

# Factors Fueling Heightened Catalan Nationalism and its Immediate Electoral Consequences: An Examination of Socio-Economic and Federalist Influences

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## **Abstract**

This essay analyzes the recent surge of Catalan nationalism and its electoral effects, focusing on socio-economic and federalist factors. Traditionally marginal, Catalan secessionism has gained traction, defying the trend of increasing socio-political integration with Spain. The study investigates the revival of secessionist sentiment after 2012 and its impact on Spanish politics. Key findings suggest the rise in separatism is driven by dissatisfaction with Spain's federal fiscal policies and fears of Spanish federalism, especially following reforms limiting Catalan self-governance. Additionally, the economic dimension, particularly the 2008 recession and fiscal imbalances, has intensified separatist inclinations. This escalation in nationalism has profound implications for Spanish politics, leading to economic consequences and strategic shifts in federal party responses to separatist demands. The essay concludes that Catalan nationalism's growth reflects a complex interaction of socio-economic elements, federal statutory reforms, and regional discontent, significantly altering Spanish political dynamics.

*Keywords:* Catalan nationalism, secessionist sentiment, Spanish federalism, federal statutory reforms.

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## **FACTORES QUE IMPULSAN EL NACIONALISMO CATALÁN Y SUS CONSECUENCIAS ELECTORALES INMEDIATAS: UN EXAMEN DE LAS CUESTIONES SOCIOECONÓMICAS Y FEDERALES**

### **Resumen**

En este ensayo se analiza el reciente auge del nacionalismo catalán y sus efectos electorales, centrándose en factores socioeconómicos y federalistas. Tradicionalmente marginal, el secesionismo catalán ha ganado fuerza, desafiando la tendencia de una creciente integración sociopolítica con España. En el estudio se investiga el resurgimiento del sentimiento secesionista después de 2012 y su impacto en la política española. Los hallazgos clave sugieren que el aumento del separatismo está impulsado por la insatisfacción con las políticas fiscales federales de España y los temores al federalismo español, especialmente después de las reformas que limitaron el autogobierno catalán. Además, la dimensión económica, en particular la recesión de 2008 y los desequilibrios fiscales, ha intensificado las inclinaciones separatistas. Esta escalada del nacionalismo tiene profundas implicaciones para la política española, generando consecuencias económicas y cambios estratégicos en las respuestas de los partidos federales a las demandas separatistas. El ensayo concluye que el crecimiento del nacionalismo catalán refleja una interacción compleja de elementos socioeconómicos, reformas estatutarias federales y descontento regional, alterando significativamente la dinámica política española.

*Palabras clave:* nacionalismo catalán, sentimiento secesionista, federalismo español, reformas estatutarias federales.

Although Catalan self-determination has always permeated Catalonia's political ethos, secession, either unilateral or through referendum, is illegal and the electoral feasibility of secession has only been viable within the last decade (Rico & Liñeira, 2014). Paradoxically, this shift has occurred within the context of a Catalonia that up until that point had grown increasingly socio-politically homogeneous with the rest of Spain. Even after the abolition of the Franco regime's Catalonian subordination, the subsequent linguistic reintegration of Catalan into the region failed to catalyze a nationalist resurgence (Ucelay-Da Cal, 2014). Given a context whereby Catalonian urbanization had largely withered Catalonian geo-linguistic boundaries (Jaraiz, Cazorla & Rivera, 2018), why has Catalonian self-determination exacerbated in viability since 2012? Further, how has this viability influenced the broader politics of Spain? Ultimately, the data concludes that secession's popularity ballooned in response to increasing grievances towards Spain's federal fiscal structures coupled with the fear of

encroaching Spanish federalism embedded within recently imposed statutory reforms. Lastly, the impacts of increased Catalanian secessionist sentiment have compelled the federal government to appease separatist demands especially given the economic repercussions associated with political instability.

