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Pro-sovereignty Politics in Catalonia and the Basque Country

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PART V

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PRO-SOVEREIGNTY POLITICS IN CATALONIA AND THE BASQUE COUNTRY

Are the two cases comparable?

Richard Gillespie

At a time when several stateless nations of Europe are making claims to sovereignty, Spain has become a key point of international reference, not least for the European Union. This is largely as a result of the rise of *soberanismo* (pro-sovereignty feeling and assertiveness) in Catalonia although there is also the emerging issue of how Basque politics will evolve following decades of political violence. While the rise of pro-sovereignty politics may be attributable partly to aspects of globalization including the repercussions of the international financial crisis of 2008, the different paths followed by nationalist movements in Catalonia and the Basque Country demonstrate the need for analysis to take full account of the endogenous features of each case. Among these, in what follows, particular attention is paid to different structures of political competition, contrasts in political and economic status between the Basque and Catalan autonomous communities and dissimilarity in the relationship between political elites and civil society.

This contribution aims to account for the marked contrast between the two territories in respect of the *soberanista* challenge faced by Spain today.¹ Is there really such a stark contrast between a Catalan national movement pushing to redefine Catalonia's relations with the Spanish state and a Basque nationalism that has become more circumspect in this regard? If so, this would represent a dramatic departure from historical patterns and necessitate a rethinking of traditional stereotypes associated with Basque and Catalan nationalism, whereby the former was "radical" and the latter "moderate" (Conversi 1997).

The chapter focuses primarily on the political orientations of the traditional mainstream Catalan and Basque nationalist forces, namely *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), a two-party federation in office in Catalonia between 1980 and 2003 and again between 2010 and 2015, *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (CDC, or simply *Convergència*), the main component of CiU which continued to head the Catalan government after CiU's dissolution in 2015, and *Euzko Alderdi Jeltzalea-Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (EAJ-PNV, from now on PNV), the party of government in the autonomous community of Euskadi from 1980 to 2009 and since 2012.

For the most part, these mainstream Catalan and Basque nationalist political forces have viewed each other as nearest equivalents and have cooperated in elections to the European Parliament. In recent decades, both CiU and PNV managed to appeal to a range of nationalist opinion, from Basques and Catalans seeking incremental increases in autonomy to

those advocating more decisive steps towards independence. Traditionally, both have been the senior nationalist forces in their respective territories, overshadowing the (since 1989) pro-independence *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC) until 2015 and successive parties of the so-called *Izquierda Abertzale* (“Patriotic Left”), including Batasuna in the past and Sortu today.

However, they are not similar in every respect. CiU, until its breakup in 2015, was a more recent, post-Franco federation involving the nationalist CDC led successively by Jordi Pujol and Artur Mas and the Christian Democrat *Unió Democràtica de Catalunya* (UDC), led from 1987 until 2016 by Josep Antoni Duran i Lleida (Barberà Aresté 2011; Barberà and Barrio 2006; Guibernau 2004, 120–151). The PNV is a much older, single party, although for a while it had a regular nationalist coalition partner in *Eusko Alkartasuna* (EA) (de Pablo and Mees 2005; Pérez-Nievas 2006).

Beginning with an overview of the distinctive nationalist paths undertaken by CiU and the PNV since the 1990s, the study goes on to highlight and discuss the three major variables behind the contrasting orientations mentioned previously. The concluding section adds some final thoughts on the value of comparing the two cases.

Changing places and defying the stereotypes? An overview of the PNV and CiU sovereignty strategies

At an impressionistic level (at least), the past twenty years have seen the mainstream Catalan and Basque nationalist parties – and essentially CDC and the PNV – engage in a dramatic process of “role reversal,” after appearing to external observers to be quite embedded in their respective traditions for a substantial part of the last century. Indeed, until only a decade ago the relatively few academic studies that made comparative reference to the two cases were fairly uniform in seeing Basque nationalism as more radical and sovereignty-oriented and Catalan nationalism as distinctively moderate and “accommodationist” in the sense of looking to pursue objectives within the framework of the Spanish state (Conversi 1997; Díez Medrano 1995; Payne 1971). In a short space of time, successive developments then conspired to challenge these stereotypes and place the two nationalisms at different ends of the analytical spectrum, although this depiction must be qualified by the greater degree of autonomy sought and achieved by the Basques during the late 1970s, when Spain’s model of devolved government was designed on the basis of individual statutes negotiated with each of the new “autonomous communities” established as regional units of the state.

The Basque evolution has involved a shift from assertive *soberanista* politics under former president of the Basque government Juan José Ibarretxe (*lehendakari* 1999–2009) to a more cautious, less urgent approach to the national question under Íñigo Urkullu (from 2012); while beyond the PNV there has been ETA’s decision to abandon armed attacks and facilitate a turn to institutional political participation by radical pro-independence forces in 2011. CiU nationalism meanwhile was seen to radicalize more recently than in the case of the PNV, especially from 2012, after Catalans had mobilized to express their growing discontent over successive decisions taken in “Madrid” – notably, by Spain’s Constitutional Court in 2010, with its unfavourable ruling on key aspects of the new Catalan Statute of 2006, which had promised enhanced autonomy and recognition of Catalonia as a nation; and by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy in rejecting CiU demands for a better financial deal, specific to Catalonia, in 2011–12. Adding to the sense of radicalization in Catalonia, there have been several huge feats of popular mobilization, emanating from a powerful civil society movement that has its own dynamics and tended to push CiU towards the road to independence (Dowling 2014).

