

Catalogne, Écosse, Flandre – et dans une moindre mesure, Corse ou Sardaigne aujourd’hui; hier, Pays basque ou nord de l’Italie... Les revendications nationales, aspirant à l’autonomie ou au séparatisme, s’expriment avec vigueur au sein de plusieurs États membres de l’Union européenne, mais dans une relative indifférence de celle-ci. Sont-ce pour autant des questions dont on devrait laisser aux seuls États concernés la responsabilité? Ne pourrait-on rien faire au plan européen? Fruit d’un Colloque Latsis, cet ouvrage rassemble diverses contributions permettant de mieux comprendre le phénomène et de rechercher des réponses à tous les échelons. Quelle est la nature de ces revendications d’autonomie ou d’indépendance? Quelle place dans l’Union européenne pour les «nations sans État»? Qu’en est-il aujourd’hui de la souveraineté, de l’État-nation? Peut-on imaginer une Union européenne qui soit une Union des peuples, autant que des États? Peut-on relancer l’idée d’un Sénat européen des régions, et comment le concevoir? Tels sont quelques-uns des points abordés ici.

*Today, Catalonia, Scotland, Flanders and, to a lesser extent, Corsica or Sardinia; yesterday, the Basque Country or northern Italy... National demands, aspiring to autonomy or separatism, are being passionately expressed within several Member States of the European Union, whereas the latter remains relatively indifferent. Are these, however, issues that should be left solely to the States concerned? Can nothing be done at the European level? This collective work, a compilation of the various contributions to the Latsis Colloquium, enables us to better understand the phenomenon and to seek answers at all levels. What is the nature of these demands for autonomy or independence? What place is there in the European Union for «stateless nations»? What is the situation today with regard to sovereignty and the nation state? Can we imagine a European Union that is a Union of peoples, as well as States? Can we revive the idea of a European Senate of the Regions, and in what form? These are some of the points raised in this book.*

Inauguré en octobre 2016 dans le cadre du Global Studies Institute de l’Université de Genève, le Centre de compétences Dusan Sidjanski en études européennes a pour mission d’effectuer des recherches académiques sur des thèmes de pointe liés à la construction européenne. Son Comité directeur est composé des Prof. Nicolas Levrat (Président), Dusan Sidjanski, Sandra Lavenex, René Schwok, et du Secrétaire général de l’Université Dr Didier Raboud. Le Conseil consultatif est composé de: Prof. Micheline Calmy-Rey, Viviane Reding, Dimitris Avramopoulos, Antoine Firmenich, Prof. Ronald Inglehart, John Latsis, Jean-Pierre Roth, Prof. Paul Taylor, Jacques de Watteville. Chercheurs affiliés: Dr. Frédéric Esposito, Dr. Miroslav Jovanović, Dr. Georges Kolyvas, Dr. François Saint-Ouen. Le professeur invité en 2019-2020 est Dr. Sandro Gozi.

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NICOLAS LEVRAT  
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## Separatist nationalism in Western Europe? A historical perspective, 1970-2014

Emmanuel Dalle Mulle

*The rise of separatism in Western Europe has been widely announced by the media in recent years. Yet, scholars have been silent about it. Hence, this paper aims to provide an analysis of the evolution of Western European separatism in the last few decades. It suggests distinguishing between the electoral results of separatist parties and trends in support for independence in specific regions. It first offers a quantitative evaluation of the former from 1970 to 2015. It then zooms in on the regions that have been characterised by the most successful separatist parties and inquires whether their popularity has gone along with changes in support for independence. It shows that, in general, separatist parties in these regions have been able to increase their share of votes in the absence of substantial increases in demands for constitutional change.*

In November 2012, an editorial published on the *Financial Times* asserted that ‘under the pressures of recession, fragile public finances and political grievances that have smouldered for decades, if not centuries, Europe is witnessing a rise in separatism and regionalism that is testing the resilience of well-established states’<sup>1</sup>. In the last few years, similar statements announcing the rise of separatism in Europe have resonated widely in the international press<sup>2</sup>.

Some of them have also come from academics writing on non-academic platforms. Campanella boldly asserted that ‘secessionism is on the rise all across Europe’<sup>3</sup>, while Palacio argued that ‘in both Catalonia and Scotland, calls for independence are growing once again – an indication of conditions not only in Spain and the United Kingdom, but in the European Union as a whole’<sup>4</sup>. Most of

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Barber, “Europe: Stretched at the Seams”, *Financial Times*, 8 November 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Raf Casert, “As EU Basks in Nobel win, Separatist Movements on the Rise”, *USA Today*, 13 October 2012; Harvey Morris, “European Economic Woes Spur Separatists in Pockets of Prosperity”, *The New York Times*, 17 October 2012; Ian Traynor, “Across Europe, Leaders Fear Spectre of Separatists Breaking Countries Apart”, *The Guardian*, 22 November 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Edoardo Campanella, “Small is Better: Disintegrated Nations in an Integrated Europe”, *Vox*, 12 August 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Ana Palacio, “Europe’s Regional Revolts”, *Project Syndicate*, 5 November 2012.

the attention has been given to what Bardos has called ‘the rise of separatism in Western Europe over the past decade’, and this for the obvious reason that it belies ‘the conventional view that democracy and economic prosperity mollify nationalist tensions and aspirations’<sup>5</sup>. These accounts of increasing fragmentation have also relied on a powerful theoretical explanation provided by Alesina and Spolaore, who have argued that, thanks to trade integration, the benefits of being part of a large political community (i.e. a relatively big state) have decreased in comparison to previous decades. Hence, being a small country has become more viable than it used to be<sup>6</sup> and separatism more appealing.

