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Hidalgo-Redondo, Oscar

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# Centralisation, Disgregation and Public Opinion: the Future of the Spanish State of Autonomies

*by Oscar Hidalgo-Redondo*

University of New York in Prague (UNYP) and University of Tampere

Email: ohidalgo1@unyp.cz

**Abstract:** The Spanish model of decentralisation has been described by academics as a successful example of solving territorial questions under difficult circumstances. The original assessment is confronted with a reality that shows that in the last decade political forces and public opinions have changed the evaluation that made of this process. This paper analyses the evolution of the decentralisation model in Spain and assesses the changes among the Spanish public with the presence of two recent opposite tendencies: a centrifugal one, in favour of increasing the level of autonomy moving towards confederative solutions; and a centripetal one, that defends the need of rationalising the state of autonomies increasing the capacity of the central government to legislate and coordinate the actions of the regions.

**Keywords:** *Spain, Federalism, Autonomy, "Autonomous Communities", Regions, "Southern Europe", Catalonia, "Basque Country", Reform, Decentralization, Transition*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The transition to democracy in Spain tends to be considered by students of processes of democratisation as one of the most successful examples of socio-political change under very complicated circumstances. Academics and political practitioners from all around the world have analysed this process with attention: classic transitology made of Spain one of its paradigmatic cases (O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead, 1986; Share, 1986, Linz and Stepan, 1996; Fishman 1990; Pridham, 1994; Gunther, Sani and Shabad, 1986). The institutional building, the political leadership, the overcoming the political fragmentation and division, the successful integration in the Western European structures has made of Spain one the most studied and influential cases of democratisation (Linz and Stepan, 1990: 87). This apparent success of the Spanish transition managed not only to create a new regime leaving behind the threats of involution but also to modernise Spain and consolidate it among the selected group of nations with a high level of human development. The achievements in these thirty five years of democratic experience (the longest period ever in Spanish history) could lead us to think that the level of satisfaction of Spanish citizens with the major institutions of the Spanish political system is rather high. However, this apparent acceptance of the decentralisation scheme established in the democratic constitution of 1978 has to be questioned in the light of the political debate about the centre-periphery relations opened since 2004 and the subsequent reform of the statutes of autonomy in some of the Spanish regions.

The aim of this paper is to re-assess the consolidation of the Spanish regional model focusing our attention on the transformation of the positive evaluations that Spanish citizens made of the system of decentralisation. Conducting an analysis of series of public opinion studies in Spain, two opposite tendencies can be seen. Firstly, a centrifugal one, represented by peripheral nationalist tendencies that question the fairness of the distribution of competences and resources between central and peripheral authorities. Secondly, opposed to the centrifugal tendency, a centripetal one that questions the adequacy of the current model due to the amount of resources that it spends and its incapability to integrate the nationalist forces.

In this study, I will examine how in the last decade the apparent satisfaction with the Spanish state of autonomies has withered away. The electoral results show an evolution in the voting patterns of Spaniards that has favoured the forces with a critical discourse towards the present model of decentralisation. The strength of both nationalist and centralist parties pushes in favour of a reformulation of the model established since 1978. The product of that transformation is not clear due to the presence of radically opposed tendencies, however, it is clear that in the present conditions, as this paper shows, the maintenance of the constitutional territorial model is an option rejected by the majority of Spaniards.

## **1. The 1978 Spanish Constitution, federalism and the creation of the Autonomous Communities**

Spain has never been characterised by a generous model of decentralised governance. Since the creation of Spain with the unification of the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile in the XV Century, the different Spanish rulers have maintained the hegemony of the central powers over local autonomous institutions. Some regions maintained local charters, a heritage of the middle ages that allowed them to keep a special status in its relations with the central authorities. These “Fueros” have been progressively suppressed by different governments of Spain extending the general legislation to virtually all the Spanish territories (Herrero de Miñón, 1998; Larrazábal Basáñez, 2005). The only exceptions are the Basque Country and Navarre maintaining their specificities until today with the constitution of 1978 recognising a unique relation with the rest of the Spanish territories.

In the process of drafting and approving the current Spanish constitution, the regional question was one of the central axes (if not the central one) around which Spanish politics were pivoting (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 103). The discussion about the final articulation of the relation regions-central authorities was one of the most difficult issues to negotiate and agree.. This was done in a context of extreme political violence directly associated with the nationalities’ question that added a huge load of drama to the negotiation. The Basque terrorist organisation ETA assassinated more than 150 persons in 1978 and 1979 in the middle of the process of the approval of the constitution and the Basque statute of autonomy. 1978 and 1979 are two of the three years with a higher number of ETA’s assassinations. The final agreement was a very complex hybrid model that did not respond to the original model defended by any political force but an agreement that included some of the main demands of the political forces. The creation of this form of consensus was favoured by the difficult environment: an anti-democratic reactions was a real possibility, the risk of a revolutionary process in which the moderate Francoist elites would lose their capacity to lead the country could not be discarded, and ETA’s activity was a constant reminder of the weakness and fragility of the new political structures. In this context, the main political forces were ready to renounce to some of the programmatic preferences in relation with the decentralisation model. Memories of failed political projects due to their inability to obtain the support of a sufficient number of Spaniards (Tomás Villarroya, 1982; Fraile Clivillés, 1975; De Esteban, 1975) forced politicians to negotiate a constitution that no political faction would love completely but few would feel excluded from. And particularly, the civil war was an emotional reference point for the contemporary Spanish transition to democracy. The war was a national drama present in the public mind of Spanish people; the creation of the new democratic institutions provided the opportunity to overcome that traumatic and divisive experience (Perez-Díaz, 1990: 24). Thus, it could be said that the members of the commission in charge of elaborating the draft of the constitution imposed on themselves the need of agreeing. The commission itself, as a result of the 1977 constitutional elections was made up by very different political forces including all the major parties (three representatives of the governmental Unión de Centro Democrático, and one more each for the socialist party, the rightist party Alianza Popular, the Catalan nationalist and the Communists). The only major political party not included was the Basque Nationalist Party. However, the Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV) was consulted for the

elaboration of the chapter VIII on the territorial organisation of the state and it was also understood that the Catalan nationalists could represent their Basque counterparts. In fact, this exclusion was the reason why the EAJ-PNV did not support fully the constitution. However, it is significant that in the constitutional referendum, the official position was to abstain instead of voting against the constitutional proposal.

Considering the balance of forces in 1978, the new democratic state could not be unitary. Only the harder sectors of the Francoist elite, represented in the parliament by Alianza Popular (AP) favoured the creation of a centralist state. However, their electoral strength made them the fourth political force with less than 9% of the votes. On the other hand, the notion of federalism was too radical in the Spanish context of 1978 to be considered openly as an option. Moderate nationalists in Catalonia and the Basque Country proposed a federative solution. The same could be applicable to the leftist forces in the 1977 parliament more inclined towards a strong decentralisation. However, the electoral results gave Unión de Centro Democrático (UCD) 166 seats in the parliament, only 10 seats below the absolute majority. UCD, the party led by Adolfo Suárez, was to play the role of the central stone around which the consensus was built. This party negotiated with centralist and decentralist forces to elaborate a model acceptable for all, taking concessions from both sides.

