Pathways and legacies of the secessionist push in Catalonia: Linguistic frontiers, economic segments and media roles within a divided society

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The enduring secessionist challenge in Catalonia has dominated Spain’s political landscape on recent years, creating a stalemate that does not present signals of clearing up. Catalan secessionism only acquired high relevance in Spanish politics from 2010 onwards. Before that, both social demands and political parties pursuing secession were minoritarian. During the last decade, however, secessionist forces won three regional elections and were able to sustain governments by tiny majorities at the autonomous parliament. Two illegal consultations about self-determination were called, in this period, and around 2 million (38 per cent of population census) supported secession from Spain. An “Independence Declaration” was indeed officially proclaimed on 27 October 2017, an action which was instantly followed by the suspension of Home Rule sanctioned by Spanish parliament, that endured till mid-2018.

The secessionist parties renovated their lead at the last regional election (27 December 2017). These elections were called by the Spanish government as a way to solve the challenge and to put an end to the suspension of Home Rule dictated two months before the results. However, confirmed the stagnation although the formation of a new regional government had to wait until mid 2018, after several unsuccessful attempts to reinstate in power the rebellious leaders who had been imprisoned or fled to exile. These long and strenuous efforts were all blocked by legal provisions dictated by the Spanish high court.

A left-wing central government was formed in Spain, at June 2018, that had the initial support from Catalanian and Basque nationalist parties. The new scenario seemed to open an opportunity to explore plausible arrangements for the chronically entrenched litigation. Exploratory talks between the Spanish government and the secessionist Catalan government did not lead however to substantial advancements. At the new Spain’s general election of 28 April 2019, left-wing parties renovated their lead without reaching a stable majority and the formation of a new government is still pending. The final sentence of the rebellious secessionist leaders by the supreme court is also pending after a trial that lasted for more than four months on Winter/Spring 2019.

The main social consequence of the secessionist campaign has been the build-up of a deep political divide between two large segments of Catalan citizenry, unionists and secessionists, which was absent before the precipitous surge of demands of segregation from Spain. The lack of a social majority behind the vigorous, perseverant but failed secessionist venture opened apprehensions and frictions that were mostly unknown previously. Close neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances and even friends and families who had shared feelings of belonging to both Catalonia and Spain (in different degrees), as a part of their intimate attachments and values, are now divided on the issue of secession and must endure living together amid an unsolved tension.

We had already shown that distinctions on “sense of belonging” (national identity feelings) can be used as a good indicator of the divide between secessionists and unionists: the first ones declare an almost exclusive affective attachment with Catalonia, whereas unionists display various communal bonds and affects, with a dominant double attachment with Spain–Catalonia (Catspanish). This gap between two predominant forms of national identification is rather recent within the region and appeared as a consequence of the abrupt polarisation on the issue of secession. The accentuation of affective features of identity around a specific political divide (accept/reject secession in this case), reproduce similar paths towards increasing animosity and ruthless partisanship that have characterised recent political struggle in several western societies. Harsh partisanship between US Democrats and Republicans that grew through an increasingly narrow fusion between self and group identities is a prominent example of that, and the contemptuous struggle that currently divide Britons on the issue of remaining or leaving the EU is another one.
2. A longitudinal view

Our main aim, in this essay, is to accrue a series of longitudinal findings that may shed light on important vectors that primed the appearance of the antagonistic fissure between unionist and secessionist Catalan communities. By building upon the complete series of data from iterated official CEO polls (the survey agency of regional government), we will display the evolving changes along the period 2006-2019 of national identity feelings (“sense of belonging”) in relation to other variables. Our longitudinal analyses included 87,038 respondents from 44 surveys and we also applied procedural tools to detect important breaking points linked to singular events that might have accentuated the ongoing and intense polarisation around the issue of secession.9

We focus first on variations of sense of belonging feelings (national identity) in two significant segments of Catalan citizens, those whose family language is Catalan vs those whose family language is Spanish. This is mandatory since previous findings either from survey data or from electoral results had established the priority of this ethnolinguistic cleavage rooted on ascendancy origins.10 Secondly, we assess the evolving changes of sense of belonging depending on media following preferences: whether the official TV and radio controlled by the regional government (broadcasting exclusively in Catalan language), vs other TV and radios, because we and others had shown the importance of this factor.11 Since media consumption trends and language/ascendancy origins are closely interrelated within the region, our discussion highlights the role played by the interactions between these ingredients upon the deepening of the fissure that separates secessionists from unionists.

