Dealing with the Secession Threat: The Strategies of the Spanish and British Governments Compared

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Abstract

A majority in the Scottish and Catalan parliaments supports a referendum on independence. While Scots will vote on 18 September 2004, the Spanish government is against a referendum in Catalonia. This paper seeks to provide an answer to why the British and Spanish governments behave differently in dealing with the possibility of secession of these two nations within their territories. Two sorts of arguments are provided. First, Spain and the UK have experienced two very dissimilar processes of nation- and state-building, as well as coming from two clearly differentiated democratic traditions. Second, there is a clear strategic element. Polls in Scotland suggest that Scots would not vote for independence while in Catalonia around half the population would do so. The combination of both factors explains why the UK government agreed to hold a referendum whereas its Spanish counterpart has blocked all Catalan initiatives to deliver a vote on independence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The extensive literature on territorial politics, federalism, and the accommodation of multinational societies has consistently analysed the cases of Spain and the United Kingdom as two multinational states that contain several ‘minority’ or ‘stateless’ nations within their boundaries. The cases of Catalonia and the Basque Country, and those of Scotland and Wales – alongside other cases in other states such as Quebec in Canada and Flanders in Belgium – have been widely compared from different perspectives: constitutional status, national

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identities, political party systems, etc. (Coakley 1992; Conversi 1997; De Winter 1998; De Winter, Gómez-Reino Cachafeiro, and Lynch 2006; Elias and Tronconi 2011; Erk 2011; Erk and Anderson 2009; Gagnon, Guibernau, and Rocher 2003; Guibernau 1999; 2006; Jeffery 2003; Jeffery and Hough 2003; Keating 1988; 1997; 1998a; 2001a; Lecours 2000; McEwen and Lecours 2008; Rokkan and Urwin 1983; Rudolph and Thompson 1985; Sorens 2008; Swenden 2006). The processes of devolution implemented in the UK (Bogdanor 1999; Brown et al. 1999; Jeffery 2009; Keating 1998b; 2004) and the decentralization process in Spain leading to the so-called Estado de las Autonomías (Colomer 1998; Moreno 2001; 2007; Requejo 2005) aimed at accommodating both Catalan and Scottish demands for self-government through devolved institutions with transferred competencies in relevant policy issues, such as health services and education.

However, recent elections at the sub-state level in Scotland and Catalonia have led to the parliaments in Edinburgh and Barcelona returning a majority for parties in favour of a referendum on the future constitutional status of both stateless nations. In May 2011, the Scottish National Party (SNP) achieved an overall majority in Holyrood against all odds, beating the Additional Member System (AMS) of voting that had been specifically designed to prevent the Nationalists to achieve such majority (McEwen 2009: 69). The SNP returned 69 seats, a majority of four, and had thus a clear way to put in practice its long-desired aim of Scottish independence. Scotland’s path to independence, according to the SNP’s party manifesto, should be based on the premise that ‘the people of Scotland should decide our nation’s future in a democratic referendum’ and consequently the SNP would ‘bring forward [a] Referendum Bill in this next Parliament’ (SNP 2011: 28). Thus, following the election result and the clear SNP victory, it was understood that the re-elected SNP Scottish Government had received a democratic mandate from the Scottish people to hold a referendum on independence.