Thus, the new model needed to use elements from federalism but, at the same time, reserving some powers for the central authorities to convince conservative forces to give their support to the new project. It is proper to talk about a “federal flavour” (Clavero, 1985: 92) without being formally a federation. A regional level of governance is established with certain independent empowerment, defying the traditional understanding of unitary state (Smith, 2004: 16). The regional authorities are not just recipients of administrative competences but they have also the capacity to legislate without the supervision or interference of the central government.

Despite the Spanish constitutionalists avoiding explicitly the notion ‘federal’ to define the state of autonomies the four classic elements that should be present in every federal state (Riker, 1964: 11) can be found in the Spanish model: two levels of autonomous government (each of them with legislative and executive authority and capacity to raise revenue); a constitution that divides powers between the administrative levels establishing constitutional boundaries; a constitutional arbiter that would decide in case of conflict of competences; and linking institutions in which both powers, central authorities and peripheral will cooperate. Thus, this model could be included among those states that some authors call ‘the devolved or regional state, sometimes described as the “meso” level between centre and locality’ (Keating, 2003: 109). A model based on the existence of autonomies that are the regional units sharing competences with the state but in a position of certain dependence and subordination. Agranoff uses the term of post-modern federalism to describe a model characterised by the existence of a federal elements without a complete federal design (Agranoff, 1996).

## **2. A system in Motion: The Evolution of the Spanish Territorial Model**

The constitution established the normative framework in which central and regional authorities were to be developed. The first stage was the development of the autonomies and assumption of competences by the regional governments. The constitution created a list of matters over which the central government has exclusive competences. However, the constitution makes reference to the possibility of cooperation between national and regional government to carry out these functions (Bassols and Serrano, 1982: 38). Article 150 opens the possibility to transfer or delegate competencies to the self-governing communities. In addition to that, the constitution lists in its article 148 competencies that regions are to take but establishes that the list of powers can be made more extensive if the statutes of autonomy (the regional equivalent of the constitution) add other competencies to the list. As Ruipérez points out it is not the constitution but 'the statutes of autonomy that, in each case individually will establish the particular jurisdiction of the central and autonomic jurisdictions for that territory' (Ruipe rez, 1988: 237). This constitutional provision opened the first major debate, the question of symmetry/asymmetry of the regions. This issue was central in the discussions of the constitutional commission. While the nationalist forces wanted the constitution to reflect the differences between the regions, centralist forces considered that the principle of equality should prevail. The need of integrating the nationalists into the bloc of consensus forced the prime minister Su rez to accept the principle of difference, leaving a door open to a future equalisation of regions. It is what Manuel Fraga, the leader of the rightist party Popular Alliance, considered 'a double and serious mistake by Su rez: to believe first that the pressure of the nationalisms would be solved not confronting them but brewing "coffee for everyone", and, then, retreat and to say that coffee for some and re-heated coffee for others.' (Quirosa-Cheyrouze, 2006: 178).

The constitutional provisions did not clarify the question of symmetry of the regional competencies and the limits for the regional powers. The model designed in the constitution did not refer to the existence of two different types of autonomies but of the creation of two paths towards autonomy: a fast track and a slow one. The fast road towards autonomy was reserved to those regions that had approved in the past statutes of autonomy (that referred to Catalonia, the Basque lands and Galicia). The slow road would be open to the rest of the territories that had to follow article 143.2 of the Spanish constitution to constitute themselves as an autonomous community.

A second aspect related with the application of the constitutional arrangements is that the constitution established as the only limit in the assumption of competences by the autonomous communities the thirty two competences of the article 149.1. Regions can assume those competencies that the legislators can in their statutes of autonomy as long as they do not invade the exclusive powers of the central administration. The flexibility that is offered, the need of enlarging the "consensus bloc", and the great number of political and social actors with their own different agendas, made the constitution very imprecise and open to various interpretations. In a context like this, the role of the institution in charge of determining the constitutionality of other norms becomes central. The judicial umpire, the Spanish constitutional court, has been placed in the central space for, as Aja points out, three reasons. One, as explained, the constitution is not too precise in the division of powers that is established. Second, the constitutional court has preferred a casuistic approach rather than trying to create general principles applicable to analogous situations. Third, the incapacity of the different administrative levels or

political actors to find agreements that would make the work of the judicial umpire unnecessary (Aja, 1993: 234).

The consequence of the implementation of these principles was the creation of a strong asymmetry among the regions. Despite all regions, according to the Spanish constitution, are equal and can aspire to the same levels of self-determination (only with fiscal exception of the tax regime of the Basque Country and Navarre), the reality is different. The variation in regional development of the different territories of Spain appeared from the very beginning. The speed in the creation of each the autonomies had effects on the strength of the autonomic governments. As Martín Oviedo states, the 'especial procedure is not especial due to the requirements exposed but -in reality- due to the consequences in terms of competences that can be assumed from the very first moment by each of the Autonomic Communities' (Martín Oviedo, 1980: 160). While in the case of the "especial" autonomies the constitution authorises them to assume immediately the competences of the regular autonomous communities (art. 148.1) and those others referred in their statutes of autonomy; those that use the "ordinary" track will have to wait for a period of five years to expand their lists of competences. This model is going to promote the existence of dual autonomic model in Spain with high-speed communities (the Basque Country, Catalonia, Andalusia, Galicia and to certain extent Navarra due to its special fiscal arrangement) and the ordinary ones. These four regions were constituted from 1979 to 1981 and this constitutes a centrifugal element promoting a feeling of distinctiveness among the citizens of those regions. On the other hand, the rest of the regions were created from 1981 to 1983 and this was followed by a failed centralising attempt with the law for the harmonisation of the autonomic process (known as LOAPA): an attempt to limit and order the decentralising process endowing the central government with the capacity to overrule the statutes of autonomy but the Spanish constitutional court considered that that attempt was violating the constitutional principles. A new law, the law of the autonomic process, was passed in October 1983, and it became the norm governing the process of transfer of competences from the central government to regional authorities. This law initiated a process of transfer of competences that was problematic and required often the intervention of the constitutional court to resolve disputes between the central government and the regions and, also, between different regional governments. Nevertheless, this period was characterised by the modernisation of Spain and the development of the state of autonomies is perceived as an element that contributed to the advance of Spain.