We explore, in addition, the role of other relevant economic and social transitions that have contributed, as well, to establish the pattern of traits that currently characterise the political entrenchment between secessionists and unionists. We expect that this detailed itinerary through an unexpected, serious and stagnated political crises, at the heart of a European democracy, will contribute to illuminate relevant pathways that may help not only to understand its origins and development, but hopefully to reduce a bit, perhaps, the more worrying legacies.

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9. See Final Note on Methods.
3. From an abrupt polarisation to a chronic entrenchment

By way of illustration, it is convenient to start by depicting the preferences of Catalonian citizens on the issue of secession, all long the period of the present analyses. Figure 1 shows the evolution of opinion on this matter of representative samples of Catalan citizenry, on successive Barometers released by the “Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió” (CEO, survey agency of the regional government), between 2006 to 2019.

Figure 1: Preferences of Catalan citizens (in percentages) about the political status of the region

Modified from: CEO surveys. Data gathered from personal interviews to representative samples of 1500-2500 citizens, on every survey (last survey, 26 July 2019). Autonomous community: current Catalonian status within Spain, meaning a decentralised region with Home Rule. The proportion of "DK/NA" (do not know or no answers) are omitted for the sake of clarity.

The series started at 2006. Preferences on the status of the region showed a rather stable pattern till 2010, when the secessionist segment started first a gradual increase for two years, which was then followed by an abrupt eruption from October 2012 peaking around the start of 2014. In numbers, at January 2010, those who wanted secession did not reach 20 per cent; at October 2011, they had progressed to 30 per cent and since October 2012 they were above 45 per cent already, thus signalling the start of the breakaway of secessionist pulse. December of 2014 marked the start of a small decline of preferences for secession that stabilised this segment at about 40 per cent of surveyed people, with minor oscillations. Figure 2 shows that raw percentages of citizenry accepting vs rejecting secession from Spain in a (hypothetical) referendum present an entrenched draw since December 2014. These results have been repeatedly confirmed, with few variations, by surveys from CIS.13
Figure 2: Percentages of citizens responding YES/NO to a direct question about secession from Spain in a hypothetical referendum of self-determination

Modified from CEO surveys. The proportion of "DK/NA" are also omitted.
4. National identity variations and family language

At figure 3 we display the evolving profiles of national identity feelings (“sense of belonging”) along the whole period, 2006-2019. This is a qualitative variable with six distinct values at these surveys: "only Spanish", "more Spanish than Catalan", "equal Spanish than Catalan", "more Catalan than Spanish", "only Catalan" and "DK/NA" (do not know or no answers). Percentages were estimated from responses to 44 surveys over the period 2006 – 2019 on samples of sizes between 2500 and 1500 persons (one survey, at 2017, with 1338 only), with a total number of 87,038 respondents. In all, there was a total increase of 13 per cent of those who feel "only Catalans" and a drop of 7 per cent of citizens who feel "equal Spanish than Spanish", signalling a substantial variation towards narrowing the relevance of dual CatSpanish national identity feelings.

**Figure 3: National identity feelings (sense of belonging) for all Catalonian population (2006-2019)**

Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. Observe a clear reduction of percentages of people with dual identity "equal Spanish than Catalan", and the increase of percentage of people with a single identity "only Catalan". The proportion of people with single identity "only Spanish" remained stable. The proportion of "DK/NA" are also omitted.

The more remarkable facts at figure 3 are the changes around 2012 on the size of two critical segments defined by national identity. In that year, the dual national identity group "equal Spanish than Catalan" initiates an abrupt descend to more than 15 percentage points (not yet recovered), while the single national identity "only Catalan" initiates an abrupt escalation of more than 15 points (not yet reversed). Such variation among segments that are critical for cohesion of the whole society demanded further inspection involving other variables.

The marks at figure 3 signal events that might have been relevant to understand the evolution of the variables along the period. These events were: the date when a new Home Rule was approved (New Statute 2006); the resolution of the Spanish high court (Tribunal Constitutional-TC) that sanctioned 14 articles (over 223) as contrary to the Spanish constitution and restricted the preamble and another 27 articles (June 2010); the peak protests of the social 15M movement (15M Peak Protests, June 2011); the regional elections of 25 November 2012 (25N); the illegal consultation about independence of 9 November 2014 (9N); the regional elections of 27 September 2015, (27S); the illegal referendum about secession, 1 October 2017 (1 Oct) and the regional elections, 21 December 2017 (21D). The crucial breaking points detected by the package ecp were marked as red lines within the plots. These
evolving changes became more evident when studying national identity feelings in the segments obtained by dividing citizens through their family/mother language.\textsuperscript{14} There are two quantitatively important linguistic groups within the region (figures 4 and 5): citizens whose family language is Catalan vs citizens whose family language is Spanish, representing 38.5 per cent and 55.6 per cent of total population respectively (at the last survey, March 2019). The remaining cases were people with both Spanish and Catalan as family/mother languages. They represented an average of 3.0 per cent of the population. Other cases were negligible. The small group whose family/mother language was “both” (Spanish and Catalan), exhibited an intermediate behaviour, so its graph has been omitted.

