

The Awkward Rhetoric of Spanish Liberalism: An Essay on the Politics of Language of the Citizens Party

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Abstract

This article explores the ideological controversies around Spanish liberalism through the story of the Citizens party – from its rise in 2006 through 2023, after a sequence of electoral defeats that almost certified its demise. Born as a regional party in Catalonia with an anti-nationalist platform focused on linguistic policies, in national politics it fostered a liberal agenda. The article examines Citizens’ politics of language hiding the party’s liberal identity because of its association to right-wing outlooks. At its founding documents there was an amalgam of liberal and social democratic constitutional values inspiring the party’s political approach. No earnest question was made of their difficult accommodation, given their disparity at the policy level. In 2017 an internal debate arose, and from 2019 a number of electoral setbacks accelerated it. By then the liberal language legitimizing its passage from regional into a national party had lost its civic appeal.

Keywords: political language; liberalism; social democracy; Citizens party; Spanish politics

1. Introduction

Ideas provide the intellectual stuff of political arguments. They inspire actions. As linguistic resources, they inform the ideological anatomy of institutions and policies. The former are assessed by their argumentative potential, whereas the latter by their outcomes. The rise and fall of the Citizens party describes an intriguing breach between ideas and actions; more specifically, between its platforms or programmes and public communication, on the one hand, and its political performance, on the other. This lack of coordination has at the end undermined the party’s chances to represent a liberal alternative.

Over the 1970s electors identified Spanish liberalism with the advancement of freedoms and the democratization of the political regime. Early liberals, belonging to centrist parties, endorsed a prominent role for the state in the economy and in building

welfarist institutions. Their electoral crumbling all through the following decade was taken advantage of by the conservative People's Party (*Partido Popular*) which softened its value and policy agenda to entice liberal voters.

Citizens entered national politics when the space of liberalism had long been occupied, yet with the hope of restoring centrism's electoral chances. From 2007 onwards it embarked on local, national, and European campaigns, enjoying a growing success until the general election of April 2019, when its fifty-seven seats made it a candidate for coalition government with the Socialist party. After failed negotiations, attributable to both leaderships, a new election in November that year left Citizens with ten representatives in parliament.

Altogether, in less than fifteen years Citizens has lived through an astonishing electoral rise and fall. But, next to tactical mistakes (replacing the party leaders in Catalonia after winning the regional election of December 2017, hoping to outpace the People's Party at the general election of April 2019), the party's path reveals some intricacies of what it means to be liberal. And of what it entails to challenge the status quo: nationalism in Catalonia, and a two-party hegemony (socialist-conservative) in Spain. The latter has been characterized as an "imperfect two-party system" (Blanco Valdés 2017) due to the hinge role of minority parties, namely, regional parties competing in national elections from their respective districts, only of late swaying towards a multi-party model divided in two blocs.

At this playing field, for a hinge party whose strength is contingent on the electoral reversals of major parties, but whose own weakness grows endemic because of its bivalent alliances, the uses of political language reveal an uneasy exercise. A widespread interpretation of Citizens' fate, circulated in the media but also voiced by former representatives, pivots around its changing partnerships to right and left, or rather, the awkward rhetoric justifying it. Such swinging movement would have blurred its ideological profile, being the party's alliances open to conservative and to socialist parties alike, and demeaned its electoral credit. It is a tenable explanation, though incomplete.

In the pages that follow, this article argues a complementing hypothesis that brings up a disregarded angle in the study of both the Citizens party and the liberal cause in Spain: Citizens' foundational endorsement of liberalism, at once with social democracy, was made in undertones given liberalism's linkage to right-wing positions. The continuity between social democratic and liberal principles was acknowledged at the

party's creation, but no further discussion addressed their policy differences. These became evident when Citizens competed in supra-regional campaigns, and when its candidates assumed government responsibilities. However, disagreements between those who saw it as a centre-left party (founders such as Arcadi Espada or Francesc de Carreras) and those who claimed to belong to a centre-right, liberal party (its two presidents, Albert Rivera and Inés Arrimadas) lay dormant until electoral setbacks triggered internal debates, with consequences.

Unlike other studies focused on the party's electoral strategies (Rodon 2020) or its ephemeral role advancing a new type of politics (Pannico and Anduiza 2023), this paper maintains that Citizens' predicament has to do largely with this unsettled tension of its political identity, absent from its founding documents but observable in the party's public language. That tension distinguishes Citizens from its European counterparts (see https://www.aldeparty.eu/alde_member_parties), with the exception arguably of Britain's Liberal Democrats.