PNV radicalization took the form of a proposal to make Euskadi semi-independent through establishing a relationship of co-sovereignty, to be achieved by negotiation with Madrid (Keating and Bray 2006; Mees 2009). There were two main drivers behind Ibarretxe's initiative in the early 2000s, which progressed through adoption by his party, government and the Basque Parliament. One was a sense that the Statute of Gernika which had granted autonomy to Euskadi in 1979 had gone as far as it would in terms of actual transfers of powers to the Basque government: after 20 years a number of *competencias* had still not been transferred by Madrid, others had been transferred but then undermined by new Spanish laws and there were now moves to recentralize by the People's Party (PP) government of José María Aznar, once it had achieved an absolute majority in the Spanish Parliament in 2000. The other was an attempt on the part of the PNV to convince ETA to renounce violence by showing that the governing party and its coalition partners in Euskadi were prepared to push for a greater degree of home rule and thus there was now a stronger possibility of changing the status quo through political action.

The term "radicalization" is questioned by some in the PNV since the party historically had entirely *soberanista* roots and had never renounced its tradition despite becoming more ambiguous on the question of autonomy versus independence (de Pablo and Mees 2005). Ibarretxe himself had been a technocrat in the previous nationalist-led government headed by the pragmatic José Antonio Ardanza (1985–99) and as *lehendakari* continued to act within the Spanish constitutional framework when presenting his proposal for co-sovereignty and a "free association" between Euskadi and Spain. He made no demands about neighbouring Navarre, still a focus of Basque irredentist ambition. However, he did give priority to the PNV claim that ultimately the Basque people had a "right to decide" on the future political status of the Basque Country, through a referendum, and his government concentrated on pro-sovereignty politics far more than did the Ardanza governments, noted for achieving economic improvement. Thus "radicalization," in the sense of a *shift* from more "accommodationist" patterns of behaviour towards an emphasis on pro-sovereignty territorial demands (Gillespie 2015), is an apt term to apply to the evolution of Basque Nationalist priorities and policy emphases at this time.

Yet this development did not signal a revolution in the PNV. A party 'general assembly' (congress) in January 2004 saw a narrow victory for Josu Jon Imaz in the election of party president and his support for the Ibarretxe plan became somewhat conditional: Imaz defended the need to find a constitutional formula that would meet with sufficient public acceptance to cross the nationalist/unionist divide in the Basque Country and insisted that this would not be feasible until ETA had finally decided to abandon violence. Sectors of the party showed little enthusiasm for the plan, waiting for it to be frustrated by the Spanish authorities rather than opposing it openly. When it encountered rejection in Madrid, Ibarretxe and the PNV were devoid of a "plan B" and the emphasis on sovereignty politics began to be questioned more openly within the party amid electoral setbacks in 2005 and 2007. Imaz himself tried to set "red lines" to constrain *soberanismo* by publishing a newspaper article in July 2007,² but he never had a strong enough institutional base within the PNV to return to the approach of the Ardanza plan of 1998 which had sought a transversal basis for a new autonomy statute.

Only after Urkullu had been elected president as a supposed "unity candidate" in the fifth assembly of the PNV in December 2007 did the party begin to offer more authoritative reassurances regarding its ideas on a "consultation" of the Basque people, but Ibarretxe's final push for authorization to hold a referendum continued to be blocked by Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero in Madrid. The more moderate, conciliatory approach of Urkullu gradually triumphed in the course of a reassessment of the party's orientation, made inevitable by its

displacement from power, temporarily, following elections in March 2009, after thirty years permanently in office. When it returned three years later, after a period of PP-backed Socialist minority government under Patxi López, both the PNV and a minority Urkullu government were united around the priorities, being recovery from economic recession and post-conflict pacification, ahead of any fresh effort to change the constitutional status of the Basque Country. Urkullu's government did eventually start a dialogue and parliamentary process aimed at achieving a "new political status" for the Basque Country, but it took a more cautious and gradual approach than Ibarretxe had, insisting that a consensus across the nationalist/unionist divide was imperative and would not come through seeking support for a preconceived party plan; rather, the PNV would explore the positions of the other Basque parties before defining its own proposal.³

While replacement of the Statute of Gernika was an ambition largely confined to Basque Nationalists and smaller allied parties, moves for statute reform in Catalonia came initially from a tripartite coalition that straddled the nationalist/non-nationalist divide while being united by Catalanism⁴ and centre-left ideas. It was formed by the *Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya* (PSC, a component of the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE), the nationalist *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC) and *Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds-Esquerra Unida i Alternativa* (ICV-EUiA, a postcommunist/ecosocialist alliance embracing a range of preferences regarding the future political status of Catalonia). While CiU, towards the end of its 23-year initial period in office, showed little sign of radicalization and had been collaborating politically with the PP from 1996, it was the federalist PSC leader, Pasqual Maragall, who took the initiative on statute reform after being able to form a governing coalition in 2003.

