The Political Quarterly, Vol. 86, No. 2, April–June 2015

The Independence Case in Comparative Perspective

ROBERT LIÑEIRA AND DANIEL CETRÀ

Abstract
Scotland is not the only sub-state unit in Europe where relevant political actors make claims for independence. To generate insights on these independence demands, we compare the drivers, arguments and popular support for secession in Scotland, the Basque Country, Catalonia and Flanders. We argue that national identity, party politics and the economy are behind the independence requests, and the exact articulation of these elements varies from case to case. Currently, the most salient of these demands are the ones from Catalonia; Basque demands for self-determination are less prominent than in the past, whereas the demand for a vote on independence is much less articulated in Flanders. Although the Scottish independence referendum has set a precedent for solving independence disputes, we argue that the possibilities of exporting the Scottish referendum experience to other realities are limited.

Keywords: secession, independence referendums, Basque Country, Catalonia, Flanders, Scotland

INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUMS in stable democracies are uncommon, and cases such as Quebec and Scotland are rare. However, a number of other places witness relevant movements asking for independence from their state. The Scottish independence referendum has set a precedent for political actors who seek to channel their secession demands through an independence referendum. Pro-independence movements may use it to claim their right to hold a similar vote, and future attempts to gain independence may be judged against the yardstick of the Scottish model.

How can we compare these different cases for independence? In this article we contrast the drivers, arguments and support for secession in Scotland, the Basque Country, Catalonia and Flanders. The aim is to look for similarities and differences in the case for independence across different sub-state units, to generate insight on independence demands and how they are channelled. Why these cases? All of them share a salient and widespread debate on the possibility of secession in democratic and relatively affluent societies. They also share the existence of self-governing institutions within a federal or regional scheme in the EU context.

The article's structure is as follows. First, we address the question of the relationship between national identity and support for independence. Second, we examine the strength of nationalist parties in the different sub-state party systems and their basic constitutional strategies. Third, we explore the role played by the economy and economic grievances in the case for secession. We finally discuss the current proposals by the different nationalist movements and the possibilities of exporting the Scottish referendum model overseas.

National identity and support for independence

Conventional accounts tend to explain secessionism as a function of the identity-based distinctiveness of groups. Although demands for secession do not necessarily stem from cultural distinctiveness, national identity is usually considered the main driving factor of independence support. Evidence from Scotland, Catalonia and the Basque Country shows that individuals who identify more strongly with the sub-state unit tend to be more in favour of

Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

independence.[1] However, there are non-secessionist nationalist movements and citizens with exclusive sub-state identity who support enhanced self-government institutions for their territories, but not full secession. This implies that a link between identification and pro-independence attitudes is by no means definite. National identity is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the development of self-determination movements, although a distinctive identity is the strongest common factor across our cases.

At the individual level, national identity is regarded as a cause of support for independence because it is a very stable political attitude that does not change easily in the short term. National identity is a consequence of socialisation and past experiences, and it conditions citizens' political attitudes in general and constitutional preferences in particular. It is the stable nature of national identity that makes it a good candidate to explain differences in support for independence across countries and individuals, but not changes in this support across time.[2]

Further, the fact that individuals tend to maintain their early acquired national identity throughout their lives makes generational turnover the main mechanism of societies' identity change, when new generations socialised under new identity patterns replace old generations. However, there is evidence that individuals can change their national identities during their life course under certain circumstances, which forces us to qualify this notion of the individual's national identity as something that affects the political process without being affected by it.

Scotland, the Basque Country, Catalonia and Flanders have in common the existence of alternative national projects which affect —to different degrees—people's identities. This implies that a state identity, mainly promoted by state institutions, competes with a sub-state identity, promoted by various sub-state political and social actors. In fact, the existence of this sub-state alternative identity and national project is the main reason behind the setting up of self-governing institutions in all four of our cases. Thus, all our sub-state units have in common the existence of dual identities which vary in degree and intensity.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of these identities using a common indicator. All show that sub-state identities are more prevalent than state identities. Sub-state identity is especially widespread in the Basque Country. A third of respondents identify as only Basque; together with those who think of themselves as mainly Basque, they form a majority of 55 per cent. In Scotland and Catalonia, exclusive sub-state identities are less prevalent than in the Basque case but the distributions lean towards Scottish and Catalan identities (53 and 46 per cent respectively).

