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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

'Spain steals from us!' The 'populist drift' of Catalan regionalism

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Abstract This article analyses to what extent traditional mainstream Catalan regionalist parties and groups have adapted their discourses and collective performances in what might be seen as a 'populist drift' from regionalism to secessionism. This strategic move has been favoured by increasing party competition among these actors and would respond to the grievances reinforced by a context of austerity policies, political corruption, and a long institutional conflict on the centre–periphery. Our contribution is twofold. First, we show how parties and movements may combine regionalist and populist arguments in order to adapt their language, stressing the will of the Catalan people and its opposition against the Spanish political elites. Second, we explore how secessionist parties and groups have innovated their mobilization repertoires in order to fit with this populist-oriented discourse, employing mass mobilization, referenda simulations, and a populist political style in the institutions. Overall, Catalan secessionism presents a peculiar case where mainstream ruling parties adopt populist rhetoric and new mobilization practices to maintain power in adverse times.

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Introduction

The study of populism has extensively analysed how this phenomenon has spread in the last 20 years. Indeed, different approaches have allowed researchers to capture the specificities of the populist wave in Europe, the USA, and Latin America (e.g. Taggart 1995; van Kessel 2015). In Europe, populism has generally been associated with the radical right (e.g. Mudde 2007, 2016; Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016) and linked to a clear nativist dimension (Betz 2017). More recently, some new challenger parties with populist features have emerged in the Southern European countries as a consequence of the economic crisis (Bosco and Verney 2012; Della Porta et al. 2017).

Taken as a deliberate strategy, populism has usually been employed by new political actors to challenge the existing mainstream parties. Alternatively, some scholars have observed that new regionalist parties, such as the Northern League in Italy, have combined regional claims with populism, presenting a sort of 'regionalist populism' (McDonnell 2006) and emphasizing economic grievances more than nativism. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to why and how regionalist parties in power have embraced populist rhetoric and promoted new forms of political mobilization. This seems to be a puzzling phenomenon that raises many relevant questions: In what contexts would mainstream regional parties decide to change their discourses and take the risk of embracing such a different approach to politics? In what sense might this 'populist drift' be connected to the main ideas of populism? Alternatively, is it just a new and more extreme expression of regionalism? What are the (new) regionalist grievances, and to what extent have they shaped political mobilization, and how so? Finally, what has been the role that regionalist parties, interest groups, and organized civil society might have played in that mobilization?

The ascent of Catalan secessionism constitutes a paradigmatic example of this particular crossroads between regionalism and populism. In the context of a harsh economic and political crisis, the debate over secessionism has become the main topic in Catalan politics during recent years. This debate has mainly been led by mainstream regionalist parties, but with the close cooperation of several interest groups that have been instrumental in formulating a new rhetoric and mobilization strategies. Astonishingly, this 'populist drift' has gained the support and active mobilization of a plurality of the electorate and has turned into mainstream politics what for years had been only a marginal affair.

Focusing on the Catalan case, this article aims to make two main contributions to this research stream. Taking into account the major approaches to understand populism (Mudde 2004; Kriesi and Pappas 2015), the article will illustrate in which ways this 'populist drift' and its main regionalist vindications might be connected with some of the distinctive features of the populist discourse identified within the literature, and its main varieties (Ivaldi et al. 2017). Second, we will explore how these grievances and new political discourses might be translated into mobilization practices (Burg 2015). Secessionist Catalan parties and interest groups have promoted a wide range of institutional, societal, and electoral

initiatives in order to keep the social mobilization going on. The article will provide evidence on the links between them and the main ideas derived from their political discourse.

In order to properly explore this phenomenon, in the first section a theoretical framework is developed. The second section provides a short overview of the Catalan case and how the main grievances have evolved over time. The third part analyses how Catalan secessionism has flirted with some issues within the populist discourse, and the fourth section highlights how this has been translated into quite successful mobilization efforts. A short conclusion wraps up the article's main ideas.

Connecting populism and regionalism

Following Mudde's definition, this article understands populism as 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde 2004: 543). This approach points out four relevant features of the populist phenomenon: the existence of two homogeneous groups, the people and the elite; their political antagonism; the shared belief that sovereignty relies on the people; and a Manichean perspective that puts into opposition a positive idea of the people and a stigmatized view of the elites (Stanley 2008; Kriesi and Pappas 2015). In addition, several authors have recently stressed the relevance of populism's illiberal conception of democracy (Zakaria 1997), which mainly refers to the literal adherence to the government by the people and, hence, the repudiation of liberal checks and balances; the hostility towards intermediation and representative politics, while it claims for plebiscitary forms of democracy and direct links between the people and its leaders; and a monolithic view of the *volonté générale* that is hardly compatible with pluralism (Pappas 2014; Kriesi and Pappas 2015).