The second stage of the development of the Spanish regional model was initiated in 1992 with a second great autonomic pact in 1992. The two major political parties in Spain, the Socialist Party and the Popular Party, agreed on extending the competences of the ordinary autonomic communities including thirty two new competences in an attempt to reduce the differences between the self-government of these ones and the historical ones. Nationalist parties (and particularly the Basque ones), considered that the pact was a threat to the privileges guaranteed by the constitution. This is a decentralising turn, since the regional governments assume more competencies but, at the same time, the historical regions (especially the Basque and the Catalan) consider that this movement towards the equalisation of regions questions their unique identity. However, the need of the support of minority parties in order to obtain a governmental stability after the elections of 1993 (with the Socialist Party supported by Basque and Catalan nationalists) and 1996 (with the Popular Party receiving the support in the vote

of confidence of Basque and Catalan nationalists and Canary regionalists) opened processes of negotiation about competences transferred to the Basque and Catalan governments that kept them being the two regions (also with Navarre) with a deeper level of self-government. After the victory of the Popular party in 2000 with an absolute majority (receiving again the support of Catalan nationalists and Canary regionalist in the vote of investiture despite it was not arithmetically necessary) the relations between the Spanish and nationalists both in the Basque Country and Catalonia deteriorated. In this context, the Basque nationalist government led by Juan José Ibarretxe launched the known as the “Ibarretxe plan”, a project to change the relation between Spain and the Basque region transforming it into a confederative scheme. Similarly, in Catalonia, the “Tinell pact” (the agreement of the Catalan nationalist parties and the Spanish socialists to govern the Catalan region and give a new impulse to the Catalan region) showed the isolation of the Popular Party and the existence of an entente between the nationalist and the leftist forces that favoured the creation a new statute of autonomy for Catalonia that would extend the regional powers and strengthen its position in front of the rest of Spain. Thus, this second phase finishes with clear signs that the autonomic model, despite being considered a positive element by all the relevant actors, began to receive stronger criticisms by those that considered that it did not develop as it should have and needed a serious reform.

A new phase was initiated in 2004 with the victory of the Socialist Party in the elections. The government led by Rodríguez Zapatero showed a predisposition to reform the statute of autonomy of those regions that considered it necessary. Catalonia that pioneered a process that concluded with the adoption of a new statute of autonomy for Catalonia in 2006 as well as for the Valencian Community, Andalusia, Aragon and Balearic Islands. This has been a particular traumatic process in which the reforms have become part of the political dialectic between political parties in Spain and the contents of the new statutes and particularly the Catalan have been subject to a close scrutiny (including a decision of the Spanish constitutional court (31/2010) that considered that fourteen of its articles were unconstitutional and declared void).

Linked to the issue of the symmetry-asymmetry and the presence of centralising and decentralising forces and dynamics is necessary to refer to a second aspect that has characterised the evolution of the Spanish autonomic development: the competition between regions. The implementation of the Spanish territorial model has been accompanied by a very strong rivalry between the different actors involved in it. The competition is not just a centre-periphery struggle but also a confrontation between the different regional powers that find, in some cases, rivals in the rest of the autonomies that have been constituted. Examples of this confrontation are the legal challenges in the Constitutional Court of the new statutes of autonomy of Catalonia (challenged by the government of the region of Murcia, La Rioja, Aragon, Valencia and the Balearic Islands); Andalusia (challenged by the regional government of Extremadura); Aragon (challenged by La Rioja) or Valencia (challenged by Aragon and Castilla-La Mancha). In addition to that, the constitutional court has resolved six times more conflicts of competences presented by one autonomous community against another autonomous community than cases in which the central government challenged a regional government (Tribunal Constitucional Español).

Moreover, the role of nationalist parties in Spanish politics has increased the tension between regions. The negotiations and bargaining that nationalist parties have conducted with the central governments that were willing to trade extra-competences for legislative support in Madrid, the differential status demanded for the autonomic communities that have nationalist aspirations, have produced a dynamic of confrontation that has not contributed to appease a decentralising process that was inherently complicated. As Keating indicates nationalist politicians have played a fundamental role in Spanish national politics searching for individual gains for their community even at the expense of other regions (Keating, 1999). There is another by-product of the process of political decentralisation and the regional political competition: the fact that even within the state-wide parties, tensions between the national direction in Madrid and the regional directions (especially in Catalonia and the Basque Country, but not only there) have appeared since the nation-wide policies are not necessarily attractive for the regional electorates. This is particularly evident in the case of regional elections and the Socialist Party where the regional discourse and the national programs present often strong incompatibilities and there is an electoral volatility that can be explained due to this confrontation (Riera 2013; León, 2014). In addition to this, richer and poorer regions also compete for the allocation of funds that would help to redistribute wealth in Spain. Taxation, investments, services provided, infrastructures became part of this competitive scenario with the paradox that it is precisely the most economically advanced and specialised regions the ones that present a lower attachment to the union of territories (Bollen, 1998: 614).

The last feature that characterises the development of the state of autonomies in Spain is its uncertain point of destination. The Spanish territorial model appears as an open-ended process in which some of the local entities do not establish a goal in terms of decentralisation but, on the contrary, the end-point of constitutional evolution is never defined except to indicate that it would involve a greater degree of autonomy. This is particularly evident in the case of those regions with strong nationalistic sentiments (Keating, 2000: 39). The absence of an agreed point of destination has not favoured the generation of trust between the parties since the central governments (and some of the regions without regionalist parties) see that bargaining with the most advanced autonomous communities can trigger future demands as the wish list of competences enlarges when the petitions from the past are satisfied. The availability of European resources and the alliances between regional forces made more complicated the position of the central government (Montero, 2001: 149-50).

### **3. Assessing Public Opinion: The Rising Dissatisfaction towards the State of Autonomies**

Once we have described all these difficulties, it is necessary to state that after almost thirty years of democratic history in Spain, the acceptance of the Spanish autonomic system was considerable. Most of the Spanish citizens considered the implementation of the the Spanish model of decentralisation was something positive. The periodical barometers published by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) showed that in 2005 that three out of four Spanish considered that the development of the autonomies was something positive for Spain (see figure I) and there was not a single

region in which the majority of the citizens did not evaluate the process positively. That included Catalonia that was the third autonomous community with the highest rate of positive evaluations.