Likewise, it opens a political discussion about affinities and differences between social democracy and liberalism. Drawing freely on Michael Freeden's studies (1996, 13–136; 2021), in this analysis political ideologies are taken as rhetorical resources that political agents use strategically to advance their power positions, in a sense cogently argued by Max Weber (1994 [1919], 35–44). His morphological approach presents ideologies as built on clusters of concepts whose semantic borders and overlapping denote conceptual affinities and dissimilarities between ideologies. Concepts provide the raw materials for ideological arguments. In this sense, ideologies draw both scholarly and political interest. On the one hand, they function as interpretive frameworks that political agents use to make sense of their political positions, and scholars apply to explore the configuration of the political spectrum. On the other hand, political agents use them as rhetorical weapons and, as such, are argued and interpreted in oppositional terms.

Acknowledging that the political significance of ideologies has received careful attention after the seminal work of Karl Mannheim (1936 [1929], 97–171), Freeden's approach is especially useful for the purposes of this analysis. His accent on the practical dimension of ideational resources is suitable to examine the correlation between ideologies, institutions, and policies, which in the case of Citizens questions the impossibility of concealing it. Further, it exploits the transformative character of ideologies as both linguistic and political tools, improving on the explanatory potential

of inquiries into the language of politics (Dallmayr 1984, 175–192) and the politics of language (Connolly 1993, 9–44). Disputes over Citizens’ ideology were battles for the control of the party.

As social democratic and liberal policies were emphasized, their affinities (based on the constitutional principles of equality and freedom) gave way to rival policy stands. A compromise was reached, yet it left Citizens at an indefinite ideological position whose effects would be felt after the general election of December 2015, when a transit began from a two-party towards a two-bloc system. The latter became coterminous with affective polarization (Rojo, Crespo and Mora 2023). In a fractured political scenario, Citizens’ social democratic lineage looked too weak for electors to be assimilated to the leftist bloc, whereas its liberal credentials brought it closer to the People’s Party.

To carry out this inquiry, the next section of the paper outlines a brief overview of Spanish liberalism. The third section deals with the identification of liberalism with centrism from the mid-1970s onwards. The fourth section delves into the grassroots origins and intellectual imprint of the Citizens party to further explore, in the two following sections, Citizens’ politics of language as it went from regional to national party. In the concluding section the argument is resumed to appraise the way Citizens has come to terms with this adjustment, and its ensuing costs.

2. Spanish liberalism in perspective

Forged as a constitutional language in the constituent debates of France and America at the end of the eighteenth century, liberalism’s intellectual origins date back to pre-Enlightenment natural rights debates. Throughout the nineteenth century liberal ideas circulated the world leaving a perceptible trail in economic laws, in politics, in social and moral thought (Rosales 2013). In some years national versions of this manifold heritage unfolded in vernacular languages and upgraded institutions.

The nineteenth-century history of Spanish liberalism is traced by its five constitutions adopted between 1812 and 1876. The Cadiz Constitution of 1812 expanded the liberal imprint to Central and South America, most notably through the political rights to representation, good government, and fair administration, together with the civil rights to property, assembly, fair trial, press freedom and freedom of

expression. Debates around those constitutional moments streamlined the transfers of liberal ideas across the Atlantic, but also all over Europe.

Institutional experiments in American and European political regimes tested liberal rights informing republican constitution-making and parliamentary politics. The rise of liberal democracy was then surveyed and scrutinized by an international publicistic culture that revamped the language of politics, though at the turn of the century showed liberalism's signs of weariness. Despite its influence abroad (Fernández-Sebastián 2017), Spanish liberalism no longer looked a lively political option (Smith 2016). A similar fatigue signalled other liberal regimes. In less than three decades illiberal alternatives challenged its prestige.

By the 1930s, liberal parties of the Spanish Second Republic, representing a minority position, put forward reformist measures in matters of social and economic rights (Payne 1993, 81–124) further driven by the aftermath of the world financial crisis. Grouping at the Service of the Republic (*Agrupación al Servicio de la República*), Republican Radical Party (*Partido Republicano Radical*) or Republican Action (*Acción Republicana*) endorsed legal changes and policies sharply distinguished from left-wing revolutionary and from conservative outlooks – the former exemplified by the Socialist party and the latter by the CEDA coalition.

Their stances stood close to those of other liberal parties, and of social democratic parties as well. Institutional affinities were discernable at the liberal New Deal of America and the welfare models of Britain, Germany, and the Nordic countries. Yet, its influence faded away from the beginning of the civil war in 1936 ending in a dictatorship in 1939. The liberal legacy was retrieved in the second half of the 1970s and reconceptualized amid a nascent pluralist party system as liberal centrism, namely, an alternative option to conservatism and socialism. A newly founded liberal, centrist party, Union of Democratic Centre (*Unión de Centro Democrático*), won the general election of June 1977 with the promise of reformist politics and policies to complete the transition from dictatorship. Its endeavour lasted barely five years in which the various morphings of political centrism ran parallel to liberalism's semantic and institutional turns (Núñez 2017).