While Western European nationalism and regionalism have been the subject of several comparative studies<sup>7</sup>, scholars have been surprisingly silent about the supposed ‘rise of separatism’ in Western Europe often referred to in the media. In their very comprehensive *Creating New States*, Pavkovic and Radan<sup>8</sup> limit their analysis of ‘secession in practice’ to the distinction between peaceful, violent and multiple secession. The ‘rise’ of separatism in Western Europe is equally absent in the wide set of papers recently edited by Doyle<sup>9</sup> and Pavkovic and Cabestan.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Borgen points out that ‘the bomb-throwing radicals of years past are largely gone, but in some places popular support for autonomy or

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon Bardos, “Spectre of Separatism Haunts Europe”, *The National Interest*, 17 January 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Alberto Alesina and Enrico Spolaore, “On the Number and Size of Nations”, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 112, 1997, pp. 1027–56.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Tiryakian and Ronald Rogowski, eds., *New Nationalisms of the Developed West. Toward Explanation*. London: Allen&Unwin, 1985; Anthony Birch, *Nationalism and National Integration*. London/Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989; John Coakley, ed., *The Social Origins of Nationalist Movements. The Contemporary West European Experience*. London: Sage, 1992; Christopher Harvie, *The Rise of Regional Europe*. London: Routledge, 1994; Michael Keating, *Nations Against the State: The New Politics of Nationalism in Quebec, Catalonia and Scotland*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996; Michael Keating, *The New Regionalism in Western Europe. Territorial Restructuring and Political Change*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1998; Montserrat Guibernau, *Nations without States: Political Communities in a Global Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999; Anwen, Elias, *Minority Nationalist Parties and European Integration: A Comparative Study*. London: Routledge, 2009; Emanuele, Massetti, “Explaining Regionalist Party Positioning in a Multi-Dimensional Ideological Space: A Framework for Analysis”, *Regional and Federal Studies*, 19:4-5, 2009, pp. 501–531.

<sup>8</sup> Aleksandar Pavkovic and Peter Radan, *Creating New States. Theory and Practice of Secession*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Don Doyle, *Secession as an International Phenomenon. From America’s Civil War to Contemporary Separatist Movements*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Aleksandar Pavkovic and Jean-Pierre Cabestan, eds., *Secessionism and Separatism in Europe and Asia. To Have a State of One’s Own*. London: Routledge, 2013.

separation is stronger than ever'.<sup>11</sup> Yet, he does not expand on the recent evolution of separatism in Western Europe in more general terms. Finally, Laible<sup>12</sup> nicely deals with some puzzles linked to the 'persistence' of separatism in Europe and the relationship between this, European integration and the changed meaning of sovereignty and statehood. Nevertheless, she does not place this discussion within a wider inquiry into whether separatism has actually grown in the last decades in Western Europe.

Some evidence of the recent growth of separatism in Western Europe has indirectly come from scholars analysing the link between secessionism and globalisation. Sambanis and Zinn provide evidence that the amount of 'self-determination movements' around the world grew from 61 in 1960 to 261 in 1999.<sup>13</sup> Yet, apart from the fact that their database refers to the entire world, rather than Europe, their findings do not offer a measure of the strength of such movements, nor do they differentiate between those seeking more autonomy for their region and those aiming at complete independence. A more precise evaluation of the rise of separatism is provided by Sorens<sup>14</sup>. Looking at 15 Western regions—most of them in Europe—he concludes that separatism did grow in the two decades between 1980 and 2000, and that globalisation played a significant role in explaining such an increase, although relative economic conditions—notably a rise in regional per capita GDP relative to the national average—had an even higher impact. Yet, although he provides justifications for selecting the dependent variable by referring to data availability and to his goal of evaluating how globalisation impacts on already existing separatist movements, his sample left out some Western European regions characterised by relevant separatist parties—Bavaria, Corsica, Galicia, Sardinia—while at the same time including regions where there were no separatist parties for a substantial part of the period analysed (all the Northern Italian regions in his sample up to mid-1990s). Also, he combined separatist and autonomist parties, without clearly distinguishing between the two of them.

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher, Borgen, "From Kosovo to Catalonia: Separatism and Integration in Europe", *Goettingen Journal of International Law*, 2:3, 2010, pp. 997–1033,

<sup>12</sup> Janet Laible, *Separatism and Sovereignty in the New Europe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Sambanis and Anna Zinn (2005) *From Protest to Violence: An Analysis of Conflict Escalation with an Application to Self-Determination Movements*, unpublished paper, Yale University.

<sup>14</sup> Jason Sorens 'Globalization, Secessionism and Autonomy', *Electoral Studies*, 23, 2004, pp. 727–752.



The most interesting and complete analysis of the growth of separatism and its relationship to globalisation has recently been carried out by Brancati<sup>15</sup>. Exploring the relationship between separatism—measured as the electoral strength of parties supporting independence—and successive waves of European integration (as a proxy for economic integration) in 35 European countries from 1945 to 2008, she concludes that such a relationship is ‘weak’ and mainly driven by two cases in the sample (Belgium and the United Kingdom). Yet, apart from providing a rough measure of the growth of separatist parties in these two countries at the beginning of the article, her study does not develop into a detailed analysis of the evolution of separatist vote in the countries analysed—showing, for instance, the extent of such growth, its regional distribution at the sub-state level and its variation over time. This is also due to the fact that she only uses data about state-wide elections, which do not always perfectly correlate with regional ones. Furthermore, like all other contributions to this literature, she does not complement data on separatist votes with figures concerning grassroots support for independence (at least for those regions in which such data are available).