The perception and assessment of the autonomic process has changed radically since 2005. The opportunity opened by the central government for the reform was taken by those regions that had shown an interest in reforming their statutes of autonomy and transforming their competence ceilings: the region of Valencia (2006), Catalonia (2006), Balearic Islands (2007), Andalusia (2007), Aragon (2007), Castille-Leon (2007) and, later, Navarre (2010) and Extremadura (2011). The process of reform was particularly complicated in the case of Catalonia and the draft adopted by the Catalan parliament was negotiated with the Spanish executive but, later, the Spanish Constitutional Court considered in 2010 that fourteen articles were void due to their unconstitutionality. In general, the processes of reform have increased distrust and competition between the different administrative levels and also between the regions that consider other regional executives as competitors. This is accentuated in a context of financial scarcity and economic crisis where regions compete to have access to resources in order to deliver services to their citizens and where the central government has to make decisions about its plan of investments. The Catalan government has been the one that has most clearly expressed its discontent issuing the report 'The Disloyalty of the State towards Catalonia' in 2013. The report denounced the situation in relation to three main areas: the aspects related with the culture, education, language of Catalonia; the paralisation of the bilateral contacts between the Spanish and the Catalan authorities and administrators and particularly in relation with the transfer of the competences pending to be transferred; and, thirdly, the finances of Catalonia and the unpaid debts of the Spanish administration (Department of Presidency, 2013). The economic aspects are critical for understanding of the dissatisfaction with the central government: more than half of the report makes reference to questions related with the financing of the services offered to the Catalan citizens. Nevertheless, even if the economic context has an impact on the perception of the idoneity of the Spanish autonomic model, there are tendencies questioning the quasi-federal structure of Spain that go beyond the economic contingencies and that are transforming the way in which Spanish citizens assess their system of decentralisation.

In the almost forty years that have passed since the death of Franco and the beginning of the democratic transition, Spain has not been able to integrate the nationalist sentiments that some of its regions have traditionally presented. The development of a decentralised territorial model has not produced the effect of deactivating the arguments of the nationalist groups that considered that the general Franco's centralised and repressive regime impeded their development as a political community. With the establishment of a democratic regime the vindications of these movements continued. Béjar refers to the development of three different discourses favouring the nationalistic grievances: a progressive discourse that understands the nationalistic claims as a product of the repression and the forced centralisation. For these, the vindications must be understood as a historical debt. Secondly, a moderate nationalist discourse where the nationalist claims are linked to a cultural identification with a peripheral nation with a pragmatic understanding of the relations between the two governments. Thirdly, a radical nationalist discourse with an ethnic rhetoric in which Spain is presented as a

failure where the only option left for the peripheral nationalisms is the secession (Béjar, 2010: 427).

We have used as a major indicator of the evolution of the nationalist tendencies the results of nationalist forces in elections. We have decided to use only the results of the regional elections. The reason for this choice is the fact that the elections for the Spanish parliament and Senate show a very strong strategic voting in those regions with strong nationalist movements (Pallarés and Keating, 2006; León, 2014; Alonso and Gómez, 2010; Lago and Lago, 2000; Oñate, 2002) and that could hide the real evolution of centrifugal tendencies.

If we analyse the results of the elections for the regional parliaments in Catalonia and in the Basque country we can find that the autonomic process has not reduced the amount of votes collected by the nationalist parties. As it can be seen in the figure 2, in the Basque Country, the initial hegemony of nationalist parties has been balanced by the electoral raise of the non-nationalist parties after the 1990 regional elections. However, after the elections in 2009 the electoral support for state-wide parties declined.

A similar development can be noticed in the Catalan regional elections. The support for nationalist options after its initial growth stabilised and as figure 3 shows, since 1992 decreases in order to rise in the last three elections. Both in the Basque Country and Catalonia, the autonomic development has not been accompanied by the disappearance of nationalist movements. On the contrary, in the last elections the nationalist movements are very strong.

Although the evolution of the nationalist vote is already illustrative, it is worth to take a closer look at the composition of the nationalist vote and the distribution of votes between radical (independentist) and moderate (pragmatic autonomist) options. Again the results show (figures 4 and 5) that the development of the Spanish territorial model has not managed to neutralise the centrifugal tendencies that favour the recognition of the right of self-determination and a potential secession of the territories where peripheral nationalism is strong. In the case of the Basque Country, the radical nationalist option has always maintained a notable electoral support. Independentist in the Basque Country have always constituted a sizeable portion of the electorate (usually between 10-20 % of the voters). Despite the fact that in the Basque Country the independentist vote has been linked to the strategy and actions of the terrorist group ETA (Hidalgo, 2013), the sharp decline in 2001 of the independentist vote has recovered, challenging for the first time the hegemony to the moderate options in the 2012 elections.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Catalonia, the division between the autonomist and radical voter also present interesting results. After the first autonomic elections where the party Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) obtained very good results, the independentist options have received a very limited popular support until 2003. From those elections the results have granted the independentist options close to 30% of the seats in the

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<sup>1</sup> The 2009 elections are very special, since for the very first time the party representing politically ETA was not allowed to participate in elections due to the decision of the Spanish courts of justice. The voters majoritarily opted for void votes and if we add the void votes to the other radical options the percentage of support of radical option could estimated to be between 25 and 30%.

Catalan parliament with the only exception of the 2010 elections (but those results could be interpreted as a consequence of the internal division of ERC and a punishment for its participation in the government led by the Socialist Party of Catalonia). Again, the increase of the competences enjoyed by the regional government did not translate into a moderation of the electoral preferences of the Catalan electors.

Another element to be taken into consideration is that even though we are aggregating historical data to provide the time series, the discourse of the political parties has varied and the radicalisation of the moderate nationalist parties is a fact. In the case of the Basque Country the "Ibarretxe plan" in 2003 moved the moderate Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV) towards positions close to the independentist nationalism. The same can be applied to the political position adopted by the traditionally moderate coalition Convergence and Union (CiU) after the decision of the Spanish constitutional court of 2010 that considered unconstitutional fourteen of its articles. CiU has defended the right of self-determination of the people of Catalonia, a position that from the nationalist point of view cannot be considered a programmatic option that a moderate autonomist party can defend.

In the other side of the political spectrum in terms of the territorial question, the supporters of maintaining a unified Spain have also seen a change in their preference for the autonomic model. Initially the most conservative party (Popular Alliance, the antecedent of the governing Popular Party) was reluctant to the establishment of a generous decentralised regime, later this party accepted the state of autonomies in Spain. The rest of the state-wide parties were favourable to the implementation of a decentralised model of governance regardless of their preference for a federal or autonomic structure. The Spanish public, on the other hand has traditionally tended to be supportive of the state of autonomies despite its problematic implementation. Studies of public opinion conducted by the CIS show the variations in the evolution of the perception of the Spanish citizens towards the autonomic regime. The Spanish public opinion has radicalised its position towards the territorial administrative division with a sharp decrease in the percentage of citizens that are satisfied with the current model. While in 1998 one half of the Spanish preferred the autonomic state in its current state, data from 2012 showed that for less than one third the current model was its choice (figure 6). On the contrary, the number of Spaniards that considered that the competences of the regions have to be reduced has tripled (figure 7). An explanation for this declining tendency, in addition to the reaction to the nationalist tensions can be found in the consequences of the economic crisis in Spain that have exposed a highly inefficient administrative model with duplication of competences that increase the cost of the public administration.

