Understanding local democracy in Catalonia: From formally institutionalized processes to self-organized social referenda on independence

ABSTRACT
This article identifies and describes key aspects of two movements that sought to empower local democracy in Catalonia from 2008 to 2010 and they are useful to understand the political process leading to the informal referendum on independence held on 9 November 2014. First, it analyses the institutional actions of the Catalan government to promote local democracy in 2008. Second, it focuses on the organizational processes of the local referenda on Catalan independence held in 2010, conducted exclusively by self-organized and ideologically oriented citizens in each locality. In 2008, there were 874 instruments created by local governments to promote the participatory process, while from 2009 to 2010 more than 500 localities held local referenda on independence. Both movements are extensive enough to be interpreted as an important turning point in recent Catalan history. This article

KEYWORDS
local democracy
independence
participation
local self-government
public policies
Catalonia
will link both processes by highlighting their main features, tracing their historical roots and explaining their relationships, in order to gain a better understanding of the political conditions that finally led to the government-organized independence referendum in 2014.

INTRODUCTION

On 9 November 2014, the Spanish autonomous community of Catalonia held an informal consultation on independence. This participatory process, strongly resembling a formal referendum, was organized by the Catalan government. More than 2.3 million people participated, of which over 1.8 million voted for independence. However, this current political scenario is not a flash in the pan; it has deep political roots. The path leading to, and the origins of, this unofficial referendum begin with two prior facts: the policy driven by the Generalitat de Catalunya (the Catalan government) for empowering local democracy, thus making citizens more politically engaged and conscious of their political power; and the self-organization by local areas of referenda on Catalan independence, in which more than 800,000 people voted for secession.

Local institutionalized participation and self-organized processes of local referenda on Catalan independence could be seen as two clear expressions of local democracy and civic engagement in the country. However, while the first were clearly framed in the public policy process, closely related to local government decision-making on issues such as reorganizing public space or local budgeting, the second was exclusively organized by civic groups and had a complex target: both to encourage a vote in favor of Catalan independence from Spain and to change the societal perception of secession.

Local democracy is a vast and complicated concept that includes a wide range of distinct features. Theoretically, local democracy in municipalities allows citizens effective control of their political agenda and the decisions that are made (government of the people), as well as providing policies, services and facilities in agreement with the needs and demands of their citizens (government for the people). Within these parameters, citizens should not be excluded from political decision-making processes (Mouritzen et al. 2009). To better understand the final vote on 9 November, attention needs to be focused on manifestations of local democracy in order to capture some of the reasons and motivations that led the Catalan government to hold an informal referendum on independence. While participatory processes are guided by local governments, the local referenda were self-organized by civil society. Nevertheless, we must assume that some linkages between the two can be made. How do those political phenomena interact? Can we find relevant features in their coincidence over time and space? How were the local referenda affected by the fact of being held in towns where institutional channels for participation already exist? In other words, does institutionalized participation have an impact on local referenda on independence?

This article is organized as follows. The first part sets out the theoretical framework for the research topic; the second part explains the institutional and legal structure in which local participation and local referenda are embedded; and the third part describes the situation for each of the processes in Catalonia, identifying their main features. As a result it will demonstrate some linkages between the topics analysed and finally it will discuss the interactions with the vote on 9 November 2014. The empirical background is limited to...
the period 2008–2011, during which time the policy of participation and the whole process of local referenda were being implemented.

LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND PRO-INDEPENDENCE ATTITUDES
IN CATALONIA

One of the prominent research fields in local government is related to the growing pressures to incorporate participatory and direct forms of democracy (Blanco and Gomà 2002; Font and McLaverty 2003; Subirats 2001). In the Catalan case, the occurrence of a significant number of local referenda, which have helped put Catalan independence at the top of the political agenda, has also invigorated the debate about local democracy (Muñoz and Guinjoan 2010; Muñoz et al. 2011). The pressure to reinforce local democracy and the extension of political participation had two different objectives: to improve the limited participation in elections (especially local elections) on the one hand, and to boost the civic capacity to work in favour of Catalan independence on the other. However, both processes can be seen as ‘schools of democracy’ that had an impact on individuals’ political consciousness, and therefore on the political mood leading up to 9 November.