Following the return of the Catalan nationalist coalition of Convergència i Unió (CiU) to office after the 2010 election, the 2010-2014 Catalan Parliament was marked by a convulsive constitutional situation. Spain’s Constitutional Court had ruled out parts of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy, reformed in 2006 and endorsed by the Catalans in a referendum, to be unconstitutional. This decision triggered a reported one million-strong protest demonstration in Barcelona on 10 July 2010. CiU won the subsequent election in November on the demand
to bring forward a new fiscal agreement for Catalonia akin to the Basque system of full fiscal autonomy, where the regional institutions collect all the taxes levied in the region and transfer a small contribution to the central government for the services that the latter provides (Castells 2001; Herrero Alcalde, Ruiz-Huerta Carbonell, and Vizán Rodríguez 2010). This fiscal demand was backed by the Catalan Parliament in July 2012 and subsequently posed to the Spanish central government, led by the right-wing *Partido Popular* (PP) since late 2011, through a meeting between the Catalan Premier, Artur Mas, and the Spanish PM, Mariano Rajoy, on 20 September 2012. The meeting followed another episode of Catalan nationalist mass mobilization consisting on another one million-strong march in Barcelona on Catalonia’s national day – 11 September – that gathered under the clear-cut secessionist motto of ‘Catalonia, the next state in Europe’. PM Rajoy rejected granting full fiscal autonomy for Catalonia and subsequently Artur Mas dissolved the Catalan Parliament and called for a snap regional election in November 2012. Mas argued that the CiU’s proposal consisted of extended fiscal powers for the Catalan institutions and facing the unwillingness of the Spanish government to grant this particular demand, the CiU had to seek the voters’ validation via a democratic mandate to go ‘beyond’ this constitutional aim. ‘The Parliament and Government resulting from this election will have a mandate from the citizens’, according to Mr Mas, who specified the scope of the mandate by arguing that ‘[t]hese Parliament has voted more than once in favour of Catalonia’s right to self-determination. It is time to execute this right’ (Mas 2012: 35).

The November 2012 Catalan election campaign unavoidably revolved around the issue of independence, with CiU declaring in its election manifesto that ‘[i]t is the right time for Catalonia to set its path towards its ‘own state’ [*estat propi]*’ and accordingly a CiU-led Catalan executive would ‘put forward a consultation in the next parliament so the Catalan people can freely and democratically determine its collective future’ (CiU 2012: 9, 13). The CiU did however suffer a setback in the election. The nationalist coalition returned 50 seats, a loss of twelve, and despite being the clear winners the result left them far from the required 68 seats to form a majority in the Parliament. However, the loss of CiU benefited the left-of-centre pro-independence *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), which came as runners-up with 21 seats. ERC, which demands independence, also backed a referendum. Therefore, the 71 seats of the CiU and ERC combined secured a majority of 3 in favour of a referendum,
which is further extended by the support to a consultation of the post-communist and greens of the Iniciativa per Catalunya-Verds (ICV) (13 seats) and the pro-independence and socialist Candidatures d’Unitat Popular (CUP) (3 seats). Thus, there is a comfortable pro-referendum majority in the Catalan Parliament, albeit discussions between and within the parties on the shape of the question and on how it could be delivered remain open in the aftermath of the election (see Martí 2013).

To sum up, then, two sub-state nationalist executives are in office in Scotland (SNP) and Catalonia (CiU) and both have put forward a demand to hold a referendum on the independence of their nations which is backed by a majority in the respective regional parliaments. The prospect of secession has been largely regarded as the least desired option for central institutions because it implies a substantial loss of the state’s territory, population, and economic resources (McEwen and Lecours 2008; Rudolph and Thompson 1985). However, the reaction of the central governments affected in these two cases has been totally opposite: the British government agreed to the SNP’s claim to hold a referendum on independence while the Spanish government has so far rejected such a claim from the Catalanist parties. On the aftermath of the 2011 Scottish election, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, said that ‘on the issue of the United Kingdom, if they [SNP] want to hold a referendum, I will campaign to keep our United Kingdom together’ (BBC, 6 May 2011), thus leaving the door open for a referendum to take place. Negotiations between the British and Scottish governments followed on the form of the question, the timing, and the legal procedure to deliver the referendum and an agreement was reached on October 2012. The so-called Edinburgh Agreement establishes the legal mechanisms to hold the referendum via the transfer of the competence on constitutional issues – Section 30 of the Scotland Bill – from Westminster to Holyrood. A referendum will be held on 18 September 2014 with Scots answering the question ‘Should Scotland be an independent country?’