The aim of this paper is to fill this gap by providing a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the evolution of Western European separatism in the last few decades. In section two, it discusses different ways of defining separatism and of measuring it. Broadly speaking, it suggests distinguishing between the electoral results of separatist parties and trends in popular support for independence in specific regions. Section three deals with the former, offering a quantitative evaluation of the supposed rise of separatist parties. Section four then zooms in on the regions for which substantial figures on grassroots support for independence are available and inquires into the relationship between these two ways of defining separatism. It shows that apart from the grassroots radicalisation which recently occurred in Catalonia, most separatist parties have been able to increase their share of votes even in the absence of major changes in demands for full self-determination.

### **What is separatism and how to measure it?**

In common parlance, separatism is deemed to have as its main goal the transformation of a specific territory into an independent state, thus entailing a process of secession. For this reason, the term is also frequently used as an

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<sup>15</sup> Dawn Brancati, “Another Great Illusion: The Advancement of Separatism through Economic Integration”, *Political Science Research and Methods*, 2:1, 2014, pp. 69–95.

equivalent of 'secessionism'. Some authors have proposed to distinguish between these two concepts.<sup>16</sup> Yet, in practice, the distinction between these two categories is often not so clear. Parties and movements easily switch from one to the other and can demand devolution of powers and accept the existing constitutional framework in the short term, while striving for state sovereignty in the longer one. Hence, a probably more fruitful way of looking at separatism and secessionism is to think of the former as a wider phenomenon entailing the will to reduce the authority of the central government over a specific territory, including the possibility, but not necessarily, of its full abolition. In this framework, secessionism can be seen as a narrower form of separatism—'secessionist separatism'—concerned with the demand for full independent statehood. This seems a more appropriate way to look at such a phenomenon also in light of the current European constitutional context, where most 'secessionist separatist' parties have called for independence within the European Union, so demanding the removal of a superordinate authority, but accepting another one—although the latter would certainly be less intrusive<sup>17</sup>. In this paper, we will thus use the term separatism as shorthand for 'secessionist separatism'. Furthermore, in line with Dandoy's recommendations, we exclude 'rattachist' parties from our definition, that is, parties seeking reunification of their reference territory with an existing nation-state. This is because these parties 'do not wish to build a new and independent state but rather join another (pre-existing) one and to be considered as an inherent part of its territory'.<sup>18</sup>

In its organised form separatism is often referred to as a movement, which can encompass diverse entities such as cultural clubs, civil society organisations for the promotion of specific rights, and, in extreme cases, armed groups. Political parties embracing the goal of independent statehood are the most interesting units of analysis from a political perspective. This is especially the case in the Western European context, where, since at least the 1970s, peripheral political parties have begun challenging mainstream national ones within the democratic institutions of their parent states.<sup>19</sup> In this connection, the electoral results of separatist parties are often used as a gauge of the strength of separatism overall. At first glance, this seems to be reasonable since we can expect people who support independence to vote for separatist parties, while people who do not will likely cast their ballot for other formations. As we will see below, reality is more

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<sup>16</sup> John R. Wood, "Secession: A Comparative Analytical Framework". *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique*, 14(1), 1981, p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> Laible, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–17; Elias, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–5.

<sup>18</sup> Regis Dandoy, "Ethno-Regionalist Parties in Europe: A Typology", *Perspectives on Federalism*, 2:2, 2010, p. 213.

<sup>19</sup> Keating, *The new regionalism*, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–71; Guibernau, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

complex. Yet, in section three, we will stick to such a definition of separatism in order to provide a first rough measure of its evolution.

The criterion used to select the separatist parties in our sample is their clear indication—in official texts such as manifestos, ideological declarations etc.—that they seek independent statehood for the community that they claim to represent. This will certainly lead to a coarse estimate, since there are parties that, while still having independence as their own formal objective, have put its pursuit on hold in the short term, while others might not have declared openly their willingness to secede for strategic reasons. Yet, we think that a ‘formal’ approach is relevant because, although it might seem to be more analytically pertinent to find ‘the hidden and true nature’ of a party’s aims, such an operation is no less problematic than taking their official claims at face value, there is no easy answer to the question of how to uncover the ‘true programme’ of a political force. Answering it would require a fair amount of subjective judgement and much more space than that allowed in this publication, without guaranteeing more accuracy than a formal approach<sup>20</sup>.

However, separatism can also be understood as something different from the support obtained by a specific political party. As pointed out by the literature on support for sovereignty-association in Quebec, support for separatist parties does not automatically coincide with support for independence as a constitutional option.<sup>21</sup> This is why, in section four, we look at trends in support for various constitutional options ranging from the status quo to independent statehood in those regions for which substantial data are available.

### **Have Western European Separatist Parties Become More Successful?**

According to most of the literature on nationalism and regionalism, the centre-periphery cleavage began to increase its salience in Western European politics approximately from the 1970s on.<sup>22</sup> That is why we start our analysis of party

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<sup>20</sup> Cas Mudde *The Ideology of the Extreme Right*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, pp. 20-21.

<sup>21</sup> Maurice Pinard and Richard Hamilton, “Motivational Dimensions of the Quebec Independence Movement: a Test of a New Movement”, *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, 9, 1986, pp. 225–280; Paul Howe, “Rationality and Sovereignty Support in Quebec”, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 31;1, 1998, pp. 31–59.

