



# Limits to territorial nationalization in election support for an independence-aimed regional nationalism in Catalonia



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## ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*  
Received 2 June 2016  
Received in revised form  
5 August 2017  
Accepted 6 August 2017

*Keywords:*  
Catalonia  
Elections  
Nationalization thesis  
Regional nationalism  
Spain  
Spatial modes

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the territorial cohesion of Catalonia in terms of political affiliations to Catalan nationalist parties in regional elections between 1980 and 2015. The objective is to evaluate the explanatory power of the nationalization thesis, which assumes convergence, uniformity, and nation-wide source of political alignments. Although usually applied to the state-level, the nationalization thesis can do justice to the independence demands of regional nationalist movements as well. The thesis is measured using the two traditional conceptualizations, and a new one which scrutinizes the Catalan-wide distribution of socio-spatial cleavages. The study uses municipal resolution data to provide a detailed insight into Catalan electoral geography. The methods involved include local and global statistical indexes for measuring variation in and distribution of electoral support, and linear and geographically weighted regressions which aim to identify predictor variables and, above all, their spatial (non-)stationarity. The results indicate that spatial patterns of nationalist affiliations are clustered, place-specific, and of a non-stationary character which disproves the nationalization thesis in all its three conceptualizations. As a consequence, the concept of spatial modes within the Catalan territory is introduced.

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## 1. Introduction

The Catalan nationalist movement has experienced dynamic and substantial advancements through occurrences of public discourse and practice, thus allowing greater visibility. This has been particularly evident since 2010, with the Spanish Constitutional Court's decision to cancel improvements to the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia. Significant national sentiment has spread across Catalonia and paved the way for numerous unofficial, municipal independence referendums; the pro-independence turn of several political parties and factions; increasing media coverage and acceptance of nationalist reasoning; and, above all, unprecedented public rallies held annually in Barcelona on the 11th of September, where about 1.5 million people have gathered in recent years (Boylan, 2015; Burg, 2015; Muñoz and Guinjoan, 2013; Rico and Liñeira, 2014). However, at the 2015 regional elections, which were regarded by nationalists as a surrogate to the cancelled independence referendum of 2014 (Orriols and Rodon, 2016), nationalist parties failed to win a majority of votes cast and thus the

call for independence seemed to lack credibility.

The resurgence of nationalism in Catalonia, and more broadly in most of Europe (Conversi, 2014) has been mirrored by substantial academic interest in the topic. With regard to the notion of independence, Paasi (2016) emphasizes its centrality for nationalism in connecting the hot with the banal form of nationalism and keeping the nationalist movement aware and mobilized. While regional nationalisms strive for autonomy/independence from their respective superior states (Keating, 1997) to establish a homogeneous national entity, state-led nationalisms often use the parable of 'independence under threat' to mobilize against the imagined internal enemy (Mandelbaum, 2016) such as social, ethnic and religious minorities (Kuhelj, 2011), against 'external' supranational institutions (notably the EU), or both (Mudde, 2007). Nor is regional nationalism immune to nativism, xenophobia and populism, as we can find at least two examples of such parties in European regions – *Vlaams Belang* in Flanders, Belgium and *Lega Nord* in northern regions of Italy (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2012; Adam and Deschouwer, 2016). However, regional nationalist movements in Catalonia, Quebec, Scotland, and sometimes the Basque Country (Olivieri, 2015) are for the most part considered liberal, civic and inclusive (Kymlicka and Straehle, 1999), though the present-day

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pursuit of independence markedly varies among them, with Catalonia and Scotland at the forefront.

From a geographical point of view, the revival of regional nationalist movements across Europe in recent decades has made visible the challenge to the internal cohesion of societies and territories in established nation-states – as such this is a challenge to the nationalization thesis. Naturally, political geography had to abandon its traditional, predominantly state-centred orientation and transform itself into a framework that better corresponds to the changing scale hierarchies of a globalized society (e.g. McNeill, 2000; Yiftachel, 1999). The prevailing response of many scholars involved a shift in attention from the state level to a regional one, from a state-building process towards sub-state nationalist and regionalist interests. But the investigation into socio-spatial cohesion within those 'national regions' beyond the differences based on the society-wide cleavage structure has rarely been subject to comprehensive research. Several authors have outlined the distribution of support for regional nationalism within the territory of respective regions: Fradera (1990) and Muñoz and Guinjoan (2013) for Catalonia, Raento (1999) and Mansvelt Beck (2005) for the Basque Country, MacLeod (1998) for Scotland, and Agnew (1997) and Shin and Agnew (2002) for northern Italy. Nevertheless, it is still not clear what role these spatial differences can play concerning the case of increasingly explicit articulation of nationalist demands and calls for independence. The efficiency of nationalist ideology and identity in establishing nationalist affiliations evenly across the territory is crucial for ensuring a majority in the popular vote and, especially, the legitimacy of hypothetical independence.

