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Why Stay Together? State Nationalism and Justifications for State Unity in Spain and the UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the way party elites in the UK and Spain discursively construct the nation and justify state integrity in the face of resurgent Catalan and Scottish demands for self-determination and independence. While in each case there is a plurality of conceptions of the state, in Spain the demos is predominantly defined as a single, indivisible nation of equal citizens while in the UK the focus is typically on a plurinational Union. This, we contend, shapes the arguments made in favor of state unity. The dominant case for state integrity in Spain is more negative, focused primarily on the unconstitutionality of independence and delegitimizing the independence agenda. In the UK, the predominant appeal to the Union is more positive and instrumental: as the country is perceived as a partnership entered into willingly, a case must be made for its continuation. This paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of state nationalism and political dynamics in plurinational states by shedding light on the ways in which party elites understand and legitimize the state at moments of profound internal challenge.

Introduction

How do party elites construct the nation and justify state integrity in the face of challenges from below? This article examines this question in Spain and the United Kingdom, two paradigmatic cases of state nationalism rearticulating and becoming explicit in the midst of constitutional crises due to persistent Catalan demands for self-determination and the process of Brexit, which has destabilized the foundation of the UK devolution arrangement and, crucially, reignited the Scottish independence debate.

This article is motivated by the paradox that, while all state nationalisms presumably have an interest in the protection of state unity, British and Spanish state actors adopt markedly different discursive strategies. We compare and contrast state nationalist claims between, and within, the two cases. Drawing on the influential view that nationalism is a claim-making process,¹ we are concerned here with state nationalism as a form of political rhetoric by party elites making the case for state integrity.

We examine the arguments of political parties which have actively engaged in the debate over independence from 2014 to 2018 in the Spanish case and 2015 to 2019 in the British case, pivotal periods in each. We capture arguments through the thematic analysis of key parliamentary and public debates along the conception of the nation; the claim to sovereignty; and the territorial integrity of the state. In Spain, we include the Partido Popular, Partido Socialista Obrero Español, Unidas Podemos, and Ciudadanos.

We exclude VOX from consideration, as, while it has actively engaged in the Catalan debate, it did not receive parliamentary representation in Madrid until April 2019. In the United Kingdom, we include the parties which campaigned under the mantle of Better Together in 2014: the Conservative and Unionist Party, the Labour Party, and the Liberal Democrats. Although other views exist within each political party, these extracts reflect the dominant view within each.

Our primary argument is that the ways in which each party understands the nation shapes its approach to their respective challenges from below. While we identify a plurality of understandings of the nation in the two places, in Spain the demos is predominantly defined as a single, indivisible nation of equal citizens while in the UK the focus is typically on a plurinational Union. We suggest that this key difference facilitates the articulation of different claims about state unity. In Spain, the dominant arguments against independence focus on legal considerations—the unconstitutionality of independence—and normative claims associating independence with anti-Europeanism, borders, and conflict. This coexists with a growing frame of Spain in more positive terms, a common project that needs strengthening. In the UK, the predominant appeal to the Union is more positive and instrumental: as the country is perceived as a partnership entered into willingly, a case must be made for its continuation.

This article aims to contribute to the understanding of state nationalism and its role and implications in the specific British and Spanish constitutional tensions. While significant attention has been recently paid to comparing the case for independence and the dynamics of the Catalan and Scottish movements,² the perspective of the Spanish and British states has received less attention.³

This article is structured as follows. We first examine the dominant contemporary conceptions of nation and union in Spain and the United Kingdom, which constitute the ideational offer available to state party elites when articulating discourses of state unity. We then move onto the empirical section, examining and comparing conceptions of the nation, self-determination, and arguments in favor of the political union in each case. Finally, we draw out the key conclusions from the comparison and suggest more general lessons about calls for state unity in the face of challenges from below.

Contemporary conceptions of nation and union in Spain and the UK

The dominant form of contemporary Spanish nationalism is constitutionalism, or the vindication of the 1978 Constitution as the legitimate basis for maintaining political order and unity in Spain. After the delegitimization of Spanish nationalism due to its symbolic and discursive appropriation by the Franco regime, the focus on the Constitution gave a democratic content to what was still presented as a previously existing nation.⁴ The Constitution became both a catalyst and a symbol of the democratic re-articulation of Spanish nationalism. State-wide Spanish parties define themselves as *constitutionalists*—or, less frequently, as *constitutional patriots*—and engage in meaning negotiation as to what precepts are most fundamental to the constitutional order. Successive Spanish governments have jealously defended the declarations about the unitary Spanish nation in the Constitution, which also recognizes the right to

self-government of nationalities and regions and includes references to the *peoples* of Spain in the preamble.

