FORTY YEARS OF MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN CATALONIA: ELECTORAL NATIONALISATION AND POLITICAL STABILITY*

Jaume Magre**

Abstract

This paper analyses the forty years of municipal elections in Catalonia from two perspectives. The first is the academic discussion on the nationalisation of local government. The concept of nationalisation, or its complement of second-order elections, refers to the principle by which local elections gradually increase in similarity to parliamentary elections. This perspective stresses the vertical integration of the local level in the national political system and the asymmetrical relationship between the two levels. The second perspective is that of the political stability achieved by local government over these years. During the transition, concerns were raised about local government, as some considered that it would be a source of political instability. This is a hypothesis that should be tested minimally. Therefore, complementary to the analysis of electoral behaviour, the paper examines the tenure and turnover rate of mayors, and the composition of the governments resulting from each town council mandate.

Key words: Municipal elections; local government; second-order elections; nationalisation; mayor's office; mayor; coalitions.

QUARANTA ANYS D'ELECCIONS MUNICIPALS A CATALUNYA: NACIONALITZACIÓ ELECTORAL I ESTABILITAT POLÍTICA

Resum

Aquest article analitza els quaranta anys d'eleccions municipals a Catalunya des de dues perspectives. La primera és la discussió acadèmica sobre la nacionalització del govern local. El concepte de nacionalització –o el seu complementari d'eleccions de segon ordre– remet al principi segons el qual les eleccions locals van adquirint progressivament una major similitud a les eleccions parlamentàries. Aquest punt de vista posa l'èmfasi en la integració vertical del nivell local en el sistema polític nacional i en la relació asimètrica entre tots dos nivells. La segona perspectiva és la de l'estabilitat política del govern local assolida al llarg d'aquests anys. El dubte que havia planat sobre el govern local durant la transició segons el qual aquesta seria una font d'inestabilitat política és una hipòtesi que cal testar mínimament. Així, doncs, de manera complementària a l'anàlisi del comportament electoral s'ha estudiat, d'una banda, la permanència i la taxa de renovació dels alcaldes, i, de l'altra, la morfologia dels executius fruit de cadascun dels mandats consistorials.

Paraules clau: Eleccions municipals; govern local; eleccions de segon ordre; nacionalització; alcaldia; alcaldessa; alcalde; coalicions.

Summary

1 Introduction

Despite the growing role of subnational governments in many contemporary democracies and the development of multi-level systems of governance, knowledge of local elections is surprisingly fragmented and scant. This is not just a characteristic of Catalonia, but a distinguishing feature of most countries around us. Studies of local politicians who have emerged in municipal elections have not flourished either. The 1990s were very productive in terms of scientific output; subsequently, the academic trend of studying the elite gradually began to wane as reforms in municipal electoral systems took place in Europe. The tradition has only resurfaced in the last few years, due to transnational studies of European mayors (Heinelt *et al*., 2018) and councillors (Egner *et al*., 2013), and perceptions of democracy, legitimacy, responsibility, and representation of local elites have been analysed in the changing context of local democracy in Europe. However, in Europe in general and Catalonia in particular there has been a lack of studies on elections. This paper does not aim to close this gap; the objective is merely to bring some of the academic discussions of municipal elections up to date.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first, we briefly summarise the existing research on municipal elections in Catalonia and describe the differences that have emerged over forty years in the field of study: the municipalities. Unfortunately, we must focus on demographic aspects and the municipal structure only. This first block is completed with a description of the main changes in the municipal election system. The second section refers to the electoral behaviour of citizens in municipal elections and specifically discusses the degree of nationalisation of municipal elections. The third and fourth sections examine the position of mayor and the composition of the governments formed after each election. In both cases, the analysis focuses on political stability and complements the theoretical discussion on the nationalisation of municipal elections.

1.1 Forty years of municipal elections in Catalonia: the existing research

Apart from historical municipal elections, particularly in the Republican period – on which the most ambitious study is the *Atles electoral de Catalunya durant la Segona República* (Electoral Atlas of Catalonia during the Second Republic) (Vilanova, 2005) – studies on local elections in Catalonia during the democratic period have been scant in local government research. Factors that have probably discouraged the analysis are the number of municipalities, the disparity in the territory, and the difficulty associated with population size. Very few studies have been based on time series (Vallés *et al*., 1995) and even fewer have a theoretical aim (Capo, 1991; Delgado, 2010). Nevertheless, there are various studies on specific elections, particularly the first elections held after the democratic transition (Canals, 1984) and others of particular importance (Marcet *et al*., 2008). However, studies of municipal elections in Catalonia have not determined the aspects that are specific to these types of elections and ultimately define them. Only in recent years, following in the wake of studies of a contextual nature with a strong presence in the international academic scene, has research been published on the association between residential mobility and participation in municipal elections (Magre *et al*., 2016) and the relationship between population size and electoral abstention (Vallbé *et al*., 2017). Therefore, there is still a considerable amount to study on the topic of municipal elections as differentiated from the rest of the elections.

Studies on local political elitism – a topic associated with municipal elections – have a certain academic presence. The first research on the local political elite was undertaken in the early 1990s. Greatly influenced by the tradition of local studies in France, this research focused firstly on councillors in a sample of Catalan municipalities (Capo *et al*., 1988) and then on mayors (Magre, 1999). The theoretical apparatus of the tradition that these studies belong to highlights the sociological content associated with centres from which elite are extracted, which in this case are local. These studies opened up a new field of research, but with clear limitations in the methodology and the results.

The research led gradually to a study of how institutions, and more specifically town councils, are run, using variables that measure political stability, focused on the figure of mayor. The research on mayors' term in office, the motion of censure, and the composition of municipal governments are the main subject areas on which research was focused at the end of the 1990s (Magre, 1995; Martínez-Alonso *et al*., 2000). This area of research ended abruptly, and new contributions have only been published recently (Pano, 2018).

1.2 Demographic changes and municipal structure in Catalan local government

Between 1979 and 2018, the resident population of Catalonia has grown by over 20% from almost six million inhabitants to seven and a half. In other words, it has risen by over 1.5 million people. Three well-defined periods in the dynamics of the Catalan population can be identified with very different annual growth rates. First, the period up to 1996 was characterised by demographic stagnation, with a very low rate of population increase (2.5% in total). In the second period, the previous pattern of stability changed, and the major immigration boom of the following decade was anticipated. Finally, 80% of the demographic growth of the four decades occurred between 2000 and 2018. The rate of growth was unusual in the population dynamics of the most advanced European countries: during the economic expansion a real demographic boom took place. Residents of Catalonia increased by a million through the indirect mechanism of immigration. Notably, a period of deceleration began in 2008, which culminated in a reduction in the population from 2011, a net loss of inhabitants in 2014, and an upturn from 2016 onwards (Catalan Advisory Council for Sustainable Development, 2015).

