

Spain and Catalonia: Identity, Autonomy, and Conflict

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Abstract

The conflict between Catalonia and Spain represents one of the most enduring identity-based disputes in contemporary Europe. Rooted in historical autonomy, cultural distinctiveness, and evolving political aspirations, Catalan nationalism has shifted from demands for self-government to claims for independence. This article examines the historical evolution of Catalan identity, the institutional framework of Spanish decentralization, and the political crisis culminating in 2017. It further explores economic grievances, judicialization of politics, and comparative insights from other multinational democracies. The study argues that the persistence of the conflict reflects deeper tensions between constitutional rigidity and demands for recognition, highlighting the need for negotiated political solutions in plurinational states.

Keywords: Catalan nationalism, autonomy, fiscal imbalance, identity politics, self-determination, constitutional conflict

Introduction

Spain is widely understood as a plurinational state composed of historically distinct regions such as Catalonia, Basque Country, and Galicia. These regions possess unique linguistic, cultural, and political traditions that predate the consolidation of the modern Spanish state. The Spanish Constitution of 1978 attempted to reconcile this diversity by creating a decentralized system of autonomous communities while firmly asserting the unity of the state.

However, this constitutional compromise has remained inherently fragile. The tension between autonomy and unity has generated periodic conflicts, with Catalonia emerging as the most politically salient case. Catalan nationalism has evolved from a cultural movement into a mass political project that questions the limits of Spain's constitutional framework.

The Catalan case illustrates a broader dilemma in multinational democracies: how to balance territorial integrity with the democratic expression of distinct national identities. This tension is not unique to Spain but resonates globally, making the Catalan conflict a critical case for comparative political analysis.

Theoretical Framework: Identity, Power, and Legitimacy

Understanding the Catalan conflict requires moving beyond descriptive accounts to engage with deeper theoretical debates on nationalism, statehood, and democratic legitimacy.

The concept of imagined communities, articulated by Benedict Anderson, provides a foundational lens. Anderson argues that nations are socially constructed through shared narratives, linguistic practices, and symbolic communication. In the Catalan case, language policy, education, and media have played a central role in sustaining a distinct national consciousness. Catalan identity is not merely inherited but continuously reproduced through institutions of everyday life. Complementing this, Anthony D Smith emphasizes the importance of historical memory, myths, and symbols. Catalan

nationalism draws upon events such as 1714 and cultural traditions to construct a narrative of historical continuity and collective grievance. This ethnosymbolic dimension explains why the conflict persists even when material conditions improve.

From a political economy perspective, theories of fiscal federalism highlight the distributional tensions inherent in decentralized systems. Catalonia's claims of fiscal imbalance reflect not only economic concerns but also questions of fairness and recognition. Fiscal grievances gain political traction when they are framed within identity narratives. Additionally, theories of multinational federalism (e.g., asymmetrical federalism) provide insight into institutional design. Spain's system, often described as a "state of autonomies," lacks the clarity and symmetry of classical federations. This ambiguity creates space for competing interpretations of authority and sovereignty.

The principle of self-determination further complicates the analysis. While widely accepted in decolonization contexts, its application within established democracies remains contested. Liberal democratic theory supports the idea that political communities should have a voice in determining their future. However, constitutionalism imposes limits to preserve state stability. The Catalan conflict thus represents a clash between democratic legitimacy (the will of a people) and constitutional legality (the rule of law). Finally, the concept of "post-sovereignty" is increasingly relevant. In an era of globalization and supranational governance (e.g., the European Union), sovereignty is no longer absolute. Yet, paradoxically, nationalist movements continue to seek statehood. Catalonia exemplifies this tension between integration and fragmentation in contemporary politics.

Historical Evolution of Catalan Identity

The historical evolution of Catalan identity is deeply rooted in the medieval consolidation of political, linguistic, and institutional distinctiveness within the Crown of Aragon. Catalonia developed its own legal frameworks, representative institutions such as the Corts, and a thriving mercantile economy centered in Barcelona, which fostered a strong sense of regional consciousness. Unlike homogenizing nation-building processes elsewhere in Europe, Catalan identity was historically anchored in a combination of political autonomy and cultural particularism. This early formation aligns with broader theoretical insights on nationhood, particularly those of Benedict Anderson, who conceptualizes nations as socially constructed communities shaped by shared language and historical experience.