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Smith, *Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*. New York: New York University Press, 1979, pp. 151-163; Birch, *op. cit.*, p. 48; Keating, *The new regionalism, op. cit.*, pp. 48-50; Alonso, Sofia (2012). *Challenging the State: Devolution and the Battle for Partisan Credibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 94-95.

results at that point in time. Furthermore, we treat our sample of parties as a family centred around the common aim to create (in the long or short-term) an independent state for their reference community. To build our database of Western European<sup>23</sup> separatist parties, we have started from existing sources on minority nationalist, ethnic and regionalist parties, notably: the *Manifesto Project Database*, from which we have selected parties grouped under the 'nationalist' and the 'ethnic and regional' party families; the categorisation efforts carried out by Dandoy<sup>24</sup> and Massetti<sup>25</sup>; the European Election Database of the Norwegian Social Science Data Service; and a number of case-specific and comparative sources.<sup>26</sup> In building the database we have followed Sartori's 'minimal definition'<sup>27</sup> of a political party and have selected those nationalist, ethnic and regional parties which: (1) have 'secessionism separatism', as defined above, as one of their primary objectives (either in the short or the long term); (2) have been in existence for three or more years (in order to exclude ephemeral formations); (3) have tried to contest elections, thus ruling out pressure groups and liberation movements using non-democratic means. In addition to Sartori's minimal definition, we have included coalitions only if these have been turned into permanent structures (e.g. *Convergencia i Unio*), but, when evaluating electoral performance, we have attributed the vote of a 'non-permanent coalition' to specific parties if the coalition has been formed by like-minded ones (i.e., if it was a coalition of separatist parties) or if separatist parties have been the major partners in the coalition, thus informing the policy of the new formation with their separatist goal. Finally, we have excluded parties supporting independence on specific occasions but for whom independence is not among their core objectives.<sup>28</sup> A first rough measure of calculating the increased importance of separatist parties in Western European politics is to look at their sheer number per five-year period. This measure addresses the so-called "threshold of authorisation"<sup>29</sup> and can,

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<sup>23</sup> For the purpose of this paper Western Europe is defined as composed of the following countries: Austria, Belgium, metropolitan France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

<sup>24</sup> Dandoy, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Massetti, *op. cit.*

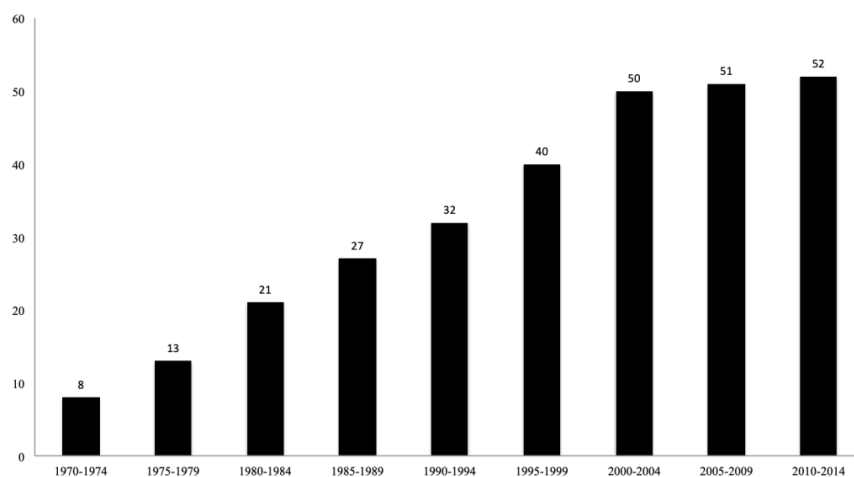
<sup>26</sup> Supplementary material with the full list and the dataset can be requested from the author.

<sup>27</sup> 'A party is any political group that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections, candidates for public office'. Giovanni Sartori *Parties and Party Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> The full list of parties and the electoral data gathered are compiled in a supplementary material file available upon request.

<sup>29</sup> Morgens, Pedersen, "Towards a New Typology of Party Lifespans and Minor Parties", *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 5:1, 1982, p. 7.

to some extent, be indicative of an increasing salience of separatism in Western European societies, as, although already present at the beginning of the period (1970–74), the overall number of separatist parties has clearly and steadily increased up until 2004 (Figure 1). However, two caveats should be borne in mind. First, such an increase could simply be due to the higher quantity and quality of information about separatist parties available in recent years, especially since the spread of the internet. Second, the aggregated data below hides very high variability. Half of the 12 countries in the sample record no separatist party active within their territory throughout the timespan analysed, while, at the other extreme, Spain accounts for between 38% and 61.5% of the entire sample, depending on the specific period.



Furthermore, the number of parties does not tell us anything about their popularity. To measure this, we need to take a look at their electoral performance. Table 1 shows the average vote share obtained by separatist parties in the six countries in our sample that have been characterised by their presence (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK) for each decade since 1970. All of the countries analysed here have seen the overall share of the separatist vote growing. Belgium has seen the most formidable increase, with separatist parties going from gathering, on average, 1.4% of the total share of votes at federal elections in the 1970s to 24.6% between 2010 and 2015. Similarly, the separatist vote has tripled in Spain and gone from being inexistent in Italy to attracting 4.5% of voters on average. Despite showing an early peak in the 1970s (largely due to the popularity of the SNP at the two 1974 elections) and decreasing sub-

stantially during the 1980s, the separatist vote in the UK increased again by about 10% in the 1990s, stabilised in the 2000s, and then doubled in the 2010s. Sheer percentage increases are big even in France and Germany (about four and seven-fold in each country), but there the overall separatist vote has remained smaller than 0.1% of the electorate.