This paper attempts to reveal new insights into the time-space dynamics of the Catalan nationalist movement and its impact on the territorial cohesion of the political unit. More specifically, the aim is to examine spatial patterns of, and probable causes behind, nationalist political affiliations in Catalonia.

Two competing theoretical approaches strive to explain socio-spatial variation in and distribution of political affiliations/behaviour across space and over time – the nationalization thesis and place-specificity account. The main distinction lies in an emphasis on the different drivers behind the distribution of a support base across the territory. The place-specificity account stresses the unique nature of place-histories and their local perceptions as the sources of between-place disparities (Agnew, 1987). In contrast, the nationalization thesis predicts spatially uniform and nation-wide sources of political alignments, with a distribution that is (1) increasingly similar across the sub-units of the territory, or (2) uniform in terms of voting shifts in sub-units with aggregated shifts at the national level from one election to another (Claggett, Flanigan, & Zingale, 1984; Schakel, 2013). Nevertheless, given that national-level sources can also bring about non-congruence/non-uniformity, I stress the need to add a new conceptualization to the nationalization thesis. The distribution of political support is nationalized if it (3) adheres to the distribution of nation-wide socio-spatial cleavages.

In the case of Spain, the nationalization thesis was investigated by Tapiador and Mezo (2009) and Cosano (2013). Whilst providing an interesting insight into Spanish electoral geography, these studies also contain several shortcomings regarding the conceptualization, measurement and aims of the research on nationalization. As Linz and Montero (1999: 199–200) suggest, the centre-periphery cleavage has intensified in the Spanish *Estado de las Autonomías* (State of Autonomies) in recent decades at the expense of the left-right division. Therefore, the main challenge to the 'nationalized' territory is not the difference between the left-right vote but rather the divergent attitudes towards state/regional nationalism, especially in cases where regional nationalism competes with state-wide affiliations (e.g. Catalonia).

The main objective of this study is to examine the explanatory power of the nationalization thesis in Catalonia in terms of the evidence. Electoral support for the Catalan nationalist parties and coalitions *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), *Solidaritat Catalana per la Independència* (SI), *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular* (CUP), and *Junts pel Sí* (JxSí), in Catalan parliamentary elections in the period 1980–2015 is used as a proxy in this regard. The underlying assumption is that since Catalan nationalist parties demand independence from Spain for the territory of Catalonia, this territory should be somehow 'nationalized'. Regional autonomy, electoral visibility and public discourse in favour of nationalism (Orriols and Rodon, 2016; Rico and Liñeira, 2014) support this expectation. Moreover, since liberal/inclusive nationalism is in general identified as a unifying phenomenon (Kymlicka and Straehle, 1999), and the inclusive character of Catalan nationalism is widely reported (cf. Olivieri, 2015), one would expect a cohesive territory, where nationalist electoral support is in accordance with at least one conceptualization of the nationalization thesis, to be a matter of fact, and hence for the nationalization thesis to be corroborated in Catalonia. These two assumptions justify the selection of Catalonia for this study vis-à-vis other cases of regional nationalism in Europe and beyond.

The relevance of the nationalization thesis was tested using global and local spatial statistical indexes for measuring variation in and distribution of votes on a municipal level. To test the relationship between political affiliations and socio-spatial cleavages (conceptualization 3) linear regression and geographically weighted regression (GWR) were employed. This helped to identify predictor variables and any spatial non-stationarity of those variables.

As the data demonstrate, the support base for nationalism is limited to a segment of Catalan territory. Increasing variation in and clustering of nationalist vote, together with the non-stationary leverage of predictor variables across the territory, indicate the absence of cohesive and nation-wide sources of alignments. For this reason, the concept of spatial modes is introduced in section 'Spatial modes in Catalonia' and it is argued that these modes, rather than cohesive territorial configuration, frame the Catalan territory, supporting the place-specificity contextual account.

## 2. Conceptual issues of the nationalization thesis

The main assumptions of the nationalization thesis are that it is understood either as an occurrence driven by the effect generated at the national level, or as a cohesive, uniform and increasingly similar nation-wide spatial pattern of political affiliations, or both (Claggett et al., 1984). With a combination of the two approaches, scholars promoting the nationalization thesis most often posit that patterns of political affiliations and partisanship of the population are generated nationally, and can therefore be explained by the spatial distribution of nation-wide socio-spatial cleavages (Agnew, 1987: 80; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Impulses from the national level may occasionally provoke dissimilarities in political behaviour across sub-units (Claggett et al., 1984: 81–2). Nevertheless, if such non-uniform responses to national-level stimuli adhere to the (re-) distribution of nation-wide cleavages, the premises of nationalization are not violated (cf. Tapiador and Mezo, 2009: 324). In this section, I first contextualize predictions of the nationalization thesis within the broader process of nation-building. I then introduce three conceptualizations of nationalization.

### 2.1. Background of nationalization

Anticipation of national cohesiveness, a necessary prerequisite for the nationalization thesis, is facilitated by a successful nation-

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