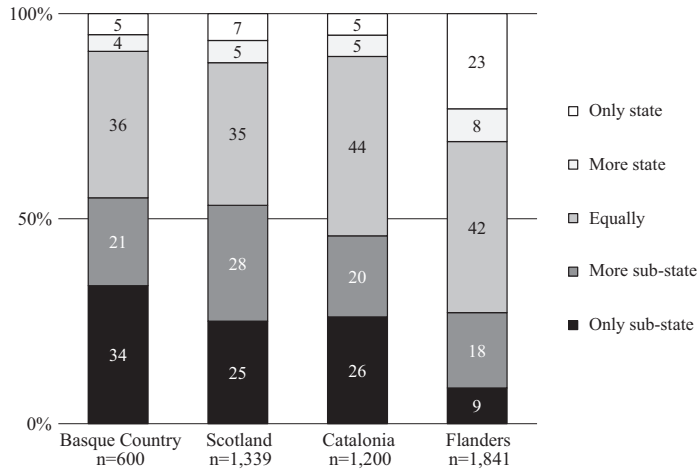

Figure 1: National identity in 2014[4]

With the exception of Flanders, state identities are selected by a small minority. In fact, Flanders shows a more balanced distribution than the other three cases, although there is a slight leaning towards state identities: 27 per cent identify themselves as only or mainly Flemish and 31 per cent as exclusively or mainly Belgians. The most frequent identity is without any doubt the intermediate one, with 42 per cent identifying as equally Flemish and Belgian.

The relationship between identity and support for independence is not a deterministic one: if support for independence was a mere function of national identity, we should expect the Basque Country to be the place with the highest support for independence, Flanders the one with the lowest, and Scotland and Catalonia somewhere in between. However, this is not exactly the case.

Table 1 shows the support for different constitutional arrangements in our four cases. Constitutional preferences in public opinion polls are more volatile than national identities, and susceptible to wording effects. Still, with the exception of Flanders—where only a minority supports more powers for the Flemish Parliament—there is clear support for enhanced self-government in the sub-state units. Scotland and Catalonia show a similar distribution of preferences, being the two cases which show more widespread support for independence. The fact that the Basque Country has more widespread sub-state identity but not more support for independence shows the necessity to add additional elements to the picture. The fact that constitutional preferences are more volatile than national identity also suggests that we must take into account political and economic explanations for short-term changes.

Support and strategies of the nationalist parties

Identity is not the full story in seeking to account for independence support: politics is important, in particular party politics. Decades of research on public opinion have persistently shown that parties provide citizens with cues which help them to establish their preferences. Parties, unlike issues or candidates, give continuity and structure to the political debate, and act as 'perceptual screens' through which individuals follow the political process. Consequently, party stances on constitutional options reflect but may also affect followers' constitutional preferences.

Our cases share some similarities. The party systems of Scotland, Catalonia and the Basque Country are a mix of state-wide and non-state-wide parties, which means that nationalist parties compete for votes with parties that also stand for seats all over the state territory. In contrast, party systems in Belgium are divided along linguistic or community lines, which indicates that Flemish parties stand for different constituencies than French-speaking parties. Since parties do not risk being sanctioned by voters from the other community, the dynamics of party competition are exclusively regional, pulling apart Flemish and Walloon parties and electorates.

An element shared by all four party systems is the existence of a clear pro-independence party: the Scottish National Party (SNP), the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), Sortu and the Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang). There are also smaller parties which support independence: the

Table 1: Constitutional preferences in 2014[iv].

	Scotland	Catalonia	Basque Country	Flanders
No devolved parliament	6	4	6	4
Less powers	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	20
Status quo	23	27	38	38
More powers	30	22	33	35
Independence	41	46	23	4
No parliament—*Status quo*	29	31	44	62
More powers—Independence	71	68	56	39
(n)	(1,339)	(1,200)	(600)	(1,841)

Note: The question wording and the alternatives offered to respondents vary significantly across the four cases.

