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**Catalonia: Absolute Majority For Pro-Independence Parties**

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With almost all votes counted, Citizens party is in the lead with 36 parliamentarians, three more than Junts per Catalunya, and four more than ERC. All pro-independence parties together reach a total of 70 seats, which gives them an absolute majority. The popular vote tells a different story with 52% voting for anti-independence parties vs 47.6% for parties vying for independence.

Meanwhile despite all the backlash against their secession attempt from Spain, dissolving of their government and their leaders being charged with the serious crime of rebellion by the Spanish government, the pro-independence parties have managed to gain more than 91,000 extra votes compared to the result in the 2015 elections in Catalonia.

Turnout on Thursday reached a record high with over 83 percent of eligible Catalans voting, significantly higher than the 63 percent turnout in 2015.

Polls suggest the region is set for a hung parliament, with the pro-independence Junts per Catalunya in second place alongside the ERC vying for third place with the unionist Citizens party coming in first.

Long queues formed outside voting stations in the prosperous region of northeastern Spain shortly after they opened.

Among those queuing in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, a working class suburb south of Barcelona, was Miguel Rodriguez, a 53-year-old doctor, who voted for independence in the referendum that Madrid declared unconstitutional.

"I'm not very optimistic that these elections will return a stable government," he said, upset that Spanish government had fired the previous regional assembly. "We've had all our rights taken away."

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy called the Dec. 21 vote in October in the hopes of returning Catalonia to "normality" under a unionist government. He sacked the region's previous government for holding a banned referendum and declaring independence, a move which failed to garner much international recognition.

The final results from Catalonia's independence referendum showed that 90 per cent of voters backed secession from Spain, the region's government said. Madrid vowed to ignore the result after Spain's constitutional court declared the poll unlawful.

The independence campaign pitched Spain into its worst political turmoil since the collapse of fascist rule and return of democracy in the 1970s.

"I want a change, because things are going from bad to worse here and it's the young people that carry the brunt of it," said Manuela Gomez, 71. Gomez voted for unionist favorites Ciudadanos, emerged as the most voted-for party in the election.

Podemos backs the unity of Spain but says Catalans should be able to have a referendum authorized by Madrid to decide their future. At the same time, Podemos favors a left-wing alliance of Catalan parties that both back and reject independence.

In this, analysts say, Podemos is caught between two options it does not particularly like, but would prefer to back the separatists rather than a coalition involving Rajoy's right-wing party.

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