The turnout in local elections in Catalonia has increasingly dropped, and has become structurally low in comparison with Spain as a whole.1 Furthermore, political relations between Catalonia and Spain have become even more difficult over time. Figure 1 shows the decline in participation in local elections (through increasing rates of abstention), and Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of people who prefer a particular institutional design for Catalonia: independence, a federal state or an autonomous community.

This is clearly a complicated scenario in which two main patterns can be identified: first, abstention in local elections is becoming a political issue to be solved by institutionalized channels; second, people’s mindsets and beliefs are evidently evolving to more extreme positions regarding Spain’s constitutional architecture. Two ‘windows of opportunity’2 seem to have opened. Regarding the institutional context, it would seem reasonable for politicians to initiate strategies to bring citizens back into the democratic process. In terms of the appearance of the ‘independence option’ in the polls, there would also seem to be a good opportunity for those who are pro-independence to take advantage of this new scenario in the relations between Catalonia and Spain. The first

Figure 1: Abstention (%) in local elections in Spain and Catalonia. Source: Data from Ministerio del Interior, Spain.

1 Local elections are held at the same time all over Spain. It is true that participation in local elections is decreasing in aggregate terms, but this is nuanced by the size of the municipality (in small municipalities we find high rates of participation, whereas in large cities abstention is more likely).

2 We take here Kingdon’s concept of political moments that allow certain ideas to arrive at a stage where ‘something can be done about it’, facilitating public debate and political intervention (1995).
step was the organization of up to 540 local referenda on independence: ‘the increased level of support for a pro-independence stance facilitated the suitable context for the emergence of the first popular referendum in Arenys de Munt and its subsequent spread throughout the rest of the territory’ (Muñoz and Guinjoan 2013: 50). These informal referenda on independence were held from September 2009 to April 2011. These processes challenged previous theories of collective action, showing an impressive capacity for societal self-organization.

The need to renew the decision-making process at the local level is driven by the idea of improving polities in terms of both efficiency and perception. Putnam (2000) is a leading author in this area, with his notion of social capital. Concerning benefits for the community, he has argued that the efficiency of local government and the economic development of an area may be strongly influenced by the active engagement of the local citizenry in community affairs (Putnam et al. 1993). Following Putnam, it can be said that the social capital of a community will increase as people bring deliberation to their civic activities (2000). According to his logic, this allows more control over elected representatives; it increases accountability and political culture; and it builds up a better perception of politics (Oliver 2001).

The defining idea of democracy is that the people govern their own affairs. Participation thereby reflects a population’s self-government. Both the local referenda and the local participation in decision-making from 2008 to 2011 certainly invigorated these democratic ideals in people’s minds.

**BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF A HOMOGENEOUS LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

Both the Spanish and Catalan local governmental systems represent the classic Napoleonic structure, framed by a shared and distinctive set of legal regulations. Fragmentation and small constituencies are also features of the local system. Catalonia has 947 municipalities, while Spain has 8115. Within this legal and political framework, effective participation is not an easy target.

The legal bases for local participation are scattered through multiple statutes. From a legal point of view, local governments are considered as
And, of course, it only affects local powers.

Mainly belonging to civil society, and formally away from politics.

Each of these instruments fulfils some of the need to activate public participation, and allows citizens to express different points of view. Consultations are like referenda, but are at the local level and exclusively related to local issues. These instruments need to be approved and authorized by the Spanish government. Participatory organisms are conceived as stable mechanisms that allow for the regular participation of citizens in different thematic areas, and at different stages of the public policy process. Participatory procedures are non-stable mechanisms (or ‘ad hoc’ processes) that allow public participation during a delimited and restricted period. These two last instruments can be binding or not, depending only on the political will of the council but we will analyse them on equal terms. Despite all of these regulations, each local council has the autonomy to decide what kind of instruments it will implement, at which stage of the policy process, in which area and with what political effects. In sum, there is widespread regulation offering local governments a broad scope of decision in order to promote local democracy. In 2004 an agency called Direcció General de Participació Ciutadana (General Directorate for Citizen Participation) was created, whose mission is to promote public participation in the design, implementation and control of government policies. However, this agency does not have any real coercive capacity over local governments.