This population increase has been distributed throughout the territory. However, in absolute terms, two-thirds of the growth has been concentrated in the electoral district of Barcelona and, more specifically, in the city's conurbation. In addition, intra-metropolitan mobility has increased since 2000, particularly towards the metropolitan region. In 2007, approximately 15% of Catalans lived in a town other than the one they had lived in ten years before (Alberich, 2010). In this period, the intermunicipal mobility of the national population, excluding foreign immigrants, has been the main factor behind the redistribution of the population throughout the territory. This movement of people flows from the central city (Barcelona) to the suburbs, and from cities that are generally bigger to smaller towns, caused by a process of suburbanisation within the wider metropolitan region. These movements bring about considerable changes in electoral participation in the municipalities that receive local immigration resulting from this process of residential mobility (Magre *et al*., 2016).

Next, we focus the discussion on the municipal structure in Catalonia. Although the European trend has been towards a reduction in the number of local entities, Catalonia has not adopted measures that favour the fusion of municipalities and has even moved in the opposite direction. For example, Catalonia has created thirteen new municipalities since 1983, the last in 2010 when the decentralised municipal entity of Canonja separated from Tarragona and established its own town council. Sixteen decentralised municipal entities have also been created in this period. In contrast to the establishment of these twenty-nine local entities, only one municipality has been eliminated in the same period. Hence, up to now, Catalonia has tended more towards separation and inflation than towards territorial unification.

Catalan local government has not only changed through the appearance of new municipalities on the map. In addition, almost half of all Catalan municipalities (46%) now have a population in a different interval to that of 1979. The contingency table (see Table 1 in the Annex) shows that the trend is towards higher population intervals. Specifically, a third of municipalities are now included in higher population intervals, while 12% have seen their population decrease to a lower interval.

1.3 Changes in the electoral system over forty years

The electoral system applied in the municipalities has changed relatively little since the approval of electoral regulations and since the first elections in 1979. The changes that have been introduced do not alter the system's functioning essentially. This is surprising if we consider that, from a general perspective, regulations on the local system have been under discussion since just after the approval of the Basic Law on the Status of Local Government (hereafter, the LBRL). Therefore, over these years, the electoral system has not been discussed, except in relation to the election of mayors. At certain moments – and often at the same time as reforms in countries in the European environment – the possibility of directly electing the mayor has been proposed to further strengthen this position, make it more stable and ensure a more executive function. Apart from these initiatives, which have not been implemented, the only other topic addressed has been the number of elected members in the plenary sessions, in this case, in the context of trends towards economic restrictions and spending cuts associated with the political structure. Announcements associated with the 2013 reform include the central government's resolve to promote a reduction in the size of plenary sessions by a third. However, this initiative has gone no further than a press release; at no time have any specific articles or proposals been observed.

Beyond what could be considered minor reforms, such as modifications in the electoral register (which is drawn up by town councils) to prevent fraudulent municipal registration, the main changes in the municipal electoral system affect territorial structure, suffrage, and the creation of election candidate lists.

In terms of territorial structure, the *concejo abierto* (open council) system – a unique formula applied in municipalities with a population below 100 inhabitants – was reformed in 2011 based on an amendment to Organic Law 5/1985 on the General Electoral System (hereafter, LOREG) that also affects the LBRL. The amendment removed the requirement to function as an open council in municipalities with fewer than 100 inhabitants, although this system is established as an alternative for municipalities that traditionally and voluntarily operate by means of this formula and others that prefer to apply it because of their geographical location to better manage municipal interests, or due to other circumstances. In political terms, the amendment was justified for reasons of institutional functioning. The fact that in the open council system only the mayor is selected and residents act as the plenum can generate operational problems with respect to calls and reaching the required majorities. In any case, approval of the amendment meant that, in practice, the number of municipalities governed by this formula was reduced dramatically. In fact, in the 2007-2011 mandate, a total of nineteen municipalities were registered that operate with this system in Catalonia; currently, this number has dropped to a total of six. According to information from the records of the Local Government Observatory at the Carles Pi i Sunyer Foundation for autonomous and local studies, only the town councils of Gisclareny, Fígols, Senan, La Quar, Savallà del Comtat and Castell de l'Areny use this formula. The amendment has an indirect impact on the number of candidates and, therefore, on preferential votes in municipalities that have up to 250 inhabitants. Each party, coalition, or group can present a candidate list with no more than three names if the municipality has up to 100 residents and six names if the municipality has between 101 and 250 residents (Pano *et al.*, 2015).

In terms of the right of suffrage, in recent years there has been an increase in voting right for migrants in municipal elections. The right of suffrage is established based on three conditions: reciprocity, legal reserve and application in municipal and European Parliament elections.

A final point concerns the creation of election candidate lists. After the approval of Organic Law 3/2007 of 22 March on the effective equality of women and men, the addition of Article 44 bis to the text of the LOREG translated the general principle of a balanced number of men and women in positions of responsibility to the composition of candidate lists for the various types of elections. Candidate lists must be balanced, so that candidates of either sex make up at least 40% of the total. This proportion must also be maintained in each band of five positions on the election candidate list. The provisions in Article 44 bis of the law do not apply to candidacies presented in municipalities whose number of residents is equal or lower than 3,000, due to the difficulty involved in effectively complying with this requirement.

Despite the change in regulations, the time series shows that this reform has had very limited success. Although the percentage of women who occupy the position of mayor has increased 15% since the first municipal elections, female mayors are still only present in less than a fifth of all mayor's offices in Catalonia (see Table 2 in the Annex). Therefore, the regulations have had a negligible impact on access to the position of mayor.

2 Electoral behaviour in municipal elections: nationalisation vs. localism

Traditionally, academic literature has approached municipal elections from two contradictory perspectives: with the view that they have a lower status than other elections, or, in contrast, with the understanding that they have a different position from other elections. The main theoretical argument that supports the idea of elections of less political relevance is that of "second-order elections" (Reif, 1997; Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Clark and Krebs, 2012). Although this concept was not initially created for local elections, it has served as a framework of reference for their analysis. The idea of "second order" has clear links to the concept of vote nationalisation, which was introduced in US literature in the 1970s and was very well-considered in Europe during the 1990s. Vote nationalisation refers to the principle by which municipal elections gradually become more like parliamentary elections. As a result, the electoral behaviour determined in an aggregate analysis shows a certain degree of contagion of the national environment in the municipal environment. The

theoretical reasoning stresses the vertical integration of the local level in the national political system, and the asymmetrical relationship between the two levels.