Opposite to this, in the Basque Country the number of citizens that preferred a more decentralised state increased in the last decade, and particularly the number of citizens that would prefer the recognition of the right of self-determination for the people living in their autonomous community (figure 8). In the case of Catalonia this tendency is particularly acute and it could be an indication of the frustration that the failed reform of the statute of autonomy has produced.

When analysed the perception that Spanish citizens have of the autonomic process and the creation of autonomic communities, then, again the results can be considered

alarming (figure 9). The tendency to consider the creation of the autonomic communities as a bad idea has increased in the last decade exponentially. While in 2005, it was widely considered positive (both in Spain and in Catalonia or the Basque autonomic community: 68%, 77% and 73% respectively) in 2012 only in the Basque country more than half of the population considered a positive thing. It can be concluded that the number of people satisfied with the autonomic regime is clearly decreasing both among the people that live in the communities with strong nationalist tendencies (that feel that the autonomic regime is not evolving satisfying the aspirations of self-government of those regions) and those that live in the rest of the regions (that consider that the autonomic model is not effective and does encourage an escalation of the demands for self-government of the regions with a strong nationalist presence).

Despite the development of centralist tendencies in Spain, not all the regions have evolved in the same way. The studies of the CIS show a growing proportion of citizens favouring the strengthening of the central authorities' powers over the regional governments in the last decade. However, not in all the regions the perceptions of the citizens have varied in the same way. It is possible to distinguish three patterns among the Spanish regions: first, those autonomic communities that since 2005 have developed a strong demand for decentralisation; second, those territories that continued being satisfied with the present system of division of competences centre-periphery; and, finally, those regions that have developed a negative sentiment towards the state of autonomies and defend a re-centralising process. As figure 10 shows there is a core of regions where the critical positions towards the effects of decentralisation have increased radically. Regions like Madrid, Murcia, Castille-Leon, Castille-La Mancha and the Community of Valencia show a clear majority of citizens in favour of returning to a unitary state or reducing the decentralisation of the system of autonomies. This contrasts with figures below 20% in 2005 in all the Spanish regions. On the opposite side are other critical regions where the demands of self-government that were not followed by an increase of competences are spurring not just the development of nationalist sentiments but an independentist agenda (figure 11). This is the case of Catalonia (where the number of defendants of the right of self-determination has doubled), the Basque Country (that maintains the presence of a strong sector of the population in favour of the right to separate since the beginning of the democratic period) and Navarre (despite the sharp increase, the percentage of citizens satisfied with the present model is majoritary: 52% against 40% that would prefer more autonomy or the right of self-determination). The case of the Balearic Islands is a particularly interesting one with a strong polarisation with both strong rises in the percentage of population in favour of centralisation and decentralisation.

In between these two groups we have regions like Andalusia, Canary Islands, Extremadura, Navarre or Rioja that are showing milder centralising tendencies but still maintaining a relatively large percentage of citizens that are in favour of keeping the autonomic model of decentralisation.

However, when analysing the whole scenario and its evolution from 2005 until today (see table 1), the picture is worrying. The number of citizens satisfied with the Spanish territorial structure has decreased in almost all the territories according to the autonomic barometers of the CIS. The success that scholars tended to refer in their analyses of the

Spanish autonomic model must be reconsidered in the light of the changes in the perception of the Spanish citizens since 2004.

## **CONCLUSION**

To summarise, we have analysed the Spanish territorial model and described its main features. The quasi-federal Spanish state of autonomies, despite not being formally a federative model, presents in practice a federal distribution of powers in which both the autonomic and central authorities assume important powers. Nevertheless, this model is still a source of political confrontation due to the fact that the constitution and the doctrine of the Spanish Constitutional Court do not offer a finished model and, on the contrary, the constitution is reinterpreted by both politicians and judges as conflicts of competences arise. In addition to that, the model has not satisfied the aspirations for self-determination of some of the regions in Spain, particularly those with strong nationalist sentiments among their citizens.

Opinion polls and electoral results show that the sentiment of frustration is increasing. That frustration is spurred by a centripetal tendency that considers that the territorial model is ineffective and expensive and that in a context of economic crisis it would be necessary to reorganise with a centralising intention. Opposite to it, a centrifugal tendency promotes a confederalising reform in which the regions would obtain the right to decide about their future including the right of self-determination. The number of citizens satisfied with the present state is declining and the model is in danger of collapsing. The optimistic and positive evaluation of the Spanish autonomic regime that many scholars made in the 1990s and early 2000s must be put into question. The latest development could be an indication that the autonomic regime cannot be presented as an alternative to the classic federal or unitary duality. On the other hand, it may be the context of economic crisis (and shrinking resources) what has caused the decrease of the positive perception of the autonomic state and once the economic situation will improve, the ratios of acceptance will also increase. One way or another, the present circumstances appear like a setting ending the initial phase of implementation of the autonomic model. After thirty five years of democratic rule, the system of decentralisation in Spain needs to be refounded. There are three potential basic scenarios that can develop. The first one is the one in which the centrifugal forces impose themselves over the centripetal. In this scenario, the autonomic state would move towards a weak federative state or even a confederative one. It can potentially conclude with the dissolution of Spain or, at least, the start of processes of self-determination in those territories more critical of the control exercised by the central authorities. Basque Country and Catalonia would be the first territories that could be followed by other regions.

The second of the scenarios would be the one in which the centripetal forces would overcome the centrifugal ones. With the use of state institutions and change of legislation the centralist parties could reduce the regionalist and nationalist parties' capacity to influence public policies in Spain. This could have a backlash effect with an increase of centrifugal movements in those peripheral areas limited by the new territorial model. A situation like this could develop into a scenario like the one described first in a second stage if the centrifugal forces would be spurred by the new relations centre-periphery.

The last of the scenarios is the one in which centrifugal and centripetal forces attempt to find a compromise that using the bases of the constitution of 1978 and the autonomic pacts would satisfy both. The centrifugal forces would obtain levels of self-governance and autonomy that fulfil their need of determining public policy in those regions. On the other hand, the centripetal forces would ascertain that all regions would be loyal to the state and that public policy would be rationalised. If this could be achieved within an autonomic model or a federal structure would need to be implemented is a different question that in the process of negotiation would have to be decided.

Independently from the scenario that will finally be implemented, Spain is going to live in the following months a critical moment in its constitutional history. The success described by the academics that studied the Spanish territorial model has transformed in less than a decade in a source of political confrontation.