It was in those years that the concept of neoliberalism spread in economic and political debates and with it, a new semantic twist cemented a dualist interpretation of liberalism in cultural and geopolitical terms. In Anglophone countries, this turn referred to the opposite meanings of 'liberal' as left-wing in America and right-wing in Britain

or Australia. In European countries, liberalism was identified with right-wing views (Freeden 2008), carrying out an inversion of its nineteenth century meaning and value preferences (see for the French case, akin to the Italian and the Spanish ones, Canto-Sperber 2008, 195–246). Hence, the brief history of Spanish centrism concurred with the gradual loss of its liberal, progressivist aura.

3. Liberalism and centrism in Spanish version

The offspring of negotiations among reformist politicians, Union of Democratic Centre grew out of an alliance of sixteen parties some of them associated to other thirty minor parties overall. It was a swift attempt to bring together pro-democracy groups of a centrist temper (Hopkin 1999). By 1983 the party would be dissolved though after winning the general elections of 1977 and 1979.

Various reasons explain the epilogue of the project, which unrolled, ironically, right after the electoral victory of March 1979. They went from the clash of individual ambitions to disagreements about party tactics and a certain awareness that Union of Democratic Centre had fulfilled its mission. However, two sweeping factors dramatically precipitated the downturn. The first one was the government's tottering social support given the slow, though secure, pace of badly needed economic reforms, subscribed in the Moncloa Pacts of October 1977 by the government with major trade unions and business associations. The second was the diffuse and disturbing threat of a coup d'état; of the various plots schemed in the course of the transition years one would materialize in February 1981.

Adolfo Suárez, leader of Union of Democratic Centre, resigned as head of government in January 1981. The party would dissolve two years afterwards. In 1982 Suárez undertook a new liberal, centrist adventure founding the Democratic and Social Centre party (*Centro Democrático y Social*). At the elections of 1982, 1986 and 1989 it won a declining number of representatives in parliament – from each one of those votes resulting a socialist government. The experience of a centre party in opposition triggered to some extent the political irrelevance not just of centrism, but of liberalism too. By the early 1990s the conservative People's Party began to distance itself from its predecessor, the former People's Alliance party (*Alianza Popular*), precisely by adopting the creed of classic liberalism since its January 1989 refoundation. The Conservatives would eventually win the election of March 1996.

Some first steps marking that distance appeared on the electoral platform that the People's Party prepared for the campaign of the October 1989 elections. It adopted the language of economic liberalization (People's Party 1989, 38–45). Yet, the most conspicuous ideological and rhetorical changes were introduced in the programme for the 1996 campaign. Its leader called it “the party of the centre”. Even though the words liberalism and liberal were not mentioned, there was a clear endorsement of liberal with conservative values – the platform's rhetoric softening the latter. Section V, titled “A solidary society,” stated that “solidarity is one of the values inspiring [the party's] political action,” to add that it is founded on the “constitutional principle” of “personal dignity,” finally conceding that “any form of social marginalization” would render invalid “the principle of equality of opportunity” (People's Party 1996, 163).

In ways that would become determining for later votes, the ideological space for liberalism-centrism was already occupied by a conservative party. One of its long-term effects would be the difficulty for any liberal party to be seen as centrist. From 2014 to 2019, the Chapell Hill Expert Survey presents Citizens' policy preferences in line with those of the People's Party (Jolly et al. 2022); in other words, its liberalism as closer to right-wing than to centrist positions. Not just for experts, for many electors Citizens was seen as a liberal, centre-right party.

From 1983 to 1986 another liberal experiment was launched with the Democratic Reformist Party (*Partido Reformista Democrático*). Its leadership kept close ties with the nationalist, conservative Catalan party coalition Convergence and Union (*Convergència i Unió*). This bond and its ensuing blend of liberal, conservative, and nationalist ideas and policies help explain its electoral underperformance at the 1986 vote. Revealingly, since the general election of June 1993 no centrist party had representatives in parliament, till the election of March 2008, when Union Progress and Democracy (*Unión Progreso y Democracia*), a party established a year earlier out of the civic platform *Plataforma Pro* (UPyD 2007), won a seat in the Congress of Deputies, parliament's lower chamber. Union Progress and Democracy epitomized a type of centrism close to that of Citizens, though with a meaningful difference.