In the second approach, local elections are considered a different type of election. Given the population size, specific electoral characteristics and dynamics are generated (Oliver *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, the approach highlights the horizontal variation: local units differ considerably from each other, which produces specific characteristics of municipal elections that distinguish them from other types of elections.
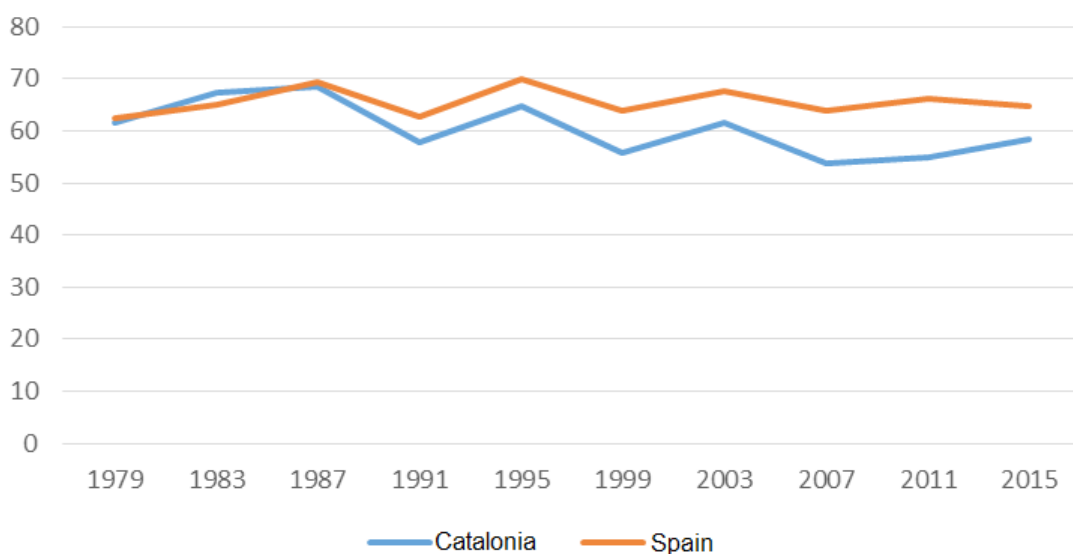
2.1 Participation in municipal elections

In general, participation in elections has stood at around 60%, except in the 1980s when it was ten percentage points above this average, and the 2007 elections, which had the highest abstinence rate (46.1%) in the history of elections in Catalonia. The explanation for the high abstinence should be contextualised in an electoral cycle with particularly low participation that began with the autonomous elections in the previous year. In these autonomous elections, it was evident that the Catalan competitive system had become more complex and could not be fully explained "by the fluctuating vote for *sociovergència* [the pact between PSC and CIU] nor by differentiating abstainers, but by the lack of definition of a party offering that brings together the nationalist electorate" (Marcet *et al.*, 2008: 4-7). This description is particularly accurate for the large municipalities of Catalonia, where abstention is greater, to the extent that participation was below half the population in the 2007 elections in the city of Barcelona. This brief *excursus* enables us to focus on the demographic aspect of the elections.

From the perspective of population, as elections have passed, the level of participation by population interval has diverged: since 1987, participation has repeatedly been higher – if possible – in municipalities with a lower population. In contrast, larger municipalities have maintained a downward trend, which has only recovered slightly since the 2011 elections. As an example, in 1979 the difference between the extreme population intervals (the largest and smallest populations) was 7 percentage points, whereas in recent years it reached 20 percentage points. Below we will see the relevance of this fact.

2.1.1 Electoral participation: Catalonia vs. Spain

Graph 1 shows the average participation in Catalonia and the rest of the Spanish state in each of the municipal elections. It reveals an interesting structure that enables us to draw at least two general conclusions.

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the Ministry of the Interior .

First, up to 1987, the percentage of participation in Catalonia and the Spanish state was almost equal. From the 1987 elections onwards, the two curves bifurcate, and the differences reach a maximum of 10 percentage points at the start of the 2000s. The difference is notable, particularly because in 1979 the starting point was the same. An initial explanation could be that municipal elections and autonomous community elections are held at the same time, except in the historical communities. Simultaneous elections for different institutions increase interest in voting and participation levels. However, this was not the case here: the average participation in the three historical communities, beyond Catalonia, is in line with the average participation of the Spanish state, while in Catalonia the downward trend is maintained with respect to values for the rest of the communities. No research has been carried out on the reasons for this percentage difference that has persisted over time. Whatever the case, Catalonia has clearly maintained a downturn in electoral participation, which is characteristic of all elections in the community, not just the municipal ones.

Secondly, despite the differences in the percentages of participation, the curves have maintained the same structure. Repeatedly since the first municipal elections, the sequence of the two curves has been similar. Is this the first evidence of nationalisation of municipal elections in Catalonia? It is difficult to establish, and more evidence is required to determine this. However, if we break down the results into population intervals, the structure of each of the curves is similar, although with different levels of participation.

2.1.2 Electoral participation: parliamentary elections vs. municipal elections

A second strategy for determining whether the degree of nationalisation of municipal elections is a suitable conceptual framework is to compare participation in local and parliamentary elections.

Graph 2. Average participation in municipal and general elections in Catalonia. 1979-2015.
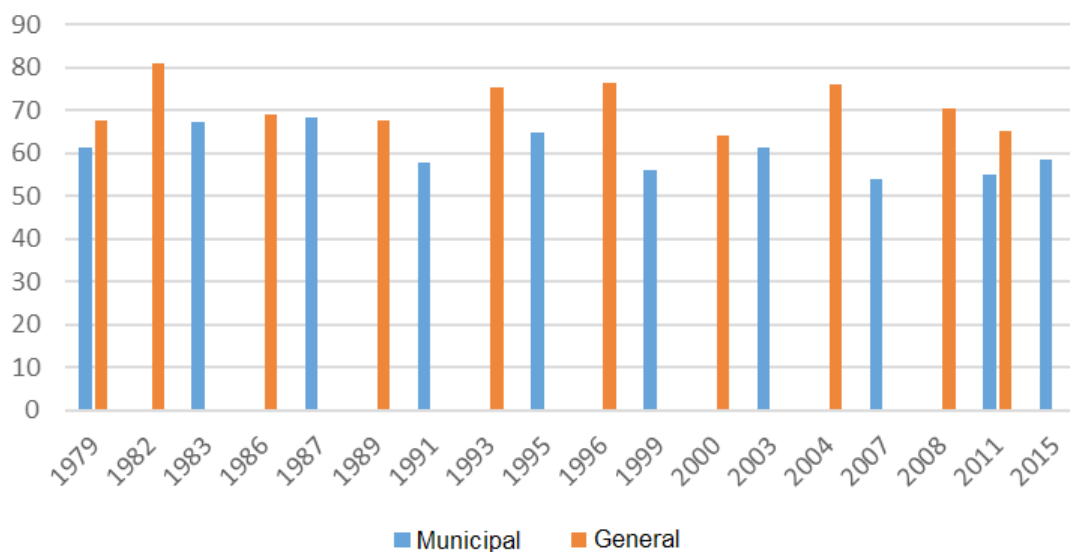
Source: compiled by the author using data from the Ministry of the Interior.