The literature has highlighted a strong relationship between nationalism and populism, particularly for the radical right (e.g. McGann and Kitschelt 1995; Mondon 2015; see also in this special issue Heinisch et al. 2018). In this vein, nationalism, regionalism, and populism have been branded as thin ideologies that are easy to combine (e.g. Stanley 2008). Following the concepts mentioned above, there are at least two particular ways in which regionalism and populism might be mixed. The first one concerns the transformation of people-centrism into 'the right to decide' and an emphasis on people within a region as the true holders of sovereignty, expressing their will through plebiscitary forms of democracy. The second one adapts its anti-elitism to a multilevel dimension in order to oppose the regionalist demands to the corrupt and/or Machiavellian manners of the state elites, hence opening up a debate on the legitimacy of the state institutions. The expression of this particular combination of ideologies might be purely rhetorical or, as in the Catalan case, it can also be carefully translated into political action through mobilization strategies.

There is, however, a lively debate on the links between regionalist parties and populism, as noted by Gómez-Reino (2002). Some academics point out the populist features of some regionalist movements like the Northern League (Biorcio 1991;

Woods 1995). Mazzoleni (2003) has shown how regionalist parties may accommodate their populist rhetoric to a multilevel political environment, as illustrated by the Lega dei Ticinesi. Similarly, several studies on populism have generally used the Vlaams Blok as a case study (de Vos 2005). On the other hand, Diani (1992: 83) highlighted key differences between the two phenomena: populism has an anti-elitist appeal, while regionalism usually relies on local elites; charismatic leadership might be a facilitator for the rise of populism (Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2014), but this is not necessarily the case for regionalism; and, finally, while populism is usually focused on external threats (e.g. foreigners), regionalism mostly embraces diversity. That is why the linkages among regionalism, populism, and nativism remain controversial: while some parties such as the Vlaams Blok might fit well into all these categories, others are mainly focused on the mobilization of political and economic issues and might hardly qualify as populist (e.g. De Winter et al. 2006).

Catalan 'populist drift' between the economic downturn and political dissatisfaction

In order to provide evidence of a 'populist drift' in the Catalan regionalist movement, we are going to focus on the main grievances and features of the new secessionist discourse, and how they have influenced the collective performances implemented by the main regionalist actors. The empirical analysis concentrates on Catalonia, a European region with high levels of self-government and a particular party system structured around two main cleavages. Since the early 2010s, Catalonia has been in the European political agenda for its widespread and consistent secessionist mobilizations. Beyond that, the Catalan case might be of interest due to the drastic shift of its main political actors, some of them in the regional government, from regionalism towards secessionism. This discursive change and its mobilization efforts might be setting an example not only for other Spanish regions, but for other countries with similar claims in Western Europe.

Catalan politics are mainly structured along the socio-economic and centre–periphery divides. Since the return of democracy, moderation in the left–right divide and dual forms of identification either with Catalonia or Spain have been predominant (Botella 1998). Mainstream contemporary Catalan regionalism has been a wide phenomenon adopted by most of the Catalan parties and traditionally close to a civic-territorial ideal type of nation. The main aim of the movement has been the quest for more devolved powers and economic autonomy. In this sense, the preferred means of achieving these objectives have mostly been through negotiation (although not without conflicts) and pragmatism either within the Catalan parties or between the Catalan and the Spanish governments (Guibernau 2004). That said, even the most subjective forms of regional identification have added a cultural side linked with the use of the Catalan language. Class or birthplace differences (e.g. migrants from the rest of Spain) have traditionally been recognized but downplayed or subjected to assimilation efforts (Conversi 2000). Ethnic, exclusivist, or even violent forms of Catalan regionalism have been marginal, as was also the case for preferences for secession until the 2010s (see Fig. 1). Actually, for more than 3 decades
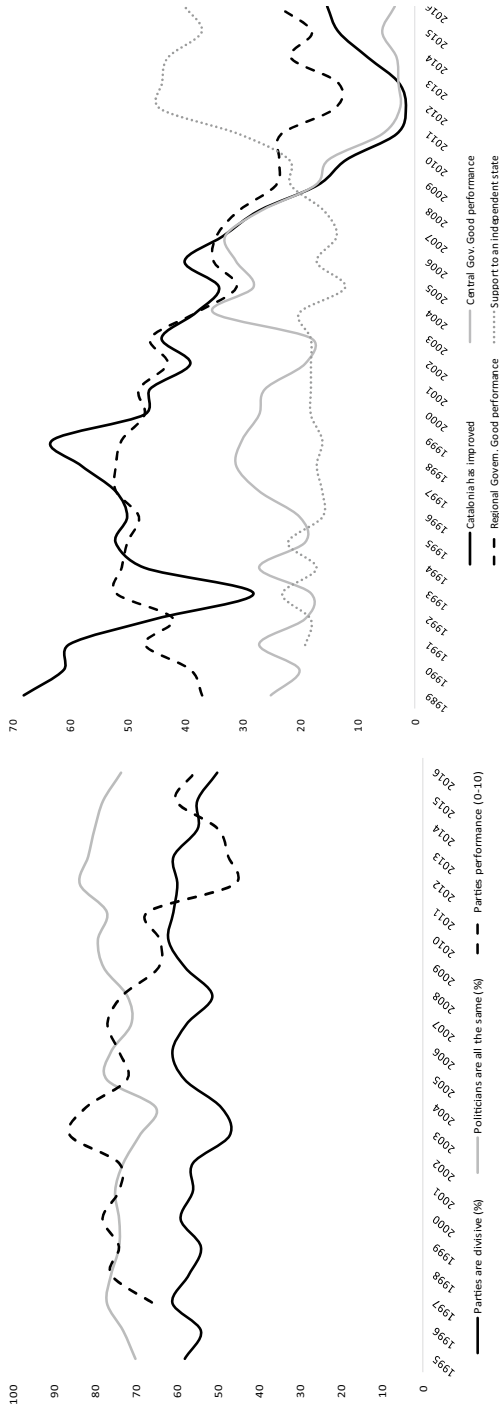
Fig. 1 Attitudes and opinions on politicians, parties, government and independence. *Source*: Authors' own based on data from the ICPS (www.icps.cat)