While Spanish party elites ground their arguments in the Constitution, their British counterparts lack an official state ideology, instead engaging with a variety of concepts—Britishness and British identity, the plurinational British state, and unionism. We focus here on understandings of Unionism, as they relate to the case for the maintenance of state integrity.⁵ Unionism is internally diverse and a polyvalent and elusive concept referring variously “to constitutional practice, to legal doctrine and to ideology, serving the common purpose of combining unity with varying degrees of recognition of difference.”⁶ Unionism can be understood as “constructive,” with a focus on the creation or furtherance of a common project between the constituent nations of the United Kingdom.⁷

This brings us to the ways in which Spanish and British political elites understand the nature of their respective nation—whether predominantly mononational or plurinational. In the Constitution, the Spanish nation is understood as a group of citizens as opposed to the sum of different peoples or nations, and the only subject of constituent power.⁸ As a single national entity, Spain is considered to be indivisible and successive Spanish governments have refused to entertain ideas about shared sovereignty. This is similar in the UK, where central governments refuse to give up the doctrine that sovereignty lies in the Westminster Parliament, which can therefore prevail in any conflict. The difference is that the United Kingdom is viewed as plurinational, encompassing what Colley describes as “four nation Britishness.”⁹ Unionist political elites reject secession but recognize a right of Scotland to determine its own future and become independent if it so wills.

Within each case, there is internal variation embodied by the political parties. Contemporary Spanish nationalism takes multiple forms, as outlined by Núñez Seixas.¹⁰ On the right, we can identify the *democratic right* (and a regionalist strand within this) and the *late-national Catholicism* whilst on the left we find the *social-democratic strand* and the *leftist-strand*. In the United Kingdom, we find multiple forms of unionism, although less clearly defined than in the Spanish state. They range from a more unitary to a more federal understanding of the Union, with all embracing devolution from 1999 onward.¹¹

Firstly, the dominant strand of conservative Spanish nationalism is the *democratic right*, currently articulated by the Partido Popular (PP) and Ciudadanos (C’s) and previously by the Unión de Centro Democrático (UCD), the coalition of Francoist reformists, liberals, Christian-democrats and regionalists that led the transition to democracy between 1977 and 1981. This strand, whose parties emphasize and draw support on the issue of state unity, adopts the vocabulary of liberalism and individual rights and stresses the role of the Constitution in guaranteeing freedom vis-à-vis the perceived excesses of sub-state nationalists’ policies, most notably on language.¹² In fact, Ciudadanos emerged in 2006 as “non-nationalist” Catalan party opposed to Catalan linguistic and nationalist policies which later became a state-wide party focused on national unity.¹³

The *democratic right* also places a strong emphasis on historical narratives elaborated by traditionalist history writers to reinforce the idea that Spain is an ancient nation and

to redress hitherto dominant pessimistic visions of Spain as a “*mater dolorosa*”¹⁴—backwards, decadent, internally unstable and internationally absent. The last government of the Partido Popular led by José María Aznar (2000–2004) promoted the most explicit form of constitutionalism, a Spanish adaptation of Jürgen Habermas’ constitutional patriotism which did not seek to re-found the nation along anti-fascist consensus and was not based on citizenship-based universal civic principles but, rather, a shared Spanish culture and identity.

Secondly, *late-national Catholicism* is characterized by the quasi-mystical identification between Spain and Catholicism and the defense of the unity of the “*patria*,” deploying a strong “anti-separatist” character. It is a small and fragmented strand articulated by parties such as Fuerza Nueva, Frente Nacional, Falange Española and, most recently, VOX, which obtained 52 seats in the November 2019 Spanish election after making a first appearance in April 2019 with 23 seats. VOX, however, fits imperfectly in this category due to its focus on nativism rather than Catholic traditions.¹⁵