Unlike Citizens, Union Progress and Democracy openly declared its centrism to be a confluence of political liberalism and social democracy. Beyond its founding declaration, no further upgrade appears on its electoral platforms, as for example those of 2011 and 2015 reveal, but its social networks campaigns clearly spread that message. A tweet published by the party's national spokesperson in May 2017 evoked its

ideological roots when claiming that it “feeds on social democracy and political liberalism. We work for this country’s progress” (UPyD 2017). Its progressivism competed with the left-wing progressivism claimed by left-wing parties precisely by its credence in liberal values. With varying fortune, it took part in European, national, regional, and local elections ever since, prior to its dissolution in December 2020. Over its latest years of activity, after electoral defeats, the party leaders agreed to draw closer to Citizens.

4. Citizens’ grassroots origins and intellectual imprint

The Citizens party was promoted by the Citizens of Catalonia Association (*Associació Ciutadans de Catalunya*). The association, initially led by a group of intellectuals, belonged to Catalonia’s civil fabric which was the source of its political pluralism (Ellakuria and Albert de Paco 2015). Alongside journalistic pieces and other media interventions two founding documents account for its civil society origins and its political singularity. Its so-called *First Manifesto* was published in June 2005. The document did not refer to centrism nor mentioned social democracy or liberalism, though it advanced a brisk demand to reconfigure the political arena by challenging the pervasive influence of nationalism: “nationalism transversally unifies the ideology and the practice of all Catalan parties” (*el nacionalisme unifica transversalment la ideologia i la pràctica de tots els partits catalans*).

For a new political party in Catalonia (Per un nou partit polític a Catalunya), as the manifesto was titled, argued the need for a non-nationalist party to challenge the “political fiction” created by twenty-three years of “conservative nationalism” and to contribute to “bring reality back” (*restabliment de la realitat*). The new party would uphold “the Enlightenment tradition, the freedom of citizens, lay values and social rights” (*la tradició il·lustrada, la llibertat dels ciutadans, els valors laics i els drets socials*) which were part of liberalism’s core tenets, but also of social democracy’s (Associació Ciutadans de Catalunya 2005).

In March 2006, the association released its *Second Manifesto* setting up a constituent process to form a political party. “Catalonia has become inhospitable for those who are not nationalists” (*Catalunya s’ha tornat inhòspita per als que no són nacionalistes*). Drawing on this diagnosis, the promoters invited supporters to deliberate

around a series of “concepts that should orient the party programme” (*alguns conceptes que haurien d’orientar el programa del partit*).

These were, first, citizenship, reminding that “territories do not have rights” (*Els territoris no tenen drets*), only individuals do, which was a claim made by Catalonia’s nationalist governments in their goal of building a national identity, and in budget negotiations with Spain’s governments every year. Such prompting of the liberal character of civic rights challenged a rife postulate of nationalist discourses pleading for a normative priority of collective over individual rights (the Catalan people over its citizens).

Second, liberty and equality, declaring that “the party will defend that the state promotes equality of opportunity so that neither ethnic origin, language, sex nor the family’s economic status determine privileges” (*el partit defensarà que l’Estat promogui la igualtat d’oportunitats de forma que ni l’origen ètnic, ni l’idioma, ni el sexe, ni la posició econòmica de la família, determini privilegis*). Among other aspects, this claim underlined that the regional government was a state institution and therefore, should rule in compliance with the Constitution’s non-discriminatory principles.

Third, the endorsement of lay values (*laïcisme*), stressing that “[i]t is essential the administration’s neutrality in religious and identity matters” (*És essencial la neutralitat de l’Administració en assumptes religiosos i identitaris*), having this proposal a twofold target: the defence of pluralism and the protection against discrimination for religious and political reasons, more specifically in the latter case when publicly professing non-nationalist values.

Fourth, bilingualism, to make effective in the administration and the education system the equal character of Catalan and Spanish as official languages in Catalonia, a demand that came to request the recovery of an eroded constitutional condition in practice. That has been considered probably Citizens’ defining feature in Catalan politics, namely, a challenge to the *nationalist consensus* around the Catalan language.¹

Lastly, the defence of the Constitution, underscoring that “sovereignty lay with the Spanish citizenry as a whole, not with each one of the [country’s] autonomous communities” (*la sobirania resideix en el conjunt de la ciutadania espanyola, no en cada una de les Comunitats Autònomes*), which signalled another constitutional basis

¹ See the regional governments’ official position at <https://llengua.gencat.cat/ca/pactenacionalperlallengua/detalls/article/presentacio-en-00001>

questioned by Catalonia's nationalist governments spawning over time the claim of bilateral relations with Spain's governments (Associació Ciutadans de Catalunya 2006).

As will be spelt out in the following section, the manifestos and their background debate were a sign of the controversies existing around nationalism that cut across Catalan society. Written in a critical and heartening ethos, their ideological features were shown, however, with softened tones, perhaps assuming the chance to somehow de-ideologize the political language, for everyone knew of the slippery character of ideological tags and the difficulty any centrist party faces to be recognized as such. This choice, aiming to focus the electoral attention on the party's centrism, proved successful also when Citizens competed in European elections in 2014 and the national elections since 2015.