Figure 4: National identity feelings (sense of belonging) among citizens with family/mother language Catalan (38.5 per cent of total population, in the March 2019 survey)

Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. Observe the spectacular rise of the single identity "only Catalan", departing around 2010. The opposite for the dual identity "equal Spanish than Catalan".

Figure 5: National identity feelings (sense of belonging) among citizens with family/mother language Spanish (55.6 per cent of total population, in the March 2019 survey)

Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. Observe a moderate decrement of dual identity "equal Spanish than Catalan".

For the Catalan language-group, the crucial breaking points on national identity feelings appeared
between the second and the third CEO 2010 Barometer (decimal number approx. 2010.4, at the graph), and the second and third CEO 2012 Barometer (decimal number 2012.65). For the Spanish language-group, the breaking points in these profiles were between the second and the third CEO 2011 Barometers (decimal number 2011.65), and the second and the third CEO 2013 Barometers (decimal number 2013.7). The more outstanding change appeared within the Catalan language-group, jumping towards a monolithic Catalan only identity, mostly around the regional elections of 25 November 2012.
5. Important media effects on current social division

We also analysed the relevance of media following. The variable news was built taking into account the answers of following news either through regional public media (TV or radio broadcasting exclusively in Catalan language) or via other media. This is a dichotomous variable with two possible values: "regional" or "other". We directed first the focus (figure 6) to variations on national identity "only Catalan", distinguishing also between Catalan-language and Spanish-Language sub-groups.

Figure 6: Changes in "only Catalan" national identities in different population segments depending on family/mother language and following news or not through public regional media

Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. At 2006, "only Catalan" national identity was 14.2 per cent of the entire population, whereas at the last survey (March 2019), had reached 27.3 per cent. Attached to each label appear the percentages of each group at the March 2019 survey.

There were important changes on "only Catalan" national identity, along the period, which were dependent on family/mother language but also on having been exposed to news in regional public media or not. The relevance of these covariations where highlighted through robust statistical contrasts.16

We repeated the same analysis for variations on respondents whose national identity was "equal Spanish than Catalan" (figure 7), obtaining also substantial distinctions dependent on family language and media following.17

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16. We made an Analysis of Covariance considering four levels for the Group factor (levels determined by family/mother language and the use of regional public media to follow the news) and Time (years) as a covariate, with percentages of "sense of belonging" (National identity) "Only Catalan" as the dependent variable. The effect of Group factor and the interactions were clear (with significance level less than 0.001). The slopes of the regression lines display the different effects of the media at the four levels of Group factor. With the exception of the slope between Spanish-language group who follow news on public regional media and Catalan-language group who follow news on other media, all other levels exhibited very significantly different slopes (p-values obtained by Tukey method less than 0.0001).

17. We applied also an Analysis of Covariance with four levels for the factor Group and Time (year) as a covariate, but now with the percentages of "sense of belonging" (National identity) "Equal Spanish than Catalan" as the dependent variable. Group effects and interactions were substantial (significance levels less than 0.001). Moreover, the slopes of regression lines displayed the different effects of media following at the four levels of Group factor. Notice that with the exception of the slope between both Catalan-language subgroups, all other levels exhibited significantly different slopes (p-values obtained by Tukey method less than 0.005). To complete the analysis, we considered both dependent variables simultaneously (MANOVA), obtaining that both Group factor, Time and their interactions were also highly significant.
Figure 7: Changes in "equal Spanish than Catalan" national identity in different population segments obtained considering family/mother language and follow news or not through public regional media

Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. At 2006, "equal Spanish than Catalan" identity was 42.5 per cent of the entire population, whereas at the last survey (March 2019), had dropped to 35.7 per cent. Attached to each label appear the percentages of each group at the March 2019 survey.

When we repeated the analysis to general public media or private plus public media, without the regional ones, no association appeared with increases in "only Spanish" national identity feelings. The figure 8 illustrates that. It shows the notorious stability of national identity feelings within the segment of Catalans (more than 30 per cent, in the surveys), who claimed to follow political news through generalist TV and radio broadcasting to all Spain. Hence, although no media is scrupulously neutral, the strong biasing effect on national identification is absent in this case.

