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## The Question of National Self-Determination in Catalonia

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The Question of National Self-Determination in Catalonia


By

Ethan Waugh

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Discipline in  
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RUNNING HEADER: THE QUESTION OF NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION IN  
CATALONIA

The Question of National Self-Determination in Catalonia

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May 3, 2020

**Abstract**

National self-determination movements are ubiquitous social attempts of one regional or ethnic community to gain independence from a larger nation-state. These movements, although founded on democratic ideals, have the potential to disrupt the democratic process and drastically change international order. In the following paper, I first examine national self-determination movements, as a whole, from a theoretical perspective. In order to more critically analyze them, I take the case of Catalonia and its relationship with the Spanish national government, closely following the movement's economic, cultural, and political claims to independence. Finally, I conclude my study by explaining Catalonia's movement in the context of similar movements around the world in order to identify the most significant obstacles that said movements face, as well as what actions or conditions may be necessary in order to achieve internationally recognized sovereignty.

## Introduction

Reacting to Southern secession from the United States in 1861, President Abraham Lincoln posed the question of the validity and implications of secession in democracies:

It presents the question, whether discontented individuals... [can] break up their Government... It forces us to ask: 'Is there, in all republics, this inherent, and fatal weakness?' 'Must a government, of necessity, be too strong for the liberties of its own people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?' (Nelson 2019).

In making these statements during a special session before Congress, Lincoln introduced a certain dichotomy between a democracy's need to honor the right to choice of its citizens and its need to deny, to a certain degree, that very same right in order to maintain stability and sovereignty. While the American Civil War ultimately resolved this question in favor of the United States, the theories which lay behind both arguments are still relevant in modern society.

Democratic forms of secession, or "national self-determination," as it is called, base their claims on the theoretical right of an individual or group to control their destiny, including decisions over the form of government. There have been many cases of political movements advocating for national self-determination, including some that are present even to this day in such places as Canada, Israel, India, and many more areas across the globe (Moore 2003).

One of these movements is that which is currently occurring in Catalonia, Spain. News of this movement reached international headlines when Catalonian political leaders held a public referendum on October 1, 2017 to determine if they should declare themselves independent from the rest of Spain (O'Sullivan 2019). Considering that these protests were able to reach international audiences, the fate of the Catalonian independence movement could very well establish significant precedents in terms of the future of national self-determination and democratic sovereignty as a whole.

Given the importance of this event, I will be investigating the cases for and against Catalonian secession from theoretical, cultural, economic, and political standpoints. More specifically, the analysis makes the following claims. Firstly, the Catalonian self-determination movement found its roots in a wide variety of issues including culture and history; however, the driving force in pushing people to actively promote the independence movement was primarily economic. Secondly, the movement generated international support from many groups but did not receive outright support from official governments because it is seen as politically unfavorable. Lastly, the movement provoked members of far-right parties and, inadvertently, led to increased support for parties against Catalonian independence and even the Generalitat of Catalonia.

### **Literature Review**

#### *National Self-Determination: A Theoretical Approach*

In the analysis of Catalonian national self-determination, it is imperative to understand the forces and theories behind secession movements in general. Perhaps the most relevant political theories in this debate come from the idea of national sovereignty. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is credited as being one of the first to define sovereignty in terms of a collective people as opposed to an individual person, entity, or other element of a Hobbesian Leviathan (Noone 1970). As such, his line of thinking led the way for the modern arguments that the concept of a “nation” can be thought of as a group of many individuals who share some common identity. In fact, many scholars in political science have come to recognize a few characteristics for determining what is or is not a nation, five of which are noted and explained by Margalit and Raz (1990). The first of these is that sovereign groups must share some kind of culture defining traditional activities, cuisine, social relationships, language, etc. Second, these cultural elements

must be strong enough that individuals born into these groups or introduced later on become socialized into adopting the culture or otherwise assimilating. The third and fourth characteristics posit that membership to the group is 1) recognized by other members of the group and 2) affects the individual's understanding of his or her own identity. Finally, membership within the group comes from a sense of belonging, not achievement. In summary, groups that are typically recognized as nations in the international community and therefore eligible to possess sovereignty are cultural groups who actively identify with, recognize, and socialize into a collective sense of being.