None of the instruments for public participation, however, was used to hold the 540 local referenda for independence. It needs to be highlighted that all of them were, legally speaking, held outside of any legal framework. This is why almost all the referenda could not count on the official support of local governments. The specific question addressed to citizens was: ‘Està d’acord que Catalunya esdevingui un Estat de dret, independent, democràtic i social, integrat a la Unió Europea?’/‘Are you in favour of Catalonia becoming an independent, democratic and social state in law, integrated into the European Union?’ Obviously, the question is far more related to international rather than local considerations. This fact led to strong opposition from the state government (Spain), and also a legal prohibition on local politicians directly helping in the organization of these referenda.

Moreover, these processes could not take advantage of the traditional guarantees related to institutionalized democracy. The organizers did not have access to the electoral census, nor to the official data on people living in each municipality. This is because the nature of those referenda could not be assimilated into the formal, legal, democratic system: basic political rights such as voter secrecy, the one-person, one-vote rule, transparency, publicity, neutrality of the process and guarantee of impunity were not protected. Thus, because the rule of law is not assured, the process is far from being ‘democratic’ in legal terms. The local referenda were coordinated by a non-elected board, created on an ad hoc basis and orchestrated by interested individuals, most of whom belonged to the pro-independence movement.
6. Briefly, a group of Catalan members of parliament asked in 2013 in the Congreso de los Diputados in Madrid to for authorization to hold referenda, which was denied; afterwards, a Catalan law to hold non-binding referenda was passed, but was contested by the Spanish government in the Constitutional Court. Finally, the consultation process was also challenged in the Constitutional Court by the Spanish government.

7. This was organized by the Generalitat de Catalunya, but implemented by more than 45,000 volunteers, despite the second prohibition issued by the Constitutional Court.

8. This article would not have been possible without the data provided by the Carles Pi-Sunyer Foundation.

9. Planning and urbanism are two main topics where local participation has traditionally been fostered by the arrival of democracy.

Figure 3: Evolution of organisms and processes in absolute numbers over the period 1978–2008. Source: Data from Carles Pi-Sunyer Foundation.

In 2014, after a heated political struggle between the Catalan government and the Spanish government, the vote held on 9 November in fact resembled those local referenda: it did not fulfil any of the aforementioned guarantees and rights. However, it did have, in people’s eyes and minds, the symbolism of a real vote on independence because it was coordinated centrally by the Catalan government.

IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTERIZATION OF PARTICIPATORY MOVEMENTS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The creation of institutional participatory instruments really picked up in the late 1990s. Until then, participatory processes were not part of local political agendas (see Figure 3). In absolute numbers, 874 instruments of public participation were implemented at the local level from 1978 to 2008, in 296 municipalities of more than 500 inhabitants. In fact, if we look at the period from 1978 to 1997, we find that a mean of 1.52 participatory processes was created each year. However, if we take the mean from 1998 to 2008, it increases to 25.8 participatory instruments created each year.

In terms of the nature of these participatory instruments, it should be noted that 83.3% are consultative in nature; 34.7% are deliberative; 21% allow citizens to decide together with their elected representative; and, finally, only 2.9% are decisional in nature. Moreover, heterogeneity is the dominant factor, and the use of these instruments does not seem to demonstrate any clear pattern of specialization, except for local participation in planning and urbanism. Another important factor, alongside policy domains and public involvement, is the territorial scope of these participation instruments. The territorial scope of the Catalan participatory processes is usually focused on a given city (rather than at a neighbourhood level), possibly to prevent ‘not in my back yard’ (NIMBY) effects (Medir 2012).

BUILDING THE PROCESS FOR LOCAL REFERENDA ON INDEPENDENCE

Local referenda on independence took place over a period of eighteen months from 2009 to 2011. These processes were conceived and organized by small groups that were in favour of Catalan independence. They originated in
Arenys de Munt, a small town near Barcelona, on 13 September 2009, where
the mayor and other political groups in the town supported the organization
of the first referenda on Catalan independence. After that, more than 500
municipalities throughout Catalonia organized similar referenda in several
different waves over time. The last, and most relevant, was the one held in
Barcelona on 10 April 2011.