Reform of the statute was to face a more positive reaction from Rodríguez Zapatero than from the preceding Aznar government in Madrid. The PSOE leader looked to collaboration with a range of left-wing, nationalist and regional parties to overcome the parliamentary ascendancy of the PP in 2000–04. He was open to statute reform in all the autonomous communities (except Euskadi, while ETA violence persisted) as part of a "second transition" to renew and deepen democracy (Muro 2009). Besides, the PSOE relied on Catalonia for a large part of its vote: hence, Rodríguez Zapatero's pledge ahead of the 2004 general election that he would accept any new statute that was approved by the Catalan Parliament, a process achieved by September 2005 with eventual support from CiU which left the Catalan PP isolated in opposition. Frustration ensued, however, from a watering down of the statute at the insistence of the PSOE as the approved text was modified in negotiations with the government and in the Spanish Parliament before the resulting document was approved in a referendum in Catalonia in June 2006 (with turnout only 48.48%).⁵

Rodríguez Zapatero had expected a more moderating role to be played by PSC deputies in the Catalan Parliament but had underestimated the Catalanism of Maragall and his colleagues. He thus used parallel negotiations with CiU (despite it being an opposition party in Catalonia) to ensure that unacceptable aspects of the text (e.g., concerning the national status of Catalonia) were diluted (Orte and Wilson 2009, 424–30). Later it was to be the actions of the PP under Rajoy (street demonstrations and a mass petition against the statute, followed by an appeal to the Constitutional Court) that were to become dominant in narratives of Catalan grievance against Madrid, yet there was always an important sector of the PSOE too that remained opposed to any special status being granted to Catalonia, arguing that this would be at the expense of other regions.

Pro-sovereignty politics had begun to emerge within CiU in the late 1990s and it also underwent leadership changes with the retirement from front-line politics of its historical founder-leader Jordi Pujol in 2003. While this turnover brought some new programmatic emphases,

Pujol's choice of Artur Mas as his successor at the head of *Convergència* was initially seen as a setback for an incipient *soberanista* current (Barberà and Barrio 2006, 114). During CiU's years in opposition (2003–2010) Mas did call for a “refounding” of Catalanism but resisted *soberanista* pressures at CDC's fifteenth congress in July 2008, believing that talk of independence would alienate an electorally important sector of Catalanist opinion and jeopardize CiU prospects of returning to dominate the centre ground of Catalan politics electorally.⁶ Yet many party members, anticipating an adverse ruling by the Constitutional Court, did become sceptical about the feasibility of further autonomist gains and they were responsible for the adoption of a euphemistic reference to independence (“a state of our own”) at the following CDC congress, in March 2012, at which Oriol Pujol, *soberanista* son of the former president, became general secretary.⁷

The years in opposition saw “sovereignty” being used often in an instrumental, rhetorical way by CiU in a competition with ERC to establish pre-eminent “national” credentials and to embarrass it for the compromises involved in governing alongside non-nationalist coalition partners at a time of deepening economic crisis. *Esquerra* leaders were coming under huge pressure from their own militants.

Soberanismo became more evident within *Convergència* than in *Unió*, but even in CDC radicalization was a gradual, somewhat tortuous process at first. When the Constitutional Court finally ruled against controversial aspects of the 2006 statute in June 2010, the initial reaction of many CiU leaders was to defiantly resurrect the proposals approved by the Catalan Parliament in 2005, while insisting on a Catalan “right to decide.” While the ruling had some radicalizing effect, the main CiU emphasis over the next two years was on economic grievance. On political sovereignty, there was an initial pragmatic retreat rather than a surge forward when CiU returned to power, under Mas, in late 2010.

Like the PNV when elected two years later, but facing a much worse financial situation than the Basques, CiU initially prioritized the economic challenges of debt and deficit. Forced to make dramatic spending cuts, the new government relied on collaboration with the centralist PP for its governing majority. Only when Mas got nowhere with demands for an improved financial deal for Catalonia (both before and after Rajoy's triumph in the general election of 2011) did CiU, and particularly CDC, begin to call for a referendum specifically on independence.

Even then, traditional moderates such as Mas only took up the sovereignty banner decisively when faced with huge pressure from civil society. The massive demonstration in Barcelona on the Catalan national day (*Diada Nacional de Catalunya*) of 11 September, in 2012, convinced pro-independence politicians within CiU that a window of opportunity had opened, while other senior figures played catch-up, concerned at the prospect of being by-passed as popular support gravitated towards the pro-independence ERC, itself no longer constrained by alignment with the PSC and ICV-EUiA. Catalonia saw a shift in the whole nationalist/Catalanist mainstream towards *soberanismo*, confirmed by the rise of *Esquerra* in the Catalan election of November 2012, in further displays of mass mobilization by pro-independence associations and in the results of elections to the European Parliament in May 2014, which for the first time saw ERC outpoll CiU, a pattern confirmed by the Spanish general election of December 2015 although qualified by changes in the Catalan party system and by enhanced political collaboration between *Convergència* and ERC from 2015, eventually leading to an agreed roadmap aimed at the creation of a Catalan state.