Thirdly, the dominant discourse in the Spanish left, *the social-democratic strand* articulated by the Socialist party (PSOE), has contributed to the democratization of the Spanish national project through a “patriotic” rhetoric that emphasizes the “plural” character of Spain, modernity, inter-regional solidarity, and a pro-European outlook.¹⁶ In the 1960s and 1970s, the PSOE defended the right to self-determination for “nationalities and regionalities” and the creation of a “republican federation of Iberian nationalities.” In the Spanish election of 1977, and especially after the failed *coup d’état* of 1981, however, Spain became the PSOE’s national frame of reference and an emphasis was placed on the idea of “a nation of nations,” under the intellectual influence of Anselmo Carretero Jiménez. In the 1980s, the distinction between political and civic nations emerged: Spain is a *political* nation encompassing *cultural* nations which are not entitled to sovereignty, drawing on a venerable distinction that goes back to Friedrich Meinecke’s *Staatsnation* and *Kulturnation*¹⁷ applied to the Spanish context by the political scientist Andrés de Blas.

This pluricultural project was rebranded “a plural Spain” in the early 2000s and especially during José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero’s first term (2004–2008). The core idea was that of a nation proud of its linguistic and cultural diversity; a plurality of identities coexisting within, and being loyal to, a common project, with echoes of José Ortega y Gasset’s ethno-civic view of Spain.¹⁸ The PSOE embraces decentralization, with divisions between those who defend symmetric and asymmetric forms. A dominant view within the party is that “patriotism” is a precondition for solidarity and social justice: a strong state is necessary vis-à-vis conservative forces and sub-state nationalisms, which are portrayed at times as disloyal and unsupportive (“*insolidarios*”) instruments of the local bourgeoisie.¹⁹

Finally, there is a minority position, *the leftist strand*, currently articulated by the coalition Unidas Podemos (and in the past by Izquierda Unida, now under this coalition) which contends that Spain is plurinational and that sub-state nations are distinct peoples with the right to self-determination while offering a collective project for the whole state community. There are internal tensions between the classic Spanish left and a populist strand influenced by Laclau and Mouffe,²⁰ but this political space has gradually moved closer to the first stance and typically deploys an explicitly patriotic

discourse focused on the protection of social and political rights. Importantly, there is within this strand of Spanish nationalism a conceptual tension between the singularization of the people (*el pueblo*) and the view that there are different nations within Spain.

Unlike in Spain, issues pertaining to Scotland's place in the Union are rarely a matter of party contestation at the state-wide level in the UK. The three main parties concur on a plurinational conception of the British state and a relatively flexible form of Britishness, position themselves positively on devolution, and are open to further manifestations of decentralization whilst registering their opposition to Scottish independence. However, there is variation when we examine their precise understanding of the Union.

First, there is a more *unitary understanding of the Union*, historically and contemporaneously articulated by the Conservative and Unionist Party, for whom Unionism, in the form of opposition to Irish Home Rule, was part of its defining ethos.²¹ Conservatives drew upon a Burkean understanding of "respect for the wisdom of ages," a focus on the historic Union and respect for these traditions.²² Unionist ideals referenced the Anglo-Irish Union, the British Empire, and the Anglo-Scottish Union.²³ The nation and the Union are presented as intrinsically linked: "for much of the last three centuries, belief in nation was synonymous with a belief in the Union."²⁴ Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990) adopted a highly unitary understanding of the British state, with Thatcher suggesting that Scottish independence was preferable to devolution, as independence would leave parliamentary sovereignty untouched. Lynch describes the 1997 general election as the "nadir for Conservative unionism," with the party campaigning against devolution in Scotland and Wales.²⁵ Since 1999, the party has embraced devolution and, as a party of government at the center, accommodated the Scottish Government's request to transfer the competences to hold an independence referendum in 2014. However, recent research suggests an increasingly assertive approach to the Union, termed by Kenny and Sheldon as "hyper unionism."²⁶ This represents a break with previous positions of the party, which were more subtle, and the unionism within the leadership of the Conservative Party has taken on a more "urgent and strident character."²⁷

Second, there is a more ambivalent form of *welfare unionism* articulated by the Labour Party which emphasizes the instrumental importance of the Union in providing for a welfare state.²⁸ The Labour Party's engagement with themes of both Britishness and Union have been episodic throughout its history and underpinned by an ideology which has at points viewed nationalism, both British and Scottish, as incompatible with broader socialist values.²⁹ History plays a minimal role in their unionism, although the Labour history of the United Kingdom is one of progress and democratic and social innovation, detached from the glory days of Empire and instead embedded within the democratic principles and institutions of the modern British state.³⁰ For example, under Gordon Brown (2007–2010), the welfare state, and in particular the NHS, was to symbolize "the essential character of Britishness" as were policies to allow for redistribution between the richer and poorer regions of the United Kingdom.³¹ Kenny characterizes this as a progressive and "even post-national form of nationhood."³² New Labour sought "to wrap itself in the Union flag in part to establish its own centrist political credentials, and also to head off the traditional Conservative argument that it could not be