Figure 8: Evolution of national identity feelings (sense of belonging) for Catalonians who follow news in general Spanish TV (TVE, A3, TV5, La Cuatro, La Sexta)

Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. This segment was 35.4 per cent of the entire population, at 2006; at the last survey (March 2019), it was 31.1 per cent. Observe that there is no evidence of polarisation.
By combining all these measures we built a summary of the notorious gap between secessionists and unionists that depended on both family language and the adscription to communication bubbles created by following/not following regional media (figure 9). This was followed by an estimation of the probability of being either secessionist or non secessionist using only these ingredients. Depending on the family/mother language (Catalan vs Spanish) and taking into account as well if a citizen follows the news through public regional media or not, we can predict the probability to support secession in a hypothetic referendum with a magnitude of 16.6 per cent for D segment (Catalans with family language Spanish who do not follow news on regional media) to a magnitude of 86.3 per cent for A segment (Catalans with family language Catalan who follow news on regional media).

Figure 9: Barplot of percentages of secession support for the combinations of language and exposure or not to public regional media

Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. The area of each bar is proportional to the population size of each group. All percentages are the average values within the period 2015-2019.

18. Using the data of the 13 surveys from March 2015 to March 2019 we may estimate the probability to eventually support secession in a hypothetic referendum just taking the weighted average of the event “answer Yes”, in each group obtained according mother language and follow the news in public regional media or not. The probability changes dramatically just by knowing two variables: mother language and the type of media followed. We get a good chance to predict the answer support vs. reject secession by a simple use of the law of total probability.
6. Economic and well-being differences along Catalanian political division

The relevance of basic socioeconomic factors on preferences for secession had been highlighted by Llaneras using data from CEO surveys near the crucial months of Autumn 2017. Secession appealed mostly to native Catalans: it was higher among citizens born in Catalonia and with at least one parent born there, with a maximum (75 per cent) for those with long native ascendancy. Among citizens coming from abroad or from other Spanish regions, and for those born within the region from migrant parents, secession was not attractive at all (CEO Barometer July 2017). The divide depended also on incomes: citizens with highest incomes and those who responded “we live comfortably” were the ones that supported secession. On the contrary, most people with the lowest salaries and those disclosing “many economic difficulties” were against secession. Maza et al. multivariate analysis of voting behaviour at the last regional elections (21 December 2017), fully confirmed the priority of ascendancy origins to explain the results, while diminishing the relevance of economic factors (see concordant results). Moreover, using CEO surveys at 2011-2013 period, Boylan had already shown that national identity (being Catalan native or assimilated) was a much stronger predictor of the desire for secession, than perceived grievances resulting from an unfair fiscal treatment or other economic and political factors. Figure 10 displays the distinctive geographical distribution of secessionism and unionism using the last regional elections as a measure. This peculiar and complex frontier has been explored as another vector rooted on both ascendancy and contextual socioeconomic traits.

Figure 10: Geographic distribution of secessionism at regional elections December 21, 2017. Percentages by municipalities over all electoral census

Source: Official election data. Secessionism is majoritarian at 76 per cent of the municipalities, representing 78 per cent of the surface of the whole region, but only 20 per cent of the electoral census live in this area, while the remaining 80 per cent live in the rest. Secessionism is concentrated on inland counties mainly, whereas unionism predominates on overpopulated coastal areas and in some Pyrenean and peripheral counties as well.
Here we present several analyses that show the relevance of economic segmentations on preferences for or against secession. Some of them cover the whole period of the secessionist wave. We start considering a new variable: the declared “household net income” per month (figure 11). The evolution of the different segments strikingly show the effects of the economic crisis, during the period 2010-2018. We present also the evolution of this variable within segments dependent on family/mother language (figure 12). Citizens with family/mother language Catalan reported higher incomes than those with family/mother language Spanish. Moreover, the effects of economic crisis were more evident within the last ones.

Figure 11: Household net incomes reported on all the surveys along the period (2006-2019), in all Catalanian population

![Figure 11](image)

Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. Observe the extended effects of the economic crisis during the period 2010-2018. 1M = one thousand euros/month.

Figure 12: Evolution of household net incomes depending on family/mother language a) in citizens with Catalan as their family/mother language and b) among citizens with Spanish as their family/mother language

![Figure 12](image)
b) Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. Observe the differences between similar income levels, and the distinctive responses of both segments during the economic crisis. 1M = one thousand euros/month.

We then combined the binary variable “household net income >3000€/month” with the two “family/mother language” segments to study their covariation with support of secessionism in a hypothetic referendum (figure 13). Results depict a very strong effect, again, of family language: Catalan speaking homes were predominantly secessionists whereas Spanish speaking households were unionists. There was also a minor effect of income levels on the probability to support secession: wealthier households reported a higher support for secession in both family language segments, but the difference was clearer within the Spanish group.