## **Historical Context**

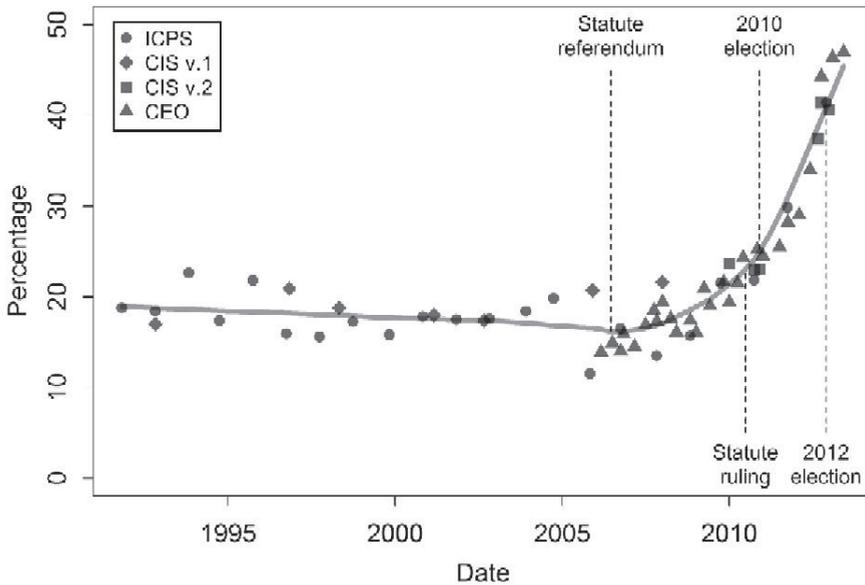
The viability of Catalanian secession had steadily decreased over the last century (Ucelay-Da Cal, 2014). The espoused sentiment of Catalan separatists throughout the mid-century was that the Franco regime's subordination of Catalan socio-linguistic values as punishment for the region's role in the civil war had been successful in its cultural erasure (Cestone, 2020). As such, separatists predicted that the autonomy granted to Catalonia post-Franco would help re-fortify Catalanian sovereignty claims as a definite region. Still, the popularity of secession remained marginal throughout the region. Post-Franco reforms which engaged in Catalan linguistic immersion via the injection of the indigenous language into media and education failed to instill greater separatist sentiment among the population (Woolard, 2018). Services conducted in Catalan struggled to compete with the Castilian alternatives. These services sustained a massive deficit and required linguistic subsidies to remain competitive (Ucelay-Da Cal, 2014). The failures of Catalan linguistic immersion reflect the broader failures of secessionist sentiment given Benedict Anderson's centralization of language as the primary factor in determining a region's self-interpretation as 'an imagined community' (Anderson, 1991).

This continued and increasing marginalization of Catalanian separatist sentiment is generally explained as a product of urbanization although there's a definite relationship between urbanization, language, and secessionist support. Particularly because the most urbanized area, Barcelona, is overwhelmingly Castilian speaking. Still, Catalanian culture remained ontologically tied to rural traditions which were subsequently eroded via urbanization (Romero-Vidal, 2020). Simultaneously, the urban scramble responsible for the importation of Castilian culture by-way-of migration patterns also led to the emigration of Catalonians into surrounding Spain further withering

geo-linguistic rigidity. Urbanization also exposed a need for cheap labor which when coupled with Spain's consolidation with the European Union (EU) catalyzed the importation of cultural traditions from northern Africa and Eastern Europe (Jaraiz, Cazorla & Rivera, 2018). Lastly, a post-Franco hegemonic naturalization of electoral politics disfigured the separatist movement's orthodox rhetoric rooted in an idolatry of paramilitary revolution (Cestone, 2020).

Despite these variables, the increasing marginalization of secessionist popularity within the century had noticeably shifted within the last decade. Surveys conducted amongst three distinct Spanish think-tanks (ICPS, CIS and CEO) conclude that in 2012 Catalan secession had doubled in popularity since the late 2000's (Rico & Liñeira, 2014). These surveys were conducted via asking participants how the region should be constitutionally governed with secession as a selectable possibility (See fig. 1).

Figure 1  
 ICPS yearly surveys; CIS survey databank; CEO barometers.  
 Conducted via local polynomial regression



Source: Rico & Liñeira, 2014.

Ultimately, the contemporary secessionist phenomena that contradicts Catalonia's historical trend towards national homogeneity can be primarily attributed to two emerging, yet interconnected, variables within Spanish politics. Firstly, the increase in secessionist sentiment can be deciphered as a response to a series of statutory reforms limiting Catalan self-governance. This conclusion is corroborated temporally as per Guillem Rico and Robert Liñeira's polynomial regression (See fig 1.). These reforms – proposed in 2005 and ratified by the Spanish constitutional court after five years of litigation – restricted existing Catalonian claims to self-governance. Specifically, they repealed Catalonian self-determination jurisdiction over linguistic rights, judicial self-determination, immigration, taxation and autonomously imposed future secessionist referenda (Mermel, 2016). Initially, the Catalan government, and voters in a referendum, approved of a new autonomy statute for the region. The right-wing *Partido Popular de Cataluña* (PP), opposition in the Cortes challenged it to the constitutional court and the court ruled it invalid. Thus, the Cortes decided to remove autonomy following a decision taken on a statute that had prior been passed and agreed upon. Still, the conclusion was the effective snuffing of Catalonian self-determination.