On the other hand, the Spanish government has so far rejected any initiative leading to a similar referendum in Catalonia. Soon after the election, the Catalan parliament passed a resolution – with the parties that support a referendum voting in favour – declaring the Catalans’ ‘right to decide’ their future and defining Catalonia as a ‘sovereign political subject’. This resolution, which has no legal effects, was nevertheless appealed against by the Spanish government to Spain’s Constitutional Court, which automatically suspended its validity.
Spain’s Deputy PM argued that declaring Catalonia ‘sovereign’ violates Spain’s Constitution, with Article 2 consecrating the unity of the Spanish Nation (La Vanguardia, 1 March 2013). Informal meetings between leading politicians in Madrid and Barcelona have followed but the Spanish government, through different ministers, and the PP have publicly rejected to hold an independence referendum in Catalonia; whereas the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), in the opposition, also rejects this scenario. The common position of both parties against a referendum to decide Catalonia’s constitutional status was further enhanced in April 2014 when the Spanish Congreso overwhelmingly rejected the Catalan Parliament’s plea to be given the competency to organize the consultation (La Vanguardia, 9 April 2014).

Hence, the similar demand for an independence referendum in Scotland and Catalonia has been dealt in opposite ways from the British and Spanish central governments. Whereas the Scots will vote in September 2014, the Catalans will not. This paper aims to provide an explanation on the reasons underlying this difference in constitutional politics from a comparative perspective. After the research question and methodology have been outlined in the following section, two different explicative factors will be analysed. Section three discusses the differences in the state- and nation-building processes in Spain and the UK that have led to different understandings on the nature of the ‘nation’ in each case. This will be framed on a historical institutionalism perspective. Section four discusses strategic choices taken by central government to explain their decision to allow or forbid a referendum on independence. Public support for independence in survey polls may be an indicator on the likeability of the referendum outcome, while other strategic arguments may be the actual low (or high) risks in terms of letting a part of the state to secede – in terms of the relative population, economic weight, etc. This second group of factors will be dealt with from a rational choice perspective. Finally, section five concludes and sets possible evolutions on how both states will have to deal with the prospect of secession in the near future.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to provide an explanation to a causality effect. Given two similar situations – i.e. a widely-backed demand for a constitutional referendum – in two different cases, we aim to determine which causal mechanisms lead to a clearly differentiated outcome; that is, permitting or forbidding the aforementioned demand for a referendum. The comparative method is appropriate in this situation for it allows to account for the differences in the
explicative factors to explain the differences in the outcome. The research question we aim to answer is rather straightforward: ‘Why did the British government allow a referendum on Scottish independence to take place while the Spanish government does not in Catalonia?’

We present two sets of factors as prospective explanations to answer the question. First, processes of state- and nation-building that have evolved towards a plural constitutional recognition of the state’s minority nations will favourably impact the state’s view as a ‘union-state’ (Rokkan and Urwin 1983), resulting in a recognition of a certain ‘right’ for the member parts of such a ‘union’ to decide whether they want to keep its membership or not. By contrasts, state formation based and influenced by unitary tendencies will tend to regard the nation(-state) as uni-national and indivisible and accordingly no formal constitutional recognition will be given to the so-called stateless nations. In such a scenario, the state’s demos is regarded as one and is not conceived that certain sub-state demois (Erk 2010; Requejo 2004; 2005; 2010) exist or can impose constitutional change on its own accord. In this latter case a constitutional referendum will be utterly rejected. This first factors leads to the following hypothesis:

**H1: The higher the recognition of the state’s multinational character and the specificities of the stateless nations, the higher the probability that the central government will permit an independence referendum.**

Second, we include rational choice elements in the decision to allow or forbid a referendum on independence. Central government’s strategy will be influenced by the probable outcome of the referendum. To begin with, assuming that secession is the least desired outcome for the central government elites (Sorens 2008; Zuber 2011), a referendum offers the possibility to central state agents to reinforce the legitimacy of the permanence of the stateless nation within its parent state by defeating the secessionists in a referendum. Thus, it seems plausible that central governments will be more tolerant towards allowing a referendum on independence if they are confident that voters will reject the secessionist project. On the other hand, if the sub-state population is perceived to be massively in favour of independence, this creates incentives for central state authorities to deny a referendum which would clearly emphasise the existence of such a pro-independence majority in the secessionist territory. Second, a strategic choice may affect the decision if the risks of secession involve the departing from the state of rich and populated territories. Put it
differently, the stakes will be higher for the central government if the secession of a part of the state’s territory heavily jeopardizes the overall economic performance of the state. Accordingly, it would be easier to accept a referendum on independence in a relatively worse-off territory with a small population that risking the independence of a stateless nation that represents, for example, a quarter of the state’s population or its GDP. Therefore, two further hypotheses are presented relating to this second group of factors:

**H2:** The most likely voters are perceived to reject secession in a referendum, the most likely it is for a referendum on independence to be granted by central governments.