Popular Unity Candidacies (CUP) in Catalonia and the Greens in Scotland have parliamentary representation and support independence. However, independence is not their main issue, or they are not big enough to dispute and claim ownership of the independence cause. Indeed, the SNP is unique in the sense that it does not have to face significant competition from another nationalist party. The other three cases show a more significant division between nationalist parties seeking independence and parties seeking more self-government within their current state. Sub-state nationalism is then a dimension of electoral competition in the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Flanders, but not in Scotland.

In the case of the Basque Country, the Christian-democratic Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV) has always been the main nationalist party. It has been the incumbent party in Basque self-government institutions for most of the time since the first regional elections in 1980. It has been elusive about the independence question, alternating between pro-self-government and pro-sovereignty positions. During this period it has always competed with the Basque radical nationalist left, which constitutes the main advocate of independence. The party labels of this group have frequently changed, and they have also experienced periods outside the law because of ties with the violent organisation ETA. The current party label is Sortu, which stood in the last Basque election within the 'Euskal Herria Bildu' coaltition. Currently, the EAJ-PNV heads a minority government whereas EHB holds twenty-one of seventy-five seats. The former will seek the support of the latter in order to deliver its proposal for a new political status for the Basque Country in 2020.

The main nationalist party in Catalonia since the advent of democracy has been the Convergence & Union (CiU) coalition, which has been the incumbent party in Catalan self-government institutions for most of the time since founding 1980 regional elections. It has been historically associated with the promotion of self-government within Spain, but recently stood in support of holding a referendum which includes the independence option, being ambivalent about its positioning on the question. CiU is a coalition between two parties: Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (CDC) and Democratic Union of Catalonia (UDC). The former currently tends to be in favour of independence, whereas the latter supports a confederation scheme; however, it is unclear how unanimous these stances are within the parties. CiU currently holds minority government status with the parliamentary support of the pro-independence ERC, which holds twenty-one seats out of 135.

In Flanders, the main nationalist party is the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), which has experienced a spectacular rise in the past few years. Founded in 2001, the N-VA supports confederalism in the short term and independence in the long term. It is currently the leading party of the Flemish coalition government and a member of the Belgian federal coalition government. The pro-independence and far-right Vlaams Belang (previously named Vlaams Blok) was the main nationalist party in Flanders in the past, but it is has been severely damaged by the success of the N-VA. There is a tacit *cordon sanitaire* around Vlaams Belang, which means that the party is blocked from accessing political power by the rest of the parties due to its extremist right-wing ideology. Thus, in practice the N-VA is the only Flemish nationalist party with actual capacity of political influence.

National identity has a strong exogenous influence on individuals' attitudes towards independence, and party stances on constitutional options may also influence individuals' constitutional preferences. However, identity and party politics are not the whole story. Economics may also colour the case for independence and influence the popular support for it.

The economic case for independence

The economy, and economic grievances in particular, are used to explain support for secession. The dominant prediction in the literature is that regions or groups that are better off than the rest of the country will have a higher likelihood of demanding secession, since they often subsidise poorer regions.[5] The mechanism is quite straightforward: by separating, they would have more dispos-

able resources, because they would no longer be subject to fiscal imbalances with respect to the rest of the state. They could also provide more public goods and do so more efficiently, as a consequence of an increased homogeneity of preferences in a smaller region.[6]

The role that the economy plays in the case for secession shows similarities and differences across our cases. Whereas the Basque Country, Catalonia and Flanders are relatively wealthier with regard to the rest of Spain and Belgium, this is not the case for Scotland with regard to the rest of the UK. Table 2 gathers the GDP per capita in our four cases, and places it in relation to the GDP of the United Kingdom, Spain and Belgium. The third column shows that the GDP of Scotland is 7 per cent lower than the overall UK GDP, while those of Catalonia and the Basque Country are 17 and 34 per cent higher than Spain's GDP per inhabitant. Flanders' wealth per capita is roughly the same than the Belgium one, but huge differences exist between the relative wealth of the three Belgian regions. Brussels is by far the richest region in Belgium (62,000 GDP per capita), whereas Wallonia is the poorest (24,600). Flanders' GDP per inhabitant is in fact 37 per cent higher than Wallonia's.

