

Catalonia independence vote: What you need to know

By **Amanda Erickson** September 30 at 11:33 AM

When Catalans go to the polls on Sunday, they'll find just one question on the ballot: "Do you want Catalonia to become an independent state in the form of a republic?"

How did we get here, what's at stake and what could happen next?

Why do Catalonians want independence?

For "independistas," the fight for freedom has been a three-century project, one that can be traced back to 1714, when Philip V of Spain captured Barcelona. (Even today, pro-independence Catalonians insult Spanish loyalists by calling them "botiflers," or allies of Philip V.)

Since then, Catalanian nationalists have consistently pursued some degree of autonomy from Spain. By 1932, the region's leaders had declared a Catalan Republic, and the Spanish government agreed on a state of autonomy.

But when Francisco Franco came to power in 1939, those gains were lost. Franco systematically repressed all efforts toward Catalan nationalism. Under his dictatorship, the New York Times writes, "the government tried to stamp out all Catalan institutions and the language, and thousands of people were executed in purges. Virtually no Catalan family emerged from that period unscarred."

After Franco died, the fight for independence started again in earnest. In 2006, Spain granted Catalonia "nation" status and taxation power. But Spain's Constitutional Court struck down this ruling in 2010, arguing that while Catalans were a "nationality," Catalonia was not a "nation." More than 1 million Catalonians protested the finding, to no avail.

Today, Catalonia enjoys a broader degree of financial control over its regional finances than most other parts of Spain. But that isn't enough for many residents. As the Times article explains: "Many Catalans have grown to adulthood believing that they were, simply, not Spanish."

There's another issue too — Catalonia is the richest region in Spain, and the most highly industrialized too. It houses many of Spain's metalworking, food-processing, pharmaceutical and chemical industries. It also boasts a booming tourism industry,

thanks to popular spots like Barcelona. The region makes up about 16 percent of Spain's population and accounts for 20 percent of the Spanish national economy.

Catalans often complain that they contribute more in taxes to the Spanish government than they get back. In 2014, Catalonia paid about \$11.8 billion more to Spain's tax authorities than they got back. But [as the BBC explains](#), “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.”

How has Spain responded?

Aggressively.

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has condemned the vote as illegal. “I say this both calmly and firmly: There will be no referendum, it won't happen,” he said. He and others have argued that the vote would undermine the rule of law, and that it could set a dangerous precedent.

Rajoy has sent thousands of troops in to stop it from happening. (They are living, at the moment, in cruise ships off the Catalan coast.) Spanish police have seized millions of ballot forms and arrested more than a dozen pro-independence officials. Websites informing Catalans about the election have been shuttered.

Catalonia's own police force has been ordered to follow the lead of Spain's paramilitary Civil Guard, and to help stop the vote from taking place. They've [been told](#) to clear out all polling stations by 6 a.m. Sunday, and to confiscate ballot boxes. (It's not clear whether, or how, they will abide.)

Critics of Rajoy say that his argue that his inflexibility has made the situation worse. “His brand of Spanish nationalism is eerily close to that of erstwhile dictator Francisco Franco, a die-hard centralist for whom the unity and cultural homogeneity of Spain was sacred,” [wrote academics Sebastiaan Faber and Bécquer Seguí](#)n.

What do Catalans want?

There's not a lot of good polling. But the surveys that do exist suggest the region is divided. One of the most recent opinion polls, [from July](#), suggests that Catalans are about evenly split on the question of independence. Forty-one percent of those surveyed said they were in favor; 49 percent said they were opposed.

There are some other clues too. In 2014, Catalan leaders held an independence referendum that they framed as an “informal” survey of the region's mood. About one-third of registered voters participated; 80 percent of those voters expressed a desire for independence. Catalonia's separatist parties were supported by about 48 percent of Catalans in the 2015 parliamentary elections. Parties loyal to Spain garnered about 40 percent of the vote.

But Spanish loyalists are boycotting Sunday's election. So on Sunday, most voters will almost certainly support independence, even if turnout is low.

How do “no” voters explain their vote?

“No” voters, especially those who've moved from other parts of Spain, worry that Catalonia's economy will suffer if the region breaks away from Spain. It would be nearly impossible for a newly independent Catalonia to join the E.U. and the World Trade Organization, which would raise the cost of exports and imports. Jobs would likely be lost.

They're concerned, also, that Catalonia could become less accepting of those who've migrated to the region. One no voter, a transplant who's lived in Catalonia since 1979, said he worries that the region's nationalism could become a kind of racism. “They have created a monster of illusion and excitement,” Gabriel Zafra, who runs an association of migrants from Extremadura, told the New York Times. “They have promised them the land of Narnia. They have promised them a Catalonia full of flowers, where happy people go to church on Sunday. That is a lie.”

“I don't want to compare it to Serbia,” he said. “But if this continues, I might have to.”

As the Associated Press explains, “no” voters, who feel both Catalan and Spanish, see themselves as the “silent majority.” Speaking out, they say, comes with social isolation, stigma and very occasional verbal and physical violence.

Can Spain actually stop the vote from happening?

Despite the Spanish government's best efforts, voting will likely take place, at least in some places. Parents are camped out at schools to ensure that they can be opened for voting. (“We will stay until Sunday,” one woman told the New York Times. “On Sunday, we will resist entirely.”) An app has been devised to help voters find polling stations.

But as the BBC writes, “it is hard to see Sunday's vote as being free or fair.”

Where does Europe stand?

European officials have expressed firm, though muted, support for Spain's central government. A European Union official said Friday that people should respect the constitution and rule of law in their countries. But E.U. officials also say that they won't mediate the clash between Spain and Catalonia, calling it an internal matter. It has galvanized secession-leaning politicians across Europe too.

Nicola Sturgeon, the first minister of Scotland, which itself has questioned leaving the United Kingdom, offered her quiet support of the independence effort. And politicians in Belgium's Flanders region, who themselves have called for secession, sympathize with Catalans and wonder if their region might be next. “There is already a dynamic (toward independence around Europe). You only have to look at Scotland. It's an evolution that no European government can avoid,” Jan Peumans, speaker of Belgium's Flanders regional parliament, told the Associated Press.

In Italy, the far-right Northern League, which wants more autonomy for Italy's north, spoke out against the arrest of Catalan leaders.

What happens next?

Of course, no matter what happens Sunday, Catalonia is a long way away from independence. Spain won't recognize the result of the referendum or any independence vote in the regional parliament. Spain is already bracing for major protests, and months of messiness.

Leaders in Madrid have said that they'd support constitutional reforms that grant Catalonia more money and greater financial autonomy if Catalanian leaders cancel their vote. The vote will go on, but perhaps Catalanian leaders would be willing to negotiate these things afterward.

With passions high, though, the moment for compromise may well have passed.

Amanda Erickson writes about foreign affairs for The Washington Post. Previously, she worked as an editor for Outlook and PostEverything. [!\[\]\(23d9fc146e83b5c3013cfa32c784f8d5_img.jpg\) Follow @AmandaWaPo](#)