Secondly, although urbanization had increased the rate at which Catalonian socio-political identity blurred into the larger Spanish ethos, it had simultaneously exposed the region's economic prospects. This has stimulated Catalonian grievances as to the region's surplus of economic contributions to the Spanish state (Rico & Liñeira, 2014). These grievances have been further exacerbated as a consequence of the 2008 recession's impact on Europe. Although the recession had damaged the popularity of incumbents throughout the country (Rico & Liñeira, 2014), Catalonia grew increasingly dissatisfied as a consequence of a regionally disproportionate economic blow. This disproportionality came partially as a product of the aforementioned statutory reforms that had limited Catalonian fiscal autonomy (Crameri, 2014: 68). These growing economic grievances coupled with the 2010 statutory reforms allowed separatist leaders to commandeer an existing populist movement concluding with the contemporary inflation of Catalonian nationalism (Romero-Vidal, 2020).

## Statutory Reforms

Urbanization, industrialization and Franco's linguistic repression had largely sociologically homogenized Catalonia with the rest of Spain leading to internal political divisiveness within the region. Still, theoretical and empirical interpretations of secession argue that internal political divisiveness remains a marginal factor to a secessionist movement's viability (Sorens, 2005). Further, realist international-relations posit that nations behave universally and predictably to maximize their sovereignty regardless of internal political polarization within that nation (Morgenthau, 1978). In regards to Catalonia, the imposition of federal statutory reforms can be interpreted as a direct threat to such sovereignty concluding with a predictable increase in Catalonian nationalism.

Jaime Lluch posits that a federally conducted statutory reform will generally presuppose a political reorganization and revitalization of separatist sentiment. This is because minority regions interpret federally imposed sweeping reforms as a reiteration of federal sovereignty (Lluch, 2010: 315). The statutory reforms in Catalonia intensify Lluch's posited phenomena insofar as they specifically challenge Catalonian claims to self-governance. Further, Lluch argues that cultural solidarity which presupposes this revitalization of separatist sentiment does not require political unity; rather, it amalgamates as the antithesis to an external threat. In the Catalonian context, this threat is understood as encroaching Spanish federalism. Lluch's sentiment is corroborated by Jason Sorens in stressing the negligibility of political difference measured in terms of ideological difference as a determinant of a secessionist movement's popularity (Sorens, 2005). This rationale adopts a realist understanding of Catalonian secession whereby nations behave universally and predictably regardless of internal politics within that nation (Morgenthau, 1978). In this context, the growing encroachment of Spanish federalism evident in the statutory reforms had triggered a predictable backlash from the Catalonian nation regardless of industrialization's impact on political polarization within the region.

This theoretical framework posited by Sorens and Lluch can be corroborated empirically by understanding the ways in which politically divided Catalonians responded homogeneously to encroaching Spanish federalism. Although post-Franco linguistic immersion had largely failed and Catalan remained linguistically subordinate to Cas-

tilian (Woolard, 2018), the statutory reforms – specifically of article 6.1 which targeted Catalan’s language – were interpreted as extensions of Franco’s linguistic repression (Cramer, 2014). These reforms were so impactful on Catalonian perceptions of sovereignty that demonstrations in protest of over one million Catalans were conducted the day after the ratification of the reforms (Romero-Vidal, 2020). Although at the point of protest there had existed great contestation between Catalonians as to whether Catalan should be spoken colloquially (Woolard, 2018), the statutory reforms were understood as an attack on Catalonia’s ability to be linguistically self-determinant in regards to that contestation. As such, the political differences between the linguistic usefulness of Catalan within Catalonia became marginal and separatist sentiment blossomed in opposition to the encroaching federalist threat to their linguistic self-determination.

Ultimately, although growing urbanization and industrialization had largely eroded Catalonian socio-linguistic traditions leading to political divisiveness within the region, the 2010 statutory reforms catalyzed homogenous Catalonian nationalism in response to threats to their sovereignty. Ultimately, internal political divisiveness proved marginal in limiting the inflation of Catalonian nationalism as soon as a threat to national sovereignty was identified evident in the proliferation of secessionist parties.

## **Economic Factors**

Although Franco’s policy of linguistic erasure had permanently stunted the resurgence of the Catalonian language (Woolard, 2018), Sorens posits that Benedict Anderson had overestimated the role of language as a determinant of a secessionist movement’s viability. Sorens challenges Anderson’s linguistic determinism in arguing that “secessionism must draw on more than cultural differences like language” (Sorens, 2012: 19). He concludes that a fiscal imbalance between a contested region and the surrounding state reflects an empirically meaningful variable in determining a secessionist movement’s viability (Sorens, 2012). In regards to Catalonia, industrialization – which had prior been explained as a factor of eroding Catalonian cultural rigidity – had also emphasized the relative strength of the Catalonian

economy (Oller & Tobeña, 2019). Further, the 2008 recession had exposed and exacerbated an existing fiscal imbalance between the region and the Spanish state. Although the recession had damaged the popularity of incumbents throughout Spain, it had disproportionately stunted the Catalan economy insofar as the previously described statutory reforms had further restricted Catalonian fiscal autonomy and increased the need to subsidize other Spanish regions more dependent on recession-targeted investments such as speculative housing (Bel & Rodon, 2019).

