



# When the context matters: Identity, secession and the spatial dimension in Catalonia<sup>☆</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 15 March 2017

Received in revised form

7 December 2017

Accepted 23 January 2018

### Keywords:

Identity

Context

Personal networks

Independence

Social relations

Geography

## ABSTRACT

Regional and national identities are significant determinants of people's support for secession. Most previous works, however, have implicitly assumed that national identity has a linear unconditional effect. We complement previous works by showing that the relationship between identity and support for secession changes as a function of the context in which an individual interacts, an effect particularly important among those with mixed national and regional identities. The first stage of our empirical analysis is based on a pool of 22,000 individuals in the context of Catalonia (Spain). Findings confirm that dual-identity individuals are especially affected by their immediate surroundings: the probability to vote in favour of independence among them substantially increases when the percentage of people speaking Catalan increases. On a second stage, we explore the existence of a social interaction mechanism by employing a survey that measures the preferences of people's close networks. We show that individual's interaction in like-minded networks modifies the relationship between identity and secession, with the effect being again strong among dual-identity individuals. This group is six times more likely to vote for secession when having only pro-secession close contacts, as compared to having none. These results have implications for studies on regionalism and preferences for territorial decentralization.

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## Introduction

National identity—the cognitive (evaluative and affective) attachment that subjectively links individuals to the nation—has been identified as a major force driving preferences towards territorial decentralization or secession. The general claim in the literature contends that, in contexts where national and regional identities coexist, the higher the regional identity, the more intense the individual's preference for decentralization or secession. Indeed, most previous works have found a strong link between regional identity and secessionist attitudes (see, for instance, Hooghe & Marks, 2004; Paasi, 2009; Sorens, 2005;

Webster, 2007).

However, when explaining decentralization or secessionism, the consequences of the (uneven) geographical distribution of national preferences have been largely neglected. Previous works have generally considered, mostly by default, that regional/national identity is a factor that directly and unconditionally affects an individual's regionalist or secessionist preferences. That is, national identity is supposed to drive citizens' territorial preferences, regardless of where the individual lives or interacts. This assumption implies that, in plurinational contexts, people rarely interact with other identities or, when they do, this interaction does not modulate the relationship between identity and

<sup>☆</sup> A previous version of this article was presented at the Democracy, Elections and Citizenship (DEC) research group of the UAB, and at the Seminar of Department of Constitutional Law and Political Science from the *Universitat de Barcelona*. We thank Jordi Muñoz, Eva Anduiza, Guillem Rico, Guillem Rimbau, Roberto Panico, Albert Falcó-Gimeno and all the audience for their useful insights. We also thank Abel Escribà-Folch for his help on the empirical models, the *Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió* for sharing the geocoded data with us and the DEC research group for granting access to the survey “Emerging forms of political protest: pathways to political inclusion”, funded by the *RecerCaixa* 2014. Toni Rodon also acknowledges financial support from the EUEMOS project (ERC-CoG-2017-647835). We also want to thank the three anonymous reviewers. The data, and replication instructions can be found at <https://doi.org/10.17632/d6ybzktf9v.1>.

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territorial preferences. This widely assumed postulate is strongly rooted to the influential theoretical position of primordialism (Smith, 1995), based on the idea that identities in plurinational contexts are natural phenomena and immutable.

The main goal of this article is to analyse whether (and to what direction) the context plays a role in explaining the relationship between identity and support for secession. This is a relevant question as it addresses the influence an individual's immediate surrounding has in shaping the relationship between identity and support for independence, a hitherto neglected topic in the literature of decentralization and territorial preferences. We complement previous approaches by arguing that, contrary to the assumption of close communities with no interaction between them, most stateless nations tend to have a fair degree of internal heterogeneity. As a result, daily interactions with like-minded individuals or with individuals with different national feelings may modulate the association between identity and secessionist preferences.

As in previous findings, we expect people's national identity to play a major effect in shaping their preferences over secession. However, we take a step further and claim that the context crucially affects the role played by an individual's national identity. We argue that the effect of the immediate context is higher among dual-identity individuals and lower among individuals with exclusive national or regional identities. In this sense, this article integrates a geographical focus on the study of secessionism, a dimension that has largely been neglected (Paasi, 2016).