However, while the above is typically thought of as the more internationally accepted definition of sovereignty (Koskenniemi 2008), this is by no means without its problems. The understanding that a "nation" is defined as a social and cultural group can be taken to extreme interpretations. As we can see in modern movements, the question of national self-determination inside of internationally recognized nations complicates world order. Similar to other types of "slippery slope" arguments, some theorists worry that allowing nations within current states to form their own forms of government will quickly lead to many new states, which could then break into even more states from there, expanding exponentially and without limitation.

In the American Civil War, for example, President Lincoln posed his "Russian Doll Theory" in this way, "If a minority... will secede rather than submit, they make a precedent which, in turn, will divide them and ruin them; for a minority of their own number will secede from them whenever a majority refuses to be controlled by such minority" (Lindsay and Wellman 2003). The overlying idea is that even though self-determination is a democratic value, too much of it causes the inevitable breakdown of democracies faced with disputes and thereby destroys democratic values in the long run.

Additionally, the subjective understanding that a nation is a cultural group is by no means the only definition of a “nation.” A nation, in more objective terms, can also be thought of as any group with two concrete characteristics. The first is that the governing body is the sole owner and controller of legal force. In modern states, for example, this would mean that nationally recognized executive bodies, such as the police or the military, are able to use certain degrees of force and violence that other citizens are not. The second characteristic is that a nation must be recognized by the international community as legitimate.

Naturally, there have been a number of scholars and governing bodies that have attempted to reconcile this issue and define some sort of limitation to self-determination. At first glance, the United Nations Charter appears to offer some form of support for national self-determination. Article 1(2) posits that one of the primary purposes of the UN is to ensure “respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples,” and later reinforces this in Article 55 using the same phrasing (Quine 1998). In this regard, the idea and acknowledgement of self-determination is quite literally written into the founding documents of the international community.

However, precedents among seceding nations (except those which were former colonies) have demonstrated that the wording of the UN Charter has not defended separatist sentiments. In terms of the founding articles, some scholars argue that the language of recognizing “the principles of... self-determination,” indicates that self-determination is nothing more than a principle and has therefore not elevated to the status of a human nor international right. (Quane 1998). In this regard, even the inclusion of self-determination in the UN Charter provides reasons for both support and limitation of secession, depending on the reader’s interpretation.



Unfortunately for national self-determination movements, international law has historically been interpreted from the more restrictive perspective. Stemming from the idea that international law tends to prohibit violence and only recognizes revolution or revolt as a means of reclaiming former property (Margalit and Raz 1990), the Canadian Supreme Court ruled that “the international law right to self-determination only generates, at best, a right to external self-determination in situations of former colonies” (“Secession of Quebec” 1998). Likewise, scholars of international law say that the international community “recognizes no ‘right to self-determination’ for the purpose of unilateral secession” (Shen 2000). This conclusion from the perspective of the international community is somewhat predictable, given that the leaders in the community are, themselves, powerful representatives from large states that have an inherent desire to maintain their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In fact, a variety of definitions of national self-determination suggest that secession and independence are inherently unilateral and without the consent of the international community. For example, three frequently cited definitions of national self-determination and secession are the following: 1) “the creation of a State by the use of threat of force without the consent of the former sovereign,” (Crawford 2006); 2) “a special kind of territorial separatism... [that] is an abrupt, unilateral move to independence on the part of the region that is a metropolitan territory of a sovereign, independent state,” (Heraclides 1991); and 3) “the creation of a new, independent entity through the separation of part of the territory... of an existing State, without the consent of the latter” (Kohen 2006). Although these definitions vary in a number of ways, all of them are consistent in arguing that secession is a unilateral act committed against a pre-existing sovereign. Consequently, it is unlikely that these movements would receive support from a large community of pre-existing sovereigns.

However, many scholars often also recognize that there may be possibilities in which unilaterally self-determination movements would be supported internationally as a limited right in the case of “severe oppression by the parent state” (Adonu 2015). Nevertheless, the term, “severe oppression by the parent state,” has yet to be defined nor applied universally, which leaves room for continued debate and discussion over national self-determination movements which claim that they were victimized by their respective state in some regard.

In general, the literature on national self-determination is rather indecisive. While it is evidenced that a lack of formal laws exists to allow for the success of these self-determination movements, that is not to say that these ideologies are doomed. In fact, the literature demonstrates that the international community has implied the existence of the right under certain conditions. Ultimately, national self-determination movements’ successes or failures in drawing international sympathy will be determined by their effectiveness in demonstrating definitive instances of abuse by the parent state.

