



Why do central states accept holding independence referendums? Analyzing the role of state peripheries

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ABSTRACT

Why do central states accept holding independence referendums if they could lose a part of their territory during this process? Several variables have been proposed to explain this contradiction, but the most robust one has proved to be the competition-proximity model formulated by Qvortrup (2014). This paper challenges this theory by stressing the role of state peripheries. According to our approach, central governments are more likely to risk losing poor and isolated territories if they represent a cost for the host state. Drawing on an updated version of the contested sovereignty data set (1776–2019) by Mendez and Germann (2018), this paper demonstrates statistically that the “peripheriness” variables related to the economy and – especially – location are significant. Consequently, the competition-proximity model remains the best-fitted scheme for explaining central governments’ decision-making, but it can be amended slightly by taking into account the peripheral nature of separatist regions.

Credit author statement

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1. Introduction

After a period of relative stability, the number of independence referendums has increased dramatically over the last 30 years (Wall et al., 2017; Cuadras-Morató and Rodón, 2019). In most countries, substate units’ nationalist leaders have urged their states of reference to organize polls about the separation of the national territory. Recently, in Southern Sudan (2011), Scotland (2014), Crimea (2014), Kurdistan (2017), Catalonia (2017), New Caledonia (2018), and Bougainville (2019), electors were asked to decide whether their territory should become an independent state or not.

Strictly speaking, secession can be defined as “a process of withdrawal of a territory and its population from an existing state and the creation of a new state on that territory” (Pavković and Radan, 2011, 1).

Thus, this definition only applies to substate units and does not include cases of accession/withdrawal of a state to/from a supranational organization. Independence referendums are usually proposed as instruments for resolving the tension between two principles (Griffiths, 2016). On the one hand, the right to self-determination of national minorities is mentioned in Article 1 of the Charter of the United Nations.¹ On the other hand, state constitutions usually guarantee the protection of the territorial integrity of their sovereign states by ruling out the right to self-determination (Fisch, 2015). As there is no example of reconnection after a separation ratified by an independence referendum, the organization of an independence referendum must be considered as an important decision that can profoundly modify the political, economic, and social equilibriums of a given area (Horowitz, 2003).

So why do state leaders accept holding independence referendums? Or in the words of Bogdanor (1994, 37), “Why should [a government] seek to put at risk its own legislation by calling for the verdict of the people upon it?” At first sight, state executives have no incentive to organize polls about the secession of a part of their territory that could provoke similar demands in other regions (Walter, 2009). Nevertheless, while most self-determination referendums are not accepted by central administrations (as in Catalonia in 2017), others are negotiated and

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¹ But it must be stressed that this principle is tempered by some resolutions of the United Nations like Resolution 2526, adopted in 1970, and Resolution 1514, adopted in 1960.