As shown in Graph 2, participation is always lower in municipal elections than in general elections. Except on the few occasions when participation was practically equal, an analysis of municipal and general election data in chronological pairs reveals that municipal elections always have lower participation, although the rate of participation does not always coincide. Therefore, the evidence on electoral participation appears to indicate that municipal elections should be considered second-order, and therefore we can refer to a process of nationalisation. However, this conclusion should be treated with caution.

However, the aggregate data that we have gathered to date could hide considerable differences between municipalities that have populations in different intervals. This is a relevant academic discussion on the unit

of analysis – the city or the municipality – that should be used to explain municipal elections. Our position on this debate is that information from both sources is equally useful. Municipal elections should be treated in the same way as parliamentary elections, and each municipal election should be treated as different, regardless of the population in each municipality. To date, we have dealt with the data so that the unit of analysis is the individual; the proposal now is for the unit to be the municipality.

The results we obtain in this way provide a dimension that complements the previous results. The proposal is to classify the municipalities in each population interval depending on whether the participation is above or below the average participation in general elections in the same population interval (see Table 3 of the Annex). The results of this methodological strategy are interesting: municipalities with smaller populations (up to 1,000 inhabitants) have become increasingly municipalised in successive council mandates. In these towns, voter turnout is higher for municipal elections than for general elections. In other words, in these municipalities, general elections are no longer the most important type of election for inhabitants. We should bear in mind that one of the defining characteristics of first-order elections is precisely the fact that voters consider them to be a point of reference. In larger municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants, the opposite trend can be found: as the years pass, nationalisation has increased. Therefore, we can state conclusively that measuring the degree of nationalisation by evaluating participation in parliamentary and municipal elections does not provide a complete picture. When we introduce contextual variables, such as the size of the municipality, the idea of nationalisation and the second-order content of municipal elections is defined in greater detail.

2.2 Electoral results in municipal elections

After analysing electoral participation as an indicator of the degree of nationalisation of municipal elections, we use a second indicator to give substance to the concept. In this case, we resume the debate with a focus on the degree of competitiveness and again use population intervals as a contextual strategy.

First, to frame the academic discussion, we present the results in municipal elections of the main political powers over the forty years. At first glance, the time series in Graph 3 gives us a certain idea of the main electoral movements that took place in the period 1979-1995.

Graph 3. Percentage of votes received by political parties in municipal elections. 1979-2015.
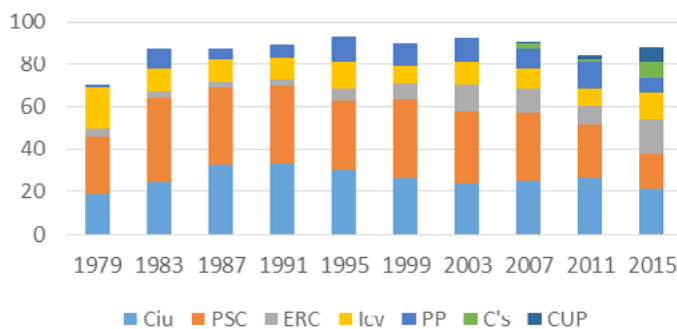
Source: compiled by the author using data from the Government of Catalonia and the Ministry of the Interior.

If we compare the results of the first years of local democracy with the last elections, we can see a notable increase in electoral fragmentation that has emerged and gradually taken root in the municipal environment. The graph clearly outlines periods in the electoral history of Catalonia. After the first constitutive elections, there was a period of electoral stability characterised by predominance of the PSC and, to a lesser extent, the CiU. The sum of the two main parties at the time gained 70% of the votes in the 1991 elections. In fact, the combined share of the vote of these two parties has never been below 60%. The 2003 elections marked the start of a new electoral cycle in Catalonia, which brought an end to the "classic model". The new cycle is characterised by greater pluralism, as what used to be minor parties in the system are tending to play a more

important role. Consequently, there is evidence of a progressive, but unavoidable, weakening in the two main traditional political forces, which in the last elections represented only a third of all votes. Hence, the Catalan competitive system has become a lot more complex: there is a context of strong mobility, with the parties that traditionally dominated the Catalan scene in retreat and weaker parties becoming stronger, as well as the emergence of new forces with opportunities for growth. The reasons for the change in model of the party system go beyond municipal elections and affect the electorates and the strategies of political parties. Hence, there are many explanations for this change: the generational renewal in voters of the two main parties, who are gradually disappearing (Bartomeus, 2018); the noticeable variation in the boundary between CiU and ERC in the nationalist electorate, which is the main agent behind the latest electoral movements (Marcet, 2008: 4); the shifts in vote that are the expression of a different voter, with a broader pattern of choice, who does not follow the dynamics that have defined the vote in Catalonia in the last thirty years, and has more erratic, unpredictable movements.

In terms of the institutional performance of the results obtained by the various political forces, the table below enables us to describe the evolution of their institutional strength and indeed how established they are in the territory.

Table 1. Difference between votes and councillors of political parties. 1979-2015.

	CiU	PSC	ERC	ICV-EUiA	PP	C's	CUP	Others
1979	-15.7	17.3	1.7	14.6	1.0			-20.6
1983	-15.0	18.2	0.9	7.9	3.8			-18.0
1987	-20.6	16.1	0.1	6.6	2.9			-7.5
1991	-19.2	14.7	0.6	6.3	3.6			-7.8
1995	-20.6	12.6	0.0	7.4	6.8			-7.9
1999	-22.0	12.7	-0.4	4.4	5.5			-3.1
2003	-18.4	7.6	-2.0	5.7	7.1			-2.1
2007	-13.2	3.2	-6.1	3.9	6.6	2.2	0.4	1.6
2011	-15.9	1.4	-6.4	3.9	7.3	1.1	1.0	1.9
2015	-15.6	2.8	-10.1	7.7	5.0	5.5	3.0	-1.0

Source: compiled by the author using data from the Government of Catalonia and the Ministry of the Interior.

It is typical of these years of democratic elections that the CiU – under the various acronyms with which it has presented itself at the elections – has always obtained a higher percentage of councillors than correspond to the percentage of votes obtained. The Socialists' Party of Catalonia (PSC) has experienced the opposite situation. In the first case, the favourable difference between number of councillors and number of votes is a symptom of the CiU influence throughout the territory, and particularly in municipalities with smaller populations. In contrast, the PSC has traditionally concentrated its vote in the more urban areas of Catalonia with larger populations. The case of ERC shows that, as its territorial penetration increases, it has improved its position in the pairing of votes-councillors. In the last elections, a significant penetration capacity was observed of political forces whose supported was concentrated until recently in very specific areas of the territory. This is the case of the CUP, which has achieved a considerable presence in the metropolitan urban area, where until recently they were a peripheral and even eccentric agent.