This civic movement involved more than half of the 947 municipalities of
Catalonia, and thousands of volunteers organized the processes in towns
and boroughs, without any other benefit other than the self-determination
of voting over Catalan independence.10 They worked only to allow people to
express their opinion regarding the independence option. This civic movement
represented an evolution in methods of political participation: it revealed an
innovative instrument for collective action, and a surprising capacity of civil
society to self-organize.

To understand this complex but well-organized movement, it is necessary
to look back in depth to two crucial moments. The first was the constitution
of the first coalition government in 2003, a coalition of three parties named
‘tripartit’ in Catalan, which was ideologically left-wing.11 One of the main
objectives of that government was the creation of a new Statute for Catalonia
(a new ‘Estatut d’Autonomia’) through which a debate on the relationship
between Spain and Catalonia would be placed on the political agenda. The
political process for changing that relationship is the second moment that
empowered the local referenda. The whole process of negotiating this law,
its approval and its final submission to the Constitutional Court provided the
perfect environment to reinforce the independence movement.12

Furthermore, the political process is linked to two other independence
campaign events promoted by the Plataforma pel Dret de Decidir, an associa-
tion of individuals who are ‘for the right to decide’, on 18 February 2006
and 1 December 2007. The group collected signatures calling on the Catalan
Parliament to hold a referendum on Catalan secession. They also organized the
so-called 10,000-person march to Brussels to call international and European
Union attention to the Catalan issue. This demonstration was linked to the
first consultation in Arenys de Munt, where the four main objectives were:

1. To show the world that the Catalan nation is prepared to exercise the right
to self-determination and independence.
2. To promote the call for a binding referendum on independence.
3. To strengthen the citizen networks that afterwards would support the
binding referendum on independence.
4. To encourage popular participation and direct democracy.

The whole process is best understood as a relevant initiative within the
strategies of pro-independence stakeholders. They were looking to place
their demands on the Catalan as well as the Spanish political agenda. It
was a movement to push forward parties and institutions, while expanding
the knowledge and reality of their claim for Catalan independence. Broadly
speaking, the Catalan movement in favour of independence works on two
confluent paths, ‘state-building’ and ‘nation-building’, the latter representing
the claim for Catalan’s unique and differentiated history, culture, language
and myths (Muñoz et al. 2011).

Regarding the role of the Spanish state in this process, it must be stressed
that its response was far from complacent. The Spanish media (especially those

---

10 In fact, this movement could be qualified as “romantic”. No participants received
any economic benefit (they were not paid) and the organization was completely
amateur and philanthropic.

11 After 23 years of continuous governance by the right-wing nationalist party (CiU),
in 2003, for the first time, a coalition formed by the Socialist Party (PSOE), the Republican
Party (ERC) and the Communist-Green Party (IC-V) reached an agreement to govern in
Catalonia.

12 The Estatut d’Autonomia is the highest law in Catalonia, and is like the constitution
of a federal state. It is approved by the Cortes Generales of Spain and submitted to referenda
of the Catalan people. It is a very special law that establishes the framework conducting
relations between Catalonia and the rest of Spain.

13 The whole negotiation process between Spain and Catalonia to give birth to the
new Estatuto was very problematic. For a brief overview, see http://
elpais.com/elpais/
2010/06/29actualidad/
1277799442_850215.html
close to the right-wing PP, or People’s Party) reacted strongly against the local secessionist referenda: anti-referenda opinion articles abounded, boycott campaigns against Catalan products were promoted, criticism of public policies was constant, and the association of this movement with violent terrorism was widespread in journals and television programmes. Nevertheless, this produced the contrary effect in Catalonia and in fact exacerbated the situation: the more people knew about the referenda, the more they wanted to participate.