**Table 1 – Electoral results of separatist parties in Western Europe, general vote at general elections, average shares by decade, 1970-2015**

	Belgium	France	Germany	Italy	Spain	UK
<b>1970s</b>	0.34%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	1.06%	1.73%
<b>1980s</b>	1.47%	0.01%	0.01%	0.36%	2.30%	1.29%
<b>1990s</b>	8.09%	0.02%	0.01%	3.47%	2.77%	1.93%
<b>2000s</b>	13.83%	0.04%	0.04%	5.79%	2.92%	1.96%
<b>2010s</b>	24.60%	0.04%	0.07%	4.32%	3.19%	3.89%

Source: compiled by author, see supplementary material.

Table 1 also suggests that separatist parties have mostly remained a minority phenomenon within the respective countries, collecting less than 7% of state-wide votes, when excluding the unusual cases of Belgium and Italy. This is little wonder, since separatist parties are mostly active in minority regions and rarely mobilise voters outside their reference territory. Hence, the data above are interesting in a dynamic perspective—since they allow us to draw conclusions about the evolution of the overall separatist vote in each country—rather than for their absolute weight on the state’s total. To have a clearer picture of the real strength of separatist parties, we need to look at their share of votes at the regional level<sup>30</sup> and, more specifically, in regional elections. This is because peripheral parties are often disadvantaged at general elections by the fact that state-wide parties can use the ‘wasted-vote’ argument against them with reference to their limited geographical scope.

The aggregated data in Table 1 hides substantial variability between regions within each country. Thus, the separatist vote in Belgium has mainly concentrat-

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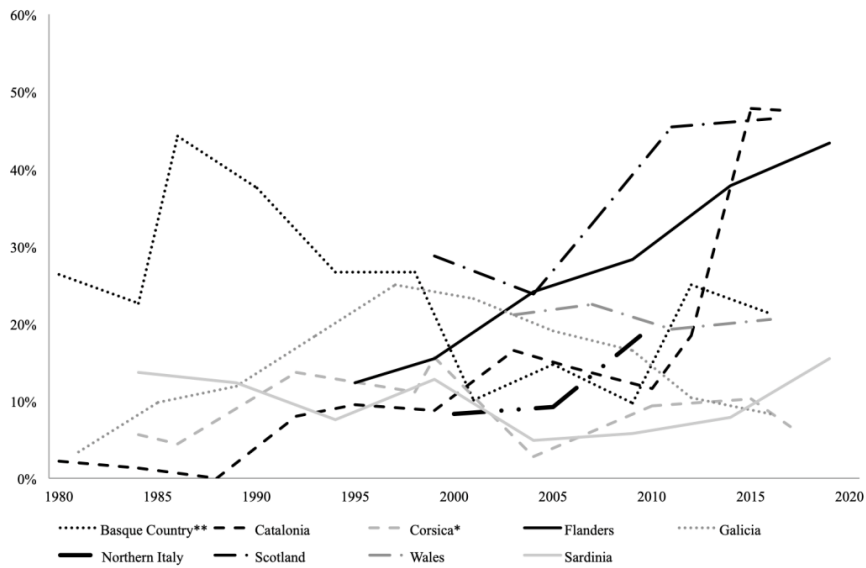
<sup>30</sup> Alonso, *op. cit.*, p. 95 ; John Curtice, “Devolution, the SNP and the Electorate”, in Gerry Hassan, ed., *The Modern SNP: From Protest to Power*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009, p. 63.

ed on Flanders, with Walloon separatist parties obtaining no more than 1% of regional preferences. In France, apart from Corsica, where separatist parties have increased their overall share of votes from 5.7% in 1984 to 15.6% in 1999, separatism has been practically inexistent. Separatist parties in the Basque Country, Galicia and Catalonia have been among the most popular in the whole of Europe, while in Andalusia and the Valencian Community they have never received more than 1% of regional preferences. Similarly, Northern Italy has seen the separatist Northern League obtaining between 8.3% and 19.7% of regional votes in the 2000s and Sardinian separatist parties have gathered between 4.9% and 13.8% of regional votes since 1984. Similar parties in Sicily and Veneto have not gone beyond 2%. Finally, in the United Kingdom, until the recent conversion of Plaid Cymru to independent statehood, Scottish parties have attracted most of the separatist vote.

Figure 2 provides a synthetic view of the Western European regions in which voting for separatist parties at regional elections has been among the highest in the continent. It shows a general upward evolution across the sample, although some regions achieved their best performances between the late 1980s (the Basque Country and Sardinia) and 1990s (Corsica and Galicia) and have since begun a downward or stagnating trend. Wales seems to be in a similar position, although Plaid Cymru's turn to separatism has been too recent to clearly assess it. By contrast, Catalonia, Flanders, Scotland and Northern Italy have shown a steady upward evolution, with all except the last one featuring an overall vote for separatist parties higher than 30% of the total regional vote between 2011 and 2015.

Hence, the data shown in this section confirms the overall rise of separatism in Western Europe, measured as electoral support for separatist parties, although it clearly points to some clarifications. First, separatism is by no means a continental phenomenon in the sense that it is not present in all European countries. Out of 12 Western European states, only six recorded active separatist political parties since 1970. Within this half, separatist parties have remained a largely minor political phenomenon in terms of overall share of national votes—except for Belgium and, to a lower extent, Italy. Yet, some parties did achieve considerable electoral strength at the regional level. In this connection, Catalonia, Flanders and Scotland accounted for the highest shares of regional separatist votes, as well as for the steepest recent increases. Furthermore, these scores have been achieved by a few parties that have dominated the separatist camp in the region concerned, notably: *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC) and, more re-

cently, *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (CDC);<sup>31</sup> the *Vlaams Blok/Belang* and the *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*; and the Scottish National Party. But has this coincided with major increases in grassroots support for independence?