Figure 13: Covariation of household net incomes and family/mother language on support of secession

Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. In addition to the effects of family/mother language, observe the distinctive effect of incomes levels within groups, especially at the Spanish language one. Also, attached to each label, there is the percentage of each group in the March 2019 survey. 1M = one thousand euros/month. MT: family/mother language.
The covariations of “Household net income >3000€/month” and “family/mother language” with “national identity feelings” for “only Catalan” and “equal Catalan than Spanish” segments appear at figures 14 and 15. The effects of income levels were much more modest than those of following regional media (compare with the equivalent figures 6 and 7).

**Figure 14: Evolution of "only Catalan" national identity feelings depending on family/mother language and household net income (2006-2019)**

![Figure 14](image)

Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. Attached to each label appear the percentages of each group at the March 2019 survey. MT: family/mother language.

**Figure 15: Evolution of "equal Catalan than Spanish" national identity feelings depending on family language and household net income (2006-2019)**

![Figure 15](image)

Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. Attached to each label appear the percentages of each group at the March 2019 survey. MT: family/mother language.
Figure 16: Evolution of "only Spanish" national identity feelings depending on family language and household net income (2006-2019)

Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. Observe more intense oscillations among the Spanish language segment. Observe also that the wealthier households of Spanish language reported less polarised national identity feelings, the opposite behaviour than the equivalent Catalan language household segment (figure 14). Attached to each label appear the percentages of each group at the March 2019 survey.

Finally, we compared the support of secession among different groups obtained considering their reported economic resistance limits (in months), in case of economic breakdown (figure 17). Results showed that secessionism increased with higher resistance limits: people with higher financial resources were much more in favour of secession. A very similar trend appeared when the measure was perception of the evolution of own economy during the last year. When that perception improved, support for secession was higher. In all, these findings consistently indicated that the recent secessionist wave Catalonia has been sustained by those society segments that enjoy better economic resources and higher well-being.
Figure 17: Support for secession and economic wellbeing

Elaborated from CEO surveys microdata. Left: secession was much more popular among those with higher economic resistance limits (in months), in case of an economic breakdown. Right: it was also more popular among those with a good perception of the evolution of their economies during the last year.
7. Important “breaking points”

Our longitudinal plots (figures 3-7) contain several hallmarks signalling relevant dates or events all along the secessionist campaign. Two recognisable “breaking points” flagged the clearest departures towards distinctive polarisation profiles among the main segments of Catalan citizenry. The first one appeared months before the sentence of the Spanish high court, at 2010, modifying the autonomy statute that had been approved at 2006. A second and much more important one was the decision taken by the moderate nationalist party that had been leading the regional government, for decades, of adopting a secessionist agenda around Autumn 2012. Elliot identified the same “breaking points” in his parallel account of Scotland and Catalonia histories, both past and recent, when he contrasted the lawful and agreed Scottish bid for independence (preceding the referendum at 2014) with the unlawful and unilateral at Catalonia (Autumn 2017).

The appearance of the first “breaking point” contradicts the usual depiction of the secessionist surge as an outrage reaction against the “deep grievance” of the sentence from Spanish high court, modifying a few articles of the 2006 new statute of autonomy that had been voted by a minority of citizens. Pro-secession preferences were already on the rise, within an important fraction of citizenry, months before such sentence. This is compatible with the proposal that the impact of such high court sentence about the new Home Rule was truly influential, mainly because it was used as a political weapon to invigorate secessionist force and activism.

Much more decisive was, however, the period leading to the regional elections at 25 November 2012. Such elections marked, in fact, the definitive point of departure for the secessionist wave, when the Catalan president at that time, Artur Mas, leading a moderate nationalist party, lost the majority at the autonomous parliament. From that moment onwards, parliamentary majority depended from various secessionist forces and the government opted for secession from Spain as its dominant strategy. Figures 3-4 illustrate how, around these elections, a segment of citizenry (formed mainly by those with family/mother language Catalan) departed from a previous slowly rising tendency, towards an abrupt acceleration of reporting “only Catalan”, as national identity. Percentages peaked on the first (illegal) consultation about secession (9 November 2014), and the rising stabilised at high levels all along the struggle between regional and Spanish powers that persist today.

This population segment displayed parallel and consistent trends on several measures: national identity feelings (“sense of belonging”); preferences for political links with Spain (opting for “independence”); and expressing support for secession on a hypothetic referendum for self-determination. Such narrowing of national self-identification linked to preferences for secession showed by this group of “Catalan-natives” mainly, was not mirrored in the other big segments of citizenry (those with either Spanish or both languages as their family/mother language). These segments tended to maintain a remarkable stability on their dual “CatSpanish” national identities without noticeable changes.