**H3:** The richer and more important in terms of population the secessionist territory is, the less likely it is that a referendum on independence will be permitted by central state authorities.

Sections 3 and 4 will deeply analyse these two sets of factors. The first group will be analysed through the perspective of historical institutionalism and path dependence, accounting for the historical processes of state- and nation-building occurred in Spain and the UK that led to different conceptions of the state and nation(s) in the two cases. The second group of factors will be dealt with from a rational choice perspective. The research methods include a literature review on nation-building in both cases; the analysis of public support for independence; socio-demographic and economic indicators; and a comprehensive review of press articles and political party and official documents containing elite views on the issue of independence.

3. NATION- AND STATE-BUILDING IN SPAIN AND THE UK

The advance of nationalism and the construction of nations in Western Europe has been regarded as an essentially modern phenomenon (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983) following the spread of the modern state organization based on the Westphalian model. However, the amalgamation of state and nation as identical socio-political communities has resulted far from being perfect (Connor 1994) despite the different nature of state formation processes. Unitary states would aim at the complete converge of state and nation whereas so-called union states would bring together former separate socio-cultural realities under the same state umbrella (Rokkan and Urwin 1983). The latter was certainly the case after the 1707 Treaty of Union between the kingdoms of Scotland and England that founded the United Kingdom of Great Britain. Albeit the Scottish Parliament ceased to exist and the UK became
formally a centralised state, Scotland retained a high degree of autonomy in important matters such as religion, the education system, banking, and civil law (Paterson 1994). This was accompanied by a lack of interest in London in creating a strong sense of British national sentiment in Scotland and the implicit recognition of national distinctiveness remained (Keating 1997; McCrone 2003).

Arguably the origins of the Kingdom of Spain can be traced back to a union-state type of state formation, with former medieval kingdoms falling into the Catholic Kings jurisdiction but with the different state parts retaining its rights and privileges, including the Crown of Aragon – which comprised Catalonia. However, the War of Spanish Succession ended with the victory of the Bourbons and the new king Phillip V abolished all the regional charters through the Nueva Planta decrees, thus shifting Spain’s statecraft towards a unitary model based on the Bourbon-established centralized model of state in France (Keating 1988; 2001a; Guibernau 1999). Since then centralism and unitarism have been the most common evolution of Spain’s territorial organization with only a few challenges to that pattern posed by the proposed federal constitution of the short-lived First Republic – heavily influenced by Catalanist federalist figures – and the Mancomunitat de Catalunya in the early 20th century. The granting of autonomy to Catalonia during the Second Spanish Republic was not accompanied by a specific recognition of Catalonia’s national distinctiveness and autonomy was abolished after Franco’s Nationalists won the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). The 40-year long dictatorship aimed at crushing any sentiment of non-Spanish peripheral nationalism, particularly the Catalan and Basque, with policies ranging from the banning of the languages, changes of locations’ names, forcing people to take Spanish given names, etc. (Harvie 1994; Llobera 1997).

After the dictator’s death, a transition to democracy followed leading to the Constitution of 1978, which recognizes a right to autonomy for Spain’s regions and nationalities. The latter term has been interpreted to refer to the stateless nations of Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galicia (Aja 2001; Brassloff 1989), albeit the Constitution does not say so explicitly nor does it make any distinction between regions and nationalities. Furthermore, after several devolutionary phases the so-called Estado de las Autonomías has a rather homogenous character with no substantial differences in powers between the two types of regional entities (Guibernau 2000) and some Spanish Comunidades Autónomas beyond the long-regarded
triad of historic nationalities define themselves as nationalities as well (Keating 2001b). Hence, the multinational character of Spain is only envisaged through a loose acknowledge of an undefined group of nationalities that are entitled to regional autonomy, but the ‘indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation’ – note the capital N – as defined in the Constitution’s Article 2 clearly reinforces the predominant role of the centre and a mononational view of Spain (Agranoff 2004).