2.2.1 Nationalisation and electoral competitiveness: parliamentary elections vs. municipal elections

National political parties' control over the local political scene is clear. National political forces are the main agents of nationalisation of local politics (Delgado, 2010: 27).

The index of concentration, that is, the sum of the two main traditional parties (the CiU and the PSC), is always higher in the municipal than the parliamentary elections. The only occasions when this description

does not fit are elections that have been considered exceptional (1996 and 2004). In a comparison of both types of election, the trend is towards stability, except in recent years in which the two main parties were defeated and their resistance in municipal elections was clearer. The competitive structure is also reproduced when these two political parties are analysed separately and when the data are broken down by population interval (see Tables 4 and 5 in the Annex). Therefore, this is a characteristic that has taken root over the years and supports the idea of a stable local government in terms of its political dimension. We will return to this idea in later sections of this article.

To sum up, the nationalisation of municipal elections is clear, particularly in terms of the main political parties' results. Nevertheless, if data of a contextual nature are used, such as the population size, the idea of nationalisation of local elections is qualified: we see a different situation, in which there is a local universe formed by the majority of municipalities, which participate significantly in municipal elections, and in which the index of concentration continues to bring together a majority of votes, compared to a more populated, nationalised world in terms of voting with lower trends of participation.

3 Mayors in Catalonia: stability and turnover

In this section, we highlight the performance of the municipal political system in terms of stability. Beyond the electoral results and their territorial implementation, in this third block of the article the aim is to determine the degree of political stability from the position of mayor.

Traditionally, when a political system is analysed from the perspective of extraction of its political staff, the heart of the debate is the dichotomy between turnover of elites and the minimum term in the position that ensures efficient administration. This relationship is of particular interest as, during the early years of the democratic transition, the idea spread that the municipal environment gives rise to political instability. The high number of municipal units and the memory of the convulsive behaviour of local government during the Republican period would have fuelled doubts about the mature behaviour of local political elites and the regular functioning of local institutions (Magre, 1999). As we will see in this section, this concern would have been resolved rapidly.

We describe the degree of political stability in Catalan municipal councils using just two indicators: the mayoral tenure and the turnover rate that has been produced over these forty years.

3.1 The length of mayoral tenure

Mayoral tenure is one of the indicators that has been used most frequently to measure the stability of the political system and the degree of professionalisation of the political elite. In fact, professionalisation has been defined as one of the products of the tenure of those elected in the corresponding post.

If we consider all the local elite who have occupied the post of mayor in local Catalan government (around 4,500 people in total), the average tenure over these forty years is 2.3 council mandates, that is, almost ten years. Few studies compare this average tenure in the post of mayor in Catalonia with analogical figures in countries in our environment that have the same political and administrative system. The only comprehensive research was carried out during the 1990s, associated with reforms in the municipal electoral system and, more specifically, in the procedure for electing mayors that was being introduced in a large proportion of European Union countries. For example, in France the tenure of the *maire* has tended to be around nine years, which is very similar to the situation of the Catalan mayor (Garraud, 1989: 48).

The following table helps to better describe this average value. It shows that the results found over these forty years refute the fear in the early years of the democratic transition that local government was a source of political instability. Out of all the mayors of Catalonia, almost 60% occupied the position for at least two council mandates, and a third remained in the position for 12 years at least. By way of an anecdote, five mayors are still in office who were elected to the position in the first municipal elections. This is the case in the municipalities of Aguilar de Segarra, Fogars de la Selva, Granyanella, Torroella de Fluvià and Vilamòs.

Giovanni Sartori established a principle by which candidates who are elected consecutively for three council mandates will likely be transformed into de facto professional politicians, even if they did not have a previous career in the political party that they represent (Sartori, 1992: 179). According to this principle, we can state that the municipal political system has been able to create a notable set of stable political careers over time, almost since the first moments of the democratic transition.

Table 2. Mayoral tenure in council mandates (N=4,416).

	Frequency	Percentage
1	1916	43.4
2	1109	25.1
3	628	14.2
4	364	8.2
5	180	4.1
6	123	2.8
7	45	1.0
8	34	0.8
9	12	0.3
10	5	0.1
Total	4416	100.0

Source: Local Government Observatory at the Carles Pi i Sunyer Foundation for autonomous and local studies.

3.2 The turnover rate

Turnover rate is closely linked to tenure in the position. As indicated by Valerio Bellotti and Marco Maraffi, level of turnover is a basic characteristic for defining the nature and process of professionalisation of the local political elite (Bellotti and Maraffi, 1994: 19). This variable is particularly relevant, as a certain amount of replacement should be reconciled with a minimum term for those elected to the position. In fact, the aim is to try to balance enough time in the position to ensure effective management of the territory with the democratic requirement of a certain degree of renewal of elected bodies. It is in this difficult balance between the requirements of representation and institutional establishment that the replacement of elected political staff gains importance.

An initial analysis can be based on the percentage of mayors who take office for the first time in the municipal political environment in each council mandate. With this approach, we can draw two preliminary conclusions. First, the incorporation of newly elected mayors each mandate is generally around 40% of the total study population. The remaining 60% are mayors who have been re-elected and therefore contribute the necessary experience to the system. Therefore, there is a balanced ratio between renewal and seniority: the Catalan political system has been able to produce careers that have lasted over time as well as the required turnover of elites, which oxygenate the system. In this respect, the stability of the Catalan municipal political system is notable in terms of the circulation of the elites. A very similar percentage of new political staff are regularly incorporated, and there are no irregular breaks in this pattern over time. Second, the time series reveals two particularly intense moments in terms of a new political elite accessing Catalan local government: the second mandate (1983-1987) and the elections in 2007. At both these times, the turnover percentage was close to half of all mayors in Catalonia. These two episodes in time appear in the other indicators that we have analysed, as we will see below.

Table 3. Percentage of new mayors by council mandate. 1979-2019.

1979	1983	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015
100	47.5	38.9	39.4	31.5	38.2	34.1	43.8	38.2	36.4

Source: Local Government Observatory at the Carles Pi i Sunyer Foundation for autonomous and local studies.

Continuity and renewal can also be verified by examining the turnover of mayors in each of the elections: the tenure of mayors depending on the original mandate. In other words, we can examine the percentage of mayors who are re-elected consecutively.

This table is not easy to interpret. Consequently, we will highlight a series of considerations to facilitate interpretation. First, at the end of each row we have included the set of mayors in each mandate that we have used to make the calculations: these are mayors who were elected for the first time in each of the council mandates, as the aim is to analyse whether the rate of generational turnover is regular over time. Second, the cells represent mayors who have been re-elected consecutively. As an example, 52.5% of mayors started their political career in 1979 and were re-elected in the elections of 1983, and so on.

Table 4. Turnover rate of mayors by mandate. 1979-2019.