Catalonian secessionism excelled, initially, to present itself as a peaceful and socially inclusive movement that wanted to reach and fulfil its final aspirations through exquisite democratic procedures. The perseverant, gigantic and usually festive street demonstrations claiming for the “right to vote” in a referendum about independence consolidated that perception for years. The fierce political struggle between the static Spanish powers and the much more dynamic regional administration also contributed to disseminate that view among many observers.26

That changed dramatically when regional powers announced, at the start of Summer 2017, that they were going to call for a binding referendum despite repeated warnings by the Spanish high court that it was fully illegal and against the constitutional law. A referendum that will be followed by enacting an immediate segregation from Spain in case of victory (an approval of secession above 50 per cent of votes, would be enough). These steps were indeed marched to the end, as announced (see “situation report” depiction), but this had the effect of awakening the response of the unionist citizenry (around three million, from a census of 5.5 million, within a population of more than 7 million). Catalan unionists had remained mostly silent and expectant along the secessionist surge, but during the weeks preceding the “independence declaration” (27 October 2017), there was a rise of unionist’s activism (pictures, figure 18) amid the escalating tensions that pervaded all scenarios.27

Figure 18: Unionists (right) were able to deploy street demonstrations at downtown Barcelona that competed with the gigantic ones (left) that secessionists had mounted repeatedly

Source: La Vanguardia, Google Images. These pictures were separated by less than a month on Autumn 2017.

Such tensions have taken many forms, during the last two years, mainly through low-intensity clashes at the streets related to attempts to monopolise public places with secessionist symbols and protests against the trial of rebellious leaders in prison or exile.28 However, the main and unavoidable legacy of the failed secessionist attempt has been the deepening of a division within a society that had been presented, for decades, as a model of porosity and conviviality. An important division that runs essentially through an unsealed ethnolinguistic cleavage with accompanying economic differences which were previously attenuated through the myriad of interactions that a truly open and contemporary society offers.

There have been repeated but unsuccessful attempts to deny the conflictive division and the affective fracture within Catalanian society. These attempts have included all kind of initiatives: from

28. Street and institutional incidents concerning the occupation of public buildings and places with secessionist symbols (“stellate flags” or “yellow laces”) have been frequent, in parallel with threats and intimidation/stigmatization actions through very different channels.
“diplomacy” actions by delegates of regional government all over the world, to persistent media campaigns and scholarly essays even. Their main message is that Catalan is a multi-hybrid and encompassing society containing a rich variety of communities with very different interests. Nobody can dissent on that, of course: most societies are hybrid and contain nuanced complexities, but they can be strongly and acutely polarised around a single and important political issue.


Globally, the series of findings presented here confirmed the outstanding polarisation surrounding the issue of secession that others had previously shown departing from a handful of surveying points or from the electoral results. Our longitudinal findings permitted to extract, moreover, important covariations between the outstanding changes on national identity feelings, all along the secessionist push, with: 1) family/mother language, Catalan vs Spanish; 2) following regional media versus other media; 3) differences on economic and well-being situation. We suspect that the scope of statistical associations that we have deployed are not trivial and deserve serious attention.

Concerning the first one, before the dawn of the secessionist surge Miley had already established the existence of divergent national identifications, in the main segments of Catalan society that depended on an ethnolinguistic frontier. Departing from CIS surveys and other social data, he challenged the depiction of Catalanoid bid for sovereignty as a form of “civic nationalism.” He highlighted the operation of an ethnolinguistic cleavage that distinguished between two population fractions: “native, Catalan speaking” citizens and their Spanish speaking neighbours with immigrant origins. “Mother tongue” had, in fact, the strongest impact upon an individual’s self-recognition as predominantly Catalan vs predominantly Spanish or mixed “CatSpanish” identities. In subsequent studies, he showed that there was a notorious gap between preferences of citizens and some options preferred by their representatives: the language policy implemented by regional powers was inconsistent with preferences of Spanish-speaking citizens. He identified, moreover, two mechanisms that blocked their representation into the region’s institutions: 1) a clear under-representation of those citizens in autonomous powers; and 2) a partial assimilation of some Spanish-speaking elected politicians into the attitudes of Catalan-speaking rulers.

He concluded that the social bases of support for Catalan nationalism were “overwhelmingly ethnic” and that the separatist movement was an elite-led, “top down” project. The present series of findings offer a strong support for these conclusions by showing that segmentation across the ethnolinguistic divide was crucially linked to distinctive polarisation profiles during the whole period of the secessionist surge. Hurried attempts to disguise that reality could not hide the strong segmentation of citizens’ preferences across the ethno-linguistic frontier.