#### *National Self-Determination: Advancing Democracy or Reaching Populism*

In addition to the politics of the international community, national self-determination movements often face substantial resistance within their own state. A number of obstacles prevent national self-determination movements from becoming too strong and attempt to undermine their ideological values. For example, one common argument against national self-determination comes from those who critique it - not for its ideology or content - but rather for its methods and course of action. Particularly in the case of republics or democracies, there are a number of ways that institutions can change without complete secession, such as through elections, constitutional amendments, and other forms of action within constitutional guidelines (Lindsay and Wellman 2003). As such, the parent state is able to claim that there is a possibility

for the members of the independence movement to enact their political desires without corroding the territorial unity of the state.

This is, of course, often unattainable for many independence movements, as they tend to correspond to a single group inside of a larger population but would be obligated to obtain the support from other peoples and regions within the state in order to access constitutional means of change. In the end, the presence of virtually unattainable constitutional mechanisms for increasing political power has the effect of reducing external support for the movements, while also adding to the claims of victimization felt within the affected communities. However, this also gives way to one of the most blatant paradoxes of national self-determination: Is the movement searching to improve democracy or to destroy it?

Democracy is, in its simplest definition, the rule of the people, but, for practical purposes, involves significantly more attributes. The first aspect of democracy is that it is liberal, meaning that it is based on the rule of law, limited government, and the recognition of civil rights and liberties. It is also a representative form of government - subject to fair and periodic elections for public officials (Nielsen 2016). In this principle of representation, it is important to understand that, while democracies attempt to follow “the will of the people,” they do not guarantee to adhere to the will of *all* people. As a result, democracies do not always satisfy all members of their communities and, instead, rely on their citizens accepting occasionally unfavorable decisions in return for stability and the rule of law. This relationship between democracies and their peoples becomes much more fragile in the presence of national self-determination because said movements often seek to promote their policies even if it requires them to circumvent societal order and elements of the parent state’s constitution.

In some instances, this fragility manifests itself in steering the democracy towards populist ways of thinking. Populism is defined as “a political program or movement that champions the common person, usually by favorable contrast with an elite” (Munro 2019). It is important to note that populism is not an ideology, such as fascism, socialism, liberalism, or many other “-isms” that are so commonly discussed in politics. Quite the contrary to political ideologies, denoting a movement, group, or thought as “populist” refers more so to the articulation, themes, and rhetoric of the entity than to its actual agenda (Laclau 2005); therefore, it is a description that can be applied to movements on both sides of the political spectrum.

In fact, history has demonstrated that populism can be either ideologically left or right, depending on the movement from which it prevails. Some of the most obvious examples of right-wing populism come from the nationalist and fascist movements of twentieth century Europe. According to retrospective studies of populist movements in both the beginning (Spanish “Franquismo” and German Nazism) and end (French Front National) of the twentieth century, the far-right populist agenda tends to construct compelling narratives on the basis of “ethnonationalist xenophobia” and “anti-political-establishment” skepticism (Rydgren 2005). In other words, the core aspects that all of these movements shared was the identification of foreigners and political elites as the enemy of the common people.

On the left side of the political spectrum, the movements of Canada’s Reform Party, Venezuela’s Chavista groups, and Fujimori’s party in Peru have all demonstrated a similar pattern of imposing centralized authority and the suppression of dissent in the guise of fighting for the cause of the people, though, in these cases, in the direction of nominally egalitarian policies and protectionist foreign policy (Akkerman 2012). In both situations, the movements idolize the notion of “the common people” in the creation of both in and out groups to such an

extent that members of these movements are willing to circumvent traditionally accepted institutions and norms.

National self-determination movements are not immune to these patterns. As addressed above, many supporters of national self-determination feel that the democratic processes in standard democracies, which often require consensus throughout their entire parent state, are unattainable. This may lead them to view the situation as one in which their surrounding area and population desire an independence that is being withheld from them by the political elites or other groups, thereby creating the us-them complexes of populist movements. Additionally, it may lead these groups to advocate for the use of unilateral and locally performed means of separating from the parent state, which silences dissenting opinions within the movements, and challenges the authority of the democratic institutions of the larger state. As such, while not all national self-determination movements are populist, the tendencies and sentiments generated by their political desires can easily fall to populist characteristics.