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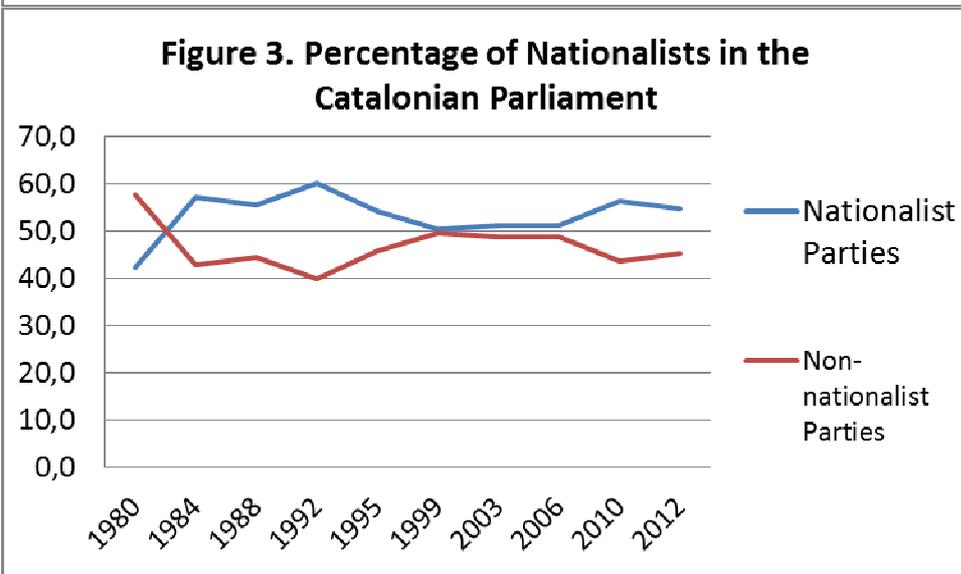
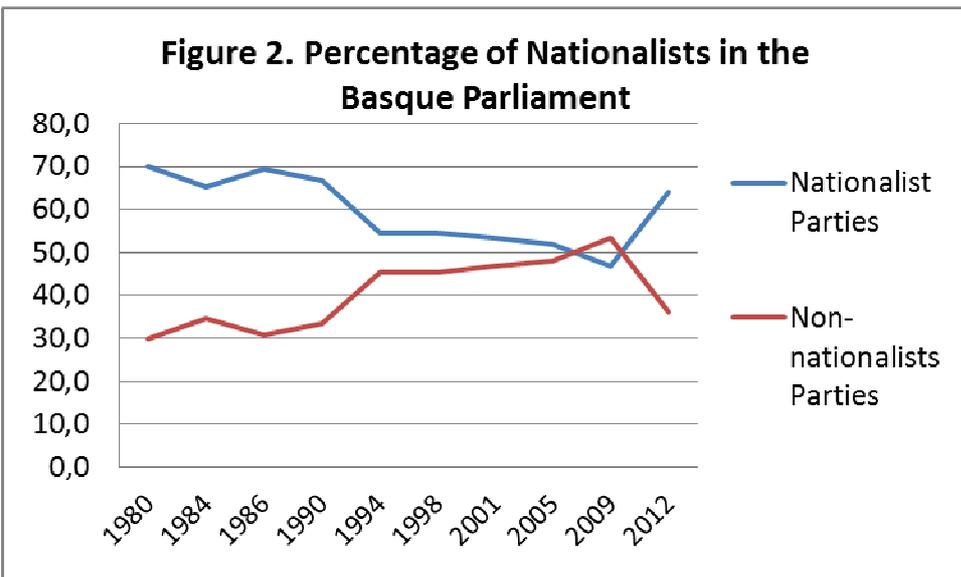
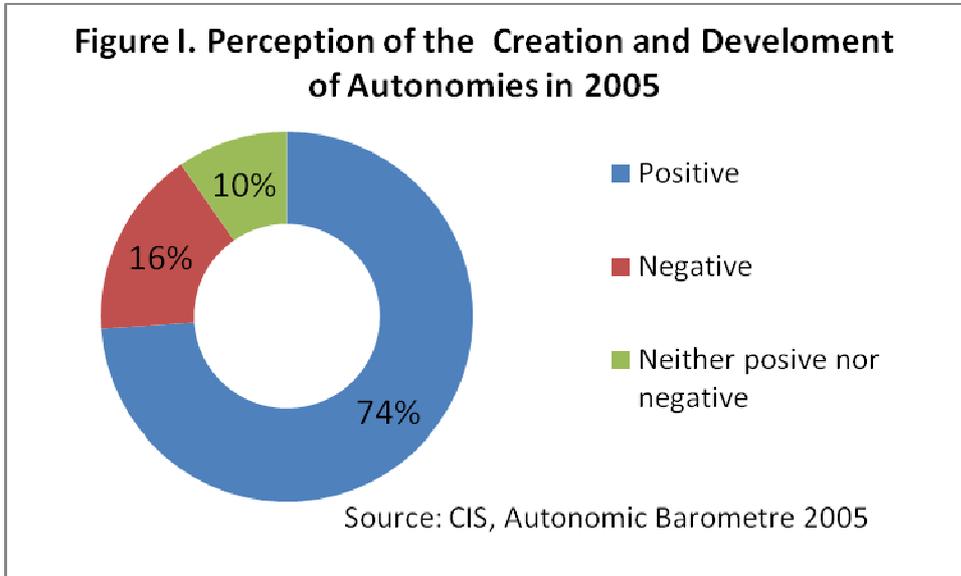
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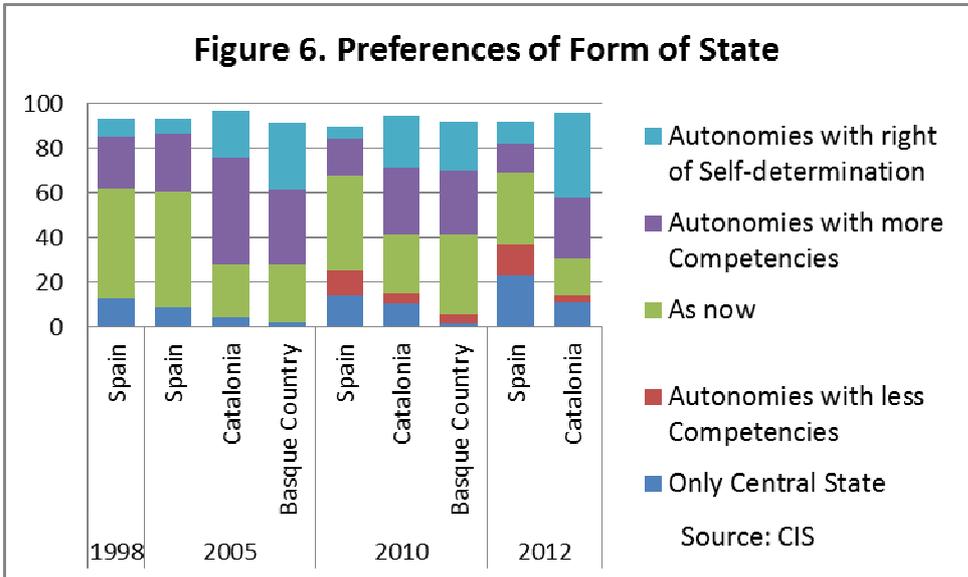
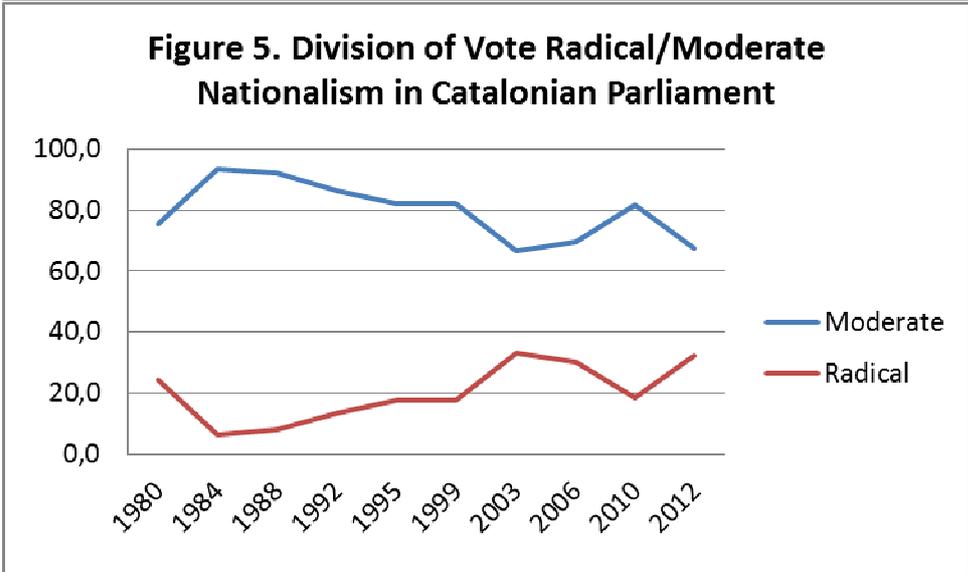
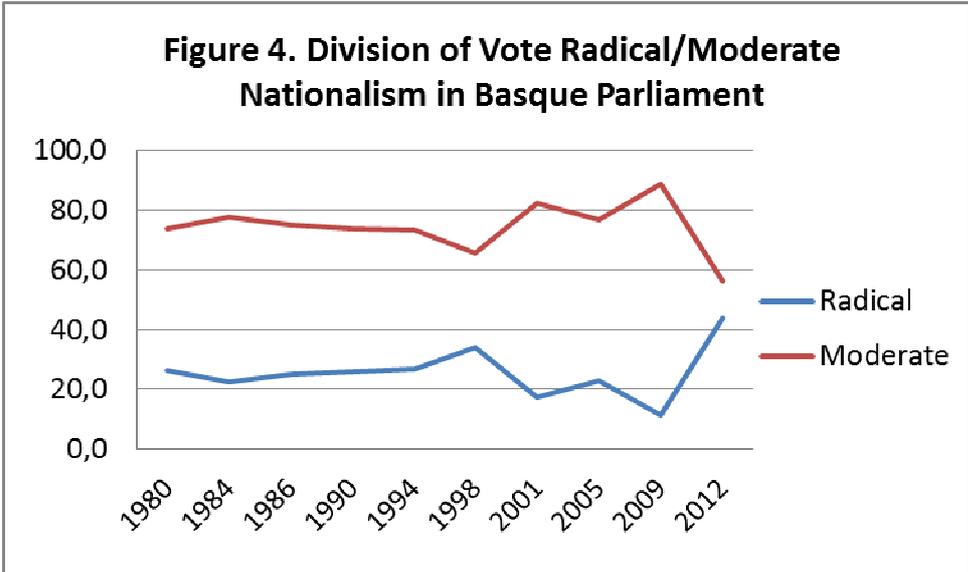
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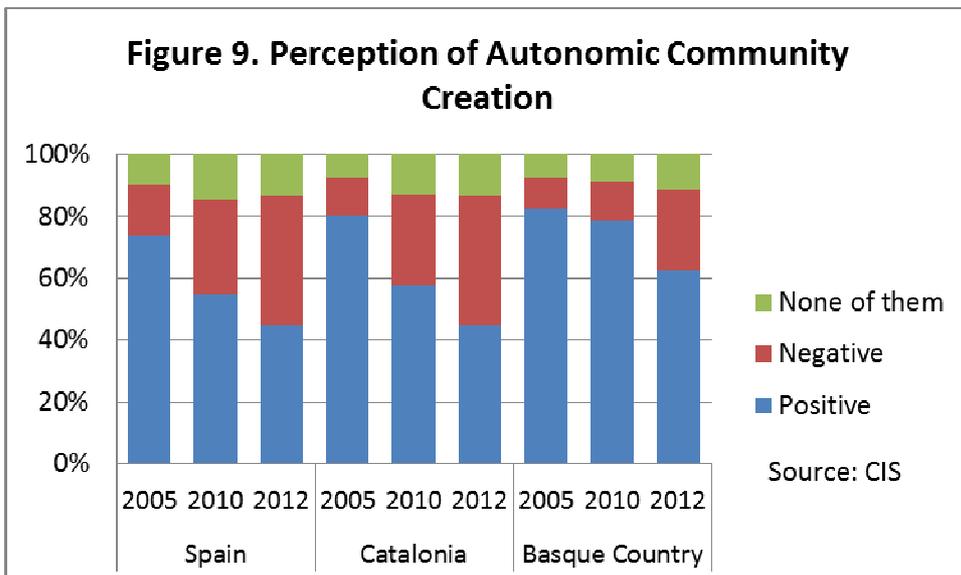
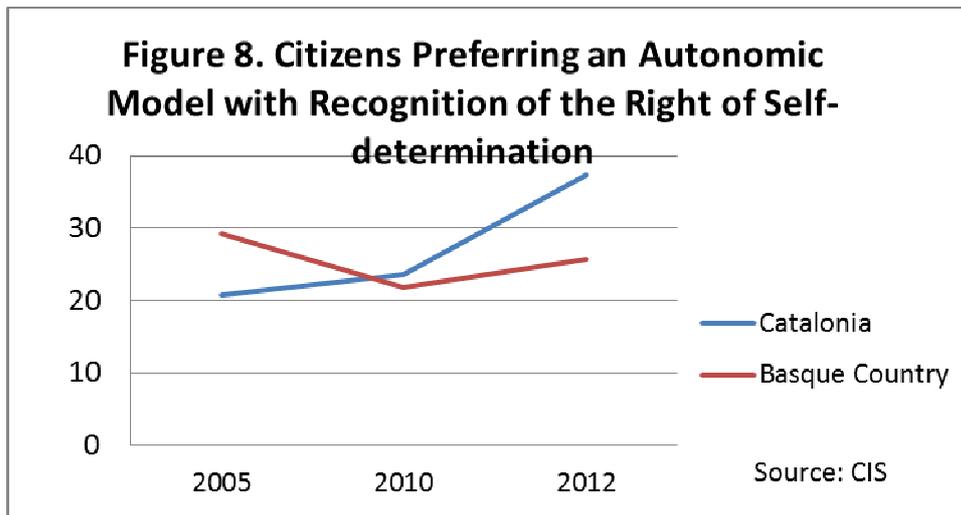