The administrative power of the Spanish state, through the public prosecutor, forced Catalan local governments not to cooperate in any way with those organizing local referenda. However, these referenda were organized only by civil society, thus it was not possible to ban any of them. Broadly speaking, the organizers of each local referendum were ad hoc boards, or a mixture of individual people and previously existing organizations (Muñoz et al. 2011; Muñoz and Guinjoan 2013). They described the manoeuvring of central government as proof of the centralist soul of Spain, and claimed that there is no difference between the PP and the PSC (the Socialists’ Party of Catalonia) regarding the constitutional architecture. In this sense, the final national referendum held on 9 November 2014 was also, legally speaking, forbidden. However, as it was also implemented by volunteers and civil society – but this time directly coordinated by the Generalitat – it still took place, even against the will of the PP government at the central level.

Thus, after many years, the Catalan independence movement has found a new form of collective action that has proved to be very powerful. The local referenda were an innovation that involved a much broader section of Catalan society than had been expected. Traditional demonstrations or protest events had rarely demonstrated such capacity-building. This may be because the act of voting is regarded as an easy way to participate and represents the most democratic act of all. Voting on something represents the most natural form of political expression (Muñoz and Guinjoan 2010).

The importance of those local referenda lies primarily in two aspects. First, the collective process of community organization generated a movement that showed a very unusual capacity for mobilization, which was almost unprecedented. Moreover, the process also represented a kind of pro-civil rights movement. We have to take into account the fact that the organizers allowed people over 16 years old to vote (two years below the legal age) and also foreigners. This was able to happen because they allowed anyone who could prove that they were on the official local census to vote. Second, the turnout achieved was remarkable, bearing in mind the legal and administrative limitations. The same restrictions on voting were in place for the referendum on 9 November 2014, thus the local referenda from 2009 to 2011 can be perceived as a first step towards gaining a political consciousness and civic training.

It is very difficult to find other examples of self-organized social movements that, in times of social and political stability – that is, outside transitions, riots or insurrections – are able to mobilize and coordinate so many people for political purposes, over such a length of time.

In absolute numbers, the overall process of local referenda had the features outlined in Table 1.

It is significant that almost a fifth of the people eligible to vote actually did so. Moreover, 92 per cent of those who voted selected the ‘yes’ option. The landslide win for independence might have been predicted given the nature of the organizers, since they basically mobilized those who were already

14 As examples, see http://foros.abc.es/cgi-local/forosabc/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic&f=31&t=003088, http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLB6A6C18F3E8C3F9
15 The accepted form of proof of registration included a national identity card, driving license or an official confirmation of registration.
16 I am very grateful to Jordi Muñoz, who kindly provided me with the 'official' data from these local referenda. As the coordinators of the whole movement erased the data from the Internet, it was impossible to find such data except on Wikipedia. Jordi Muñoz's data are a copy from those who entered the information, so they can be considered accurate and robust.
However, it is true that we have to look into this in more detail to understand the evolution of these referenda. They were held at different moments in time, and they present distinctive features from one wave to another, as Figure 4 shows.

There is an overall pattern of decreasing participation – and probably interest – as the process evolved over time. The First Waves saw much greater participation than later rounds. At the same time, the ‘yes’ vote seemed to lose influence over time, while the ‘no’ vote increased.

**Table 1: Main features of local referenda for independence.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number of municipalities</th>
<th>Suffrage (number of people eligible to vote)</th>
<th>Votes (number of people who voted)</th>
<th>% participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 September 2009</td>
<td>Arenys de Munt (1)</td>
<td>6517</td>
<td>2,659</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 December 2009</td>
<td>Second Wave (168)</td>
<td>702,072</td>
<td>192,460</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 January 2010</td>
<td>Third Wave (79)</td>
<td>290,012</td>
<td>61,232</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24–25 April 2010</td>
<td>Fourth Wave (213)</td>
<td>1,327,817</td>
<td>231,704</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 May 2010</td>
<td>Sabadell (1)</td>
<td>173,426</td>
<td>24,061</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 June 2010</td>
<td>Fifth Wave (48)</td>
<td>484,310</td>
<td>68,178</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July to December 2010</td>
<td>Sixth Wave (19)</td>
<td>209,196</td>
<td>17,642</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 January 2011</td>
<td>Terrassa (1)</td>
<td>176,975</td>
<td>20,168</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 April 2011</td>
<td>Barcelona/others (10)</td>
<td>1,505,084</td>
<td>262,202</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>540</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,875,409</strong></td>
<td><strong>880,306</strong></td>
<td><strong>19.1</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Participation mean (%) | 19.1 |
| Yes %                  | 92.4 |
| No %                   | 5.27 |