For the traditionally hegemonic party federation, this pattern of evolution was not without contradictions. Part of CiU, especially UDC leader Duran i Lleida, was far from happy with the eventual agreement reached by pro-*soberanista* Catalan forces to proceed with plans for a referendum or (if that were prevented) a plebiscitary election. However, the problem facing advocates

of a “third way” (to enhance autonomy but avoid the uncertain road towards separation) was that the Rajoy government remained inflexible and had nothing substantial to offer to the many Catalans who sought better treatment but did not ideally wish to break with Spain completely.

CiU’s eventual breakup in mid 2015 did not mean an end to the bid for independence, for CDC was able to form an alliance with ERC and Catalan civil society organizations and thereby retain pre-eminence through a common *Junts pel Sí* (“Together for Yes”) platform in the next regional election in September, hoping – with the road to a referendum blocked – to use this event instead to demonstrate the existence of a popular mandate for moves to bring Catalan independence. The alliance won the election, but fell just short of an overall majority of the votes, and also of the seats in the Catalan Parliament. It thus relied now on conditional support from the radically anti-capitalist *Candidatura d’Unitat Popular* (CUP) in order to govern and one dramatic consequence for *Convergència* was that Artur Mas was prevented from forming another government. Instead, the new Catalan administration formed in January 2016 would be presided over by a more long-standing advocate of independence, the former CDC mayor of Girona, Carles Puigdemont.

Variables along the nationalist path

In discussing variation in the trajectories of mainstream Basque and Catalan nationalist parties, one must go beyond a focus on the parties themselves and highlight key contextual variables that influence elite decisions on whether to emphasize autonomist or *soberanista* demands in practice, the former seeking to reconcile Basque or Catalan home rule with a Spanish and European context, the latter seeking direct representation within the EU. Since it is necessary here to be selective rather than exhaustive in order to discuss such variables, only those deemed of greatest importance are the subject of this section.

Political competition

Electoral competition in both autonomous communities has involved the traditionally larger nationalist forces in competition mainly with more radical nationalist parties and with socialist parties. The PP has been weak in both communities, although a major force to contend with in Araba, the smallest of the three provinces of Euskadi.

In relation to their “electoral frontier” with other nationalist forces, CiU for a long time tended to dwarf ERC, a party noted for pervasive factionalism and instability arising from direct forms of internal decision making and ideological debates about the balance between nationalism and socialism (Culla 2013; Lucas 2004). The electoral gap between nationalist parties left CiU with considerable scope to cooperate with the major Spanish parties, mostly the PP within Catalonia and the PP or PSOE in Madrid, especially at times of minority government. This situation favoured the politics of accommodation, so long as it was seen as bringing incremental increases in Catalan autonomy and/or financial benefits for the community. However, a different balance of forces emerged from 2011 as CiU bore the costs of governing during financial crisis and recession while ERC grew for several reasons: it finally united after a string of electoral setbacks between 2006 and 2010; brought in non-sectarian candidates with no baggage from old internecine battles to head its electoral lists; reflected the rise of pro-independence public sentiment more quickly and unitedly than CiU; and initially managed to gain political influence without actually accepting the responsibility of office, by negotiating a pro-referendum (and wider programmatic) pact with CiU at the start of the latter’s second term of office under Mas, in December 2012. A CiU setback in the Catalan election of that year

had left it in need of allies and there was strong *soberanista* support for alignment with ERC within CDC. While some leaders may have been manoeuvring just to match ERC's programmatic "offer," others held that Catalonia now had a historic opportunity to press for independence and thus *soberanista* unity was crucial, even if it brought a *sorpasso* of CiU by *Esquerra*.

In contrast, in the Basque Country, electoral and other pressures from radical nationalists to make the PNV commit to independence politics have been weaker. Owing to the historical association of a large part of the *Izquierda Abertzale* with ETA, nationalist unity was never in prospect so long as political violence lasted. The PNV viewed ETA as a fundamental impediment to pushing for further autonomy or independence, since if it did so, rivals would claim it was legitimizing terrorism. Moreover, the party became convinced that no Spanish government would agree to transfer all the powers envisaged in the Statute of Gernika, since Madrid would want to keep back something to "concede" in the event of any of the peace negotiations undertaken by PSOE or PP administrations finally prospering. When the PNV under Ardanza and Ibarretxe tried to develop plans designed to bring an end to violence by securing an eventual referendum on a cross-party Basque agreement on future status (and thus, it was hoped, leave ETA without a justification to carry on), it was at times when the *Izquierda Abertzale* itself was concerned about a growing civil society repudiation of ETA attacks, not least among Basques. The early failure of these efforts, signalled by the collapse of an ETA ceasefire in late 1999, prevented any "normalization" of political contestation in the Basque Country, especially after changes to Spain's law on political parties were used from 2002 to ban parties such as Batasuna, on the grounds of involvement with ETA.