### **National Self-Determination: Practical Application in Catalonia**

#### *History of Spanish-Catalonian Relations*

In order to more closely examine national self-determination movements as well as demonstrate distinct examples of the arguments made above, we will take the issue of the Catalanian national self-determination movement as a case study. Catalonia is located on the border of Spain and France and with a shore along the Mediterranean Sea. Under the Spanish Constitution of 1978, the region was declared one of Spain's 17 autonomous communities. Being an autonomous community, Catalonia has enjoyed the right to control certain services, including education and health care, independently from the other regions of the country; however, most powers remain either shared or dependent on the national government. (Gladstone et al. 2017).

The region as it is known today was also given a self-governing body, La Generalitat, under the Spanish constitution on December 18, 1979 in order to administer and conduct these affairs (Rodriguez 2019). Economically speaking, Catalonia is part of the regional financing system of Spain, which means that revenue generated by the region is shared with the national government and, in turn, redistributed throughout the country as necessary, making it inherently dependent and subject to national rule; however, it is also notably the only region in all of Spain to have exclusive control over culture and religion (Gladstone et al. 2017). As such, this particular region distinguishes itself by already being, in part, institutionally separated from the rest of its parent state. Additionally, the region is significant because of its longstanding adversarial relationship with the rest of the larger country.

Sentiments for Catalonian independence date as far back in history as the Middle Ages. While the majority of Spain's history can be traced back to the expansion of the Kingdoms of Castille y León during the Spanish reconquest, Catalonians have a tendency to argue that their lineage and history stems from the Earldom of Catalonia ("Catalonia's Bid..." 2019). Even after these two states merged into one formal Kingdom, tensions over Spain's rulers remained. In the nineteenth century, the early death of King Ferdinand brought about a problem of legitimacy and inheritance as the country split into supporters of Queen Isabel II (the daughter of King Ferdinand) and Don Carlos (the king's brother). In the end, Queen Isabel II rose to power upon turning eighteen; however, the Catalonian people remained faithful to Don Carlos, causing an initial wave of independence sentiments (Rodriguez 2019). More pushes for independence came with the ascension of dictators Primo de Rivera and Francisco Franco, both of whom outlawed special privileges that had historically been given to the Catalonian people (Ortiz 2012). Despite

the fact that the country has now returned to a democratic structure, these questions of independence have not faded.

### *Chronology of Recent Spanish-Catalonian Relations*

Since the turn of the 2000s, Spanish-Catalonian tensions have only amplified. The first major event to demonstrate these increasing conflicts on an institutional level occurred in a judicial battle in 2006. On September 30, 2005, the Catalanian Parliament passed a bill to expand the existing Statute of Autonomy under the Spanish Constitution of 1978 and later achieved popular ratification of the new bill by means of a regional referendum. The new bill, which consisted of over 30 articles aimed at expanding the power of the Generalitat, was then signed into law at the regional level (“Catalonia’s Bid...” 2019). However, this unilateral display of power expansion did not take well with the rest of the country, and shortly after the passage of the bill, the Partido Popular, a conservative nationalist party, filed an appeal to the Spanish Supreme Court.

After a lengthy and exhausting legal battle for both sides, the Spanish Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Partido Popular, declaring that 14 of the articles were to be removed and requiring another 27 to be re-interpreted and reviewed by Catalanian magistrates on case-by-case bases each time the Generalitat wished to use the powers enumerated under the bill. The Court also moved to abolish preferential status for the use of Catalan in mass media and in government documents, and to restrict the “right of citizens to address constitutional bodies and the Spanish judiciary in Catalan” (“Spanish Constitutional Court Cuts Back...” 2010). While the conservative factions of the country were pleased with the decision - considering it a decision of reason and unification - the rulings met heavy criticism in Catalonia, which caused further fracturing between the region and its parent state as opposed to true unification.

Years later, in 2014, the Catalanian government launched a new approach to separation. The Generalitat organized a referendum to ask citizens two questions – whether or not Catalonia should be a state, and, if yes, whether or not it should be an independent state from the rest of Spain (Kassam 2014). The referendum was almost immediately declared illegal by the federal authorities in Madrid, being called “political propaganda...devoid of any kind of democratic validity” (“Catalonia’s Bid...” 2019), but the vote nonetheless was carried out. After the results were in, the referendum demonstrated that 80.7% of voters responded yes to both questions – showing apparently overwhelming support for independence. However, the official records also demonstrated that only about half of the region’s eligible population attended the vote, leaving major questions about the true validity and authority of the referendum (Kassam 2014). In fact, third-party opinion polls taken shortly after the referendum reported that Catalonians were evenly split on their attitudes toward formally splitting from Spain (Burrige 2015).