This view was notoriously challenged by the 2006 reform of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy. After the initial reform proposal declared Catalonia as a nation in its first article, negotiations in the Spanish Parliament modified this assertion and confirmed Catalonia’s definition as a nationality. However, the preamble of the reformed Statute of Autonomy boldly asserted that the Parliament of Catalonia had declared Catalonia to be a nation. The Constitutional Court invalidated this assertion in its famous ruling (STC 31/2010) on the Catalan Statute of Autonomy, by confirming the main constitutional interpretation of Spain as a unitary nation-state. Albeit admitting that the concept ‘nation’ is subject to multiple interpretations, the Court confirmed that ‘regarding solely and exclusively the nation in a judicial-constitutional sense [...] the Constitution acknowledges only the Spanish Nation’ and thus the definition of Catalonia as a nation lacked juridical value although the Court accepts that Catalonia may be regarded as a nation in a ‘ideological, historical or cultural sense’. The interpretation of the Constitutional Court, which is also backed by the main Spanish political parties, has therefore little to do in constitutional terms with other interpretations that describe Spain as a ‘nation of nations’ (Moreno 2007). This majority view of Spain heavily differs from the way central elites in London see the UK, and in particular the separate national characters of England and Scotland and the wide recognition of Scotland as a nation. As Keating (1998b: 202) puts it,

‘In Britain, [...] symbolic recognition is given freely to the minority nations. Their cultural institutions are given the title of ‘national’, official usage accords them the status of nations, and they even have their own teams in some international sports competitions. Their flags are flown on all manner of occasions, without any serious conflict’.

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Even most significantly, and beyond the symbolic realm, the long debate on constitutional doctrine between the Westminster view of sovereignty-in-parliament and the Scottish favoured view that sovereignty in Scotland lies within its people (Kidd 2008) has been effectively sorted out by the recognition of the Westminster parties that Scotland could not be kept in the Union against its will, thus acknowledging *de facto* Scotland’s right to self-determination (Keating 2009).

The key distinction between Spain and the UK is the different understanding of the nature of nation and state. While the UK has been understood, both in London and Edinburgh, as a multinational union-state with more-or-less clearly delimited nations, the view of Spain as a ‘nation of nations’ is only envisaged by the peripheral nationalists and a tiny minority within some leftist statewide parties; whereas political elites at the centre stick to the unitary view of Spain as a homogeneous nation-state. The current constitutional debate triggered by the Catalan nationalist parties in their bid to hold a referendum on Catalonia’s independence has met the frontal opposition with the Madrid-based elites from both the PP and the PSOE on the grounds that a region – i.e. a part of the ‘Nation’ – cannot decide about the nature or organizational structure of the whole Spanish nation. Spanish PM Rajoy recently asserted that the right to decide on Spain’s future belongs to the whole people of Spain and that the Articles 1 and 2 of Spain’s Constitution are beyond any possible discussion (La Vanguardia, 25 November 2013b). Similarly, the former leader of the PSOE, Mr Alfredo Pérez-Rubalcaba, also rejected the Catalans’ right to vote on independence and assured that he wants ‘the Catalans to vote, but to vote for a reform of Spain’s Constitution’ (La Vanguardia, 25 October 2013a). The PSOE-sponsored proposal to reform Spain’s Constitution in a federal sense (PSOE 2013) implies as well that the new Constitution be approved by Spain as a whole entity, first in the Spanish Parliament by an overwhelming majority and then in a state-wide referendum, following the established constitutional procedure.