*Source: Based on data from Muñoz and Guinjoan (2013).*

**Figure 4: Evolution of participation and results over time.** Source: Based on data from Muñoz and Guinjoan (2013).
However, we might expect that the population variable also has a clear impact on turnout in these processes. Figures 5 and 6 clearly demonstrate that the higher the population, the lower the participation and the higher the ‘no’ vote.

Population consequently seems to be a relevant feature. In fact, it is always a relevant variable when analysing local governance in aggregated data. The local referenda for independence are no exception. As Figure 6 shows, there is a relevant correlation between participation and population. The bigger the city, the lower the participation.

Figure 5: Evolution of participation and results according to population. Source: Based on data from Muñoz and Guinjoan (2013).

Figure 6: Relationship of turnout (%) and number of inhabitants having the right to vote (log). Source: Based on data from Muñoz and Guinjoan (2013).
We ran a regression between those two variables (population and turnout in local referenda) in order to analyse this relationship. We found a significant and quite explicative (0.53) negative relationship (−6.47) between turnout and population, as is clearly shown in Table 2.

**RESULTS**

Now that we have analysed local referenda and institutional participation, what about the relationship between them? Our results indicate that institutionalized and official instruments of participation have an impact on local referenda on independence.

At first glance, we can conclude that having an institutionalized process for participation in local affairs affects participation in local referenda on independence in Catalonia, but in a negative sense (Figure 7). Municipalities with at least one participatory instrument show a significantly lower mean of participation in local referenda compared to those that do not have such an instrument. Moreover, the percentage of ‘yes’ votes is slightly smaller, and the percentage of ‘no’ votes is a little higher (although not significantly).

![Figure 7: Difference in results by function of having or not having institutionalized instruments of participation in a given municipality. Source: Author’s own creation based on data from MUNICAT, Pi-Sunyer Foundation and Muñoz and Guinjoan (2013).](image-url)

**Table 2: Regression ordinary least squares.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept)</td>
<td>80.35***</td>
<td>(1.98)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>log(Padro_16)</td>
<td>−6.47***</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sigma</td>
<td>9.90</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>535</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p < 0.001

Source: Based on data from Muñoz and Guinjoan (2013).
Table 3: Regression of institutional participation and participation in local referenda.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Intercept)</td>
<td>37.03***</td>
<td>80.00***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.73)</td>
<td>(2.12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participatroy_instr: 1/0</td>
<td>-11.50***</td>
<td>-0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.19)</td>
<td>(1.03)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>log(Padro_16)</td>
<td>-6.40***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.31)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sigma</td>
<td>13.36</td>
<td>9.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>535</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p > 0.001

Source: Author’s own creation based on data from Pi-Sunyer Foundation and Muñoz and Guinjoan (2013).

Taking this into account, if we run another regression that considers the existence of a relationship between the fact of having participatory instruments and participation in local referenda, we find another pattern between these two political phenomena. Consistent with the previous result, the more institutional channels of participation we have in each municipality, the less participation in local referenda we find, decreasing by up to 11.5 per cent (Table 3, Model 1). However, if we control this relationship by population, it is not significant (Table 3, Model 2). Population is a key variable that powerfully affects all others.

As mentioned above, the number of inhabitants appears to be a variable that affects participatory processes. Following Keating’s (1995) assumptions, smaller units do not necessarily empower local democracy because they are naturally democratic. By contrast, large units will need more participatory instruments in order to involve citizens in politics and democracy (Keating 1995). This assumption fits perfectly with institutionalized participation, but in fact needs to be reformulated for the case of local independence referenda. These political manifestations were clearly more robust and more extensive in smaller localities. The bigger the municipality, the fewer referenda were organized and with lower turnouts, while the smaller the town, the more participation was found in these referenda.