trusted with the country's national interest."³³ Gordon Brown described his vision of Britain as "multiethnic and multinational": "I understand Britishness as being outward looking, open, internationalist, with a commitment to democracy and tolerance."³⁴ His charge was picked up by Ed Miliband as leader, in the form of the One Nation narrative, but it was a broad one, designed to address immigration, diversity, and the English question in addition to the plurinational British state.³⁵

Third, there is a *federal unionism* espoused by the Liberal Democrats which offers limited engagement with debates on Union and Britishness. The party positions itself against nationalism (whether in its British or Scottish guises) although in practice it supports attachment to the United Kingdom. The Liberal Democrats also argue for the exercise of popular sovereignty, with sovereignty vested in the people of the United Kingdom rather than in Parliament, unlike most of its Labour and Conservative counterparts.³⁶ The party focuses on the maintenance of two Unions, Scotland within the United Kingdom and the United Kingdom within the European Union, and draws parallels between Scottish and Britishness nationalism as equally divisive.³⁷

Having examined contemporary conceptions of nation and Union in Spain and the United Kingdom, we now turn toward how they manifest in state-wide parties' political discourse when confronted with Catalan and Scottish self-determination demands.

Debating union and separation from the state

Who are we? The nation(s) within the state

Spanish and British party elites demonstrate different understandings of the demos. The dominant discourse of Spanish parties regarding the political community emphasizes two core ideas, *single sovereignty* and *equality among Spaniards*, which are interrelated through the view of Spain as mononational. This is in sharp contrast to the position of British party elites, which recognize and accept the plurinational nature of the British state, with sub-state identities nested under a broader British identity. The articulation of Union and the embodiment of sovereignty within parliament, rather than sitting with the people, shapes the understanding of the internal nationalist challenge.

In Spain, the core argument is that of *single and indivisible sovereignty*. This view is shared across the political spectrum but, as suggested in the previous section, there is variation along ideological lines in terms of saliency and the precise articulation of the argument. "In Spain there is no conflict of sovereignties because there is only one sovereignty, that of 47 million Spaniards," in the words of a then-PP MP.³⁸ Former PP Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy provided the following response in 2014 when a delegation of the Catalan Parliament requested the competence to hold an independence referendum to the Spanish Congress:

The sovereignty of the people, Spanish sovereignty, belongs to all Spaniards, all of them. There are no regional, provincial or local sovereignties; they don't exist, they can't be created, and they could not be accepted, at least not under our current Constitution. (...) Neither this Government, nor the Parliament, nor the Catalan Parliament, nobody, can legitimately and unilaterally deprive the whole of the Spanish people, the only subject of sovereignty, from its right to decide its collective future. (...) I do not have the right, as a Galician, to decide about the future of Galicia ignoring the rest of Spaniards. (...) *One part cannot decide for the whole thing.*³⁹

The last two sentences capture the core notion of *equality among Spaniards* and the view of Spain as mononational. The argument about equality is the logical consequence of the defense of single sovereignty: it is because sovereignty belongs to the whole of Spanish citizens that they must be the ones taking the decision on self-determination. The equality argument is framed by Ciudadanos, a party belonging to the *democratic right* which also draws on a civic vocabulary characteristic of the *social-democratic strand*, as part of their view of Spain as a common project. For Albert Rivera, then-leader of Ciudadanos:

All Spaniards are equal against the law and we all decide about our country – not territories, Autonomous Communities, provinces, but all of us, as the most advanced nations in the world do (...) Equality and union are unnegotiable (...) We stand against those who want to do a coup d'état against the Constitution, infringe the rules of the game, and undermine the equality and the fundamental rights of all Spaniards, including Catalans.⁴⁰

While all conservative parties share the mononational view of Spain, we may distinguish between organicist and civic forms. The organicist view, articulated by VOX and by some PP and C's MPs, stresses that “the idea of Spain without Catalonia is unbearable, unthinkable, a mutilation.”⁴¹ A more common view is that shared nationhood grounds democracy and the Spanish civic project. This is a core principle of liberal nationalism, a strand of liberal political theory that stresses the importance of membership to national groups for individuals which has both state-focused⁴² and minority-focused⁴³ approaches. The current PP leader Pablo Casado delivered a lecture in 2019 in which he sought to make a liberal nationalist case for Spain:

Democracies find their ground in national loyalty. A common framework is necessary even to have a discussion. It's impossible to play chess without a board, to play football without a pitch, to play tennis without a court. For the same reason, it is impossible to do democratic politics without a nation and for this reason the Constitution is based on the unity of the nation. It is national loyalty, what we call patriotism, which allows for concord without the need for agreement.⁴⁴

This idea is present but implicit in the social-democratic strand of Spanish nationalism articulated by the Socialists. The main difference between them and right-wing parties is that, while the Socialists agree on a single Spanish sovereignty, they place an emphasis on diversity and occasionally reference the “peoples of Spain,” “the Catalan people” and even “the national aspirations of Catalonia.” In June 2017, the PSOE affirmed in its party congress the plurinational character of the state, under the influence of the Catalan Socialists (PSC) as well as Galician and Valencian socialists to a lesser degree, but crucially added that sovereignty lies in the Spanish people as a whole and continues to oppose a Catalan referendum.⁴⁵ Consider the following statement by Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, leader of the PSOE when the delegation of the Catalan Parliament requested the competence to hold an independence referendum to the Spanish Congress in 2014:

We the Socialists fight for equality: for equal opportunities and equal rights, and we respect all, absolutely all, identities. We are socialists, we are not nationalists. (...) In our model of Spain, the one we have defended since our Constitution was born, everybody can feel comfortable with her own identity. For this reason, we don't like projects forcing people to choose between being Catalan and being Spanish.⁴⁶

Alongside the equal sovereignty argument, the emphasis on diversity and shared belonging underpins most of the Socialists' discourse on the nation. In 2016, party leader Pedro Sánchez argued that "Spain is much more than a territory. Spain is much more than a geographical space in the world. Especially for the Socialists, Spain is an idea of equality, fraternity and freedom, a way of living together in our diversity."⁴⁷ This refers to a plurality of linguistic, cultural and national identities. Since Pedro Sánchez became Prime Minister in 2018, the emphasis on a plurality of identities has been increasingly used to reframe the political dispute as one *within* Catalonia, rather than *between* Catalonia and Spain. Sánchez has continuously argued that "the Catalan people, rather than one people, are peoples with multiple identities."⁴⁸

The leftist coalition Unidas Podemos is the only state-wide political force arguing that Spain is plurinational and that Catalans are a distinct people with the "right to decide" their political future in a referendum.⁴⁹ The party has sought to adapt the vocabulary of patriotism along plurinational and social lines. The party leader Pablo Iglesias has referred to Spain as a "plurinational homeland" and "a country of countries" while claiming that "there is a new Spain that wants our country to respect national diversity and articulate institutional and democratic mechanisms to allow for such recognition."⁵⁰

In contrast to the predominantly mononational conception of the Spanish state, UK political elites acknowledge the plurinational nature of the state and use the Union as the main point of reference. Largely absent from this discussion, and notable in comparison with the Spanish case, is any meaningful discussion of sovereignty. Speaking on the Union, then-Prime Minister Theresa May explained:

The accommodation of multiple, layered identities within a common system of values is one of the UK's greatest assets. It is a hallmark of what it is to be British and it is a defining strength of our Union.⁵¹

One can, in the words of Theresa May, "support a football team representing one of the UK nations and cheer on Team GB at the Olympics, and feel that there is nothing incoherent about it."⁵² Labour MP Martin Whitfield described the Union "made stronger by the diversity of its communities and constituent parts rather than creeping uniformity."⁵³ The parties draw a distinction between sub-state national identity and sub-state nationalism, the former to be welcomed and embraced, the latter a threat to the unity of the British state.⁵⁴ Britishness is framed as another, higher, level of identity to that of the sub-state nations:

Each of us is proud of our distinct history and culture and our different traditions. Although our distinct identities are proudly held, perhaps particularly when we are watching sport, there is another set of values and ideas that unite us all, from Coleraine to Colchester and from Campbelltown to Caernarfon. The values of tolerance, democracy, equality and fairness are central to who we are as citizens of the United Kingdom.⁵⁵