### Has Grassroots Separatism Increased?

Ideally, data on support for independence would be collected in any region characterised by a nationalist party, regardless of its own strength. Unfortunately, this is not the case. To our knowledge, substantial and consistent longitudinal data is available only for the Basque Country, Catalonia, Flanders and Scotland. In this section we will focus on the last three, since they are the ones in which separatist parties have shown a constant upward trend confirming the widely popularised idea of a rise of separatism in Western Europe.

The questions asked in the relevant polls are not exactly the same for the four cases, but all pertain to the constitutional future of the respective area, offer a

<sup>31</sup> This is also the case with *Convergència i Unió* (CiU) between 2012 and its dissolution in 2015. After such dissolution, CDC changed its name in *Partit Democrata de Catalunya* (Democratic Party of Catalonia).



range of choices from status quo to full independence, and are reproduced in the same, or comparable, form for the entire timespan analysed.<sup>32</sup>

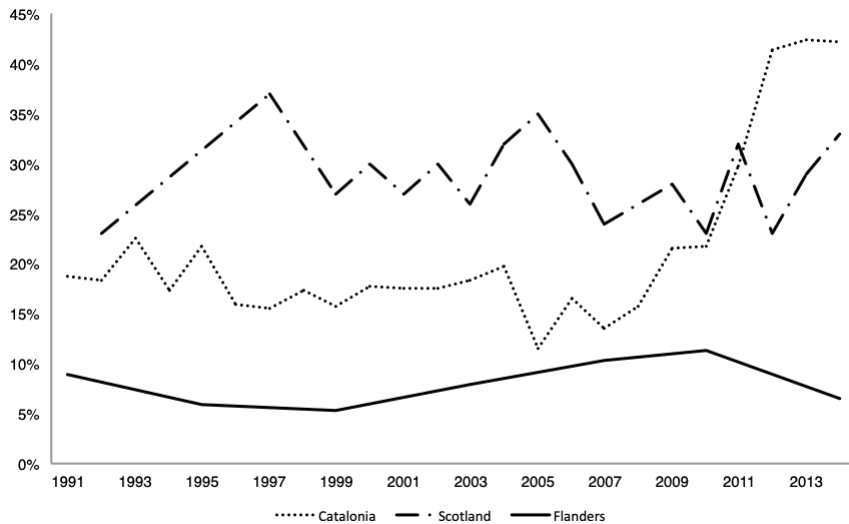
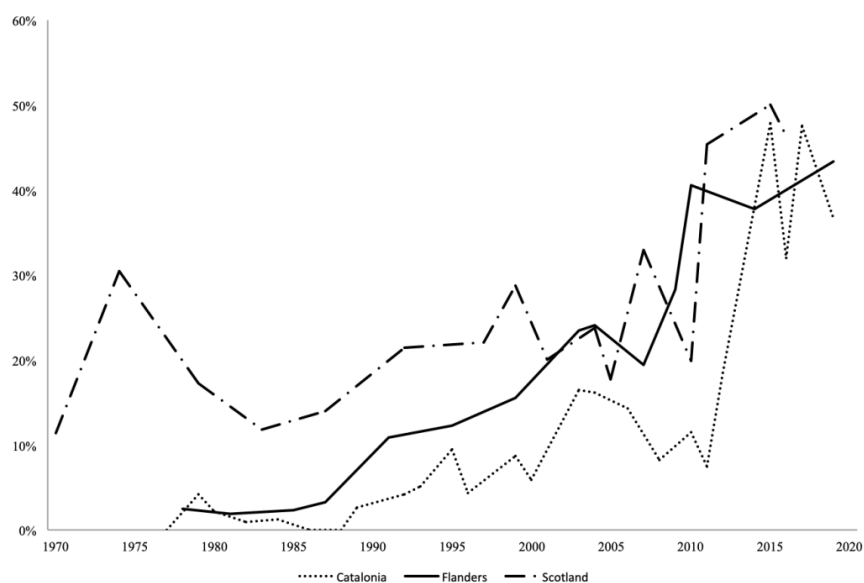


Figure 3 suggests that, in the last 23 years, despite regular oscillations, grassroots support for independence in the three regions has remained quite constant.<sup>33</sup> It is true that in Catalonia, such support has increased dramatically since 2010, reaching unprecedented levels, but this is a very recent evolution. Indeed,

<sup>32</sup> In Catalonia people could opt for a Spanish region, an autonomous community of Spain, a state within a federal Spain, and an independent state. The Belgian question asked Flemish interviewees to position themselves on an 11-point scale (0-10) where 0 coincides with the 'Flanders should decide everything' pole and 10 to the 'Belgium should decide everything' one. The data shown below refers to the '0' end of the scale. As after 2007 the full scale is no longer available (we only found aggregated data), we have used a different but comparable question for the years 2009–2014. This asked Flemish voters to indicate their preferred constitutional option for Belgium among a unitary state, the status quo, devolving more power to the federal government, more power to the regions and communities, and splitting the country. The Scottish question asked people to decide between 'no Scottish Parliament', 'devolution' and 'independence', although a more complex form of the same question was also available which made a distinction between a Parliament with tax-raising powers and one without.

<sup>33</sup> The 2015 Scottish Social Attitude Survey shows a recent increase in support for independence in Scotland as well (from 33% in 2014 to 39%). Yet, this is much more contained than in Catalonia and support for devolution shrank only very slightly (from 50% to 49%). The data are not inserted in the chart because comparable figures for the same year for Flanders are not available.

if we stopped our analysis in 2007, support for independence in the region would even show a slightly downward trend. In other words, the 'rise of separatism' defined as electoral support for separatist parties has not coincided, or only in part, with a 'rise' in popular demands for independent statehood.