As Table 4 clearly shows, population matters. In general terms, larger populations tend to use more institutionalized participation than local referenda on independence. That will mean that in fact smaller units do not seem to need to empower citizens in ordinary politics, while they are ready to work in favour of Catalan independence. The higher the population, the fewer referenda are held, and the more legal participatory channels are implemented.

In general terms, the percentage of municipalities that have institutionalized participation increases with population bands, while the highest percentage of municipalities that have held referenda is concentrated in small and small-to-medium municipalities. This distribution clearly confirms a fracture between the metropolitan area surrounding Barcelona and the rest of Catalonia, which is much more rural (Medir 2014).
Understanding local democracy in Catalonia

Local referenda on independence seem to be related to the political mood: discontent with the whole Estatut d’Autonomia process, the Spanish reactions against the first referendum in Arenys de Munt and the increasing desire for independence. These are key factors through which we may better understand the reactions of certain sectors of the Catalan citizenry.

Discussion

The local referenda were followed by other evidence of the civic and complex nature of the pro-independence movement, such as the massive demonstrations on 11 September 2012, 2013 and 2014, which were designed and organized by a wing of the local referenda organizers.

It is quite remarkable that the preliminary results from the general referendum held in 2014 have clear patterns of similarity with the local referenda held from 2009 to 2010. Leaving aside the fact that participation was higher in aggregate terms (more than two million people voted in 2014), we also find clear patterns of higher participation and also stronger pro-independence support in smaller towns, rather than in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. For instance, in the fourteen counties where the number of participants on 9 November was closer to that of the 2012 election, these represent 7.1 per cent of the Catalan population. In contrast, the six counties that participated less in the 2012 elections compared to 9 November have 57.1 per cent of the Catalan population.

In any event, after the national and regional elections in 2011 and 2012, the main pro-independence party in Catalonia (ERC) has considerably increased its number of deputies (growing from ten to 21 deputies from 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population size in inhabitant bands</th>
<th>Presence of institutionalized processes</th>
<th>Local referenda held</th>
<th>Total Catalonia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of municipalities</td>
<td>% of band total</td>
<td>Number of municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to 500</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501–1000</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1001–5000</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5001–20,000</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>70.9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,001–50,000</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,001–100,000</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,001–500,000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 500,000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1): Total number of inhabitants for the band; (2): Number of municipalities included in the band.

Source: Author’s own creation, based on data from MUNICAT, Pi-Sunyer Foundation and Muñozand Guinjoan (2013).

Table 4: Total number of referenda and participatory instruments by bands of population.
to 2012 in the regional chamber), and ‘pro-federal’ solutions parties like the Socialists (PSC) or the Greens (IC-V) have turned to more extreme positions with regard to Catalan secession claims. Furthermore, the small pro-independence parties have grown considerably. Finally, the large nationalist right-wing party (CiU), which has always worked for consensual relations between Spain and Catalonia, has clearly adopted a more secessionist position, paying the price of losing twelve deputies from 2010 to 2012.

To summarize, the local participatory processes held in 2009 and 2010 have helped to make the pro-independence voice stronger in formal institutions, to the level of pushing the Catalan government to hold a general ‘referendum’ on independence on 9 November 2014. Above all, without having a clear majority of members of parliament, political participation at the local level has brought the secession debate to the top of the political agenda, for an extended length of time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The author would like to thank all those who gave comments on this article at the 33rd Annual Conference of the Association for Contemporary Iberian Studies held in Glasgow, and specially to Jared D. Larson for his advice (not only linguistic). Special thanks are also due to all the staff of the Pi Sunyer Foundation and to Dr Joan-Josep Vallbé.

REFERENCES
Understanding local democracy in Catalonia


**SUGGESTED CITATION**


**CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Lluís Medir, who has a Ph.D. in Political Science (Université de Toulouse 1 and Universitat de Barcelona), works as a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Constitutional Law and Political Science, University of Barcelona. He is currently conducting research at GREL (SGR-838) (Grup de Recerca en Estudis Locals, www.ub.edu/grel), and is also member of RefLoc (CSO2013-48641-C2-2-R). His research interests are related to intergovernmental relations, local policies and education policies.


E-mail: lluismedir@ub.edu

Lluís Medir has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.