In debates that took place in the House of Commons about the Union, the strains of the Scottish independence referendum and the process of Brexit, the Union was generally defined by parties across the divide as something to be valued, maintained and strengthened. It was strengthened as a result of its plurinational nature and the fact that it was a union entered into willingly and to the benefit of all.⁵⁶ The Union was also framed as a living thing, capable of accommodating the needs and demands of the

constituent nations of the United Kingdom. Conservative MP John Lamont explained: “The Union has evolved organically, with no written constitution at its heart, so it lacks the texts and the formalities that define other nations, but I stress this is a good thing.”⁵⁷ Theresa May returned to these themes, describing the Union as the “modern, 21st century relationship,” both “durable and flexible.”⁵⁸

It is our contention in this piece that these dominant understandings of the state in the respective cases, as a *single nation* in Spain and a flexible and *plurinational Union* in the UK, shape political parties’ discourse on self-determination demands and independence.

A right to decide? Self-determination viewed from the center

Most Spanish and British party elites frame the right to self-determination differently, with Spanish party leaders viewing referendums on self-government as unconstitutional and the right to self-determination as inapplicable in Catalonia while UK political elites affirm Scotland’s right to self-determination but argue that 2014 served as an exercise of this right which should not be revisited in the near term.

Facing demands for a Catalan referendum which are typically grounded on democratic arguments, the dominant argument by state-wide Spanish parties equates law-enforcement with democracy. Indeed, the former Spanish Vice-President Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría (PP) repeatedly argued that there is no democracy beyond the law,⁵⁹ while the current Vice-President Carmen Calvo (PSOE) has made it clear that “we cannot talk about what is not legal.”⁶⁰ The framing of the argument in legalistic terms is facilitated by the fact that the Constitution codifies that “the Spanish people” are the subject of sovereignty (art. 1.2), establishes that the state is “based on the indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation, the common and indivisible homeland of all Spaniards” (art. 2), and states that referendums can only be called by the central government in Madrid. The Constitution is thus instrumental to demarcate valid issues in the political agenda: given that the text is presented as the very symbol of democracy, demands outside the Constitution may be deemed unacceptable.

In addition to sitting outside the Spanish constitutional framework, Spanish politicians argue that the right to self-determination does not apply because Spain is a democracy and Catalonia is not a colony. The Secretary of State of Global Spain, created by the PSOE in 2018 to improve the international image of Spain, states in the report *Information about the Catalan independence bid* that the Spanish constitution is “just like all other constitutions in Western nations”⁶¹ in that it does not recognize self-determination. With regard to the 2017 Catalan independence referendum, Global Spain argues that “there is no right to participate in a voting process which has been declared illegal by the Constitutional Court.”⁶² Politicians have argued that self-determination “is not democratic, is not a right, it is just the negation of everybody else’s rights,” drawing on the notion of a single and equal Spanish sovereignty highlighted above.⁶³

This is in contrast to the approach of UK politicians who have, since devolution, affirmed the right to self-determination despite opposing independence.⁶⁴ Speaking of

the Union, Prime Minister Theresa May reiterated that the Union is a partnership requiring the consent of the constituent nations:

Our Union rests on, and is defined by, the support of its people. It is not held together by a rigid constitution or by trying to stifle criticisms of it. It will endure as long as people want it to – for as long as it enjoys the popular support of the people of Scotland and Wales, England and Northern Ireland.⁶⁵

In a debate instigated by the SNP on the Claim of Right for Scotland, unionist parties across the political spectrum affirmed Scotland's right to decide its own future.⁶⁶ Douglas Ross MP stated: "The claim of right is very clear and we all support it. It says the Scottish people are sovereign and can choose the Parliament that best suits their needs."⁶⁷ However, this argument was caveated: whilst Scotland has a right to self-determination, the consent of the UK Government would be required for any future referendum and this consent would not be forthcoming, a matter of contestation in the General Elections of 2017 and 2019.

Indeed, Theresa May famously responded to calls for another referendum after the 2016 Brexit vote with "Now is not the time."⁶⁸ This argument was employed with notable consistency by all three Unionist parties. Then Secretary of State for Scotland, David Mundell, explained: "the people of Scotland exercised their right to choose their future in 2014. They were very clear that they wished to remain in the United Kingdom."⁶⁹ Scottish MP Ian Murray described this in terms of sovereignty, which the Labour Party stressed its support of: "The sovereign will of the Scottish people was to deliver a Scottish Parliament and stay in the United Kingdom."⁷⁰ Christine Jardine of the Liberal Democrats argued in favor of the principle while arguing that it had been exercised: "although we would all agree that no nation can be held in a union against its will, the expressed will of the Scottish people was that they would stay within the Union."⁷¹