We investigate this claim by following a research design in two stages. Firstly, we employ a pool of more than 22,500 individuals interviewed in Catalonia in different surveys carried out between June 2011 and November 2014. Catalonia provides an ideal case study given the uneven geographical distribution of political identities across space (Muñoz & Guinjoan, 2013) and the relevance of the ongoing secession debate since 2010 (Cuadras-Morató, 2016). By combining individual and aggregate data at the municipal level, we show that identity plays a differential role according to people's immediate context, and that the effect of the environment is particularly strong among individuals with a dual identity—regional and national. In fact, our evidence shows that for individuals with dual identities, a ten-points increase in the percentage of people speaking Catalan in their immediate surroundings increases their probability to vote in favour of independence more than 7 percentage points.

In the second part of the article, we complement this finding by highlighting the social interaction mechanism—that is, the role played by individual-level networks. By using data from a survey including 1500 individuals interviewed in Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia, we show that the effect of identity on preferences for secession changes as a function of whether an individual's close contacts share the same preference for secession. Findings show that, among dual-identity individuals, moving from a close relational network composed of five anti-secession close contacts to five pro-secession contacts multiplies by six the likelihood of being in favour of independence. Overall, our results challenge previous monolithic assumptions about identity and territorial preferences and emphasize the importance of the context where an individual develops and interacts as a crucial factor that shapes support for secession, especially among individuals with mixed national and regional identities.

### Previous research on context and identity

The place where people live has deep, lasting effects on

people's lives. The immediate context in which individuals interact, namely the social composition of the neighbourhood (Simpson, MacLennan, van Ham, Manley, & Bailey, 2011), is likely to affect an individual's attitudes, opinion or behaviour. This process, conceptualized in the literature as the neighbourhood effects, has triggered a massive volume of work in different fields (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002; Sharkey & Faber, 2014). A major part of extant research has devoted intense efforts to confirm that individuals reinforce, change or adapt their attitudes and behaviour as a function of their immediate context (Sampson et al., 2002; Sharkey & Faber, 2014), in which family, friends and workplace contacts can play different roles (Rindfuss, Choe, Bumpass, & Tsuya, 2004). The debate, however, is still vivid, as previous works still not offer a definitive conclusion. As Simpson et al. put it, “we are still no closer to answering the question of how important neighbourhood effects actually are” (Simpson et al., 2011, p. 3). Part of this might be due to the concept's ambiguity: according to Galster (2012) there are up to fifteen different causal mechanisms explaining the ‘neighbouring effects’, organized in four broad groups of explanations: the social interaction, the environment, the geography and the institutions. It is beyond the scope of this article to summarize all the literature on neighbourhood effects, although it is important to point out that the general finding in political science is that the ‘neighbourhood’ significantly influences an individual's attitudes or behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of the immediate social context has also been considered to study individual's national identity. Previous works have mainly tried to understand whether immigrants living in heterogeneous communities, where natives and foreigners easily interact, are more likely to develop a more pro-integration national identity to the recipient society than immigrants living in homogeneous neighbourhoods. For example, Patacchini and Zenou (2016) find that African American students in poor areas develop a different oppositional identity than those living in more affluent areas. Similarly, Bisin and colleagues (Bisin, Patacchini, Verdier, & Zenou, 2016) find that ethnic minorities are more motivated in retaining their own distinctive cultural heritage the more integrated are the neighbourhoods where they reside and work. In a different context, Lin, Wu, & Lee, (2006) show that voters of the same subethnicity who reside in different geographic locations can have different levels of national identity.

Despite the previous prolific literature, less is known about how the spatial dimension—the ‘neighbourhood’—shapes the effect of regional identity in stateless nations. Crucially, identity in these contexts plays a different role than identity among the immigrant population. As compared to the immigrant's identity, the minority's group regional identity can hold a majority in its region, while still being a minority in the State. This is the case, for example, of Catalonia, Quebec, or Scotland, among others. In nationally-fragmented countries, the state and the region's minority regularly compete against each other to become the dominant framework of reference in the region. In addition, in these contexts, regional identity is considered to have a certain degree of dissimilarity against national identity and both identities (regional and national) are thought to be exclusive for a share of the population. In practical terms, this implies a negative correlation between both identities: people scoring high in regional

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Pattie and Johnston (2000) showed that people are much more likely to change their votes if those with whom they discuss political issues support that direction. Similarly, Enos (2016) showed that, consistent with psychological theories of racial threats, in the US, white voters' turnout dropped by over 10 percentage points after they stopped living close to African Americans.

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