



Catalonia's independence from Spain has few open backers in DC -- for now

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Catalonia's parliament is preparing to meet Tuesday in Barcelona, where it may declare the region independent from Spain in the aftermath of a violent crackdown on a banned referendum.

There's been relative quiet from Washington, but Catalonia's representative to the U.S. says that's not necessarily a bad thing as the region maintains behind-the-scenes contacts.

The relatively wealthy and Catalan-speaking region's government says more than 90 percent of people supported independence in the Oct. 1 referendum, though turnout was under 50 percent as the Spanish government imported police to stop voting. National police dragged voters by their hair, threw them down stairs and fired rubber bullets as they confiscated ballots.

Andrew Davis, the head of the government of Catalonia's delegation to the U.S. since 2008, told the *Washington Examiner*, "I'm not terribly surprised that there's a lot of silence" from American officials, and that "a lot of what we do is try to keep people posted discretely."

"People don't want to get ahead of their skis on some of these issues, but they're all well-briefed," he said about American lawmakers he views as supporters. "In Europe, things are a bit closer to Catalonia, so there's more of a need to be participating. I think here there's more of a wait and see attitude."

Catalonia's leaders have made outreach to Washington specifically regarding the independence vote for years. The region's foreign minister Roger Albiñana smiled for a photo with a group of five lawmakers during a 2015 visit.

In March, Catalan President Carles Puigdemont -- the current face of the independence movement — met in a Capitol Hill office with three of the same representatives.

One of the lawmakers at the 2015 meeting, Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., issued a statement calling on Spain to allow for a second referendum. But spokespeople for the other four — New Jersey Democratic Rep. Albio Sires and Florida Republican Reps. Mario Díaz-Balart, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Carlos Curbelo — did not respond to requests for comment Monday.

Some foreign press accounts portrayed the lawmakers as supportive of independence. Curbelo, according to the Catalan-language El Nacion, said in March that he supported the region's right to self-determination, likening Catalonia to Cuba, where his family used to live.

"The issue of self-determination is very important for us. My family had to flee from a country where that right did not exist," Curbelo reportedly said.

Davis said the Catalan government is in regular contact with lawmaker offices, and with the House and Senate foreign affairs committees, but declined to identify allies in Congress, saying, "if they want to step forward, it's better for them to do that."

The Trump administration has been nearly as quiet as Capitol Hill.

In the run-up to Catalonia's vote, the State Department said it was an internal political issue for Spain and President Trump said he personally supported a unified Spain, premised on his belief that most residents do as well. Since then, Trump has not commented on the crackdown.

By contrast, ahead of Iraqi Kurdistan's relatively peaceful September 25 independence referendum, the State Department and White House came out strongly in opposition. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., meanwhile, called on the U.S. to facilitate Kurdish independence.

"In terms of what the president said, I think more was made of his statement than need be," Davis said about Trump's remarks, which he made at a joint conference with Spanish prime minister Mariano Rajoy at the White House.

"We haven't detected much of a change in the U.S. position from Obama to Trump," Davis said. "Both of their State Departments have referred to it as an internal matter for Spain and Catalonians and both have expressed a preference for the status quo. ... They were under tremendous pressure to go much farther with more specific statements against this process, but that didn't happen."

Davis said it's understandable that the controversy has received understated treatment, at least for now, in Washington.

"Obviously Europe is the first port of call for Catalonia because we are part of the European Union," he said. "So priority is always going to be given in that sense to Brussels, and then Berlin, Paris, London in roughly that order. But the United States is extremely important for Catalonia. The Catalan government opened its first commercial office here in the late '80s."

Polling ahead of the independence vote showed an overwhelming majority of Catalonia residents wanted to be able to vote on independence, though there was not a clear majority in favor of actual independence. Although many massive protests have backed independence, a Barcelona crowd of hundreds of thousands rallied against secession over the weekend.

Helena Vicente, a member of the Catalan Institute of America, told the *Washington Examiner* there are mixed views even among members of the approximately 200-member New

York-based group, which seeks to foster Catalan culture and community but does not have an organizational position on independence.

"Most of the people agree on independence, but not all of them," said Vicente, a temporary New York resident who said she returned home to vote in the independence referendum. As with Catalan society itself, she said just about all members of the expat group in the U.S. support the concept of a vote.

"We're asking for voting and democracy, which is not any crime," she said.

Justin Raimondo, the editorial director of Antiwar.com, who warned of a possible "Spanish Tiananmen Square" ahead of the vote, said he's not surprised that there's so little support from elected officials in the U.S., which he attributes to "a reflection of their own centralist politics, plus the fact that there's no domestic pressure group pushing for Catalanian independence."

Raimondo said he's more surprised by the reaction of "Beltway libertarian types" such as Marian Tupy, a Cato Institute analyst who wrote for Reason that Spanish police "were remarkably restrained and only responded with batons and rubber bullets when under physical threat from the pro-independence protesters."

Spain's central government acquired a court order to stop the vote, arguing the country's 1978 constitution says the country is indivisible. Hundreds of people were injured as they attempted to vote anyhow. If Catalonia's parliament does vote for independence, a six-month transition period toward independence may be endorsed. The central government may respond by dissolving the regional government, which would open another chapter in the confrontation.