Like their Spanish counterparts, British politicians argue that a referendum would be divisive. The SNP is described as single-minded, "obsessed with another referendum against the wishes of a clear majority of Scots."⁷² Instead, if Scots wished to express their preference, they could do so at the ballot box. Scottish Labour MP Ian Murray, in the debate over the Claim of Right, argued:

I simply say, on the sovereign will of the Scottish people and the convention, that it is written down. It is being delivered. It has been delivered and everything that will be delivered in the future, in terms of the sovereign will of the Scottish people, will happen at the ballot box when the people of Scotland go to vote.⁷³

This framing allows parties to argue that they respect Scotland's right to self-determination whilst also rebuffing calls for a second independence referendum. While differences of opinion on the prospect of a second referendum exist within and between the three parties, this is a common thread to unionist parties' discourse.

Why stay together? The case for state unity

Party elites in both the UK and Spain make combined claims *against* independence and *for* state unity. However, there is strong variation in the balance between negative and positive arguments, and in the content of these arguments. In Spain, the discourse

focuses overwhelmingly on the negative framing of independence and the centrality of the Constitution, although there is growing recognition within the social-democratic and leftist strands of the need for a more appealing state project. In contrast, while British party elites also view independence negatively and emphasize similar issues around risk and division, they adopt a comparatively more positive and developed case for the Union, avoiding broad principles and focusing instead on pragmatic benefits. British party elites are more practiced, having learned from the 2014 referendum experience, in which the unionist campaign Better Together stressed the risks and uncertainties of independence, and unionist politicians speak of shared history, shared institutions, and a common future.⁷⁴

Indeed, in Spain, the delegitimizing of independence and the fetishization of the 1978 Constitution characterize Spanish parties' political discourse. The language is more assertive than in the UK, especially that of the conservative parties, and the Catalan self-determination demand is framed as a "challenge," a "provocation," a "stand," a "project of rupture," and a "threat," while independence supporters are "those who want to break-up Spain," "liquidate the Constitution," or "dissolve the nation." With the Constitution grounding Spanish democracy and justifying the impossibility of a Catalan referendum, Spanish parties self-describe as "constitutionalist forces," replacing but not completely removing the hitherto dominant "patriotic" label, and present the Constitution as a symbol of compromise, democracy, modernity and harmony.

The discursive emphasis is on undermining the legitimacy of the independence cause and movement. For then-leader of Ciudadanos, Albert Rivera, the movement represents "the poison of Europe, which is nationalism" and a "challenge to Spain as a common national project" because it "defies democracy."⁷⁵ According to Pedro Sánchez, the Catalan independence movement is backwards because "it goes against history," seeking separation and new borders, and illegitimate, because it does not have a social majority of Catalans behind it and "excludes" or even "silences" "the non-nationalist part of Catalonia." For all these reasons, Catalan independence would be like Brexit:

Catalan independentism undermines the European project because it contests Spain's collective project. The strength of the [European] Union is grounded on its integration, never its segregation. (...) Both Brexit and the Catalan independentist movement walk along parallel ways and similar rhetoric. Both create a narrative of invented and exaggerated grievances. Both want to force the population to make a binary decision (...) Both blame a third party.⁷⁶

This goes in hand with an emphasis on the dire consequences of independence itself. For Mariano Rajoy, an independent Catalonia would be "as close as it gets to Robinson Crusoe's island" because Catalonia "would be poorer, would leave Europe *sine die*, would leave the Euro, the UN and international treaties."⁷⁷

Within appeals to the Constitution, we may distinguish between a static conception of the text defended by the PP and C's and a more dynamic view defended by the PSOE. The former stress the Constitution as a guarantee for unity and equality and present their interpretation, focused on precepts of state unity and a single sovereignty, as the valid version. Insofar as the Catalan issue is about law-abidance and the valid answer to Catalan demands lies in protecting the Constitution, these parties do not feel compelled to articulate a clear case for staying together. Differently, the PSOE

and Unidas Podemos often stress the constitutional precepts around autonomy and recognize the need to provide a political solution to the “territorial crisis.” A contrast is also established between their “social patriotism” and the “standardizing patriotism” of the conservative parties.⁷⁸ While explicit calls to “patriotism” are less common than anticipated, the view of Spain as a civic union and a common project is increasingly voiced: “a project of conviviality, recovering rights and reconstructing the welfare state after years of austerity,” in the words of Pedro Sánchez.⁷⁹