A decisive rupture occurred in the early 18th century following the War of the Spanish Succession, when the Bourbon monarchy imposed the Nueva Planta decrees, dismantling Catalonia's autonomous institutions and enforcing administrative centralization. Despite political suppression, Catalan identity endured through cultural reproduction, particularly during the 19th-century *Renaixença*. This cultural revival reasserted the Catalan language and literary tradition as key markers of identity, transforming cultural nationalism into a precursor for political mobilization. In this context, the evolution of Catalan identity reflects what Eric Hobsbawm terms the "invention of tradition," where historical narratives and cultural symbols are selectively revived to construct a cohesive national consciousness.

The 20th century marked the transition from cultural assertion to explicit political nationalism. While limited autonomy was restored during the Second Spanish Republic, the subsequent repression under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco intensified the symbolic significance of language and identity as forms of resistance. The democratic transition and the 1978 Spanish Constitution reinstated Catalonia's autonomy, institutionalized through the Generalitat, yet tensions between regional aspirations and state sovereignty persist. In contemporary discourse, Catalan identity operates within a complex interplay of historical memory, democratic legitimacy, and globalization, making it a dynamic case for examining sub-state nationalism within modern Europe.

Economic Grievances and Fiscal Debates

Catalonia's economic strength has made fiscal redistribution a central issue. While claims of fiscal deficit are politically powerful, they are best understood as part of a broader narrative of perceived injustice. Economic grievances alone do not explain the rise of independence sentiment. Rather, they interact with identity-based claims, reinforcing a sense of distinctiveness and unfair treatment.

Political Mobilization and the 2017 Crisis

The 2010 Constitutional Court ruling marked a turning point, transforming moderate autonomy demands into a mass independence movement. Civil society mobilization, electoral victories of pro-independence parties, and the 2017 referendum culminated in a constitutional crisis. The events of 2017 revealed competing conceptions of legitimacy: constitutional legality versus democratic expression.

Judicialization and Constitutional Constraints

Spain's reliance on judicial mechanisms to resolve political disputes has intensified the conflict. While courts ensure legal order, they are less equipped to address underlying political grievances. The judicialization of the Catalan issue has contributed to polarization and weakened trust in institutions, highlighting the limits of legalistic approaches to political problems.

Comparative Perspectives: Scotland, Quebec, and Beyond

A deeper comparative analysis reveals how different institutional approaches shape the trajectory of secessionist movements.

In Scotland, the 2014 referendum was made possible through the Edinburgh Agreement between the UK and Scottish governments. This negotiated approach enhanced democratic legitimacy, even though independence was rejected. The process demonstrated that allowing institutional channels for self-determination can reduce conflict intensity.

In Quebec, referendums in 1980 and 1995 were followed by a landmark ruling of the Supreme Court of Canada, which established that a clear democratic mandate for independence would require negotiation. This framework balanced constitutional order with democratic principles.

In contrast, Spain's refusal to authorize a referendum reflects a more rigid constitutional model. This rigidity has limited opportunities for dialogue and contributed to escalation. Beyond these cases, Belgium provides an example of extreme federalization, where linguistic and regional divisions are institutionally entrenched. India, meanwhile, demonstrates how linguistic reorganization and asymmetrical federalism can accommodate diversity, though not without tensions.

The key comparative insight is that flexibility and negotiation are critical in managing identity-based conflicts. Systems that provide institutional avenues for expressing political aspirations tend to experience lower levels of confrontation.

Identity, Recognition, and the Limits of Autonomy

The Catalan conflict underscores the limits of decentralization without recognition. Autonomy can address administrative and economic concerns but may fall short in satisfying symbolic demands for nationhood.

Three factors are particularly important:

- ★ Lack of symbolic recognition
- ★ Institutional ambiguity
- ★ Political polarization

Implications for Multinational Democracies

The Catalan case offers several broader lessons:

- ★ Constitutional flexibility is essential
- ★ Political negotiation must complement legal frameworks
- ★ Fiscal arrangements must be perceived as fair
- ★ Recognition of identity is central to stability

These lessons are relevant for countries such as India, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Conclusion

The Spain–Catalonia conflict represents a profound challenge for democratic governance in multinational states. While Spain’s decentralized system has provided significant autonomy, it has not fully addressed demands for recognition and political voice.

The persistence of the conflict demonstrates that constitutional rigidity alone cannot resolve identity-based disputes. Sustainable solutions require dialogue, institutional reform, and a willingness to engage with the deeper emotional and symbolic dimensions of nationhood. Ultimately, the Catalan case highlights a fundamental truth: democratic stability depends not only on legal structures but also on the continuous negotiation of identity, legitimacy, and belonging.

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