1979	1983	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015	N
100	52.5	31.1	19.9	13.3	8.7	4.9	2.6	1.3	0.5	(923)
	100	61.1	37.9	24.6	17.2	12.6	4.6	3.2	1.8	(435)
		100	60.6	36.5	23.9	12.8	5.6	3.5	2.4	(373)
			100	68.5	46.4	24.9	11.5	6.6	3.4	(349)
				100	61.8	39.1	19.2	12.1	7.4	(322)
					100	65.9	39.4	21.7	11.7	(317)
						100	58.2	32.5	14.7	(366)
							100	61.8	35.5	(419)
								100	63.6	(377)

Source: compiled using data from the Local Government Observatory at the Carles Pi i Sunyer Foundation for autonomous and local studies.

After the above methodological considerations, the results obtained in the table are interesting. One of the areas of interpretation that we have outlined – the consistent circulation of the local political elite over time, together with notable persistence of long careers – was confirmed again.

Indeed, the above distribution shows that the percentages of mayors who are re-elected consecutively has a certain regularity that can be observed in the diagonals of the table; we have highlighted one as an example. Thus, in general and for each of the municipal elections, mayors are re-elected for a second mandate in 60% of cases, a third reach a third mandate, around a quarter serve as mayors for 12 years, and so on successively. The table is therefore interesting because of the rate over time and its consistency, as similar percentages are reproduced over the forty years of democratic elections.

A second piece of valuable information that we can extract from the above table is the stratification over time of the set of mayors in certain elections: we can determine the composition according to the original mandate of Catalan mayors at a specific time. For example, mayors in office in the last council mandate (2015-2019) are a combination of professionalised mayors according to Sartori's definition – mayors who have been at least twelve years in office, who represent over a third of all mayors – and those who have taken office more recently and, from a systemic perspective, compensate for the high average tenure of mayors in Catalonia.

Conclusively, the regular, high turnover in the position of mayor – in each council mandate around 40% of mayors join the political scene for the first time – balances the duration of the tenure of mayors, which has been found to be high and consistent. Professionalisation of the local elite has produced the institutional establishment and stability required for normal functioning of the municipal administration, which was secured just a few years after the process of democratic transition.

This process of stability and circulation of the elite is recurring and has no irregularities over time: it is not concentrated at certain points over the forty years. Instead, we have demonstrated that turnover follows a very regular pattern. The second mandate (1983-1987) and that which started with the 2007 elections are the only two moments in which the political system increased its regeneration capacity. In fact, the transition was capable of creating very long careers and, at the same time, sporadic entries into the political scene, as shown by the high turnover produced in the second municipal elections. This is the period in which there was the greatest turnover of the local political elite that, nevertheless, only represented 47.5% of all mayors who emerged from these elections. As described in Section 2 of this paper, the 2007-2011 mandate was when the transformation in the Catalan party system's classical model became evident and led to a change in local political staff. Two additional circumstances caused a slight increase in the turnover rate. First, the historical moment of "Pujolism" had reached the end of its path, and this was reflected in local government. At the same time, other political parties, such as the Socialists' Party of Catalonia (PSC), decided to enter a new political cycle by renewing many of their historical mayors.

4 Municipal governments over the forty years: scope and composition

Traditionally, studies on the processes of forming governments have focused on higher political and territorial levels. Studies on local government are scare or practically non-existent (Márquez, 2003a and 2003b; Reniu *et al.*, 2006). This is a pity, as the Catalan case is particularly interesting as the motion of censure of the mayor, a key variable in the establishment of coalition strategies, is an instrument that does not exist in most countries in the European environment.

To demonstrate the institutional performance during these forty years of municipal elections, the composition of the governments, and more specifically the composition of political coalitions, is considered one of the important variables that affects the stability, efficacy, and legitimacy of the democratic system.

4.1 The scope of coalition phenomena

In terms of coalition phenomena in local governments in Catalonia, the picture that emerges from the following table is one of a clear predominance of single-party governments, which in all council mandates represent over two-thirds of all the Catalan municipal governments. Coalition governments make up the remaining 30%. Therefore, consistency is once again a characteristic of the local political system, this time in the formation of governments. The only time that the proportion was blurred was in the mandate that began in 2007, which, as we have seen in the above sections, is one of the intervals in which the change in local elite occurred most dramatically. This could explain the increase in coalition solutions. Furthermore, in the 2007 elections, the Catalan competitive system of political parties was more complex, and the offer was considerably broader than in other elections (Marcet *et al.*, 2008). Nevertheless, the proportional municipal electoral system has not impeded solid majorities in most Catalan municipalities.

Table 5. Types of government in Catalan municipalities. 1987-2019.

	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015
Coalition government	28.7	30.5	31.7	33.8	34.1	42.1	31.3	29.0
Non-coalition government	71.3	69.5	68.3	66.2	65.9	57.9	68.7	71.0

Source: Local Government Observatory at the Carles Pi i Sunyer Foundation for autonomous and local studies.

If the composition of government is really a key variable that affects the stability and efficacy of the political system, then the ratio between single-party and coalition governments has guaranteed, since the early years of the democratic transition, a universe that is *a priori* very stable from a political perspective, with the capacity to run the municipal administration in a normal way.

Based on the above description, the question is whether the behaviour of coalitions in Catalan municipalities differs depending on the size of the population. The local Catalan scene is dominated by the presence of single-party governments, which have a comfortable majority of councillors. Coalition governments only appear in greater numbers in municipalities of over 10,000 inhabitants. Indeed, the table shows clearly that as the number of inhabitants in a municipality increases, so does the influence of coalition solutions. In municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, single-party governments are predominant. Coalition governments are only the main solution for forming governments in municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants. It is precisely in the area between these two population sizes of 5,000 and 10,000 inhabitants that the proportions of single-party and coalition governments are almost equal.

Table 6. Percentage of coalition governments by population interval. 1987-2019.

	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015
Fewer than 500	11.3	18.4	16.4	16.1	16.4	32.4	23.1	17.9
From 501 to 1,000	36.6	28.2	26.3	32.5	20.8	29.9	15.3	13.4
From 1001 to 5,000	35.4	32.5	34.0	37.2	33.6	41.9	26.1	26.5
From 5,001 to 10,000	44.2	53.5	56.5	53.5	62.8	58.1	59.8	47.1
Over 10,000	40.7	45.4	58.3	62.5	80.0	73.3	65.0	71.7

Source: Local Government Observatory at the Carles Pi i Sunyer Foundation for autonomous and local studies.

The reasons for the close relationship between population size and coalition solutions are easy to understand. Firstly, opportunities to form a coalition government are directly associated with the size of the town council. In municipalities in which the town council is formed by a small number of councillors (between five and seven) the opportunities to form coalitions are scarce. Secondly, municipalities with smaller populations tend to present a very limited number of candidates, and it is very common for only two parties to be represented in the council. Consequently, coalition strategies must be implemented in a rather unfavourable context. An increase in number of councillors and a rise in electoral competitiveness lead to a different trend in the spread of coalition governments.