Catalonia's limited fiscal autonomy becomes apparent when compared to Spain's Basque region. The Basque region retains fiscal autonomy as a consequence of their economic accord (*concierto económico*). This accord allows the Basque to conduct their own taxation and pay a negotiated percentage to the federal government (Cramer, 2014). By contrast, Catalonia's tax revenue is directly allocated to the state which subsequently returns a percentage to be used for Catalonian services and investments. This grants jurisdiction to the federal government as to Catalonia's fiscal contributions to other regions via mechanisms of equalization (Castells, 2014) and their infrastructural budgeting.

Further, the 2010 statutory reforms had directly increased the fiscal imbalance by removing article 206.3 which had prior alleviated Catalonia's obligation to provide direct financial support to surrounding regions if they are experiencing economic crises (Cramer, 2014). Given these fiscal reforms, coupled with the recession's impact, Catalonia's surplus contributions to the federal government had peaked resulting in 7-9% of Catalonia's annual GDP leaving the region in recent years for external allocation (Pons-i-Novell & Tremosa, 2005).

Generally, it is understood that secession is preferred by a region when such region is compelled to subsidize necessitous regions (Boylan, 2015). Ultimately, the disproportionately high rate of industrialization within Catalonia, 2008 recession and 2010 statutory reform which reinstated Catalonia's obligation to fiscally support necessitous regions during crises coalesced into an inflation of separatist sentiment.

## **Subsequent Impact**

Understanding Catalonia's increased nationalism in the last decade as a consequence of growing grievances with Spanish, fiscal structures as well as a response to the threat of encroaching Spanish federalism via statutory reforms explains the subsequent impacts on broader Spanish politics. These impacts reflect a broader economic and electoral shift in Spain. The economic paradigm shift is evident in the ways in which separatists – motivated by Catalonia's disproportionate contribution to the Spanish economy – had employed the use of regional economic paralyzation conducted via strikes and civil disobedience (Kollmeyer, 2017). This was done to emphasize the extent to which Catalonia over-contributes to the Spanish economy. Further, the economic affects of increased secessionist popularity reflect the market volatility often associated with political upheaval. Within Catalonia, this is evident in the increased regional Catalonian bonds signaling investor hesitancy in the region (*Financial Times*). Several prominent Spanish banks have also moved headquarters to Madrid including CaixaBank and Banco de Sabadell (*Financial Times*, 2017).

The more consequential paradigm shift catalyzed by increasing separatist sentiment reflects the broader electoral politics of Spain. This is evident in the ways in which growing Catalonian nationalism and the subsequent economic repercussions had increased federal party awareness as to the popularity of the nationalist's demands leading to the acceptance of various separatist demands by major federal parties. Although a failure to appease all separatist demands has resulted in the political re-viability of the pro-separatist Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) as predicted by Simon Hug's theory of party assemblage (Hug, 2000), the leftist coalition currently in power had begun negotiations with separatists as of February 2021. Of the separatist demands, the federal government has agreed to grant amnesty to jailed politicians involved in Catalonia's 2017 attempted secession as well as retroactively legalize the referenda associated with the secession (Bernhard, 2020).

Catalonia's increased secessionist popularity is generally attributed to two factors. Firstly, there is an expectation that regions adopt separatist tendencies when there is a fiscal imbalance between the region and the federal government. The last decade's increase in Catalonian nationalism temporally corroborates these fiscal grievances. This is evident

given the statutory reforms in 2010 which challenged autonomous fiscal structures and a ballooning of their imbalance with the federal government as a consequence of the 2008 recession. Secondly, the statutory reforms themselves reflected encroaching Spanish federalism on Catalanian autonomy. Internal political and linguistic grievances amongst Catalonians were marginal factors in response to a homogenization against this external threat. This theory is proposed by Lluçh, Sorens and realist international relations scholars who argue that nations behave universally and predictably to maximize their self-preservation regardless of internal domestic polarization (Morgenthau, 1978). These conclusions proved useful in understanding Catalanian nationalism's broader Spanish, economic and electoral impacts including the economic repercussions of increased political upheaval informing the federal government's willingness to accommodate separatist demands.

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