The divergent and increasingly polarised identities were also associated, to an important degree, to differential exposure to the media under direct or indirect control of regional powers. We saw that following or not the news on regional public media was an important mediator of the changes on national identity feelings. The statistical main reasoning and the full dataset of data contain multiple contrasts which support the elaborated discourses and political actions of all secessionist forces have been always inclusive, could not hide the strong segmentation of citizens’ preferences across the ethno-linguistic frontier.

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The divergent and increasingly polarised identities were also associated, to an important degree, to differential exposure to the media under direct or indirect control of regional powers. We saw that following or not the news on regional public media was an important mediator of the changes on national identity feelings and for preferences for secession. The strong gaps on media following preferences (for news and political debates) based essentially on family-language divisions, surely contributed to exaggerate distinctive communal attachments and frames of reference at both sides of the ethnolinguistic frontier: Catalans vs CatSpanish. TV channels, newspapers and broadcasting stations which are directly or indirectly under control of the regional government not only dominated but fully encapsulated the secessionist audiences operating only or mostly, in Catalan language. This represents an obvious mismatch as Spanish is the language of daily use of more than half of Catalan citizens, thus reflecting the operation of a “communication bubble” that nourished the process of differentiation of a community imagined, in Coll, I. Molina I and Anic-P. Maldonado M (Eds) (2014) Anatomia del procés de referèndum d'autodeterminació dels catalans (pp. 221-246), Maza A, Villaverde J and Hierro M (2015) The Regional Election in Catalonia: an attempt to understand the pro-independence vote, Economia Política, 36, 1-18, Rodon T and Guinjoan M (2018) When the context matters: identity, secession and the spatial dimension in Catalonia, Political Geography, 63, 72-87.

A complete and much more detailed version of the present findings are to be found at that paper. It conveys the elaborated discourses and political actions of all secessionist forces have been always inclusive, could not hide the strong segmentation of citizens’ preferences across the ethno-linguistic frontier.

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Social networks have been another important vector for the rising segmentation of attachments and affects inside unionist and secessionist fields, though there is an ongoing discussion about its relative relevance. A large-scale analysis provided solid evidence that during the 2017 illegal “referendum” for Catalan independence, analysed as a case study, social bots generated and promoted violent content, aimed mainly at the secessionist population segment. Nearly 4 million Twitter posts, on that issue, generated by almost 1 million users, were monitored and analysed during two weeks around such event. The findings clearly indicated that automated social hacking contributed to exacerbate a serious political conflict.

During deep political crises the existence of unsealed ethnocultural cleavages is a widely known prerequisite to trigger quick polarisation and partisanship alignments in neighboring communities. The divide in Catalonia has not arrived at the threshold of an open violent conflict, though tensions were high during Autumn of 2017 and they still subsist, though attenuated, while the situation remains on a chronic standstill. All kind of frictions appear nowadays at different social scenarios and keep confronted two communities who had enjoyed a long tradition of tolerant and convivial relationships. There have been worries that such a divide might lead to inter-group clashes that would carry the ingredients that appear in societies sheltering unsealed ethno-cultural frontiers.

The highest achievement of Catalanian secessionist venture was the creation of an intense devotion for the goal of attaining full sovereignty, as an independent state, to the point of carrying traits of a collective romantic passion engaging an impressive segment of citizenry. Such passion hardly elicited, however, the rest of Catalan population. The ingroup self-glorification ingredients conveyed by such nationalistic passion excluded, by definition, other communities within the region.

The secessionist movement has been persistently nourished by partisan autonomous powers, responding probably to the tenacious litigation between various secessionist forces to lead the regional administration. The series of findings discussed here have unveiled important operating tracks of an induced civil conflict that has left, as a main legacy, a deeply divided community within the heart of Europe.
To study the changing evolution of secessionist vs unionist preferences among Catalanian citizenry we worked mainly with data obtained by CEO Barometers (the official survey agency of the regional government), along the period 2006-2019. Sample sizes of the surveys oscillated between 2500 and 1500 citizens each, exception of Autumn 2017 which had only 1338 citizens. We also used electoral data from last regional election, 21 December 2017, to complete the picture.

The most important variables to search were “national identity feelings” (sense of belonging), “preferences for political links with Spain”, “affirmative/negative answers on a legal referendum about secession”. We selected “national identity feelings” as our main target because it was studied in the whole series of CEO surveys and does not depend on changing political labels that may distort the results. We start, however, mentioning CEO results on “preferences for political links between Catalonia and Spain” and explicit “support/reject of secession” in a hypothetic referendum of secession (figures 1-2). This latter will be related with other variables as we shall see hereafter.