Having been declared unconstitutional, the vote carried relatively little political weight; however, the results helped to fuel popular support for the region’s pro-independence parties. This manifested itself in the regional 2015 parliamentary elections in which pro-independence parties won 1.9 million out of 4 million votes cast and gained a majority of seats in the region’s parliament (Burrige 2015). As such, the separatist factions of the region, although representing a slight minority of its constituents, rose to power on the promise of enacting a referendum for an independent state.

In 2017, the pro-independence government in Catalonia attempted to do just that. Despite results from a survey in July of 2017 which demonstrated that only 41.1% of Catalonians supported independence (Burgen 2017), the government moved to hold a referendum. This referendum, announced in September, was declared illegal by the Spanish government, as it



attempted to change the constitution of Spain without holding votes in the other regions of Spain (Burridge 2015). On the first of October (L'1-O in Catalan), the vote was held. Over 90% of those who voted demonstrated a desire for independence. However, this vote was boycotted by anti-separatists, leaving the voter turnout rate at approximately 42.3%, or less than half of the region's eligible voters (O'Sullivan 2017). All the while, the Civil Guard, a police-like force sent from Madrid, was sent to stop the vote, which led to many physical altercations. In the end, the region was left confused as to what to do, as their government had been dissolved by the federal government and many of their leaders were detained (Will 2020). Although this chronology paints a picture of the relationship between Catalonia and the rest of Spain, it by no means provides a full understanding of the many other factors at play.

#### *The Political Dimension of Catalan Self-Determination*

In addition to a consequential view of the national self-determination movement, there is also a political dimension to the issue that has changed over the course of the movement's history. This political analysis focuses on the general forces that lead people to form pro-independence attitudes in the context of the debate. Interestingly enough, aspects of both left-wing liberalism and right-wing nationalism created a basis for some form of pro-secession ideology (Moore 2003). In the earlier years of Catalonian independence, for example, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century up until approximately 1925, many Catalonian nationalists supported the absolute monarch, Carlos V (Rodriguez 2019). These nationalists, with mostly anti-liberal and strong Roman Catholic beliefs, sharply opposed growing liberal movements in Madrid and desired to maintain a decentralized government controlled by the Catalonian "nation." However, after the dictators Primo de Rivera and Francisco Franco banned Catalonian language and independence movements, a second wave of secular, liberal-leaning school of thought for independence

emerged – emphasizing progressive ideals of justice and democracy (Rodriguez 2019 and Moore 2003).

In the current make-up of the national self-determination movement, supporters from both sides of the political spectrum, stemming from these two distinct schools of thought and distinct preferences of values, can be found. Furthermore, this issue, which both unites otherwise opposing parties while also dividing people who would otherwise be ideologically similar, has amounted to be a second political division, meaning that voters strongly identify themselves both in terms of liberal versus conservative as well as separatists versus unionists, increasing political fragmentation and legislative difficulty for all those involved.

#### *The Economic Dimension of Catalan Self-Determination*

Another important aspect in this dispute is based around economics. In the eyes of the Catalanian separatists, the region provides far more in national revenue than it receives. According to recent data, they are correct in saying that a disparity exists. The region, which includes approximately 7.5 million inhabitants (Rodriguez 2019), or about 16 percent of the country, generates over 19 percent of Spain's GDP while receiving only about 15 percent of the total benefits redistributed throughout the country, equating to what they calculate to be net loss of nearly 16 million euros each year after subtracting the amount of benefits received from the total amount of taxes paid to the Spanish government (Ortiz 2012). Other reports also demonstrate that, per capita, Catalonians make more than most other Spaniards, second only to the Autonomous Community of Madrid ("Spanish Regional Accounts" 2019). In fact, even major Catalanian economists, such as Elisenda Paluzie, Dean of the Economics and Business School at the University of Barcelona, go as far as to say, "even if it had to pay for its own military and diplomatic corps, the financial benefit to Catalonia would be equivalent to seven

percent of its GDP” (Ortiz 2012). As such, one must recognize that the Catalanian’s claims to higher production and lower federal payouts in comparison to other regions in the country are factually correct. On the other hand, the conclusions that Catalonia would be better off as a separate country and that it, as a region, is being taken advantage of are both questionable.

