

# [***How far has Spain moved past Catalonia's secession crisis? Voters will decide in regional election***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C0H-F3N1-JC5B-G3XG-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

BARCELONA, Spain — Carles Puigdemont, Catalonia’s [*fugitive former leader*](https://apnews.com/article/spain-election-sanchez-puigdemont-catalonia-8ca29d88a246110d943d3add2ac0ed7a), stares confidently out the backseat window of a car, the sun illuminating his gaze in a campaign poster for Sunday’s critical elections in the northeastern Spanish region.

The image plays on another one imagined from six years prior when Puigdemont hid in the trunk of a car as he was snuck across the French border, fleeing Spain’s crackdown on a failed illegal [*2017 secession attempt*](https://apnews.com/article/spain-ap-top-news-elections-laws-international-news-c00bbc82c39b4b669ff998cc7b39d894) that he had led as Catalan regional president.

Sunday’s elections will be a test to see if Catalonia wants him back as leader or if the wealthy region has moved on from secession and has more pressing worries.

Puigdemont is still technically a fugitive. But ironically recent maneuvers by Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez have revitalized his political career. Sánchez promised [*amnesty to Puigdemont and other separatists*](https://apnews.com/article/spain-politics-catalonia-amnesty-sanchez-8d647b740274a8f01d5a08b32e8ceacb) facing charges in return for the support of separatist lawmakers in the national parliament to form a new government in Madrid. But that could now backfire and cause problems for the national government if Puigdemont, public enemy No. 1 for many Spaniards, is reelected.

**SÁNCHEZ'S STAKE**

Either from conviction or necessity, Sánchez has spent huge amounts of political capital taking decisions embraced in Catalonia but largely lambasted in the rest of the country that were aimed at wooing back voters from the separatist camp.

So far it seems to be working.

The Socialists’ candidate, [*Salvador Illa*](https://apnews.com/general-news-cde2b4e0e7924ba1d959378aa908d6c0), is currently leading in the polls ahead of both Puigdemont and current Catalan regional president Pere Aragonès, another secessionist from a different Catalan party.

Illa won the most votes in the 2021 Catalan elections but could not stop Aragonès from keeping the separatists in power. If the Socialists win Sunday, Sánchez, who has campaigned alongside Illa, can boast that [*his risky bets on Catalonia*](https://apnews.com/article/spain-politics-catalonia-amnesty-sanchez-8d647b740274a8f01d5a08b32e8ceacb) have paid off.

“Carles Puigdemont is the past, we represent the future,” Illa said at a debate this week, as he focuses on social issues and casts the debate about secession as stale.

“If the Socialists have a strong showing, that will give Sánchez a boost, especially before European elections (in June),” Oriol Bartomeus, a professor of political science at the Autonomous University of Barcelona told The Associated Press.

But Illa’s chances of becoming regional president will, according to all election polling, still hinge on winning the support of other parties, including most likely Aragonès' Republican Left of Catalonia.

**PUIGDEMONT'S PLEDGE**

Puigdemont is running on the pledge that he will finally return home — in theory under the protection provided by the amnesty — when the newly elected lawmakers convene to form a new regional government. That investiture vote would come in the weeks after the post-election negotiations between parties.

Puigdemont has moved, at least temporarily, from Waterloo, Belgium, where he has lived as a self-styled “political exile,” to a French village just north of Spain where he has campaigned with rallies by followers who have crossed the border.

He has said that if he is not restored to power he will retire from ***politics***.

**VOTER PRIORITIES**

The question Puigdemont, Illa, Aragonès and the other candidates now face is how much Catalonia has changed.

A [*record drought*](https://apnews.com/article/climate-drought-spain-villages-catalonia-791dd212ab85245cc95a45d5a49f91cd), not independence, is the number one concern among Catalans, according to the most recent survey by Catalonia’s public opinion office. Some 70% of would-be voters now say that the management of public services, the economy and [*climate change*](https://apnews.com/hub/climate-change) would drive their choice at the polls, while 30% say the question of independence was still their priority.

The opinion office said 50% of Catalans are against independence while 42% are for it, meaning support for it has dipped to 2012 levels. When Puigdemont left in 2017, 49% favored independence and 43% were against.

Pablo Simón, political science professor at Carlos III University in Madrid, said that the secessionist movement was in a period of uncertain transition.

“I would not dare say that the secessionist movement is dead, but I can say that we are in a period where we don’t know what will come next,” he said.

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Ciarán Giles contributed from Madrid.

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