In Scotland, even if there have been some attempts to build an economic case for independence around oil and tax revenues, it is difficult to convey the argument that, by separating, there would be more disposable resources. Additionally, the economic argument to support secession is not employed in all cases: it is used in Catalonia and Flanders, but less often in the Basque Country.

Until recently, Catalan nationalism mainly focused on linguistic and cultural issues; the *recognition* of national distinctiveness and promotion of the Catalan language were the main goals of the nationalist movement. Economic issues have gained salience in recent years. The perception of economic grievance, and specifically the idea that the difference between Catalonia's contribution and what it receives in transfers and investments from the Spanish government is too large, has fuelled a sense of unfairness across Catalan elites and a significant portion of the Catalan public. This dispute has also fired discussions between the Catalan and the Spanish governments about the level of the Catalan fiscal deficit. Thus, the parties favouring secession or greater devolution in Catalonia have agreed that the fiscal treatment received by the Catalan government is unfair, and that it limits Catalonia's ability to develop stronger social policies and promote economic growth. Under these circumstances, secession has often been presented as an alternative that would increase the available budget of the Catalan government and remove obstacles to welfare.

In the Basque case, the economic argument for independence is largely absent. The main reason is that it enjoys a beneficial fiscal agreement. Under the *concierto económico*, the three Basque historic territories that currently form the Basque autonomous community set and collect most taxes and pass on a share to the Spanish government for common services. The amount passed by the Basque authorities is low enough to allow the Basque Country to run a surplus, i.e., its per capita contributions are smaller than what it receives in transfers and investments per inhabitant.[7] This is particularly shocking if we take into account that the Basque Country is the wealthiest region in Spain. Para-

Table 2: Socioeconomic characteristics

	Population (Millions)	Nominal GDP 2011 in Euros	Ratio sub-state/state GDP per capita 2011
Scotland	5.2	26,200	0.93
Catalonia	7.3	26,600	1.17
Basque Country	2.1	30,500	1.34
Flanders	6.3	30,100	1.00

Source: Eurostat, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/1-27022014-AP/EN/1-27022014-AP-EN.PDF

doxically, this advantageous fiscal arrangement can be seen as a structural difficulty for Basques independence, given that a case of economic grievance similar to the one in Catalonia cannot be made.

As in the Catalan case, the cultural and language domain has been very salient in Flanders. Although a degree of controversy still remains in the Flemish periphery of Brussels, the cultural case is now less prominent, giving ground to the economic one. The economic argument is built around two related ideas: first, a sense of grievance over transfers to Wallonia and a critical attitude toward generous Walloon welfare policies; second, the notion of a democratic deficit, which refers to the idea that Flanders' pro-liberal policy preferences (compared to the more 'pro-socialist' Wallonia) cannot be delivered due to the consociational scheme of federal institutions. More powers for the Flemish region are deemed necessary to make congruent policy preferences with policy outcomes in Flanders.

The argument regarding different policy preferences is also present in Scotland, but in this case the argument comes from the other side of the political spectrum: independence would be used to promote a more social democratic policy agenda than the one preferred by the UK government. The SNP makes a case for Scottish independence that largely focuses on welfare and social policy, connecting independence to social fairness and drawing on myths of egalitarianism and the notion of democratic deficit (see articles by Malcolm Harvey, Kirstein Rummery and Craig McAngus and Sheila Riddell and colleagues in this volume).

Discussion: independence referendums beyond Scotland

Independence referendums will continue to be rare events. However, the Scottish experience has helped to normalise them, becoming a potential yardstick for solving future secession disputes (see Stephen Tierney in this volume). This is so because of the fairness of the Scottish referendum process, the general spirit of mutual respect and cooperation achieved between the two sides, the public's level of engagement with the debate and the acceptance of the results by all parties.