Unfortunately for the national self-determination movement, the economic arguments presented in its favor are significantly less compelling than they might appear. In general terms, there are a number of situations world-wide in which a rich area or internal region of a country generates more into the federal budget than others. Examples of these situations can be found in many developed countries in Europe and even in the United States (Kapur and Smith 2020; Ortiz 2012). In a more finite analysis of their claims, research also suggests that the disparity between Catalonia and the rest of Spain is on par with average disparities between other regions throughout Europe and their respective parent countries. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which examined 30 of the world’s richest countries, showed that Spain had a comparatively low level of regional economic disparity, reporting, “Over the last sixteen years, differences between the regions of Spain in terms of GDP per capita remained stable at low levels... Only four out of 30 OECD countries with comparable data record lower regional economic disparities than Spain” (“Regions and Cities...” 2018). In this sense, the separatists’ claims that the Spanish government abuses them and/or exploits Catalonia appear to be an exaggerated complaint and fuel for motivated reasoning. Interestingly enough, this situation also demonstrates a certain element of populism, in that it attempts to form a narrative in which there is a parasitic relationship between the community and the *outsider* rest of Spain without regard for traditionally accepted redistributive policies.

Additionally, even if Catalonia were able to recover the money that it pays in taxes to the Spanish government, a separation would be far more detrimental to the Catalonian GDP than beneficial. Firstly, the regional product generated in Catalonia is substantial, but would likely be damaged by any kind of separation given that 35.5% of Catalonian exports are sent into Spain's national market (Bosch 2017). Likewise, major leaders in the European Union have indicated that, in the case of Catalonian secession, the new state would need to reapply to be a member state of the EU which could possibly take a significant amount of time or even be blocked entirely by the Spanish government, thereby sealing the new country off from another one of its major markets and trading partners (Ortiz 2012). Lastly, there is a large question as to whether or not Catalonia, upon separation, would be required to pay off a portion of the Spanish national debt to reflect the amount that it had borrowed as a region. Economists suggest that all of these factors could cause the Catalonian GDP to shrink by as much as thirty percent and double its unemployment rate (Bosch 2017). In this regard, although economic disparities are a motivating factor in the national self-determination movement, the economic feasibility of formal separation is bleak at best, and leaders should be careful to fully examine and prepare economic recovery plans if they plan to seek independence.

Despite the questionable validity of the Catalonians' economic arguments, understanding the history of commercial relations between the region and the parent country are paramount to explaining the re-emergence of a national self-determination movement. In addition to the aforementioned Supreme Court case's influence on raising pro-independence attitudes, the economic turmoil of 2008 heightened economic tensions between the two parties. Following this global crisis, multiple sources indicated that the tighter budgets placed on regional governments across Spain, coupled with the reductions in pay and soaring unemployment rates, notably

contributed to a widespread feeling that the central government was to blame (Ortiz 2012, Bosch 2017 and “Catalonia’s Bid...” 2019). While Catalonia was not the only area affected by these hardships, the economic downturn, in effect, cemented distrust towards the national government in Madrid, paving the way for greater levels of paranoia and a yearning for separation in the hearts of Catalonians.

### *The Cultural Dimension of Catalan Self-Determination*

Finally, the last of the major arguments presented by Catalan separatists, alongside historic disputes and economic inequalities, is that of cultural differences between Catalonia and the rest of Spain. For example, in Catalonia, primary and secondary school-aged students devote 12 times more hours to teaching Catalan language than to teaching Spanish (Will 2020). Catalonia outlawed bullfighting in 2010 (Ortiz 2012), which also demonstrated a desire to show a fundamental difference in culture. Some members of the movement have even gone as far as to assert that Catalanian people are genetically and historically more similar to Italian and French people than to other Spaniards (Will 2020). Nonetheless, anti-separatists in other regions of Spain point out that in the original creation of the current Spanish constitution, a referendum was held in which 90.5% of Catalonians approved of the nation as “indivisible” with a 70% turnout rate, demonstrating higher support than in Madrid or in any other region (Will 2020). Likewise, the notion that the Catalanian people are culturally different from the rest of Spain implies that the Catalonians are, themselves, culturally unified.