The historical trend revealed in the previous table is towards maintenance of the proportions in each of the population intervals, with a slight downward trend in the number of coalition solutions. The exception to the trend can be observed in municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants, in which the number of coalition governments clearly increased by 30 percentage points over these years. The main inflection point is the entire time series was again the 2007 elections. In this case, beyond the turnover of political staff that we have referred to above, the fact that this election coincided with a three-party coalition in the Government of Catalonia prompted us to analyse the possibility of mimetic behaviour in local governments, with a greater incidence of three-party coalitions at local scale. This theory would be verified if multi-level compatibility was found in the formation of coalition governments. In this regard, apart from the methodological difficulties in validating this hypothesis, there is hardly any coincidence between the composition of three-party coalitions in the Government of Catalonia and in Catalan municipal governments. Three-party solutions only represent 7% of coalition governments in the 2003-2007 mandate. The use of the arguments of "familiarity" and "inertia" do not have particular explanatory capacity (Franklin *et al*., 1983). The supposed dynamics of political imitation in this area are non-existent at local government level.

4.2 The composition of coalition governments

In addition to a quantitative analysis of the governments that have been formed, we need to examine the qualitative aspect of coalition governments, that is, try to determine which criteria guide the formation of these kinds of governments.

4.2.1 The number of coalition partners

Coalition governments in small Catalan municipalities are, essentially, the result of collaboration between two parties. Justifications of the decision to form two-party coalitions do not only include the greater ability to reach agreements and greater coalitional performance for each member. Two-party coalitions can also be explained by institutional factors that impose a lower number of councillors in these councils.

Table 7. Composition of coalition governments. 1987-2019.

		1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015
Two-party governments	coalition	79.6	75.5	73.7	75.2	70.3	76.1	81.5	80.7
Three-party governments	coalition	20	23.8	25.2	23.8	29.4	23.2	18.1	18.9
Other coalition governments		0.4	07	1.1	1.0	0.3	0.7	0.4	0.4

Source: Local Government Observatory at the Carles Pi i Sunyer Foundation for autonomous and local studies.

4.2.2 Spectra of competence and the formation of municipal governments

In this section, the aim is to assess the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity among coalition members, by differentiating the ideological (left-right) and national (Catalan nationalism-Spanish nationalism) dimensions.

In aggregate terms, the main conclusion from the time series is that governments with no internal homogeneity, whether ideological or national, have disappeared slowly and gradually. As the transition became established and successive council mandates were completed, coalition governments have developed a greater tendency towards homogeneity among members. In the last council mandate of 2015-2019, almost half of the coalition governments showed both ideological and national homogeneity of their members. The coalition possibilities that could have occurred during a certain period due to the immaturity of the political system have gradually disappeared, to reveal once again an administration that is run effectively, in this case with the desire to attain democratic legitimacy before popular scrutiny.

Table 8. Evolution of homogeneity in coalition governments. 1987-2019.

	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015
National and political homogeneity	36.9	44.3	28.8	29.8	27.2	27.7	34.0	48.6
National homogeneity	8.8	5.1	17.6	16.6	21.4	19.5	21.6	23.9
Political homogeneity	15.3	10.6	17.6	23.8	25.6	23.2	17.4	11.6
No homogeneity	39.0	39.9	36.0	29.8	25.9	29.6	27.0	15.8
N	249	273	278	302	309	379	282	259

Source: Local Government Observatory at the Carles Pi i Sunyer Foundation for autonomous and local studies.

The second conclusion we can draw from the table is that, over these years, ideology has been the dimension that has been more of a determining factor in the formation of coalition governments. Indeed, until 2011, the left-right spectrum was the basis of the minimum homogeneity between coalition members. From then on, the percentages have been reversed, and the national dimension is what gives consistency to almost a quarter

of local governments. This reversal indicates that the local government of Catalonia has also been influenced by national political tension, as we have seen in other sections of the paper (Ortega, 2012).

Conclusively, we have found that the most common situation is a predominance of single-party governments with an absolute majority of councillors, to a great extent due to the town council structure as well as the number of candidates who participate in the elections. Only in municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants does the size of the council provide more spaces for differentiation between political options, and therefore the trend is reversed in terms of the composition of local governments.

With respect to the composition of coalition governments, the image is also very clear: most are two-party governments, which are essentially homogeneous due to the dimension of ideology. Only in recent years has the national dimension acted as a main axis in coalition solutions.

5 Conclusions

The knowledge attained about the determinants of electoral behaviour in local elections in Catalonia and in other countries in our European environment is still quite limited. The research that has been carried out over the years has not identified the aspects that are specific to this kind of elections and that ultimately define them. The number of municipalities, the disparity in the territory, and difficulties associated with population size have probably deterred researchers from the analysis. In this paper, we have analysed the forty years of municipal elections in Catalonia from two perspectives: the first is the academic discussion of nationalisation of municipal elections, and the second is the political stability attained in local government over these years.

Regarding the first of the concerns, the national dimension has always played a role in municipal elections, whether through the perceptions of the voters or the parties' strategies. Nevertheless, a certain academic debate continues about whether municipal elections have national characteristics in their content or their results or whether, in contrast, the municipal vote follows local patterns of electoral competence. The research is inconclusive. The description in this paper adopts the framework of "electoral nationalisation" as a reference, and aims to incorporate some contextual variables, such as population size. We consider that the analysis of municipal elections as if they were parliamentary elections is not enough to understand them. A complementary strategy should be used in which the municipality is considered as a unit of analysis. Thus, the context enriches the analysis.

When variables of a contextual nature are introduced, such as the size of the municipality, the idea of nationalisation and the second-order content of municipal elections is qualified. A different scenario is observed in which the local universe is formed by most municipalities, which participate significantly in municipal elections and in which the index of concentration continues to bring together most votes. This is in contrast with a more populated, nationalised world in terms of votes and with lower participation. Changes over time heighten this dichotomy: if we compare participation in municipal elections with that of general elections, we find municipalisation of elections in towns with smaller populations and nationalisation in larger cities. Therefore, the concept of nationalisation to categorise municipal elections in Catalonia needs to be reconsidered and variables need to be introduced, as proposed in recent studies that go beyond the traditional model (Kjaer *et al.*, 2019).

With respect to the second of the perspectives adopted in this article, the mayoral tenure shows that the political Catalan system has avoided what seemed intrinsic to local government during the transition: political instability caused by the large number of municipalities and the memory of the convulsive behaviour of local elites during the Second Republic. Indeed, the tenure of mayor in Catalonia over these forty years is relatively high at around ten years and is at least very similar to that of the mayors' European counterparts. This long duration of the career is compensated for by a high rate of turnover of local political staff that is maintained over time: each council mandate, 40% of mayors enter the local political scene for the first time. A mix of continuity and turnover is therefore one of the structural characteristics of Catalan local government.