Only following ETA's announcement of a "definitive" and permanent end to violence was the *Izquierda Abertzale* (having itself made sustained efforts to achieve this outcome in recent years) allowed to participate again in elections, initially through the alliances Bildu and Amaiur. It proceeded to present a challenge to PNV pre-eminence within the nationalist community by taking a quarter of the vote in the Basque election of 2012, largely at the expense of the PNV. However, the dynamics of inter-nationalist rivalry remain very different to those in Catalonia, given an absence of nationalist mobilization on the Catalan scale, pressure on the radicals to convince Basque sceptics that their commitment to democratic praxis is sincere and irreversible, and significant differences in how the radical and moderate nationalist parties envisage territorial politics.

The Socialist presence in Basque and Catalan political life has been greater in the past, and PSOE affiliates have tended to do better in general and local elections than in regional ones. The *Partido Socialista de Euskadi-Euskadiko Ezkerra* (PSE-EE) has functioned as a loyal branch of its mother party whereas the PSC is the result of a merger and has experienced strong Catalanist influence in competition with an ultimately prevailing PSOE orientation. Although the PSE seemed almost a "natural" partner of the PNV under the pragmatic governments of Ardanza, it was always critical of the Ibarretxe plan and sceptical of PNV efforts to reach agreements with the *Izquierda Abertzale* aimed at conflict resolution. Referring strategic questions to Madrid, the Basque Socialists gravitated towards alignments with the PP, seen in the existence of competition between nationalist and unionist blocs in elections in 2001 and 2009. Despite periodic attempts to give the PSE a greater "Basque" identity, this never went so far as to create tension with the mother party. The nature and evolution of the PSE were thus something of an impediment to any pro-sovereignty shift by the PNV. Certainly, nationalist parties together have often taken 50% to 55% of the vote in Basque elections, but have not been able to unite or claim the level of endorsement claimed by CiU for *soberanismo*, whose adherents won 87 of 135 seats in the Catalan election of 2012 and 83 (including the *Catalunya Sí que es Pot* left-wing alliance and the CUP) in 2015.

Despite the Catalanist influence, the PSC did not in the end subscribe to the *soberanista* pact of 2012, but it had supported the broad notion of a Catalan “right to decide,” so long as it was approached through reform of the Spanish Constitution. Those who argue that the rise of sovereignty politics has been more from above than below, as a result of CiU language and education policies introduced by the Generalitat, may regard the Socialists as having facilitated nationalist radicalization by embracing the idea of mainstreaming Catalan culture in public life. However, support for the policy of making Catalan the basic language of delivery in education had enjoyed much broader cross-party support within Catalonia, including from the PP. More certainly, the PSC facilitated the trend towards *soberanismo* simply by falling victim to its own internal disagreements over the national issue and PSOE-PSC relationship.

Regional financing arrangements

Attracting increased attention during the economic recession, the financial context of the autonomous communities in which the Basque and Catalan nationalists operate is an important key to the contrasting political itineraries of the PNV and CiU. The fact that Euskadi (together with neighbouring Navarre) has near fiscal autonomy under an agreement known as the *Concierto Económico* (*Convenio* in Navarre) whereas Catalonia comes under the common financing regime that applies in all other regions of Spain has given the Basque government greater control over its finances and greater resources during the financial crisis and its aftermath. Since the Basques collect their own taxes and the law governing the quota (*cupo*) that they pay to the state is subject to bilateral agreement, they are in a stronger negotiating position when this comes up for review than Catalonia (which negotiates its financing alongside fourteen other regions with conflicting priorities). PNV leaders claim to have had a better overall record of economic management and probity than CiU has had and maintain that their funding arrangements in themselves place them further along the road to independence than Catalonia, though they are envious of the scale of active support for *soberanista* goals in Catalan society.⁸

The generalized system of funding undoubtedly worked to Catalonia’s disadvantage during the recession, since inter-regional redistribution had quite extreme effects in pushing Catalonia down the ranking of regional per capita fiscal resources (Gray 2014, 25). It is this, together with complaints about public investment in the region and political frustration that has led to support for independence outgrowing its traditional identity-based core and extending to non-nationalist Spanish-speaking sectors. Catalans are well aware that the region of Madrid has become economically dominant since the 1980s as Catalonia has slipped (Dowling 2014, 228–29), and they know that Euskadi’s *Concierto* helps account for better-quality health care and lower unemployment levels than in Spain overall. A dominant theme behind the demands for a “fiscal pact” was for Catalonia to be granted its own unique funding model, although not a replica of the Basque *Concierto* since Catalan politicians have generally been adverse to the unilateral risk that this entails. If hypothetically applied to Catalonia, the *Concierto* arrangement would imply a much higher contribution to the Spanish exchequer than Catalan advocates of fiscal sovereignty would find palatable because of Catalonia’s far greater weight in the Spanish economy (c. 18–20% of Spanish GDP versus c. 6–7% in the Basque case).