the most senior figures of the Catalan government have denied having secessionism or independence on their political agendas.

Nevertheless, since the late 1990s, most of these moderate features have changed: the centre–periphery divide has gained intensity and transformed competition among the Catalan parties; the economic crisis and subsequent austerity policies have altered key citizens' opinions and attitudes; and some political scandals have deepened the population's already low evaluation of political parties. The first of these streams of change deals with party politics. The decline of Convergència i Unió (Convergence and Union, CiU) as a dominant party in the late 1990s led to a new and more competitive party system (Barberà et al. 2011). Since the early 2000s, competition revolved around outbidding strategies on the centre–periphery divide (Barrio and Rodríguez-Teruel 2017). For years, the main Catalan parties discussed (and competed around) a reform of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy that was later emulated by other regions such as Andalusia and Valencia. In 2010, several years after the reform was finally approved by a referendum, the Spanish Constitutional Court (CC) ruled against key articles of the Catalan Statute (but not of other regions). That legal opinion was interpreted as a political grievance that pointed out the unwillingness to recognize the Catalan particularities and marked the beginning of a new wave of mass demonstrations and protests in Catalonia (see below), a prominent change in support for independence (see Fig. 1), and a new rise in the outbidding competition between the main regionalist parties.

Another stream of change involves the social and attitudinal effects of the 2008 economic crisis and, more importantly, the impact of the austerity policies implemented by the Spanish and Catalan governments since 2010. In this context, a classical but downplayed grievance of the Catalan nationalist movement has regained prominence: the idea that Spain is somehow underinvesting and economically mistreating Catalonia. This economic grievance, quite typical in multilevel settings, is also related with the attribution of economic and political performances and blame avoidance. Figure 1 shows with a bold line the percentage of Catalans who consider that the political and economic situation of the region has improved during the last 2 years. The figure highlights the dramatic decline starting in 2008. These results are in line with the perceptions of other Spanish regions and South European countries (Llera 2016). Figure 1 also points out how the Catalan government, mostly dominated by regionalist parties since the 1980s, has been very successful in claiming the merit of its achievements and passing the blame for its fiascos to the central government or other regions. As a result, its performance has always been ahead of the national government despite a sharp decline since the late 1990s. That said, blame avoidance and comparative grievances were used not only in Catalan politics. On the contrary, they rather became a typical feature of the Spanish ethno-territorial competition since the early 1980s (Moreno 1995).

Finally, several political corruption scandals have also shocked the Catalan and Spanish public in recent times (Villoria and Jiménez 2012). So far, the sharp increase in the perception of corruption has had limited effects on the attitudes of Catalan citizens about parties. As Fig. 1 shows, a poor opinion of parties and politicians is one of the main features of the political culture, and this has not substantially changed with the crisis (Torcal 2010). However, assessment of Catalan parties'

performance has steadily weakened since the early 2000s, with a sharp decline since 2010. That has not prevented the regionalist forces to use the Spanish corruption scandals as a new form of grievance against the Catalan people.

Populist features of the secessionist discourse

This section will analyse how Catalan secessionist parties and groups have used some key rhetorical arguments closely connected with the main dimensions and varieties of the populist discourse. To narrow the research, the rest of the article will focus on four actors: the two main Catalan parties and two main civic groups. The main parties are the Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català (Democratic European and Catalan Party, PDCAT [Democratic Convergence of Catalonia, CDC, successor party]) and Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (Republican Left of Catalonia, ERC). CDC was the main partner of a long-term ruling coalition in the regional government (1980–2003; 2010–2012). ERC was an older regionalist party created in 1931 that has steadily gained strength, becoming a relevant partner in the Catalan government (2003–2010) and winning the 2014 EU elections in Catalonia. During the last decade, both have embarked on a 'populist drift', embracing the arguments and claims made by other more radical regionalist parties. This has contributed to a transformation of the classical moderate Catalan regionalist discourse and turned it into a more extreme and secessionist rhetoric that has quickly become mainstream. In addition, two civic groups are also taken into account: the long-established Omnium Cultural (OC) and the newly formed Assemblea Nacional Catalana (Catalan National Assembly, ANC). Both have been instrumental in promoting collective action in favour of the secessionist cause since the rise of the movement in the early 2010s. By 2015, the CDC and ERC, with the active participation and support of the ANC and OC, formed a pro-secessionist joint candidature, the so-called Junts pel Si (Together for the Yes, JxSí), with the aim of turning the elections into a sort of independence referendum. They won by a plurality but did not reach 50% of the votes and needed the support of other minor secessionist parties to govern. Hence, despite the fact that there are other political actors, these four constitute the heart of the Catalan secessionist movement. Our analysis will be based on several documents released since 2012 (party platform, electoral campaign material, working papers), and press sources reporting on their political initiatives (interviews, etc.).