This finding is confirmed by electoral studies. Researchers from ISPO have provided evidence that separatist parties have won votes *despite* low support for Flemish independence rather than *because of* any substantial increase in it<sup>34</sup>. In Scotland and Catalonia, support for independence has tended to be bigger than support for separatist parties and pro-independence voters have not automatically identified with them. In the former, during the 1990s, only about 50% of total electors in favour of independence identified with the Scottish National Party

<sup>34</sup> Marc Swyngedouw, "L'essor d'Agalev et du Vlaams Blok", *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, 1362, 1992; Marc Swyngedouw and Nathalie Rink, *Hoe Vlaams-Beglijshgezind zijn de Vlamingen?*, CeSO/ISPO/2008-6, 2008; Marc Swyngedouw, Koen Abts and Jolien Galle, "Vlamingen en de communautaire kwestie", in Koen Abts, Marc Swyngedouw, Jaak Billiet and Bart Meuleman, eds., *Vlaanderen kiest. Trends in stemgedrag en opvattingen over politiek, staatsvorming en kerk*. Leuven: Lannoo Campus, 2014, pp. 219–245; Marc Swyngedouw, Koen Abts, Sharon Baute, Jolien Galle and Bart Meuleman, *Het Communautaire in de Verkiezingen van 25 Mei 2014. Analyse op Basis van de postelelectorale Verkiezingonderzoeken 1991-2014*. Leuven: ISPO, 2015.

(SNP), while between 38% and 50% were Labour sympathisers. At the same time, 'only' between 50% and 75% of SNP identifiers supported independence.<sup>35</sup> These figures did not change substantially during the period 1999-2014, when, on average, 40% of pro-independence Scots declared themselves to be closest to the SNP and 28% to Labour (the latter attracted even more 'separatists' than the SNP from 2001–2006).<sup>36</sup> Although the samples are too small to reach a rigorous conclusion,<sup>37</sup> ICPS data suggest a similar dynamic in Catalonia. These figures seem to indicate that, on average, 64.5% and 56.9% of ERC's voters supported independence in the 1990s and 2000s respectively.<sup>38</sup> During the same decades, only 20.5% and 31.1% of separatist voters identified with the party, while 32.6% and 22% were CiU's sympathisers.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, pro-independence voters do not necessarily sympathise with separatist parties, while these latter are able to attract people who do not support the parties' core goal. As much as the electoral progression of such parties does not automatically reflect any grassroots radicalisation in favour of independent statehood, trends in support for the latter do not always account for separatist electoral outcomes. Yet, it could be that in those regions where separatist parties recorded prolonged success—Catalonia, Flanders and Scotland above all—over time more voters came to demand increased autonomy for their region and to find that separatist parties were the best actors to impose this on other parties. In order to do that we look at trends in support for further devolution in Catalonia, Flanders and Scotland—i.e. the countries for which such data are available in a longer longitudinal perspective.

Most of the polls conducted allow differentiation between a wide and a narrow definition of autonomy. The first has to do with the concept of devolved powers itself and does not discriminate between the maintenance of the status quo or the demand for more powers. The second instead clearly points to an increased form of autonomy within the parent state. In both cases the demand for auto-

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<sup>35</sup> David McCrone, and Lindsay Paterson, "The Conundrum of Scottish Independence", *Scottish Affairs*, 40, 2002, pp. 54-75.

<sup>36</sup> Our calculation based on data from the Scottish Social Attitude Survey (1999-2014), available at: <http://whatscotlandthinks.org/> (accessed 16 December 2015).

<sup>37</sup> The chi-square test showed more than 20% of cells with an expected count lower than 5 in each year of the series.

<sup>38</sup> As we will see later this share increased considerably in the 2010s, reaching 83.3% on average and 91.9% in 2014, as a consequence of the grassroots radicalisation seen in Figure 4.

<sup>39</sup> Our calculations based on ICPS (covering several years), *Sondeig d'Opinio Catalunya*, <http://www.icps.cat/recerca/sondeigs-i-dades/sondeigs/sondeigs-d-opinio-catalunya>

my has tended to grow in the last 25 years in all regions. The only exception is Catalonia since 2007, but this only when considering a wide definition of autonomy (that is including the status quo). When taking the option of Catalonia as a federal state within Spain, which implicitly points to more powers than the current status of autonomous community, even in Catalonia we see a positive trend. Hence, we can conclude that while support for independence has been stationary for almost all countries (with the exception of Catalonia since 2012), demand for autonomy—and in particular more autonomy than the status quo—has been slightly positive throughout the period in all cases. This could explain persistent support for separatist parties if these have been able to convince voters that they can bring about such institutional change without falling down the ‘slippery slope’ of full secession.

These results suggest that, in general, the most successful separatist parties in Western Europe in the last 40 years have been able to increase their share of vote without necessarily profiting from changes in grassroots support for independence. Although this apparent paradox might in part be explained by considering support for autonomy, which as mentioned above has slightly increased in the last decades, a full answer can only be provided by looking at the supply side of the equation, that is at party strategy and at the political opportunity structure.