A related factor complicating the assertion of *soberanista* claims in the Basque Country is that fiscal and political authority is subjected to a more decentralized institutional structure reflecting greater territorial complexity compared with Catalonia (Goikoetxea 2013; Ibarra Güell 2011). Under the *Concierto* and the Basque Law of Historical Territories, it is Euskadi’s three provinces of Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa and Araba that collect taxes and in turn provide a proportion of the funding to the Basque regional government (a proportion of which is contributed

to the Spanish treasury). Thus the provincial level of government is uniquely important in Euskadi and elections linked to municipal elections can, as in May 2011, lead to different parties and coalitions controlling this tier of government in each province and potentially constraining the options open to the regional government in Vitoria. Thus, even without considering debates about the wider Basque Country (including the *Pays basque* in France and at least parts of Navarre), Basque nationalists – including the *Izquierda Abertzale* – have difficult issues to consider about how and where a Basque “right to decide” might be operationalized even if a sufficient consensus were to exist or emerge within Euskadi itself in support of a referendum. In contrast, Catalan politics are dominated by the city and province of Barcelona and although ERC retains a residual attachment to the notion of the *Països Catalans* (including the Valencian Community, French Catalonia and the Balearic islands, where it is organized as *Esquerra Republicana*), the campaign for a Catalan state has focused entirely on the autonomous community of Catalonia. Thus territorial parameters have not been a source of divergence within the *soberanista* camp.

Party-society relationship

A third area where mainstream Basque and Catalan nationalist parties have found themselves in different circumstances has been in the relationship between political forces and society. Following Spain’s transition to democracy, Basque society continued to be deeply marked by political conflict, whereas Catalonia has enjoyed peace and a relatively soft, fuzzy community division around language and identity that has allowed for an unconstrained evolution of civil society. The Basque Country remains more internally divided, owing to a combination of factors: the marked historical impact of immigration from other parts of Spain (which bears comparison with Catalonia), the ethnic basis of early Basque nationalism and the impact of political violence. Although at times since the 1980s the nationalist-unionist divide has been bridgeable through PNV-PSE coalitions, there have also been periods of polarization or at least political tension between two “fronts.” As a result, associational life in the Basque Country has tended to be segmented and colonized by political forces divided over the national question. Nationalist trade unions, for example, account for some two-thirds of union members in Euskadi, in contrast to Catalonia where the leading trade unions have been those that prevail throughout Spain, but are *soberanista*.⁹ Even today, notwithstanding recent initiatives by pro-independence platforms in the Basque Country to borrow from Catalonia’s mobilization repertoire, Basque associational life remains dominated by political acronyms.¹⁰

Modern Catalonia meanwhile has been free of organized political violence and in Catalanism has had a powerful ideological, cultural and political current that has offset the potential clash of nationalisms by embracing both nationalists and forces for which attachment to the national community has been combined with explicit loyalties to class or left-wing ideas. This helps explain why the anti-Franco movement in Catalonia was broad and unitary notwithstanding organizational fragmentation. Despite salient electoral rivalry between CiU and the PSC from 1980, there was a widespread consensus within Catalonia over political autonomy and the privileged status of Catalan in education.

Comparing the two episodes of radicalization in leading nationalist parties, the different politics-society configurations help account for the contrast between a Basque initiative under Ibarretxe that was an initiative “from above” and the rise of *soberanismo* in Catalonia which received considerable impetus “from below.” In the Basque case, the initiative came purely from the party and government and was carried forward by the Parliament despite ETA’s resumption of hostilities in early 2000. No attempt was made by the PNV to mobilize mass

support, which would have been impossible at this time given the impact of conflict on associations and on individuals. Public responses were mixed and partisan (Keating and Bray 2006, 358–361). Public involvement was limited to a consultative process involving some 65 hearings by the Basque Parliament and appeals for electoral endorsement by Ibarretxe.¹¹ Little surprise then that there was no public protest when Ibarretxe met with rejection in Madrid or when the initiative finally died with the end of PNV-led government in 2009.

In contrast, the process of statute reform in Catalonia, a “prequel” to the rise of *soberanismo*, was made possible by transversal developments such as PSC efforts under Pasqual Maragall to appeal beyond the party’s traditional base and ERC interest in collaboration with other Catalanist forces on the left. Public identification with the notion of a “right to decide” (pioneered by Ibarretxe) was evident by 2006, as some 200,000 Catalans protested over the dilution of the statute approved by their Parliament to a version acceptable to the government in Madrid. Opinion polls registered a gradual rise in independence preferences from 13.6% to 25.2% between 2005 and 2010,¹² while Catalanist mobilization grew in volume; pro-independence sentiment then became truly massive and more sustained from 2012.