The contrasting views of state and nation in Spain and the UK have also had important implications when central governments have faced such a delicate demand in the form of a referendum on secession. It has been argued that multinational states ought to be regarded as being comprised by a state-wide *demos* alongside concurrent *demoi* representing the sub-state nations (Erk 2011; Requejo 2001). This pattern is clearly identifiable in the UK with a British-wide demos coexisting alongside Scottish, English, Welsh and Northern Irish *demoi*. 
This interpretation facilitates the establishment of boundaries to determine who is entitled to take the decision based on the effective recognition of the different national *demoi* that co-exist in the state. However, this is not the case in Spain where such a plurality of *demos* is completely rejected by the central elites, which at the end of the day proves the acceptance of such a constitutional referendum is highly unlikely. The decentralization process *tout court* in Spain has also boosted regional and therefore dual identities in most regions, including Catalonia (Moreno 2001), and the establishment of up to seventeen *Comunidades Autónomas* has also diluted the specific character of Catalonia, which is regarded by many in the centre and other non-self-assertive regions as one region among many others. Therefore, it is difficult to establish a clear boundary between the Catalans and non-Catalans in the sense that Scotland and England can be set apart, because, to put it simply, there is no England in Spain (Keating 2001c: 109).

To sum up, then, both the British and Spanish governments have made it clear that they are against the secession of Scotland and Catalonia. However, the different nation- and state-building processes and the understanding of state and nation in both cases explains the difference on why the UK Government agreed to an independence referendum being held in Scotland and the Spanish government not allowing a similar consultation in Catalonia. The lack of homogenizing nation-building attempts in the UK alongside the maintenance of a certain institutional particularism in Scotland, which even preceded devolution (Paterson 1994), led to an understanding of the UK as a union-state in which the central elites have respected the separate national character of its constituent parts and therefore, following a clear democratic mandate from the Scottish electorate to hold a referendum on independence, the British government agreed to permit such demand.

Conversely, Spain’s history of attempting to establish a unitary nation-state has led, despite the presence of considerably assertive sub-state nationalist movements to envisage Spain as a mono-national state and only recently, after the democratic transition, to acknowledge a rather loose cultural pluralism through the granting of autonomy to the *nationalities*, the recognition of non-Castilian languages as co-official, and the acceptance to define these territories as cultural or historical *nations*. However, in constitutional terms, the central view remains that the Spanish state is made of just one and indivisible ‘Nation’ and accordingly an integral part of this ‘Nation’ has no right to modify on its own the territorial status quo of the
state. Hence, allowing a referendum on Catalonia’s independence is something that would shake the foundations of Spain’s concept as a nation and is therefore rejected. The analyses of the constitutional and historic dimensions of both the UK and Spain seem to confirm our Hypothesis 1. The next section discusses rather more contextual and strategic elements in explaining both central governments’ decisions.

4. STRATEGIC CHOICES AND RISK-MANAGEMENT FACING THE PROSPECT OF SECESSION

Political actors tend to take actions that are best suited to serve their own needs and objectives. It has been clearly stated throughout this paper that central governments tend to be against losing a part of the state’s territory because of the demographic, economic, and symbolic loses that secession entails. Referendums are mechanisms that facilitate secession and states might be reluctant to accede to implement them since there is a risk that the people involved decide to support independence. However, if the perception of the central government is that people may reject an independence bid at the polls it might be an interesting idea to secure the stateless nations’ desire to stay within the state and inflict a severe defeat to the parties and other political actors that support independence. In other words, following a No vote in an independence referendum, the question of the stateless nation becoming independence might be settled for once and for good.

Central governments may consider several indicators to get a perception on the level of support for independence in a specific region. A common proxy used in the academia may be the strength of stateless nationalist parties that advocate independence (Sorens 2008: 330). However, this measure is not that relevant when discussing the prospect of allowing or preventing a referendum on independence. If support for pro-independence parties is low or even moderate, it is highly unlikely that a demand for an independence referendum will come forward from the sub-state institutions. Even when a pro-independence party is in power, such as the SNP in Scotland following the 2007 election, there is the possibility that the referendum demand will not be put on the central government’s table because the secessionists are not strong enough. This is what occurred in the 2007-2011 Scottish Parliament, when the unionist parties together could block a referendum bill in Holyrood and
defeat the SNP government. On the other hand, when parties that support independence, or the call for a referendum on the issue, are in a majority position in the sub-state parliament, the demand for a referendum will be necessarily faced by central governments, as the current situation in Scotland and Catalonia clearly shows.