There are four characteristics that future independence processes may be asked to mirror, from the Scottish model, to be considered legitimate. First, the right to claim an independence referendum must derive from a popular mandate. Second, an independence decision must be decided directly by citizens via referendum. Third, the terms of the referendum should be agreed between the state and the sub-state governments; i.e., the method used to address independence disputes should be settled by a bilateral agreement within domestic law. Fourth, the referendum must pose a clear question to citizens.

In Scotland, initiation of the referendum was agreed by the UK government after the SNP won a majority at the 2011 Scottish parliament election, having advocated for an independence referendum in its party manifesto. In addition, the referendum as instrument had already been used in 1979 (there was a small Yes majority, but it did not reach the required threshold of 40 per cent of the electorate), setting a precedent for the 1997 referendum that approved the establishment of a Scottish parliament and the 2014 referendum that went a step further to ask about independence. Finally, the terms of the referendums were set at the Edinburgh Agreement between the UK and the Scottish governments, which included the 'clear question' condition and its supervision by the Electoral Commission.

In both Catalonia and the Basque Country, sub-state governments have attempted to hold referendums on self-determination. Both sub-state units have in common with Scotland the use of the referendum instrument to decide on self-government issues. In contrast with Flanders, where the constitutional reforms that led to the setting of the Flemish parliament were passed by a parliamentary vote and not by a popular one, Catalonia and the Basque Country set and reformed their respective self-government institutions by mandatory referendums. However, holding a referendum that includes the possibility of independence is problematic because the Spanish constitution does not contemplate the possibility of seces-

sion, nor of any sovereign nation other than the Spanish people as a whole.

The most serious of the attempts to hold a referendum on independence outside Scotland has been the recent vote in Catalonia. On 9 November there was a non-binding popular vote on independence, promoted by the Catalan government and opposed by the Spanish government. The vote, which came to be known as 'participation process', was more an act of protest by the pro-independence side than a decisive test on the issue of secession. Voters were asked two questions: whether Catalonia should be a state and, if yes, whether it should be an independent state. The Catalan government estimated that around 36 per cent of Catalan residents turned out to vote. Results showed that 80.7 per cent voted yes to both questions, 10 per cent voted yes to the first question and no to the second and 4.5 per cent voted no. The next step in the process will be what the Catalan government has called a 'plebiscite election', a snap election on 27 September 2015 in which pro-independence parties would stand with a joint candidacy and will run with independence as the key point in their manifestos. This strategy is currently under discussion by the interested parties.

The vote in Catalonia was the result of an intense period of mobilisation by supporters of self-determination. The main trigger was political dissatisfaction generated by a failed constitutional reform of the Catalan statute of autonomy. After being passed by the Spanish and Catalan parliaments and ratified by the Catalan people in a mandatory referendum in 2006, the statute was taken to the Constitutional Court by the Popular Party (PP), the main opposition party to the Spanish socialist government of the time. The Constitutional Court ruling in 2010 amended the statute, decreasing further the powers granted by the approved version: fourteen articles were declared unconstitutional, several were subjected to reinterpretation and the statement in the preamble that 'Catalonia is a nation' was explicitly described as being without legal standing.

This outcome was perceived by large sections of the Catalan population to be an illegitimate resolution, for a number of reasons: only ten of the twelve Constitutional Court magistrates voted on the ruling, because one member had died without a successor being appointed and the authority of another member was challenged; in addition, the terms of three other members had already expired when the decision was made.

Any reform to enhance self-government and the recognition of Catalonia's national distinctiveness looked less likely after this, damaging the political opportunities of those groups in favour of a federal reform of the constitutional framework but giving momentum to promoters of overcoming the current constitutional setting. The perception that a constitutional reform on the issue was politically impossible was accentuated by the ample victory at the 2011 general election of the PP, the party that opposes most ferociously to any kind of territorial reform. The polarisation of party stances has helped make the independence issue more salient than ever. Also, public opinion has shifted, from an overwhelmingly pro-autonomy position to an increasingly pro-independence stance. The proportion of voters choosing an independent Catalan state in a multiple-option question has risen from 14 per cent in 2006 to around 45 per cent in 2014.