Developments relating to identity and to Catalan and Spanish attitudes towards one another played a part in the rise of *soberanismo*, but what took independence politics into the mainstream was a wider *combination* of diverse drivers and the fact that (in contrast to the Basque case) a catalyst (the fate of statute reform)¹³ or arguably a series of catalysts (anti-crisis measures, statute verdict, rejection of fiscal pact) existed to spark mobilization (Cramer 2014). An important role has been played by the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) as a horizontal umbrella structure for pro-independence groups working together on an inclusive basis, capable of appealing transversally across Catalan society to such an extent that CiU felt tempted and indeed obliged to harden its position, play catch-up in relation to pro-independence sentiment and participate in *Diada* mobilizations from 2012. The experience of *Òmnium Cultural*, which organized the demonstration against the court ruling in July 2010, is also instructive. Dedicated to the promotion of Catalan language and culture, it recovered from earlier symptoms of stagnation to reach a membership of 38,000 by early 2014, becoming sociologically and demographically more transversal and more geographically widespread in the process. Nationalist cultural associations in the Basque Country have been much smaller and more closely identified with nationalist parties.¹⁴

The interplay between top-down and bottom-up dynamics in the interpretation of how the nation-building project and (eventually) *soberanista* politics have become mainstream in Catalonia has been the subject of academic controversy which has tended to emphasize one perspective or the other,¹⁵ yet it would seem plausible and necessary to include both in analysis. It is beyond the remit of this contribution to do so, but in any case one should be wary of framing the debate as purely one about nationalism. *Soberanismo* in Catalonia cannot be understood simply as a manifestation of nationalism – indeed it owes its potency to the movement’s transversal nature which has allowed it to capture multiple sources of dissatisfaction with the current political and economic order and incorporate a significant part of the Spanish-speaking population.

Adding value through comparison?

While this study shows important differentiating factors that affect nationalist party behaviour in the Basque Country and Catalonia, the very fact that both Basque and Catalan parties have been involved in assertions of sovereignty relative to the Spanish state make them comparable,

even if the leaderships of these parties do not always identify with the terminology of accommodation and radicalization used by analysts. Moreover, nationalist political movements, while tending to emphasize singularity, do gaze across at one another, often only to draw lessons about what *not* to do in their own communities, but sometimes to borrow ideas and concepts from the other. This is certainly true of the Catalan and Basque cases.¹⁶

What this particular comparison shows about the dynamics of mainstream nationalist parties is that shifts along the sovereignty-accommodation axis are far from unidirectional and should not be assumed to be permanent. Processes of radicalization may lose impetus; reversion to more accommodating or cautious strategies can occur, as in the Basque Country. A key factor facilitating reversion there was the fact that the *soberanista* initiative was elite-led and -controlled. Equally the PNV was under relatively little pressure from radical nationalist electoral competition, there was some risk of it losing centrality to statewide parties if their competition was ignored, and the party upon returning to office in 2012 faced far less advantageous economic conditions than it had known under Ibarretxe and thus had to focus on managing crisis, in view of its responsibilities under the *Concierto*.

The strength of *soberanismo* as a transversal movement and not merely a political force must mean that complete reversion is less likely in Catalonia, although even many *independentistas* acknowledge that windows of opportunity are of limited duration and mass mobilization cannot be sustained indefinitely. In 2012–14 the option of changing tack was simply not open to CiU once it had committed to a referendum: accommodationism lacked a suitable disposition on the part of central government, the PP and at least sections of the PSOE; the economic situation was a fundamental constraint; CiU had no potential partnership alternative to ERC, as the PSC broke with the “right to decide” alliance and was hit by crisis; and pressures from the ANC found a ready response from a majority within *Convergència* and among many *Unió* members. While reconsideration was being urged by some of the (big) business interests close to CiU, no alternative other than the discredited one of a “fiscal pact” was being posed from within. Certainly, *soberanismo* in Catalonia still faced an up-hill struggle by the start of 2015. There were tensions between *Convergència* and *Esquerra*, not to mention the wider range of pro-sovereignty forces, partly as a result of the decision of Artur Mas to accept a Spanish ban on the referendum on independence which these forces had been organizing for November 9, 2014.¹⁷ Instead a more informal, unofficial consultation was held, in which it was largely the supporters of independence who took part.¹⁸ There was also evidence of the pro-independence viewpoint losing ground in Catalonia by 2015–16.¹⁹ And there were also indications that the new Spanish anti-establishment party, *Podemos*, which supported a Catalan “right to decide” but opposed separatism, would provide a formidable challenge to pro-independence parties in the future, both here and in the Basque Country.²⁰ Nevertheless, the *soberanista* challenge continued to be maintained, bolstered by the pact between *Convergència* and *Esquerra* ahead of the Catalan elections of September 2015 and encouraged by the loss of the PP’s absolute majority and the difficulties surrounding the establishment of a stable Spanish government following the general elections of December 2015 and June 2016. Yet party responses to these developments affecting Spain’s own governance showed *Convergència*, as it contemplated its own “refoundation” in July 2016, and even more clearly the PNV, to be still keen to have an option on negotiation with the Spanish parties, even as rank and file pressures in the Catalan party were forcing the leadership around Mas to retain the *independentista* definition for the refounded party in preference to the more ambiguous term *soberanista*.²¹