Yet, after its major defeat at the November 2019 vote, it became apparent that its grassroots origins gave Citizens no immunity against the plights of traditional parties.² Its condition as an alternative party (along with *Podemos* and *Vox*) would fade away in a few years. Recent studies document that trend (Pannico and Anduiza 2023). As the account of the founding member Xavier Pericay soberly reveals, Citizens became quite a rather conventional party where a clique ("*núcleo duro*") took the main decisions (Pericay 2020, 75–95). The latter further explains the erosion of the social democratic inspiration of Citizens as a regional party in the course of its growth into a national party.

5. Citizens' liberal language describing its path from regional into a national party

All in all, ever since its foundation in July 2006, Citizens–Party of the Citizenry (*Ciudadanos–Partido de la Ciudadanía*) became a promising hope of a new kind of politics. Mulling over its first victory entering the regional parliament with three representatives at the November 2006 election, founding member Félix Ovejero (2006, 14) acknowledged he could not anticipate further electoral outcomes, adding “[b]ut of

² At this webpage of the Spanish Ministry of the Interior the results of all elections can be browsed, <http://www.infoelectoral.mir.es/infoelectoral/min>. For the Citizens party, the results are summarized in “Anexo: Resultados electorales de Ciudadanos–Partido de la Ciudadanía.” *Wikipedia*. https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anexo:Resultados_electorales_de_Ciudadanos-Partido_de_la_Ciudadanía

which I have no doubt is that after 1 November the Catalan society is a little freer. If only for that, it was worth it”.

The rise of Citizens appealed to a segment of the electorate jaded with the status quo. The adjustment of its dual identity turned, however, problematic. Features of liberalism and social democracy were found separately scattered in the positions of moderate wings or trends of socialist and liberal parties elsewhere, from the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats in Britain to the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) and the *Freie Demokratische Partei* (FDP) in Germany. What made Citizens’ political identity a distinct case, along with its anti-nationalism, was its contested ideological eclecticism.

Probably the closest comparable trajectory is that of the British Liberal Democrats which over the 1980s were a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (a split of Labour) and the Liberal Party. The new party gradually abandoned social democratic positions in its support of liberal policies already before it entered a coalition government with the Conservatives in 2007 (Lakin and Ostrowski 2014). And even if the party’s platform for the general election of May 2015, the *Manifesto 2015: Stronger Economy, Fairer Society* (https://www.libdems.org.uk/policy_papers), aimed to gain back its social democratic electorate, their prospects failed and afterwards the Liberal Democrats kept a centre-right, liberal profile (<https://www.libdems.org.uk/history>). Another similar but more successful case of centre-right liberalism is Macron’s political movement *La République en Marche!* (Youngs and Mortera-Martínez 2019). Active from 2017 to 2022, it grew out from the political movement *En marche*, set up in 2016 and out of which the liberal party *Renaissance* was founded in the same year. *La République en Marche!* became in 2021 part of the coalition *Ensemble* to compete at the presidential election of 2022.

Despite policy differences, there are undeniable ideological and policy affinities between social democracy and liberalism which look blurred in a simple left versus right opposition. In this regard, the building and expansion of welfarist institutions since the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe has been the gradual contribution of governments from left and right and, thus, a cross-ideological conquest, no matter how at different times it may have been considered either a social democratic or a liberal achievement. Thus it is against this backdrop that contrasting accounts of welfarism put the accent on liberal contributions (Freeden 2005, 19–37) or on social democratic accomplishments (Berman 2006, 200–218).

Citizens' singularity draws on this cross-ideological background which was not thoroughly discussed and assumed, and so remained an unsolved question on the party's platform. At the policy level its goals in Catalonia and in national politics were partially overlapping – being its guiding thread the defence of constitutional equality. Yet, to grasp Citizens's centrism, appreciating this eclectic character is just a first step. It was its anti-nationalist outlook what most definitely distinguished Citizens and together with it, because of its distance from socialism and conservatism, fairly justified its being a centrist party. Yet, the bonds of liberalism with centrism plunged into another tricky discussion, namely, around the question of liberal nationalism in Catalonia, approached from academic circles, government spheres, and the public both within Catalonia and from within the rest of Spain.