The classical populist opposition between the people and the elite (e.g. Mény and Surel 2000) has been adapted to pit the good and naïve Catalan people against the oppressive and corrupt Spanish State. This general argument is presented under different guises. In a broad sense, the external adversary of the Catalan people is usually defined as the Spanish political class, identified with a widely Machiavellian and corrupt political system in the hands of a small bureaucratic and economic elite, and supported by the Spanish media (including the main journals and TV networks). Occasionally, those Catalan politicians (usually linked to statewide political parties) and influential interest groups in Catalonia who are opposed to the secessionist movement (particularly the Catalan business elite) are also presented as an

internal adversary.[1] That might suggest the use of some kind of 'multilevel populist' arguments (Mazzoleni 2003). In any of these alternative versions, the Catalan people always become the subject suffering oppression from the corrupt elites,[2] and the Catalan government appears to be powerless to stop them. Following this argument, the claim for a new state would be the natural reaction of the Catalan people against the Spanish establishment. The reasons underlying the opposition between the Catalan people and the Spanish state and its elites are often expressed with arguments of moral superiority, aiming to make the secessionist claim a moral cause for everyone.[3]

Another paradigmatic example of these arguments is illustrated by the long-term debate over fiscal grievances summarized under the slogan '*Espanya ens roba*' ('Spain steals from us'), which became the battle cry of the independence campaign with the 2008 economic downturn and, more particularly, with the failed negotiations in the early 2010s over a new fiscal deal for Catalonia (Dowling 2014: 229). As stated above, comparative grievances are not new in Catalonia or Spain. However, these ideas were for a long time a common feature of minor left-wing secessionist parties, and their inclusion by the regional mainstream ERC or centre-right parties such as CDC constituted a main change in their rhetoric. Since the 2010s, statements like 'the subsidized Spain is living from the productive Catalonia' have been common mottos for CiU[4] and ERC. An added feature of these campaigns has to do with the bad manners and mocking political style (Moffitt and Tormey 2014) in which they were presented.

Another of the central pleas of the Catalan secessionist movement is the call to follow the people's will. Although other minor parties previously made a claim for a referendum on secession, ERC was the first regional mainstream party to include the plebiscite as a central demand at the 2010 Catalan elections. After a massive demonstration in September 2012, CDC also took up this request. The emphasis on the 'right to decide' or the 'will of the people' was obvious in CDC's electoral motto at the 2012 Catalan elections (see Fig. 2), whereby Artur Mas, the incumbent regional

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[1] In her last speech for the 2017 regional campaign, Marta Rovira, ERC's secretary general, asked for the vote against those who put Oriol Junqueras in jail, namely "the Catalan establishment, the elite, the oligopolies, and the Spanish government". (Source: El Periódico, 20-12-2017 http://www.elperiodico.com/es/politica/20171219-erc-anuncia-relevo-establishment-catalan-del-80-ataca-psc-convergencia-6506435.).

[2] In his speech 2 weeks before the 2014 referendum simulation, Artur Mas identified Mariano Rajoy (Spain's prime minister) as the "real opponent and powerful" enemy of the Catalan people. This idea has been rephrased several times. (Source: http://www.elmundo.es/cataluna/2014/10/15/543e249aca474168738b4575.html.) Mas has also presented CDC as the true party "fighting against the powerful". (Source: http://www.cataloniatoday.cat/article/9-politica/844293-mas-avisa-que-el-24-m-catalunya-es-juga-saber-quanta-gent-dona-suport-al-proces.html.)

[3] It is a commonplace to compare the allegedly higher amount of corruption in the rest of Spain to its lower levels in Catalonia. Carme Forcadell, leader of the ANC, stated that "it is true we have corrupted politicians in Catalonia—something which is employed [by our adversaries] to erode our self-esteem—but there are many more in Spain, so do not pay attention to those that are employing the issue against us". (Source: http://www.naciodigital.cat/noticia/52836/no/som/espanyols/evangeli/segons/forcadell.)

[4] Source: http://politica.e-noticies.es/ciu-compara-la-espana-subsidiada-con-la-cataluna-productiva-78541.html.

Fig. 2 'The will of the people' CDC poster for the 2012 regional election. *Source*: http://www.archi voelectoral.org/campana/2012-espana-regional/308/imagenes/

prime minister, attempted to strengthen his personification of the idea of people's will. Since then, the secessionist movement has defended the idea that only a referendum and plebiscitary elections would allow for such political expression of the people's will, to the detriment of political representation and other kinds of consociational arrangements. The plebiscite has become the moral principle under the idea that 'democracy is principally counting votes'. That is why both Catalan referendum simulations, on 9 November 2014 and 1 October 2017, were maintained despite being declared null and unconstitutional by the CC some weeks before (see next section). A similar situation happened with polemical moves such as the alleged declaration of independence on 27 October 2017.