This, however, is largely untrue. In reality, 2.6 million out of the 7.5 million people in Catalonia were born in other countries or in other regions of Spain (Verdú 2015), indicating that Catalonia is not as uniform as these arguments may assert. In fact, the immigrant and migrant population in Catalonia consists of approximately 1.6 million people with the right to vote, 43.2

percent of whom have reported a desire to “keep things as they are” in terms of possible secession whereas only 25.6 percent of them support the national self-determination movement (Verdú 2015).

Regardless of how these immigrants vote, one thing is clear: the pro-independence parties and other groups have to recognize in their arguments the cultural and ethnic diversity of Catalonia. At present, the focus of the movement on presenting Catalonians to be a Catalan-speaking, regionally distinct, ethnic group is inherently exclusionary towards these immigrants, which may lead to decline in that voting bloc’s support for separation. Furthermore, the emphasis on Catalanian nationals teeters on populist, in that it largely neglects the need to recognize diversity and dissenting opinions among sizeable minorities.

#### *The Catalan Independence Movement Today*

Nowadays, the Catalanian national independence movement marches forward but has a new set of obstacles to face. In response to the 2017 referendum, federal officials sent the national guard to quell what was considered to be an unconstitutional uprising. As the national guard fought against Catalanian people to close polling locations and stop the Catalanian government, various leaders of the Generalitat were arrested, incarcerated, and initially charged with violating the constitution and for inciting rebellion, which, combined, carried a potential jail time of 25 years (O’Sullivan 2019). In the end, 12 of the most influential leaders in the organization of the referendum were charged with various crimes from sedition to misuse of public funds, but none of them were found guilty of rebellion (Minder 2019). Perhaps the most devastating consequences of the referendum came with the loss of the region’s president, Carles Puigdemont, who fled to Belgium in an act of self-imposed exile to avoid Spanish prosecution,

and of the region's vice president, Oriol Junqueras, who was given the longest prison sentence: 12 years (O'Sullivan 2019 and Will 2020).

The prison sentences once again fueled anti-Madrid sentiments in Catalonia, which ultimately led to yet another uprising in November of 2019. Influenced by democratic protests in Hong Kong, nearly 25,000 protesters filled the metro system and major plazas in Barcelona and even more protesters gathered at the city's airport, all with the intention of disrupting transit and flights in order to elicit news coverage and a response from the federal government (O'Sullivan 2019). The protesters were successful in their attempts to disrupt traffic, as over 100 flights were canceled by various airlines in one single day (Minder 2019). However, this success was accompanied by severe backlash from the government. Police forces from Madrid were once again sent into the city with batons and foam bullets. Various incidents between the police and the protesters resulted in 131 people requiring medical assistance, including one man who lost an eye after being shot by one of the bullets (O'Sullivan 2019).

Certainly after the police response in 2017, the protesters knew what to expect and prepare for, but many were ready to accept physical damage in hopes of gaining international sympathy. At present, no European countries have taken further action to support the Catalonians' cause. In fact, the 2019 protests may have had adverse effects on the movement's success, as only 42.5% of Catalonians supported pro-independence parties in the elections following shortly after these protests (Will 2020), which resulted in said parties losing their ability to form a coalition government.

Outside of Catalonia, the political turmoil and routine protests have also had effects on the make-up of the Spanish Parliament. During the time after the 2017 referendum, arguments on the federal level about how to respond to the national self-determination movement intensified

the divide between the left- and right-wing parties of Spain (Penty 2019). While right-wing parties preferred a hardline solution to the issue and pushed for the dissolution of Catalonia's Statute of Independence, the left-wing parties saw an opportunity to seize power by forming a coalition with Catalanian pro-independence parties in order to reach a compromise and gain a majority in the Parliament.

However, this strategy of uniting with the separatists had major backlash from the more right-leaning parties. Perhaps the greatest effect of this backlash can be seen in the growth of Spain's most conservative party, Vox. The party, which held just 24 seats in the Parliament before the 2019 elections, grew to have 52 seats (Hedgecoe 2019), which now makes them the third largest party in Spanish politics (Penty 2019). While 52 out of 350 total seats in parliament is by no means a majority, the fact that the party has nearly doubled in size demonstrates the growing tensions within Spain's autonomous communities outside of Catalonia and makes the Vox party extremely influential in the event that a conservative coalition government should form.

