



Barcelona protest in support of jailed political leaders AFP

# A VOTER PERSPECTIVE ON THE CRUSHING OF DEMOCRACY IN CATALONIA

## TRIBUNE

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**E**vents in Catalonia can be grasped through an additional perspective by providing some insight into the rationale of voters, given the vast contrast between the electorates of the pro-independence and the unionist camps. Indeed, the two sides of the political spectrum have electoral bases that are manifestly dissimilar. On one side there is the Catalan middle class, homogeneously spread throughout the territory, which has arguably been the main engine and catalyst behind the independence movement. In contrast, the unionist parties gather their votes at the extremes of the social spectrum, and are geographically reduced to a few locations with a majority Spanish-

speaking population.

The Catalan middle class, which throughout the Catalan Process has always been constant and determined, now finds itself facing a whole new scenario today, as things have changed from bad to worse since September 2017. Now the central government does not even try to hide its blatant abuse of power when trying to suppress independence. So far, a great number of red lines have been crossed, completely transforming the political landscape in both Spain and Catalonia. Some instances of this are detention without trial and the rigged accusations of civil servants, the occupation of government premises, the violent crackdown of thousands of citizens by riot police during the 'illegal' referendum of October 1, or the political prisoners being held in Spanish jails under extreme conditions.

The Spanish political elite, in its thirst

for power and in order to keep its corrupt structures running, is turning itself into a Turkish-like "democracy", putting Spain light years away from its cosmopolitan European partners. Understandably, this reminds many people of the Franco dictatorship and, although this warlike context may clearly show the limits of justice and reason, it also challenges many with a new dilemma: that of political activism vs the status quo. In fact, with the threat of punishment, and even prison is a very real possibility, the different organs of the state, from the judiciary to the police forces and the media, are working at full throttle to curb any kind of dissent and political protest.

The case of the polarisation of the pro-unionist voters deserves special note. This is epitomised in the Ciudadanos (C's) political party, which was created in Barcelona 10 years ago to oppose Catalonia's self-rule. After Spain's ruling PP party was almost obliterated in the last regional elections of December 21 (it won only four seats out of a total of 135), C's has become the de facto main actor to defend Madrid's control over Catalonia. But while C's leaders are largely well-off urbanites, the bulk of its voters come from the much less affluent suburbs of the Catalan cities populated by immigrants (or their descendants), with backgrounds among the poorest Spanish regions, such as Andalusia or Murcia. Curiously enough, this anomalous structure, which mirrors that of many a populist movement around the world, has been hardly commented on by either the Spanish or the foreign media.

The style of C's, its language and ideals, clearly situate it within the parameters defining populist movements: presumptuousness, aggressiveness, victimisation to the point of absurdity, and a large dose of demagoguery. Furthermore, while avoiding overtly nationalistic tones, it is an inherent manifestation of the most fervent Spanish nationalism, since it rejects any of the existing political consensus in Catalonia. Indeed, its role to subvert the political consensus may be the reason it has been able to unify such diverse social strata.

Henceforward, it will be relevant how the two sides keep momentum in this new context, and how they ultimately evolve. Eventually, their will for power will determine what awaits in the coming months, considering that the local elections in the spring of 2019 may end up having much greater relevance than initially expected.