Furthermore, an appeal is made to the 'people' as the ultimate source of legitimacy (e.g. Canovan 2005: 80; Kriesi and Pappas 2015). This raises an opposition between legitimacy and legality, which has been employed to confront the legal arguments permanently presented by the Spanish institutions. As the Spanish government has rejected the negotiation of terms and conditions for a legal referendum on secession beyond the current constitutional framework, the Catalan secessionist movement has continued to insist on the lack of legitimacy of those public institutions. Hence, the legal resistance of the Spanish institutions to accept unilateral secession would be defeated by the moral legitimacy that the international community would give to the Catalan cause. Recently, the opposition between legitimacy and legality has achieved new and increasing importance as some relevant Catalan representatives have been found guilty of disobeying the CC after sidestepping its orders regarding the referendum simulation held in November 2014 and October 2017 (see next section). In this context, secessionist political leaders have repeatedly insisted on their will to disobey any legal requirement that would contradict the popular mandate. As the ERC's spokesman in the national low chamber stated, 'If we are imprisoned, we will be released by the Catalan people'.[5] In the same vein, the

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[5] Source: http://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20160831/4115172888/tarda-rajoy-debate-investidura.html.

ERC party leader and regional deputy prime minister, Oriol Junqueras, has argued that 'voting is a right that prevails over any law'.[6] That was the same argument that led to the controversial results of the so-called 2017 Catalan referendum and the even more polemical declaration of independence. These statements seem to imply an illiberal version of democracy where the rule of law and the separation of powers are presented as a trade-off with democracy, and where a monolithic conception of the people's will could eventually harm minority rights (Kriesi 2014).

The predominance of the popular will entails praise for the unity of the people. This idea of a nation expressing a unified voice and seeking a common goal is shared by regionalism and populism. At its extremes, this might lead to dismissal, if not denial, of the division of interests and pluralism within society. It might also involve a rejection of the legitimacy of either the external or internal opponents because they are not merely political actors with different priorities or views on the Catalan issue, but adversaries to the people's will (Mudde 2004). Hence, in this Manichean confrontation of ideologies, secession is the only fair outcome of the process, and any other option or compromise would harm the people's interest. This helps to explain the strong polarization of Catalan politics during the last years, as any non-supporter of the secessionist movement has actually been considered an anti-secessionist actor.[7] In this vein, political parties have occasionally been suspicious of dividing the unity of the people and, hence, becoming an obstacle for secession.[8] Independent, non-partisan politicians or activists from secessionist interest groups such as the ANC or OC have eventually been seen as more reliable agents than party members. Similarly, these groups have often been instrumental in promoting initiatives to bring parties, interest groups, and institutions together, and in restoring the unity and cohesion of the movement (see next section).

Likewise, the aim of keeping national unity has downgraded other traditional political divisions in the party competition, particularly the left–right cleavage. Although, once again, these are shared ideas between regionalism and populism, they resemble Laclau's arguments that populism tends to downplay the left–right divide and turn it into a new logic dominated by the fight for hegemony (Laclau 2005). In this sense, Catalan regionalist parties and interest groups have long considered the left–right divide as a threat to the unity of the movement and its mobilization potential, particularly in times of crisis. In order to overcome the social debate, two main arguments have been presented. On the one hand, secession has strong social content, as independence will provide sufficient economical tools to solve most Catalan social and economic problems. This was the explicit argument behind the 2014 campaign 'Ara és l'hora' ('Now is the time'), with several mottos such as 'We want ice cream for dessert everyday' and 'A country where it only rains

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[6] Source: http://www.naciodigital.cat/noticia/74423/junqueras/votar/dret/preval/sobre/qualsevol/llei.

[7] Junqueras stated "the enemies of freedom and democracy are those who fight to prevent Catalonia to hold a vote to decide its future". (Source: http://www.regio7.cat/arreu-catalunya-espanya-mon/2013/09/11/junqueras-diada-demostrara-mon-nostra/243777.html.)

[8] After being forced to resign as prime minister, Mas warned about the role of political parties, as they were likely to get involved in internal fights and competition, becoming an obstacle for the secession. (Source: http://www.diaridegirona.cat/catalunya/2016/03/30/mas-diu-que-proces-complica/774976.html.)

on school days', meaning that there will be no limits on the people's will after independence day. On the other hand, people must focus on the national question, not on social issues, as the latter will favour the status quo and will erode Catalan national aspirations. That is why several calls for dismissing the left–right divide have been made during this time. As a Catalan government spokesman stated, 'the left–right debate makes us Spaniards and subordinate' to Spain.[9] In the same vein, regional Prime Minister Artur Mas has often argued that 'independence is neither left-wing nor right-wing, it is for everybody'.[10]

Key secessionist claims, grievances, and political mobilization

This section will highlight the links between the main grievances, the core arguments behind the discourse of the Catalan secessionist parties and groups (unity of the Catalan people, the right to decide, etc.), and their mobilization efforts. The repertoire ranges from the classical modes of performance (electoral mobilization, mass demonstrations, or some institutional actions) to new societal forms such as referenda simulations.