For years it has been running as an academic debate, networked internationally to other nationalism disputes which were mainly centred around linguistic issues, in particular being Catalan and Spanish official languages in Catalonia, whether Catalan should be given preference based on nationhood arguments (Cetrà 2019, 87–123). Very early on this debate reached a wider public, when the effects of linguistic policies enacted by the regional government since May 1980 began to be critically weighed up. That happened with the publication on 12 March 1981 of the *Manifesto for the Equality of Linguistic Rights in Catalonia*, known as the *Manifesto of the 2,300*.³

In their reasoning, the signatories of the document criticized both the central and the regional governments – the former because of its inaction whereas the latter because of its partisan measures that dismissed a “bilingual social reality”. They suggested that promoting the Catalan language and culture should be compatible with the acknowledgement of bilingualism. This awareness move captured a dissident state of opinion which eventually assumed a low profile with intermittent public testimonies. It was, however, this accumulated experience of dissent from the official image of Catalonia, publicized as monolingual and politically homogeneous, what inspired the rising of alternatives.

To Citizens the linguistic policies that Catalonia's regional governments had carried out for more than two decades, by marginalizing the use of Spanish, turned a real bilingual society into a de facto monolingual community mostly in the administration and the education system. Those policies were not steadily or

³ See https://es.wikisource.org/wiki/Manifiesto_de_los_2.300

consistently opposed by regional non-nationalist parties and, more relevant to interpret the situation, were largely deemed a regional issue, not a national one, by Spain's successive governments (Cardenal 2020, 33–82). Over the years, the early measures became part of a more systematic policy planning. On 28 October 1990 the Barcelona-based newspaper *El Periódico* published the translation of a working paper provided by the regional government, *Generalitat*, under the headline “The Recatalanization Strategy,” containing a series of measures to increase the Catalan national conscience in all areas of public life.

Monolingualism was also adopted by the network of public media as part of linguistic policies aimed at community-building. It was further spread by advocates of a Catalan liberal nationalism, in line with a recasting of Spain's decentralization in terms of “asymmetric federalism” (Máiz and Losada 2011), and projected onto the official image of Catalonia at home and abroad which over time would be put at the service of secessionist parties and associations (Cardenal 2020) – of the former, *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (est. 1931) or *Junts per Catalunya* (est. 2020); of the latter, *Òmnium Cultural* (est. 1961) or *Assemblea Nacional Catalana* (est. 2012). Citizens questioned that state of affairs pointing out its consequences: a hindrance of constitutional equality among Spanish citizens and the undermining, if not dismantling, of the state institutions in Catalonia.

There were, and there are, ways to debate secession in political and legal terms, to publicly discuss its conditions and foreseeable social and economic outcomes, as for example the Quebec case within Canada illustrated (Dion 1999, 131–181). Yet, in their full extent the lessons from this example were not openly and consequentially considered in public debates by supporters of secession – a path backed then by roughly more than a third of the electorate and over the following years keeping a stable support of the citizenry.⁴

Citizens' arguments, also unrelatedly presented by scholars such as Medina Ortega (2017), or Kolb and Gazzini (2021); for a nationalist position, Colomines i Companys (2020), noted the lack of conformity of pro-independence claims with the international law and highlighted the costs of advancing secessionist aspirations in what was already a fractured society. One of its effects, which prompted the setting up of the new party,

⁴ See the evolution of opinion polls conducted since October 2004 by the Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió of the Generalitat de Catalunya at <https://ceo.gencat.cat/ca/barometre>

was a critical response to what its founders considered a crackdown on political pluralism and the resulting undermining of democratic freedoms.

So in this sense, together with the dispute over the ideological compatibility of liberalism with nationalism, the party's political stance embodied a new dissensus, across left and right, from nationalism's hegemony. Citizens' anti-nationalism in Catalonia was easily interpreted by political rivals as a form of alignment with Spanish nationalism or centralism (Sanjaume-Calvet and Riera-Gil 2022). The latter would be better represented by the far right *Vox* party and somehow also by the conservative People's Party. However, in national politics this ideological association would compromise Citizens' chances to be seen as a centrist instead of a rightist party.

Citizens competed in the elections to the European Parliament of 2014 and the general election of 2015 (Rodríguez Teruel and Barrio 2016). Both tests proved successful and nurtured the idea in the party leaders that as a centrist, non-nationalist party it could be a reliable candidate to keep wrestling not just with Catalan nationalist parties, but also with Spain's mainstream parties, Spanish Socialist Workers' Party and People's Party. That was a demanding goal for a hinge party whose nationwide presence was not yet consolidated. It seemed to require a long-term vision, a gradualist approach through successive electoral contests to test the voting potential of its message.

Yet, getting forty representatives in the December 2015 vote gave an unexpected morale to that endeavour (Orriols and Cordero 2016). By 2019 the party leaders thought, however, it could be accelerated if Citizens surpassed the People's Party. Opinion polls outlined a growing trend in electoral support. At the April 2019 vote Citizens, the underdog, got fifty-seven representatives in the Congress of Deputies, close to the sixty-six of the People's Party, and four senators.