Unfortunately, this goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, one cannot fail to notice that the three regions characterised by the most successful (and persistently so) separatist parties—that is Catalonia, Flanders and Scotland—are relatively rich regions within their parent states. While this is undisputable with regard to Catalonia and Flanders, it is also the case with Scotland when counting the potential revenues of North Sea oil, which have been used by the SNP as a key propaganda asset since the 1970s. This finding is in line with conclusions from works on the relationship between separatism and globalisation. As argued by Sambanis and Milanovic ‘self-determination is typically demanded when the economic benefits of membership in the predecessor state are low relative to the economic and political gains of independence’, although this is likely to happen as ‘an indirect result of globalization in countries with already active conflicts over self-determination’<sup>40</sup>. Hence, separatist parties are strongest in relatively rich regions with an already existent sub-state cultural/national cleavage.<sup>41</sup> This points to the additional importance of structural factors shaping sepa-

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<sup>40</sup> Nicholas Sambanis and Branko Milanovic, *Explaining the Demand for Sovereignty*, Policy Research Working Papers, The World Bank, 2011, p. 225. See also Sorens, *op. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> On nationalism in relatively rich regions characterised by sub-state national/cultural cleavages see Emmanuel Dalle Mulle, *The nationalism of the rich: Discourses and strate-*

ratist success, although, as seen above, even in these regions, the strength of separatism at the grassroots level should not be overestimated. At the same time, the case of the Basque Country, itself a relatively rich region in Spain, where separatist parties peaked in the late 1980s and never went back to the same results, suggests a more complex picture, one that needs to weave together structural, demand-side and supply-side explanations.

### **Conclusion**

This article has aimed at providing a nuanced perspective on the supposed ‘rise’ of separatism in Western Europe. It shows that, while it is true that the overall separatist vote has increased since the 1970s, this has not happened homogeneously in the entire area, nor has it automatically coincided with substantial increases in grassroots support for independence. Half of the countries in our sample did not show any active separatist parties in the timespan analysed. Within the other half, regional variation was great. Hence, the growth of separatism is limited to a handful of Western European regions and, with the exception of Belgium and Italy, it has accounted for a minority of the overall state vote in each of the countries concerned by this phenomenon. Yet, some regions have clearly been characterised by active and successful separatist parties. The overall vote there has increased since the 1970s, although only in Catalonia, Flanders, Northern Italy and Scotland has this been steadily on the rise. Furthermore, when looking at trends in grassroots support for independence in Catalonia, Flanders and Scotland—where separatist parties have been most successful and exhaustive data on public attitudes concerning independence is available—one can conclude, in agreement with the literature on sovereignty-association in Quebec, that changes in support for separatist parties and grassroots support for independence do not necessarily coincide. With the only exception of the recent radicalisation in Catalonia, separatist parties have been able to improve their electoral performance without substantial changes in support for independence. This has been confirmed by regional electoral data revealing that such parties have consistently attracted a sizeable share of votes outside the pro-independence camp. In order to exhaustively explain why this happens, we need a complex model weaving together structural, demand-side and supply-side factors.

Before concluding two further points should be made. First, grassroots radicali-

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*gies of separatist parties in Catalonia, Flanders, Northern Italy and Scotland*, London, Routledge, 2018.

sation remains an avenue for success, as shown by recent events in Catalonia. Yet, while radicalisation might well be a sufficient condition, it is not necessary to explain separatist parties' electoral growth. Second, although parties can win elections without relying on a larger base of pro-independence voters, this does not mean that nothing has changed with regard to the perception of independence and secession in the relevant regions. On the contrary, there is evidence to suggest that people perceive independence as less of a threat than some decades ago. Between the late 1970s and the late 1990s, independence went from being the third preferred constitutional option of the Scottish population, after devolution and the status quo, to being the second, ahead of the status quo.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, McCrone and Paterson have found that about 60% of Scotland's population has contemplated the possibility of voting for independence.<sup>43</sup> ICPS data (covering several years) showed that, in 1991, 67.4% of the Catalan population was afraid that separatism could cause 'problems of coexistence' among citizens of the region.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, this question was not asked in later polls, but in 2014 the *Centre d'Estudis d'Opinio* asked a sample of the Catalan population what effect independence would have on the coexistence of the region's citizens: only 18% believed that this would worsen.<sup>45</sup> We do not have similar data concerning Belgium. Nevertheless, the break-up of the country has become a common topic of discussion both in academic circles and on popular media, suggesting that Flemish independence is no longer a taboo at all.

### Figure Titles and Captions (list)

#### **Figure 1 – Number of separatist parties in existence in Western Europe per five-year periods, 1970-2014**

Source: compiled by author, see supplementary material.

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<sup>42</sup> Paolo, Dardanelli, "Democratic Deficit or the Europeanisation of Secession? Explaining the Devolution Referendums in Scotland", *Political Studies*, 53, 2005, pp. 320–342.

<sup>43</sup> McCrone and Paterson, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>44</sup> ICPS, *op. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> Centre d'Estudis d'Opinio (2014). *Barometre d'opinio politica (BOP). 1<sup>a</sup> onada*, REO 746.

**Figure 2 – Regions recording the highest separatist vote in Western Europe, regional elections, 1980-2015**

Source: compiled by author, see supplementary material.

**Figure 3 – Comparison of Support for independence in Catalonia, Flanders and Scotland, 1991–2014\***

\* Data referring to Catalonia was available for all years in the series. Regarding Scotland, data was available for every year except 1991, 1993–1996, 1998 and 2008. The Flemish series only provides data for federal elections.

Sources: ICPS, several years; Swyngedouw and Rink, 2008; Swyngedouw et al., 2015; McEwen, 2002: 78; SSAS, several years.

**Figure 4 – Electoral results of separatist parties in Catalonia, Flanders and Scotland, general and regional elections, percentage of regional vote, 1970–2015\***

\* The figure shows the results of separatist parties at both regional and general elections as a share of the total regional vote. As in Belgium the regional and general 1995 and 1999 elections were held on the same day, we have taken the regional result (which however differs only slightly from the general one). In 2015, the Spanish regional and general elections were held within less than three months of one another. We have taken only the regional results into account.

Sources: see supplementary material.

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