Massive demonstrations

From the 1980s until the 2000s, demonstrations in favour of independence were testimonial. However, for the secessionist movement, massive demonstrations have been a key instrument to reinforce the messages of unity and even of defiance towards a Spanish state that supposedly denies or ignores the democratic right to decide. In this sense, they have become an icon and a practical representation of the whole 'people of Catalonia', in contrast to the Spanish political elites. This is why they also have given much relevance to the figures of participants, to mirror the idea of 'millions' of citizens marching for the aim.[11]

A big turning point in the process of secessionist mobilization was the 2010 rally after the CC ruling annulling several articles of the reformed Catalan Statute of Autonomy of 2006 and (as pointed out below) widely interpreted as a strong political grievance. The polarization and media attention over this issue in both Catalonia and Spain, the disputed legitimacy of the CC members, and the watering down of key aspects of the reform (e.g. Catalonia's definition as a nation) led to a massive demonstration of thousands of people organized by OC and supported by all Catalan

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[9] Statement by Francesc Homs, regional government spokesman, 12 October 2014. (Source: http://www.ara.ad/premium/tema_del_dia/Francesc-Homs-alhora-volent-ho-saconsegueix_0_1264673554.html.)

[10] Speech 16th June 2015. Source: https://cat.elpais.com/cat/2015/06/16/catalunya/1434486492_301887.html.

[11] In fact, figures about participants have always been very controversial, as different sources have given highly fluctuating estimates. For instance, at the 2012 demonstration, the organizers reported 2 million attendees and the regional police estimated 1.5 million, while the national police and some non-partisan sources reduced the amount to 600,000 or even lower. (Source: http://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-diada-2017-grafico-intento-representar-objetivamente-evolucion-asistentes-20170909085120.html.)

parties except the PP and Ciudadanos. The slogan 'We are a nation, we decide', however, was still ambiguous on the issue of independence. Shortly after the 2010 rally, the political debate quickly shifted towards the economic crisis, and Catalan parties focused on preparations for the upcoming 2010 Catalan regional elections.

The ANC inception by 2012 made a huge impact on the secessionist movement. The ANC was instrumental in reframing the economic crisis as a new step in the centre–periphery conflict, and it called, with the support of other groups such as OC, for a big demonstration on 11 September 2012 with the unambiguously pro-independence slogan 'Catalonia, new European State'. Both groups then organized all types of meetings at the local level and through social media to support the demonstration. The event received a significant amount of media attention mostly because some regionalist parties unsuccessfully tried to downgrade or change its main aim. At the end, the rally was supported by some but not all regionalist parties, which caused disagreements within the moderate ones such as the Socialists. The peaceful demonstration held in Barcelona gathered hundreds of thousands of individuals. One year later, by September 2013, the ANC and other secessionist groups emulated the human chain organized in 1989 in the Baltic states. In an extraordinary display of strength, the groups successfully organized a 400-km human chain from tip to tip of Catalonia and gathered hundreds of thousands of people in favour of secession. The event captured major international and regional media attention (Crameri 2015).

Since 2014, the demonstrations slightly changed their orientation and became more in line with the aims of the main secessionist parties. They were called in order to mobilize support for the referendum simulations promoted by the Catalan government (2014 and 2017) or for the regional elections (2015). Despite a slight decrease of people attending the secessionist demonstrations, they still represented symbols of unity and determination.

In addition, following the October 2017 referendum, the separatist movement held two partially successful general strikes: one supported by the regional government and the other organized by a minor secessionist union without the support of the main labour organizations. Since the 2017 referendum, the grievances and mobilizations have been focused on the liberation of all the leading figures imprisoned by the judiciary.

Referendum simulations

The mass mobilization repertoire of the Catalan secessionist movement has also introduced new performances, the main novelty being the introduction of referendum simulations. The two more relevant such simulations were held on 9 November 2014 and 1 October 2017, although they were preceded by other local ones between 2009 and 2011.[12] Like massive demonstrations, referendum simulations highlight

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[12] The first initiative was held in Premià de Mar in 2009 and then was replicated in several other Catalan towns, supported by the local representatives and organized by pro-independence groups. This initiative was not accepted in the major cities, and the participation rates were also highly asymmetric (Muñoz and Guinjoan 2013, pp. 50–51). It is estimated that around 800,000 people participated in all of them. The last and more important of these was the one held in Barcelona a few weeks before the 2011 local

the expression of the people's voice but also take the argument a step forward: as expressions of civil disobedience they force the Spanish institutions to intervene, hence stressing the already stated clash between the (legitimate) general will of the Catalan people against the 'corrupt', 'violent', 'repressive' Spanish (illegitimate) law. This has been made even more obvious when some Catalan representatives have been sentenced by the courts for leading and organizing such events.