Negotiations with the Socialist party, then having one hundred and twenty-three representatives, ended in deadlock. Definitely a lengthier historical perspective is needed to impartially assess the reasons and interests that were at stake. Responsibility for the result was shared by the leaders of both parties, but no less revealing were the conditions imposed by the nationalist Republican Left of Catalonia to continue backing the parliamentary majority reached on 1 June 2018, when the conservative government was ousted by a no confidence vote. Republican Left declared its support incompatible with a coalition government of the Socialists with Citizens.

A new election was called for November, the third in three years. Throughout the months in between the political climate got stuffed with reproaches for the country's prolonged instability. Citizens drew a great deal of them and as the election came nearer, it turned for its candidates increasingly embarrassing to give credible reasons of their political stance. It was rare to find fair accounts in the media explaining the complexity of such an intricate crossroads, and opinion polls announced a punitive electoral reaction. Citizens suffered a dramatic loss of representatives down to ten – the loss of its condition of hinge party anticipating what became a sort of chain reaction in regional and local elections where it had ruled or been part of coalition governments.

6. Citizens' liberal refoundation (and dwindling electoral performance)

Assessments of Citizens' shifting strategy of coalition-building with conservative and socialist parties were *ex post facto* considered misjudgements, namely, when they did not meet the expected results in elections. To a remarkable degree they portray the uncertain position of a hinge party whose electoral base was not yet established nationwide but needed to test its performance in government. In June 2015, Citizens backed the formation of a Socialist government in Andalusia, while from January 2019 till June 2022 became part, with the People's Party, of the regional executive. Between August 2019 and March 2021 Citizens and the People's Party kept a coalition government in the Murcia region, whereas from August 2019 until March 2021 the two-party coalition governed the Madrid autonomy. Concurrently, between July 2019 and December 2021 a coalition of the People's Party and Citizens shared the regional government (*Junta*) of Castile and León.

Against this backdrop, it can be argued that the jump to national politics drew on unrealistic expectations. For any impartial observer the odds of matching the two mainstream parties' logistic capacity seemed poor. Yet, looking back, the audacity of those electoral decisions still deserves attention. When they were taken, opinion polls suggested that a change of political cycle to overcome the two-party system was taking shape, and most party leaders took a chance on the bid. Those decisions further sidelined ideological concerns arguably with the hope that the party's imaginable rise would rely on a forecast decline of its main rivals. The party leaders' aspirations to outpace the People's Party made them to lay aside its focus on Catalonia and take

instead an all-absorbing interest in challenging the national status quo, overlooking the strategic function that a hinge party performs (Pericay 2020, 185–192).

Some years before that decisive turn, Citizens' fourth general assembly of February 2017 started a *liberal refounding* of the party, following its membership of the alliance of liberal parties in the European Parliament the previous year. This ideological move, among other effects, triggered a series of resignations of leading social democratic party members. A document approved by the assembly titled *Our Values* opened with a clear pronouncement, the clearest in a long time: "Our enlightened character drinks directly from the Spanish political liberalism," to append, "[c]onsequently, we define ourselves as a liberal, progressive, democratic and constitutionalist party" (Ciudadanos–Partido de la Ciudadanía 2017, 2). However, it fell short of its expectations to reconquer the space of liberal centrism, as it would not be systematically developed through any strategy, becoming thereafter a Sisyphean endeavour.

Moreover, this identity statement would not be included in the party statutes. A similar fate found a working document presented at the May 2020 general assembly, the liberal-oriented *Motion on Strategy and Guidelines for Political Action*. Not only did it claim that "more than ever we uphold our political space: liberal progressive centre" (Ciudadanos–Partido de la Ciudadanía 2020, 2), which was reminiscent of the political creed of the former Democratic and Social Centre party (1982–2006). The entire document was a thoughtful liberal platform in abridged version.

Thus, it recognized that the four autonomous communities with Citizens governments (Andalusia, Murcia, Madrid, Castile and León) were ruled according to "liberal, moderate, reasonable and regenerating projects" (Ciudadanos–Partido de la Ciudadanía 2020, 3), to further explain that the party advanced a "liberal reformist" model in the economy, in social affairs, in migration policies, in international relations. As for national politics, assuming the position of "liberal centre" meant "to defend in these territories equality, solidarity, freedom and union" (Ciudadanos–Partido de la Ciudadanía 2020, 17).

Its European strategy was plainly liberal (Ciudadanos–Partido de la Ciudadanía 2020, 19–20), a stance largely justified by its membership of the Alliance of Liberal and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE), which started in June 2016 (Ciudadanos–Partido de la Ciudadanía 2016, 14–15). Unlike in national politics, Citizens's seven MEPs from the May 2019 elections were clearly identifiable as liberals in their performance (<https://www.ciudadanos-cs.org/europa>). And this was also reflected in their

membership of the centrist Renew Europe Group of the European Parliament (<https://www.reneweuropegroup.eu/who-we-are>).

