



Diversity and Unity in Spain's *Estado De Las Autonomías*

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Some countries face a national question. Spain has rather a question of nationalities and regions. Despite ongoing tensions in the functioning of its political structure, secessionist aspirations of some of its citizens, and diversity in language, socioeconomic status, and territorial identities, the case of Spain can serve as a model for other diverse countries facing similar challenges for accommodating long-standing diversity and unity.

Spain was established as the first modern state in Europe by means of a dynastic union of the Catholic monarchy in the second half of the 15th century. However, its constituent territories maintained their political existence. In the following centuries there were failed attempts at constituting a centralized polity along the lines of the French model. This failure was reflected in the emergence in 19th and 20th centuries of different local regionalisms and nationalisms claiming autonomy, home rule, or even secession. Efforts to accommodate them in the short-lived First Federal Republic (1873) and the Second Republic (1931-1939) failed. After the demise of General Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975) a wide social and political consensus was achieved with the 1978 Constitution.

The 1978 Constitution initiated a deep process of political and administrative decentralization that took place in parallel with that of democratization.

The democratic constitution opted for an open-ended model of territorial organization of a federalizing nature and established a “State of autonomous communities” or *Estado de las Autonomías*. Although the “f” word does not appear in the Constitution, it established provisions devised to accommodate a diversity of collective identities within Spain, as well as to address historical grievances and articulate a long-standing inclination for regional self-rule. The process of devolution of administrative and political powers started in the early 1980s in three territories that had previous experience with autonomy and a constitutionally recognized vernacular language in addition to the state-wide official Spanish (or *castellano*). These three territories – the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Galicia – are usually known as “historical nationalities.” Soon after a second group of regions, Andalusia, Canary Islands, Navarre, and Valencia, mobilized in order to achieve the same powers of self-rule as those of the historical nationalities. Since then, all 17 nationalities and regions have engaged in a multiple horizontal competition for power and resources, some of them in order to maintain a special status and some to remain on the same footing as the others.

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The 1978 Constitution also sanctioned various asymmetries, among which the recognition and protection of a quasi independent fiscal regime in the Basque Country and Navarre, and a special economic-fiscal regime for the Canary Islands, should be underlined. Traditional civil law systems in Catalonia, Galicia, Navarre, Valencia, Balearic Islands, Aragon, and Basque Country were also recognized.

The functioning of the state has been underpinned by two main tensions. The first is a vertical tension between regional governments and the central government. The former have often sought after more powers and resources from the centre; the latter has strived to keep its policy-making role state-wide. Second, a horizontal tension exists among the autonomous communities themselves. Some have attempted to maintain a different status from the rest of the regions, while others have aimed to achieve the same institutional and political resources. These tensions have manifested in the evolution of the party system, with a relevant presence of local nationalist parties in some autonomous communities. Some of these parties advocate confederal or secessionist options, while others declare loyalty to the existing model of federal-like statehood, although they also claim a deeper degree of regional autonomy. In other *Comunidades Autónomas*, local nationalism is confronted by different versions of Spanish state-nationalism with strong ideas of equality, cohesion, and unity.

A minority of citizens in the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Galicia aspire to outright independence. In the Basque Country, some of them support the ideas of ETA, a Basque acronym for “Basque Homeland and Freedom,”

a terrorist group advocating secession with Navarre and the French Basque Country. In the whole of Spain, however, more than two-thirds of its citizens express a dual identity or compound nationality. This dual identity incorporates both regional and state-wide identities in various degrees and without apparent contradiction between them. Such a dual identity is at the root of the federalizing rationale of the *Estado de las Autonomías*, which has largely transcended previous patterns of internal confrontation.

Spain's linguistic diversity is at the base of many political claims put forward by local nationalisms. These language differences are often politicized in order to request a greater degree of autonomy in the running of policy areas such as education, health, planning, or social services, now fully devolved to the *Comunidades Autónomas*. Unlike the cases of Switzerland, Canada, or Belgium, in those Spanish regions with official local languages, virtually everyone can speak – and be understood – in Spanish. Some political parties and civil society groups have proposed the use of co-official local languages in nationwide institutions, to the detriment of the common language, as a way of recognizing diversity. For others, it seems unreasonable to renounce the use of a common and world language like *castellano* Spanish.

Spain is also socio-economically diverse. A majority of citizens (57.8 percent of the Spanish population) live in four *Comunidades Autónomas*: Andalusia, Catalonia, Madrid, and Valencia. The regional share of gross domestic product (GDP) by these four *Comunidades Autónomas* represents 59.9 percent of the total. Likewise, ten regions have a population of less than five percent of the total, and ten regions account for less than five per cent of GDP. Concerning religion, a majority of Spaniards profess to be Roman Catholics, including the majority of Basque and Catalan nationalists. The North African cities of Ceuta and Melilla now have large Islamic minorities. At present, Spain has around 4.5 million immigrants (ten percent of the total population), mainly from Latin American countries and Morocco, who work mainly in Catalonia, the Mediterranean coast, and Madrid. Changes in the demographic structure are bound to result in new political and constitutional tensions.

Through pacts at the political level and the successful accommodation of a diversity of interests through negotiation, Spain has had a relatively smooth transition to democracy since the late 1970s. Accommodation of regional interests in policy making has also been accomplished through intergovernmental relations among the national government and autonomous communities – mostly through ministerial sectoral conferences and, more recently, through the Prime Ministers' Conference. Internal negotiation of divergences within parties and other informal practices, such as building the Spanish cabinet with ministers coming from different regions, have also played an important role in accommodating regional interests. However, a main shortcoming of "federal" Spain is represented by the dysfunctional workings of the Senate – many Spaniards consider it a constitutionally ill-defined chamber of territorial representation.