The Basque government also tried to agree a constitutional referendum with the Spanish government under the so-called Ibarretxe Plan, which was promoted by the PNV Basque president of the time and rejected by the Spanish parliament in 2005. The party's demands for a constitutional referendum are now less salient. Drawing inspiration from the Scottish referendum and the Catalan mobilisation, a recently created civil society organisation called 'It's in our hands' (*Gure Esku Dago*) organises events that aim to push for a referendum. However, the present stance of the PNV is a new political status for the Basque Country—an ambiguous notion that basically pretends to protect the powers of Basque institutions and to establish a bilateral political relationship with the Spanish government. The emphasis on bilateralism is an old demand of Basque nationalism, and was evident in the 'co-sovereignty' proposal of the Ibarretxe Plan.[8]

In contrast to the other cases, public support for independence in Flanders is minimal, and political efforts to promote a secession referendum have been largely absent. In fact, the current territorial proposal by the main nationalist party (N-VA)

is further decentralisation (confederalism): Belgium would have two autonomous entities—Flanders and Wallonia—and a bilingual capital, Brussels. The idea of confederalism partly derives from the 'problem' of Brussels, today basically a French-speaking city in historical Flemish territory that Flemish parties do not want to abandon. Flemish nationalists were reluctant to accept the creation of the Brussels Capital Region (1989) in the first place, for fear that it would align with the mostly French-speaking Walloon region. Under the N-VA's confederal proposal, the Belgian parliament and government would disappear and be replaced by a coordinating state authority that would not be directly elected. It would retain control over the army and diplomacy, but key issues such as social security, tax and labour policies would be transferred to Flanders and Wallonia. Rather than a referendum on independence, a progressive hollowing-out of the Belgian state to the benefit of the regions seems the most likely future scenario.

Conclusion

In sum, identity, politics and the economy are behind the independence claims in Europe, although the precise articulation of these elements is case-specific. The most salient of these claims are now the ones from Catalonia; Basque demands for self-determination are less prominent than in the past, whereas the demand for a vote on independence is much less articulated in Flanders. In any case, it is far from certain that there would be a new independence referendum in any of these places. No relevant actor in Flanders is pushing for it, whereas holding such a referendum in Spain would require a change in the conception of the constitution and an agreement between governments that now looks unlikely.

Notes

1 D. McCrone and L. Paterson, 'The conundrum of Scottish independence', *Scottish Affairs*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2002, pp. 54–75; I. Serrano, 'Just a matter of identity? Support for independence in Catalonia', *Regional & Federal Studies*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2013, pp. 523–45; J. Costa-Font and R. Tremosa, 'National identity and the preference for state opting-out in the Basque Country', Working Papers in Economics, Universitat de Barcelona, 2006.

2 A. Blais and R. Nadeau, 'To be or not to be sovereignist: Quebeckers' perennial dilemma', *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de Politiques*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1992, pp. 89–103; P. Howe, 'Rationality and sovereignty support in Quebec', *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1998, pp. 31–59.

3 M. J. Hierro, 'Change in national identification. A study of the Catalan case', PhD dissertation, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2012.

4 Sources: For the Basque Country, Euskobarómetro (November 2014); for Scotland, Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2014; for Catalonia, Political and Social Sciences Institute (ICPS) poll 2014; for Flanders, Kris Deschouwer, Pascal Delwit, Marc Hooghe, Pierre Baudewyns and Stefaan Walgrave, Décrypter l'électeur. Le comportement électoral et les motivations de vote. Brussels, Lannoo Campus, 2015, p. 164. Note: with slight differences, the common question is: 'Which best describes respondent, on a scale from "Sub-state not state" to "State not sub-state"?'

5 V. O. Bartkus, *The Dynamic of Secession*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999; M. Hechter, *Containing Nationalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

6 A. Alesina and E. Spolaore, *The Size of Nations*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2005.

7 http://www.minhap.gob.es/Documentacion/Publico/GabineteMinistro/Notas%20Prensa/2014/S.%20E.%20ADMINISTRACIONES%20P%C3%9ABLICAS/23-07-14%20NP%20Sistema%20Cuentas%20Publicas%20Territorializadas.pdf.

8 A. Lecours, *Basque Nationalism and the Spanish State*, Reno, University of Nevada Press, 2007.