## **Conclusions**

As shown above, the conflict between the Catalanian people and the rest of Spain is a complicated one, full of distinct arguments, manifesting itself on various occasions in the form of physical altercations. Scattered throughout the many events and issues in the Catalanian national self-determination debate are three main areas when analyzing the validity of the separatists' arguments: the economy, culture, and politics. However, attempting to further examine these arguments in terms of their abilities to bring about internationally recognized and longstanding political change requires us to return to the central, theoretical basis of national self-determination movements: democracy. Curiously enough, while the pro-independence groups of



Catalonia claim to have a more perfect version of democracy, the truth is that their movement and arguments demonstrate anti-democratic tendencies.

These anti-democratic tendencies can be seen in many aspects of the movement. Firstly, we see that the Catalanian separatists place a significant amount of importance on voting and on self-determination, but relatively little importance on the constitutionality of said votes nor on representing the entire region. For example, reviewing the votes cast in both 2014 and 2017, one observes that Spanish official authorities had declared the votes unconstitutional well in advance and warned that guards would be sent to control the referendum, should it occur (Burgen 2017). In the case of the 2014 vote, reports indicate that the Catalanian government “knew that [the vote] would be controversial and complicated” (Burrige 2015). In both instances, the government, despite promises to protect Catalonians, knowingly placed its citizens at risk of physical harm and legal persecution in an effort to create a political stunt.

Likewise, the government following the 2015 election was a pro-independence government that had a majority in the Catalanian Parliament but had lost the popular vote. In this regard, an official, a democratically conducted regional vote had already been conducted and showed a very clear degree of ambivalence in terms of voters’ attitudes towards the question of independence, but the government pushed forward, claiming a mandate to hold the referendum in the face of the perceived obstacles.

Finally, the movement has yet to address the question of immigrants and the status of foreign-born peoples in their otherwise nationalist society. In order to truly convince the international community that Catalanian independence would promote democratic practices in the region, the movement must re-examine its efforts and actions in order to avoid being considered a populist or democratically flawed concept.

In addition to internal issues, the movement also faces two external obstacles in its path to international recognition. Generally speaking, these obstacles stem from a desire for international stability. Based on the current precedents in international law, secession is only recognized when there are clear abuses of the parent state against a specific region.

Acknowledging Catalonian national self-determination inherently admits that regions, even without credible claims to abuse, do, in fact, have a right to self-determination. In recognizing said right, the international community expands the conditions under which secession is permitted, thus opening itself up to potential instability, as alliances between Spain and any country to concede sovereignty to Catalonia would likely be tense if not ruined entirely.

Additionally, giving Catalonia independent status would justify other national self-determination movements such as Brexit, thereby leading to widespread international fragmentation. The recognition of Catalonia as a state would also be a detriment to the stability of international law, as it would serve to counteract previous international cases that restricted the right of self-determination in other cases. Finally, given the potentially devastating effects that Catalonian independence would have on Catalonia's economy, recognizing the region as a state would imply that the international community, or at least the supporting countries, would have to accept some form of responsibility for assuring that the country does not immediately collapse and require development aid to be redirected into Catalonia. Overall, the international community has fairly little incentive to acknowledge Catalonian self-determination.

These issues in the Catalonian crisis are not necessarily unique to Catalonia. Although not all national self-determination movements throughout the world involve such a tumultuous chain of events or as intense of a cultural divide, the general factors that propel the movement as

well as those that prevent it from gaining international support are seen in most other national self-determination cases.

Nevertheless, it is, in theory, not impossible for national self-determination to one day come to fruition if a movement were able to resolve the problems inhibiting its success. The first requirement would be that it can demonstrate a true desire for heightened democracy. In order to do this, the movement would likely need to involve a vast array of ethnic groups and propose a clearly defined constitution or governing documents to institute upon separation. By incorporating some degree of diversity both demographically and institutionally, the movement can strengthen its cause by avoiding being cast aside as an ethnic uprising. The separating group must also be able to demonstrate an ability to survive the separation both economically and politically, meaning that the region must be free of possible complications in trade deals and questions of legitimacy. Perhaps most importantly, the movement must be able to demonstrate that it is inherently different from other national self-determination groups in order to give the international community a clear reason to support that particular movement while still reasonably denying others.

In any case, there are many lessons to be learned in the case of Catalonian national self-determination. It provides a clear representation of how the theoretical forces identified by many secession movements play out in a real-world situation, and may, in effect, establish a precedent for the fate of national self-determination movements in general for years to come. As such, it is of the utmost importance that Catalonian nationals, Spanish anti-separatists, and the international community alike carefully consider their courses of action to avoid falling into the pitfalls of populism or polarization.

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