After the 2012 Catalan elections, an agreement between CDC and ERC stated that a consultation on independence had to be held during 2014. Shortly afterwards, the Catalan Parliament made a request to the Spanish Parliament for the power to hold a referendum, which was denied. The Catalan Parliament then decided to pass a law on referendums and public consultations that was partially suspended by the CC. The Catalan government then shifted to organizing a non-binding consultation that upset ERC and the ANC. In order to avoid its suspension, the consultation was formally called by the government but organized with the assistance of 40,000 volunteers. The government denied any real participation in the process, but this was a highly contested issue. That is why this non-binding consultation was also suspended by the CC. In a controversial move, the Catalan government decided then to disobey the CC ruling and proceed with the consultation. In the wake of the consultation, all parties and secessionist groups actively campaigned to mobilize the population to attend the referendum simulation. The active opposition of the Spanish government and the resultant media attention favoured the mobilization. The 9 November 2014 consultation was attended by 2,344,828 people (under 40% of the population), 1,897,271 of whom voted yes to Catalonian independence. This non-binding vote had a low turnout but was deemed a success by the regional media.[13] By early 2017, the former regional prime minister and other regional ministers were barred from office for 2 years for their disobedience to the CC ruling.

The referendum on 1 October 2017 followed a similar process, although there were also some relevant differences. The main one was its formal nature, as the coalition government (formed by CDC successor party and ERC) decided to conduct the process in a legalistic manner, aiming to produce a binding vote. Despite the CC having also declared this referendum unconstitutional, the vote was finally held amid police repression in some voting precincts and several protests from supporters. The participation rate was 43% (2,266,498) of the population, with 2,044,038 voting yes (92%). Moreover, the organization of this referendum also relied on a wide and new repertoire of protest: families occupied a vast number of schools where the voting was to take place, and people held in custody ballot boxes and other electoral material (ballots), etc.

Footnote 12 (continued)

elections. Although 240,000 people supported independence, the overall participation rate was very low (18%).

[13] The results provided by the regional government may be consulted at www.participa2014.cat. The level of turnout is an estimate by the media, as the government never provided official results.

Electoral mobilization

Catalan political parties and secessionist groups have also tried to transform electoral competition into a broader campaign for independence. Hence, they have presented recent elections in a plebiscitarian mode in order to facilitate the expression of the people about their future as a nation against the oppression of the Spanish institutions. Their efforts have not always been successful. At the level of national, European, and local elections, this plebiscitarian mode was weakened by other political dynamics. That was also the case with the 2010 regional elections, when the economic crisis became one of the most predominant issues despite the efforts of other minor secessionist parties.

The 2012 regional campaign was the first occasion that revolved around secessionist issues, as two of the main regionalist parties—CiU and ERC—suggested proposals for self-determination. However, the 2012 campaign also discussed CiU's implementation of harsh austerity policies. The 2015 and 2017 regional votes were more successful attempts to transform a regular election into a sort of plebiscite on independence. The 2015 campaign was preceded by the aim of forging a single candidature with all secessionist parties and key interest groups such as the ANC and OC. Although that proved not to be possible, an electoral agreement was built between CDC, ERC, and other secessionist parties and interest groups under the name Junts pel Sí (Together for the Yes, JxSi) as we explained. That candidature did succeed in framing the election as an exceptional event with just two sides. However, these efforts were distorted by the presence of other regionalist parties such as the Socialists and Catalunya Sí Que Es Pot (Catalonia, Yes We Can) defending self-determination but not independence. The 2017 campaign presented very similar dynamics but was affected by the exceptional consequences of events that occurred in the previous weeks (referendum simulation, declaration of independence, arrest of leading secessionist figures) and also featured a division between the two major secessionist parties (ERC and CDC successor party now transformed into Junts per Catalunya). Both 2015 and 2017 elections registered the highest turnout rate since the 1980s, but the results were somehow controversial: the secessionist parties did not achieve 50% of the votes although they kept a narrow (absolute) majority in seats (a constant in the Catalan parliament since 1984).

Institutional actions

As stated above, since 2012 several secessionist initiatives have been launched at the institutional level, aiming to show that both the legislative and the executive branches were taking steps towards secession. In this sense, the Catalan secessionist leaders have tended to behave with a populist political style characterized by acting decisively and urgently, favouring short-term and swift decisions that responded to the 'historical moments' that Catalan people were heading (Moffitt and Tormey 2014: 391–392). Their institutional actions have also aimed to stress the connections with the grassroots and the people through collective decisions mirroring unity and

internal cohesiveness. Hence, 'national agreements' and 'declarations' have usually been tools to express these goals.

The first such expression was a Declaration of Sovereignty made by the Catalan Parliament in order to announce the beginning of a so-called National Transition towards Independence. The parliament selected an advisory committee comprising several academics who wrote 19 reports. The Catalan government also promoted the so-called National Pact for the Right to Decide, designed to build and display a wide consensus among parties, institutions, and civil society on the way to the 2014 referendum. By 2017, a new 'National Pact for the Referendum' had replaced the previous one.

A previous attempt to build and show institutional consensus on secession at the local level was the forging of the 'Association of Towns for the Independence' (AMI) by 2011. This interest group brought together 787 out of 947 Catalan local councils and other supra-municipal institutions. So far, however, some of the most relevant cities, such as Barcelona, have not been represented. The AMI has recently promoted the so-called Assembly of Elected Representatives, aimed to work as an alternative Catalan legislature in case the regional MPs were to be barred from office by the CC in the final steps of secession.