Opinion surveys may then be an indicator on how people may vote if the issue of independence is put to them. Although granting the vote entails a calculated risks, if polls suggest that the bid for independence will be clearly defeated there is an incentive for the central government to permit the vote. This reasoning may lead to a confirmation of Hypothesis 2 in the cases of Scotland and Catalonia. Support for independence has tended to be rather stable in Scotland for years, and even reached the lowest levels when the SNP came into office in 2007 (Curtice et al. 2009: 58). Figure 1 shows the evolution of constitutional preferences in Scotland, with independence being constantly beaten by those who preferred a devolved Scottish Parliament within the UK.

**Figure 1. Constitutional Preferences in Scotland (1999-2014)**

![Graph showing constitutional preferences in Scotland](image)

*Source: Scottish Social Attitudes (from Curtice 2014).*

Independence has received a consistent support of between a quarter and a third of the population, according to the Scottish Attitudes Survey, which nevertheless represents but a
significant minority. In this sense, one may think that voters may be more inclined to reject independence rather than embracing it if a referendum on the issue is called. The Scottish public’s leaning towards a No vote on 18 September has been constantly confirmed in recent polls taken throughout the referendum campaign, in which the No has taken the lead in almost every single survey.³

Public support for independence was traditionally low in Catalonia and it was further contained following the reform of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy in 2006 (Guibernau 2007: 54). However, the eventual ruling of Spain’s Constitutional Court – published in June 2010 – led to an overwhelming rejection of the Catalan political elites and also translated into a progressive increase of public support for independence since 2010. In just two years, support for independence not only doubled reaching around 40% in a multi-preference constitutional question, but also became the first constitutional choice of the Catalan respondents, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Constitutional Preferences in Catalonia (1999-2012)**

![Graph showing constitutional preferences in Catalonia from 1999 to 2012](image)

*Source: ICPS annual opinion survey (1999-2012).*⁴

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³ See for instance the poll tracker available at the BBC website which contains survey data for the last 12 months provided by six different survey sources (available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/events/scotland-decides/poll-tracker).

⁴ The constitutional options in the original in Catalan read: ‘Una regió d’Espanya’; ‘Una Comunitat Autònoma d’Espanya’; ‘Un Estat d’una Espanya federal’; and ‘Un Estat independent’.
Support for independence has not decreased since the Catalan Parliament’s commitment to call for an independence referendum on 9 November 2014. The last survey of the Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió shows that in a multi-preference constitutional question like the one shown in Figure 2, those who supported independence represented 45% of the respondents. Furthermore, the same survey asked the same intended question(s) to be asked to the Catalans on 9 November, as agreed by four parties in the Catalan Parliament: “Do you want Catalonia to become a state? And, if yes, do you want this state to be independent?” The results show that those supporting Catalonia to become an independent state account for 47% of the respondents; while those rejecting the term “independent” were around 30% (CEO 2014).

This data suggests that support for independence might be higher in Catalonia than it is in Scotland and, given the late boost that independence support has experienced, it might have very well convinced the central government in Madrid that if a referendum takes place, there is a chance that secessionists may win it. Therefore, the considerable public support for the independence prospect has an influence on the central government’s decision to reject any possibility to ask the Catalans about whether they want to secede from Spain.

The position of both the British and Spanish governments regarding the independence referendums in Scotland and Catalonia is further strengthened when the economic and demographic consequences of such secessions would imply both for the UK and Spain. On the one hand, Scotland represents around a tenth of the UK’s population and its economic importance is relative. Catalonia, on the other hand, represents a large share of Spain’s GDP. Put simply, Catalonia’s independence would mean a bigger blow to Spain that what Scottish independence might mean for the rest of the UK, which contributes to explaining the Spanish central government’s decision to forbid a referendum in the former case; while the British government acceded to celebrate a referendum in Scotland.