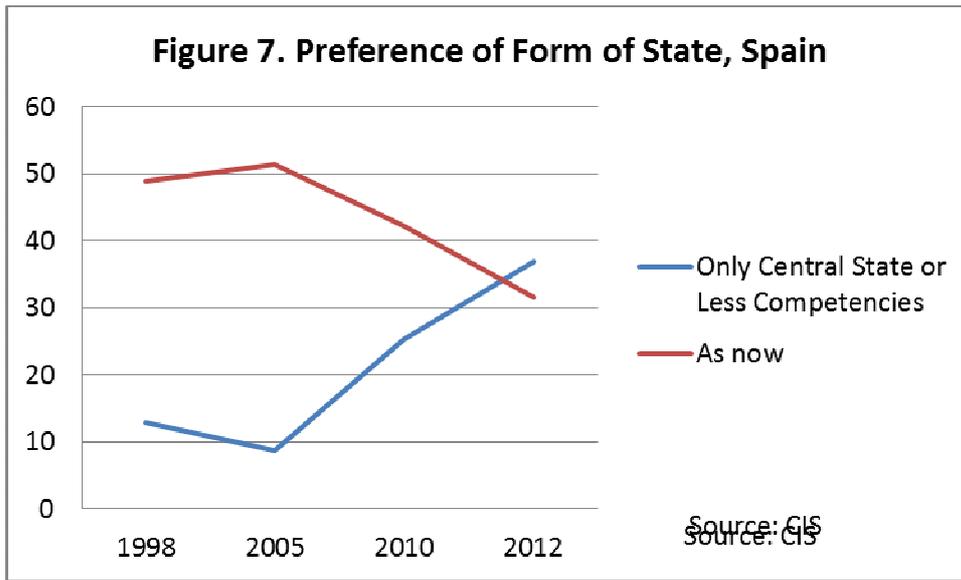
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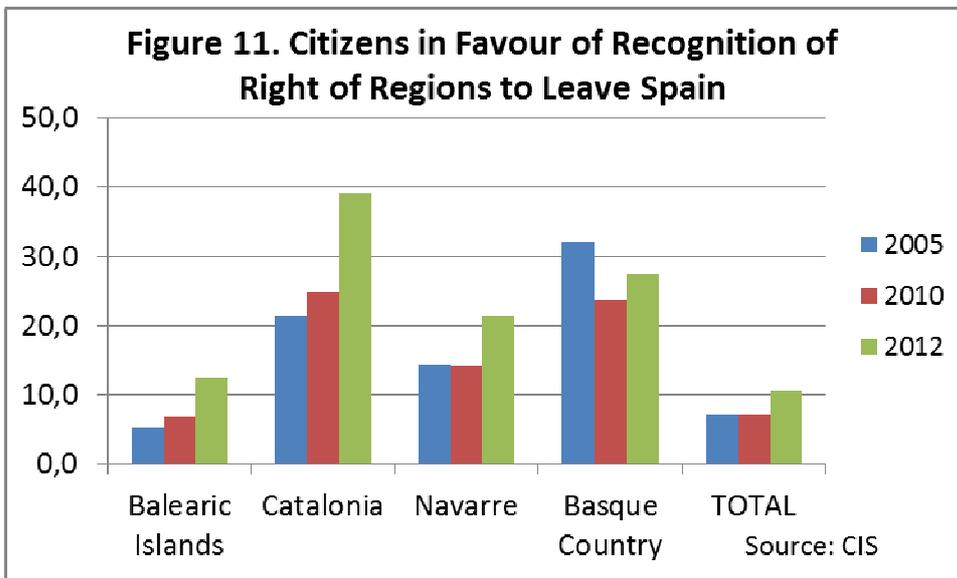
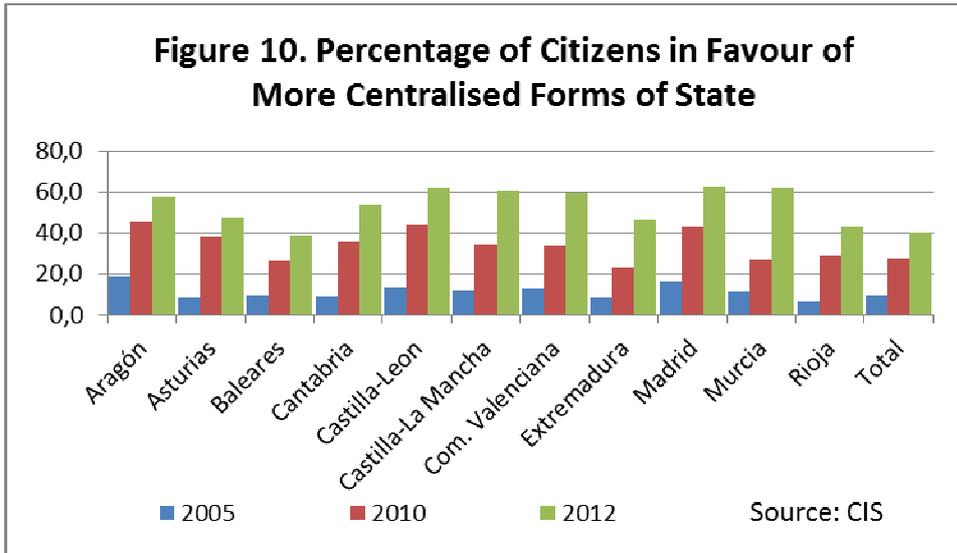
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Annex: Figures and Tables









**Table 1. Variation in the Percentage of Citizens Satisfied with the Spanish Autonomic Model per region, 2005-2012**

	<i>Variation 2005-2012</i>	<i>Region Tendency</i>
Andalusia	-19.7	Autonomist
Aragon	-15.0	Centralisation
Asturias	-24.2	Centralisation
Balearic Islands	-20.3	Autonomist
Canary Islands	-14.3	Autonomist
Cantabria	-38.9	Centralisation
Castille-Leon	-40.0	Centralisation
Castille-La Mancha	-38.2	Centralisation
Catalonia	-6.9	Decentralisation
Valencian Community	-32.5	Centralisation
Extremadura	-33.1	Autonomist
Galicia	-13.5	Autonomist
Madrid	-31.5	Centralisation
Murcia	-40.9	Centralisation
Navarre	-0.8	Autonomist
Basque Country	16.7	Decentralisation
Rioja	-29.3	Autonomist
Average Spain	-20.7	

Source: CIS