At the meeting of its general council of 2 April 2017, following the fourth assembly general of February that year, the then party leader, Albert Rivera, claimed that “Citizens is a party that supports the working middle class, with a project for the future, unlike conservatives and socialists”. In the information posted on the party’s website, no reference to liberalism was made, and the same happened with the general councils of November and December 2016, for example (<https://www.ciudadanos-cs.org/consejo-general>). Three years later, after the electoral defeat of November 2019, the statutes approved by the fifth general assembly of May 2020, being its new president Inés Arrimadas, made no ideological mentions either (<https://www.ciudadanos-cs.org/estatutos>).

By then, the party’s liberal profile was its only ideological identity. However, this move arrived late and, for example, the slogan for the party’s July 2021 convention, *Citizens: the liberal alternative*, failed to halt the bleeding of departures and the internal strifes over the party strategy. Citizens competed in the regional and municipal elections of May 2023 with a framework programme (*programa marco*) titled *A liberal project for a better Spain* (Ciudadanos–Partido de la Ciudadanía 2023, 2–3), being its new secretary general MEP Adrián Vázquez. The new statutes approved in September 2023 defined Citizens in article 4.2 as a “liberal political force” (<https://www.ciudadanos-cs.org/estatutos>).

By January 2022, the party had lost more than 70% of its members, namely, some 24,000 out of the roughly 34,000 registered in April 2019 (Ramos 2022). By October 2023, the party acknowledged around 6,000 members (Escartín 2023). This agony would not find the expected support in the regional elections of Galicia and the Basque Country held in July 2020, Catalonia in February 2021 (debunking the party leaders’ decision to underestimate the symbolic value of this regional election), Madrid in May 2021, Castile and León in February 2022, Andalusia in June 2022, where it lost its twenty-one representatives, or those of other six autonomous communities in May 2023.⁵ Then the party announced it would not compete in the general election scheduled for July that year.

⁵ See “Elecciones autonómicas en España.” *Wikipedia*. https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elecciones_autonómicas_en_España. Official information is found at the

7. Concluding remarks

Far from earlier liberal projects, Citizens grew out of civil mobilizations to vindicate a non-nationalist, constitutionalist alternative in Catalan politics. And unlike a plausible distant forebear, the Grouping at the Service of the Republic, the liberal party of intellectuals formed in 1931 and dissolved one year later, Citizens was also founded by intellectuals, in 2006, as a civil society party. This open character made it appealing to a wide centre-left to centre-right electorate.

Citizens began to compete in municipal and regional elections all over Spain since 2007, and in general elections since 2008. The experience of participating in coalition governments in cities and regions taught the convenience of tactically withering programmatic differences. Its leaders accepted that whereas in the run-up to elections their views were formulated in terms of ideological opposition (centrism upholding a bunch of tenets alternative to those of conservatism and socialism), after elections the party's views had to be re-interpreted in cooperative terms.

Understandable as this choice was for pragmatic reasons, which can also be the case of other hinge parties elsewhere (Arter 2016), it has been harder to grasp why the party leaders decided that Citizens' identification with liberalism would remain in undertones for more than ten years. Even if from the 1990s liberalism got a biased meaning, a well-informed explanation of liberalism's polysemy and of its historical linkages with social democracy would have settled the internal disputes in a reasonable way, not hiding the existence of this double, compatible profile in the party's identity. And besides, a different, enlightened approach would have elucidated the semantic and policy-making affinities and differences between liberalism and social democracy.

The consequences have been numerous, as surveyed in this article. That helps to explain, on the one hand, that for several decades the People's Party has met no rival in the contest for liberal centrism, even though its endorsement of conservative values remained stronger than its liberal identity. But also, on the other hand, that the concentration of power in a clique around the party leader and electoral misjudgements about the chances and role of a hinge party provide crucial but partial accounts of the rise and fall of Citizens.

website of Spain's Central Electoral Board (*Junta Electoral Central*) at <http://www.juntaelectoralcentral.es/cs/jec/elecciones>

All in all, its tempestuous trajectory also tellingly reflects the difficulties that still exist in Spain for a centrist, liberal party to become a stable political actor. Those difficulties, appreciable in every centrist, liberal party ever since the early 1980s are not autochthonous. The Liberal Democrats endured in British politics a comparable path of ideological recast from 2007. The strains can be tackled with a different view both on party strategy to compete in Spain's imperfect two-party system, and on the political language rendering that endeavour. For how to launch and make grow a long-term project enduring all sorts of adversities, the history of Citizens provides a bitter but worthwhile moral.

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