We have explored the relationship between our main variable with others related with to the main ethnolinguistic cleavage that characterises Catalanian citizenry. Specifically, we considered, for each survey, the qualitative variables “family/mother language” and the binary variable “follow news on public regional media or not” (TV or radio, under control of regional government). To complete the analysis, we considered variables of economic nature: “household net incomes” for all Catalan population or interactions with family/mother language segments. We used also a binary variable “household net incomes > 3000€/month” and a qualitative variables “economic resistance limit in case of economic breakdown” and “perception of the evolution of the own economy” in combination with support for secession in a hypothetic referendum.

We were fully aware of the limits and restrictions we adopted in our analyses of an obviously multi-causal phenomenon. We limited ourselves to study significant stochastic dependencies between variables, a strictly statistical work (descriptive plus correlational), although it is true that, in this context, high stochastic associations might suggest plausible explanations, of at least part of the mechanisms that shaped the observed trends.

We studied first the evolution of the distinctive percentages of “sense of belonging” (national identity feelings), in the overall population, in the period 2006-2019. Then we made the same study in each main linguistic segments, according to their family/mother language: Catalan group (38.5 per cent was its size at March survey of 2019) and the Spanish-group (55.6 per cent was its size, at that 2019 survey). For the sake of clarity, we decided to plot only the more frequent national identities in both linguistic groups.45

Moreover, we marked within the plots relevant historical events that might have been crucial to understand the evolution of the studied variables along the period. These events were: the date when a new Home Rule was approved (New Statute 2006); the resolution of the Spanish high court (Tribunal Constitutional-TC) that sanctioned 14 articles (over 223) as contrary to the Spanish constitution and restricted the preamble and another 27 articles (June, 2010); the peak protests of the social 15M movement (15M Peak Protests, June 2011); the regional elections of November 25, 2012 (25N); the illegal consultation about independence of 9 November 2014 (9N); the regional elections of September 27, 2015, (27S); the illegal referendum about secession, 1 October 2017 (1 Oct) and the regional elections, 21 December 2017 (21D).

We studied also the evolution of these national identity feelings taking into account not only family/mother language but also a dichotomous variable constructed taking into account whether the

45. We added also a smooth 95% confidence band based on a generalized additive model (GAM) implemented through the R package mgcv (Wood et al, 2016; Hastie and Tibshirani 1990). Additionally, in order to identify important change points detected in the series, we used the R package ecp designed for nonparametric multiple change point analysis of multivariate data (James and Matteson 2013, 2014), which implements a divisive hierarchical algorithm to detect reasonable change points, through a bisection method and a permutation test.

We worked at 0.05 significance level and demanding at least six observations, from 1.75 to 2 years, between change points. The change points obtained using this approach are indicated as vertical red lines in the figures. These change points were obtained using the complete profile of national identity feelings of the groups: from those who self-considered “only Spanish” to those who self-diagnosed as Only Catalans, including also the class of DK/NA (do not know or no answer). Hence, they are multivariate results although the series showed the evolution of main profiles of each linguistic group.
news were followed (or not) through regional public media (TV channel TV3, and radio station Catalunya Radio). We plotted the evolution of national identity feelings, within the Catalan-group: percentages of people who feel "only Catalans"; and the same for the Spanish-group: percentages of those who feel "equal Spanish than Catalan". In both segments, we obtained similar graphs as before, though clear differences appeared between people who followed the news on public regional media and the rest.46

Similarly, we studied the evolution of the household net incomes, on the overall population, in the period 2006-2019. Then we made the same study in each main linguistic segment, according to their family/mother language: Catalan and Spanish. We studied also the interactions of support of secession in a hypothetic referendum in relation with family/mother language and the binary variable Household net income > 3000€/month; and the main national identity feelings with these latter variables. For all these variables we have performed the previously mentioned analyses. More information can be provided by the authors on demand.

46. We additionally analysed this data, as an approximation, through the perspective of Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) and also a bivariate version of MANCOVA. Notice that there were two sources of randomness: one corresponding to the sample procedure and another corresponding to the political and communicative events along the period; we used a linear model as a simple way to deal with both sources of variability, just as an approximation, introducing Time (in years, from 2006) to try to capture potential trends and checking the global adequacy of this approach examining the standard output supplied by the function lm of R package stats. We supply also a graphic plot illustrating the dependence of each percentage ("only Catalan" and "equal Spanish than Catalan") with respect to Time covariate; in each one of the four levels determined by both factors. The apparent visual changes of these groups determined by Family/mother Language and to follow the news through public regional media or not are highly significant. Further details may be supplied by the authors on request.