There is a clear predominance of single-party local governments, which in all council mandates represent over two-thirds of Catalan municipalities, while coalition governments represent the remaining 30%. The number of coalition governments increases as the municipal population increases. Between the smaller

municipalities and those with a larger population, the proportions are reversed. In any case, the municipal map of Catalonia, the legal design of public bodies, and the role of the local elites have formed a structure of Catalan local government that is stable from the political perspective. Stable and with a clear tendency towards cohesion of its members: the time series demonstrates a slow, gradual disappearance of governments without any kind of internal homogeneity, whether ideological or national. Over time, the most determining factor in the formation of coalition governments has become the ideological spectrum, given that only in recent years has the national dimension become the focus of negotiation.

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7 Annex

In this annex we include firstly two methodological considerations that are required to interpret the results of this study properly. Secondly, we present some tables that we decided to take out of the body of the text to make it easier to read.

Methodological considerations

1. To carry out this study of electoral behaviour in municipal elections, we used the electoral results of 948 Catalan municipalities. To study Catalan mayors in each of the elections we considered 923 towns: we removed from the database the 25 municipalities in which, due to the number of intra-mandate changes (early substitution of the mayor, motions of censure, withdrawals and resignations, among others), it was not feasible to carry out a comparative analysis.

2. Regarding the study of local governments, the time series starts with the 1987-1991 mandate. Data from periods prior to this mandate are scarce and of poor quality. Likewise, we have considered municipalities with over 250 inhabitants. The reason for this is that in municipalities with fewer than 250 inhabitants the government is elected practically directly.

Tables

Table 1. Percentage of municipalities that have kept the same or changed population interval. 1979-2019.

	1979	1983	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011
Lower interval		6.6	22.5	17.4	12.1	4.5	8		
Same interval	57.1	73.7	49.7	50.6	54.1	37.1	40	42.8	100
Higher interval	42.8	19.7	27.7	32	33.7	58.4	52	57.1	

Source: Compiled using data from the Ministry of the Interior.

Table 2. Percentage of female mayors by town council mandate. 1979-2019.

1979	1983	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015
1.9	1.4	2.7	3.4	4.1	6.6	8.9	12.8	13.7	16.9

Source: Local Government Observatory at the Carles Pi i Sunyer Foundation for autonomous and local studies.

Table 3. Percentage of municipalities in which participation is above the average for the same population interval in the general elections.

	1979	1983	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015
Up to 100 inhabitants	33.3	56.7	30.0	43.3	63.3	86.7	53.3	86.7	96.7	76.7
From 101 to 250	37.3	41.1	50.6	38.6	53.8	73.4	58.9	81.6	75.9	72.8
From 251 to 500	32.4	43.7	53.5	53.5	54.9	70.4	57.0	78.2	81.7	64.8
From 501 to 1,000	31.2	47.8	70.7	51.0	57.3	72.6	56.7	75.2	75.2	68.2
From 1,001 to 2,500	26.8	49.0	75.2	43.3	45.2	84.1	38.2	61.8	71.3	42.7
From 2,501 to 5,000	26.0	58.3	83.3	33.3	32.3	78.1	14.6	26.0	43.8	15.6
From 5,001 to 10,000	16.1	54.0	83.9	16.1	10.3	44.8	5.7	4.6	13.8	2.3
From 10,001 to 20,000	1.8	48.2	78.6	1.8	5.4	25.0	1.8	1.8	1.8	.0
Over 20,000	1.6	34.4	50.0	.0	.0	1.6	.0	.0	.0	.0

Source: Compiled by the author using data from the Ministry of the Interior.

Table 4. Index of concentration in general elections (CiU+PSC).

	1982	1986	1989	1993	1996	2000	2004	2008	2011	2015	2016
Up to 100	61.2968	78.1069	73.5795	66.5556	71.5120	71.3619	56.8564	64.1189	61.5023	42.6012	41.1672
From 101 to 250	63.4092	75.8865	76.2999	69.3916	75.8006	69.7536	58.7685	67.4870	65.2091	42.2643	39.7184
From 251 to 500	63.5723	75.0476	75.8450	69.1116	75.3516	69.6882	58.5619	67.5160	64.9673	41.5731	38.6149
From 501 to 1,000	65.6954	75.1543	75.6897	69.1439	76.2536	70.0491	58.4955	68.2923	64.7316	40.3807	37.3627
From 1,001 to 2,500	67.0877	76.2358	75.4399	70.0213	76.9868	70.6937	59.7135	69.5541	64.3343	39.1420	36.5703
From 2,501 to 5,000	68.4469	77.2131	75.7831	71.6239	76.4952	69.9750	59.8213	69.4385	62.3905	35.8378	33.5928
From 5,001 to 10,000	67.6378	76.2923	73.6198	69.6675	74.0846	66.9239	59.4536	67.9594	59.7607	33.6014	31.8188
From 10,001 to 20,000	70.0301	76.9398	74.1881	70.7923	73.4529	66.5865	60.6075	68.2657	58.7551	32.1783	30.8502
Over 20,000	68.6175	72.3673	66.7660	66.1191	67.5737	62.2303	61.2451	66.8986	55.4415	29.3955	29.1794

Source: Compiled by the author using data from the Ministry of the Interior.

Table 5. Index of concentration in municipal elections (CiU+PSC)

	1979	1983	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011	2015
Up to 100 inhabitants	86.7378	85.0699	82.7660	83.9647	72.3537	82.9884	71.5238	63.8330	62.5084	64.4727
From 101 to 250	75.8397	80.7888	85.6343	85.5084	81.9907	82.8917	77.9845	61.6044	71.1368	61.2072
From 251 to 500	68.8814	77.1911	84.9680	79.4989	74.3969	75.7533	77.9480	73.0763	74.0310	65.8158
From 501 to 1,000	50.7381	75.7114	76.2822	75.8602	73.8326	74.3134	68.3345	67.4471	70.4143	57.6547
From 1,001 to 2,500	54.7750	68.6346	72.7283	72.1803	68.1554	65.8235	68.1985	67.0327	67.3732	54.6537
From 2,501 to 5,000	43.4763	65.2442	68.7743	68.1509	66.2709	66.8558	63.9030	60.9084	59.2188	47.9197
From 5,001 to 10,000	47.3567	60.1617	67.5243	65.3639	60.7143	60.9526	57.2196	56.2118	52.0843	43.4400
From 10,001 to 20,000	50.1757	67.0888	70.2397	70.5185	64.4187	63.3676	59.0491	58.9976	53.6602	41.4536
Over 20,000	49.0130	67.2809	71.7693	72.2292	63.7038	65.4277	58.2874	58.5334	52.8417	36.1603

Source: Compiled by the author using data from the Ministry of the Interior.