By September 2017, the Catalan parliament had passed the referendum and other transition laws. Although these were approved without the opposition parties and later were ruled unconstitutional by the CC, they were framed as evidence of secessionist unity and determination against the Spanish state and as responses to the 'democratic mandate' given by the people in the regional elections. The same happened later on with the organization of the referendum and the declaration of independence in October 2017.

Conclusions

This article aimed to illustrate a case where regionalism can feed populist strategies in mainstream parties, in a context of increasing political and economic dissatisfaction, particularly when this fosters the perception of both rooted and new grievances. We illustrated this argument with the case of the Catalan secessionist movement, focusing on the 'populist drift' adopted by its main regionalist parties, mirrored by their political discourse and their repertoire of collective action. Our first main point stressed the evolution from a traditional, pragmatic, regionalist discourse towards a new populist framework characterized by several important traits: the opposition of the Catalan people to the Spanish state and its political class; a constant appeal to the will of the Catalan people; an emphasis on direct and plebiscitary forms of democracy; and the predominance of popular legitimacy against legality (leading eventually to civil disobedience). At its worst, this approach could favour the spread of an illiberal perspective on democracy, to the detriment of both liberal checks and balances and the representative mechanisms linking voters and institutions. Our second main point illustrated how the secessionist movement has adapted its actions in the constant search to reflect this populist mental map and to display the firm determination of the Catalan people to exercise their 'right to decide'. Hence, the populist

message has been reflected in several massive demonstrations, referendum simulations, the attempt to transform elections into plebiscitarian votes, and the adoption of a populist style at the institutional level.

However, as in other cases of populist parties, the Catalan secessionist movement displays other features that do not easily fit within the populist framework. Hence, the public discourse of the main Catalan secessionist parties and organizations can hardly be identified with anti-immigration issues or explicit nativist claims—to mention just two issues often associated with populism as manifested in other countries and regions. Unsurprisingly, the definition of the 'Catalan people' is often vague and blurred, as any attempt to set boundaries to define political or ethnical boundaries has become highly controversial and counter-productive for the secessionist movement. Although the opposition between Catalonia and Spain has occasionally led some partisans to dismiss those Catalan voters who do not support independence (especially those born in the rest of Spain), considering them simply as non-Catalan, 'invaders', or outsiders,[14] such statements have usually been disapproved by the party leaders. In addition, the main 'threat' to the 'Catalan people' is essentially posed by the Spanish establishment and its elites, not by other levels of governance (as, for instance, the EU) or by people from other countries. Notwithstanding, 'Euro-scepticism' started to emerge after the lack of support for the October 2017 declaration of independence that was displayed by EU institutions and European governments.[15]

Moreover, the leadership in the Catalan secessionist movement can hardly be represented solely by a charismatic leading figure, despite the attempts by some party leaders to perform as the main representatives of the whole movement (as shown in Fig. 2). These attempts have usually been contained by the tendency towards collective leadership emerging from both the political parties and key interest groups such as the ANC. Nevertheless, the evolution of the process along 2017 contributed to reinforce the personalization around Puigdemont, specially after its escape to Brussels and the making of the personal candidature for the regional election in December 2017.

Similarly, the potential illiberal threat is not present in the real day-to-day life of the Catalan regional institutions. Still, some parliamentary or executive decisions aiming to promote a binding referendum of independence have aimed to break with the (Spanish) constitutional framework. Although they can hardly be qualified as anti-democratic, they pose legitimate doubts about their liberal nature. Indeed, the

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[14] As stated by Carme Forcadell, the ANC's main leader, in 2014, "Our adversary is the Spanish state. Let's be clear about something: the Spanish parties in Catalonia, such as Citizens and the Popular Party—that should not be called PP of Catalonia but PP in Catalonia—are our adversaries, the rest is the Catalan people". Some years later, when Forcadell had become the parliament's speaker, she regretted these words. (Source: eldiario.es, 26 September 2017: http://www.eldiario.es/politica/Forcadell-PP-Ciudadanos-adversarios-Cataluna_0_690831925.html.)

[15] After the declaration of independence, support for the EU among pro-independence supporters declined slightly. Former regional prime minister Carles Puigdemont recently proposed the possibility of a vote about the EU in Catalonia, although the other parties and regionalist leaders did not back the proposal.

legislation passed in September 2017 calling for the referendum and organizing a new institutional framework afterwards included some controversial aspects considered contradictory to liberal values.[16]

In the end, this shift of Catalan politics poses questions as to what extent this rhetoric—based as it is on grievances, the will of the people, and opposition to the Spanish state and its elites—is an inherent feature of populism or is a new (and more radical) form of nationalism or regionalism. Does all regionalism contain a hidden populist dimension ready to emerge, or does it sometimes simply comprise phenomena that converge under quite specific circumstances? The Catalan case seems to be closer to the second answer, but there is definitely a need for more research to be carried out in this area.

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[16] Among other controversial aspects, the transition law reinforced the prime minister's powers to appoint judges and implemented a unilateral breakup with the Spanish public administration and institutions. (Source: El País, 28 August 2017: https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/08/28/actualidad/1503904357_215435.html.)

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