5. CONCLUSION

Faced by a similar demand, a referendum on independence sponsored by a stateless nationalist majority in the sub-state parliament, the British and Spanish governments have reacted differently. Scots will vote on 18 September 2014 on whether they want to be independent; whereas the Catalan referendum announced on 9 November 2014 has been
and will certainly continue to be opposed by the Spanish government. This paper has tried to unpack the reasoning underlying each government’s decision to allow or forbid the demand for a referendum but with the same aim in mind: to avoid the secession both of Scotland and Catalonia.

The decision of the British government to accept a referendum in Scotland is grounded both on institutional and strategic factors. Amongst the former there is the long democratic tradition in the UK and the commitment to respect the will of the Scottish people that gave a clear democratic mandate to the SNP to hold the referendum. Besides, the prospect of independence is grounded on the de facto recognition of the British state of Scotland’s right to self-determination, with a wide acceptance of Scotland’s national character and the UK as a union-state, with no constituent nation being able to be enforced to stay in against its people’s will. Furthermore, strategic choices may have strengthened the British government willingness to allow a referendum. The limited appeal that independence has traditionally had amongst the Scottish public may have provided an interesting incentive for Westminster to have the vote, defeat the SNP at the polls and forget about independence for a long time, a situation which may resemble the 1995 referendum in Quebec and its evolution afterwards.

On the other hand, the Spanish government has blocked, and will continue to do so, any attempt by the Catalan institutions to hold a referendum on independence. These blockades have included the appeal against symbolic resolutions by the Catalan Parliament that declared Catalonia’s right to decide its constitutional future, to the straightforward rejection to cede the central government competency to organize a referendum to the Catalan institutions. The imminent law that the Catalan will pass to call for the referendum on 9 November will be brought right afterwards by the central government to the Constitutional Court, a mechanism that invalidates the regional law automatically. The reasons underlying the Spanish government decision are both institutional and historic, in the sense that the main view is that Spain is a unitary Nation and therefore Catalonia is not, and accordingly cannot claim a right to self-determination that is not contained in the Spanish constitution. Besides, even if the referendum was a consultative one, the Spanish government surely fears that the Catalans might vote for independence, a scenario that would create a formidable democratic problem. Catalan independence following a referendum would mean a considerable setback
for Spain’s already struggling economy, which adds fuel to the government’s position of prohibition of the referendum.

It is worth asking which of the two factors matters more. It seems like the way that state and nation are perceived is crucial to understand each government’s position. It is complicated to guess what would have the British government done if Scotland clearly spearheaded the UK’s economy; but one must bear in mind that around 90% of the oil reserves in the UK are on Scottish shores (Keating 2009). This is an example that economic interests might take a secondary role to the fact that the UK has been traditionally perceived as a union-state with the acknowledgement that the Scots would be free to go if they wanted to. Likewise, it is unlikely that the Spanish government would agree to hold a referendum in another Spanish region, even if it was an economically struggling one. The unitary character of the Spanish nation espoused by the central political elites and the defence of the Constitution leaves little margin to other factors weighting in the decision. However important the institutional-historic views of the state and nation are, the other practical factors have probably strengthened each of the central government’s decisions regarding the celebration of independence referenda in Scotland and Catalonia.

To conclude, we all need to wait and see if both governments’ strategies have been successful in maintaining Scotland and Catalonia within the UK and Spain. Following a Yes vote in Scotland on 18 September, the strategic choices of the British government would have clearly failed. Conversely, if the Scots reject independence, the constitutional debate will entirely focus on extended devolution and it remains to be seen if independence will be pursued again in the short term. The situation in Catalonia is far more delicate. Forbidding the referendum has not appeased public support for independence and some Catalan nationalist parties may want to pursue more radical and unilateral ways to achieve secession. The forthcoming years in Catalan and Spanish politics will be highly unstable, and it remains to be seen if the central government’s decision to ban any referendum will avoid Catalan independence. If the referendum took place on 9 November, perhaps those against independence would prevail; but if a solution is not given to the parties and people that want to break out with Spain, in a few years’ time it might be too late to make amends.
REFERENCES


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