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on research undertaken as part of a project on “The Dynamics of Nationalist Evolution in Contemporary Spain,” funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK (ES/J007854/1). It draws upon scores of personal interviews with Basque and Catalan political representatives in 2012–14. The author gratefully acknowledges feedback on an earlier draft from Andrew Dowling (2013) and Caroline Gray.
- 2 Jon Josu Imaz, “No imponer, no impedir,” *El Correo*, July 15, 2007.
- 3 Interviews with Andoni Ortuzar and Iñaki Goikoetxea, PNV, April 2014.
- 4 Catalanism is noted for diverse ideological currents but invariably involves demands for political and cultural recognition of Catalonia’s distinctiveness and regards the territory as a fundamental framework for political action.
- 5 *El País*, 24 June, 2006.
- 6 “La ola nacionalista agita Cataluña,” *El País*, September 16, 2007; “Mas defiende el derecho a decidir como base para refundar el catalanismo,” *El País*, November 21, 2007; “Convergència quiere que Cataluña sea una nación libre y soberana,” *El País*, July 13, 2008; “Otra vuelta de la tuerca,” *El País*, editorial, July 14, 2008.
- 7 Oriol Pujol abandoned this post in March 2013 after being charged with political corruption offences. This was one of several cases involving members of the Pujol family, the biggest political fallout coming after the former President of the Generalitat, Jordi Pujol, announced in July 2014 that he himself was under investigation for tax offences.
- 8 Interviews with Andoni Ortuzar, Iñaki Goikoetxea, Emilio Olabarria, PNV, April 2014.
- 9 Interviews with Ander Gurrutxaga, University of the Basque Country, April 2013, and Txema Montero, political analyst, April 2014.
- 10 Conversation with Iñaki Zabaleta, University of the Basque Country, April 2014.
- 11 Interviews with Joseba Egibar and Juan José Ibarretxe, PNV, April 2014.
- 12 *Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió* data, reported in *El País*, September 13, 2009, and November 6, 2010.
- 13 Interview with Laura Mintegi, Bildu, April 2014.
- 14 Interviews with Muriel Casals and Jordi Gabaró, ANC, February 2014.
- 15 Miley (2007, 2013) is critical of the work of Conversi (1997) and Guibernau (1999) for understating the role played by nationalist elites. Cramerí (2014) and Dowling (2014) take the debate beyond the confines of nationalism. The former sees the process as pre-eminently “bottom-up” whereas the latter depicts a complex interaction, noting the important role played by cultural elites in the Catalan independence movement.
- 16 One recent example is the emulation of the ANC’s *Via Catalana* human chain in support of independence by the Basque *soberanista* platform *Guru Esku Dago* (It is in our hands) in June 2014: an attempt to go beyond the politically exclusive initiatives of the past. At the institutional level, the Basque and Catalan premiers Iñigo Urkullu and Artur Mas announced an intention to work together against what they viewed as a “growing recentralization” of the Spanish state under Mariano Rajoy (“Urkullu y Mas harán frente juntos al proceso recentralizador de Rajoy,” *El País*, December 28, 2014).
- 17 “El frente soberanista exhibe su división en el Parlamento catalán,” *El País*, October 15, 2014.
- 18 Of the 2.3 million Catalans who took part, 81% voted for independence (*El País*, December 1, 2014).
- 19 According to surveys by the *Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió* (CEO), funded by the Catalan government, public support for an independent state in Catalonia was highest in 2013–14, reaching a peak of 48.5% in November 2013. By March 2016 it stood at 38.5%. See “Baròmetre d’Opinió Política. 1ª onada 2016,” at <http://www.ceo.gencat.cat>, accessed 9 June 2016. Support for independence in Euskadi, which had reached 37% in 2013, was also falling by this time: a Euskobarómetro survey published in April 2016 found 24% of Basques wanting independence while larger cohorts preferred either federalism or the existing system of autonomy. See “Euskobarómetro. Enero 2016,” at <http://www.ehu.eus/euskobarometro>, accessed June 9, 2016, and *El País*, April 8, 2016.
- 20 In fact, the platform identified with Podemos, *Catalunya Sí que es Pot*, came a disappointing fourth in the Catalan election of September 2015, winning 11 of the 135 seats, but an equivalent alliance, *En Comú Podem*, won in Catalonia in the Spanish general elections of 2015–16. In the Basque Country, a Podemos-led alliance came third in its first regional election, in September 2016, behind the PNV and Bildu.

- 21 The decision to refound *Convergència* was strongly influenced by a desire to dissociate the party from a succession of corruption scandals associated with CDC funding and the Pujol family. The party presided over by Mas adopted the name *Partit Demòcrata Català* on 10 July 2016, after delegates rejected other names proposed by the leadership. Subsequent judicial challenges led this to be changed to *Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català* (PDeCat). For reports on the congress, see *La Vanguardia*, *El País* and *El Periódico*, 7–11 July 2016. For analysis of competing internal party currents within CDC and the PNV, which were again in evidence at this refoundation congress, see Gillespie 2016.

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