder shown by the international community to the potential withdrawal of big business from the region.

A clear victory by the secessionists would do much to vindicate their cause, if not in Spain then perhaps abroad. The opposite is also true, of course.