This is connected to a growing, yet underdeveloped strand of arguments which focuses on a more positive case for state unity, or at least the need for one. Even if independence is deemed impossible under the Spanish constitution, there is a growing recognition that the situation requires a re-articulation of the Spanish national project. Pedro Sánchez’s views are the following:

The situation in Catalonia requires the strengthening of our common project, of Spain. I think that, in order to fight against independentism, to fight against pressures of territorial fragmentation, what we have to do is to articulate a common project for our country. A plural Spain which recognizes itself in diversity and also defends equality among citizens.⁸⁰

Meritxell Batet, then-Socialist MP and current speaker of the Spanish Cortes, sought to specify what this reformist agenda could look like:

The solution to the territorial problems, the best way to defend the union between all citizens, is to build a better Spain –to build a country that recognizes its diversity sincerely and proudly; invests in education and health care; democratizes the institutions; generates welfare; defends all Spanish languages as a richness of its own; has a project for the country that clarifies the distribution of competences to avoid the current levels of conflict; reforms the Senate so that Autonomous Communities feel represented and participate actively in a common project and common governance; and has a fairer funding system.⁸¹

The leftist strand of Spanishness of Unidas Podemos attempt to position themselves as a different and more moderate voice. For the party leader Pablo Iglesias:

We need to accept with composure that discussing the territorial question in Spain means discussing a historical matter which has been present every time a democratic period started in our country. The territorial crisis is something common in our history and we probably should accept it more naturally and with a more constructive spirit.⁸²

Within the PP, there is also a more positive element based on generic historicist claims about centuries of unity and universal values condensed in the Constitution, in the absence of a consensual view about the turbulent contemporary history of Spain. In the words of Mariano Rajoy: “I see centuries of shared history; centuries of shared union; generations of Spaniards united in a common destiny, in hopes, success, difficulties, and also in differences.”⁸³ The fight against ETA is also mobilized as a source of state legitimacy, which is a difference with the UK, where the memory of terrorism from the IRA is largely absent from unionist claims at the center.

In contrast to the Spanish case, where attention to the positive case for state unity was comparatively minimal, British political elites across the political spectrum set out plans for the reform and reinvigoration of the Union. In a speech made shortly before she left office, Prime Minister Theresa May explained:

We need to work more cleverly, more creatively and more coherently as a UK Government fully committed to a modern, 21st century Union in the context of a stable

and permanent devolution settlement to strengthen the glue that holds our Union together.⁸⁴

As he took over as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson spoke to his ambitions for a strengthened Union outside of the European Union, saying “Our constitutional settlement, our United Kingdom, will be firm and secure; our Union of nations beyond question; our democracy robust; our future clean, green, prosperous, united, confident and ambitious.”⁸⁵

The Union is presented as a common British project which benefits Scotland in three ways. Firstly, the Union is a shared project, with historical and contemporaneous achievements, most notably the defeat of fascism and the development of the welfare state, an argument made by all three Unionist parties. Secondly, found among Labour and the Liberal Democrats, the Union was one of solidarity, allowing for the sharing of risks and resources throughout the United Kingdom. And finally, a Conservative argument spoke of the global influence of Scotland within the United Kingdom. We examine each in turn.

Firstly, parties of all colors make reference to the Second World War and the collective effort to defeat fascism.⁸⁶ Gordon Brown described “Scots, English, Welsh and Irish forefathers who fought on the battlefields as one – standing together, dying together – when our freedoms were threatened in two world wars”⁸⁷ while Conservative MP Stephen Kerr described the global achievements of the United Kingdom, in which “The Union between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom has together defeated fascism, seen out communism and helped to shape today’s modern world.”⁸⁸ The presence of a consensual and shared “patriotic memory” is a significant difference with the Spanish case and allows unionist parties to shift the focus away from the British Empire, while in Spain the imperial past and expansion in America are “remembered” collectively with pride, as evidenced by the fact that the national day on October 12 commemorates the anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s first arrival in the Americas.

The NHS and the welfare state are lauded by all parties as an example of the achievements made possible by the Union. British identities and British values are understood to be embedded within these shared institutions, despite shifts in their role within British society, and all pledged further investment in these shared institutions.⁸⁹

The second argument, which focuses on the Union as an instrument for sharing and pooling risks for the economic and social benefit of all, is employed by Labour and the Liberal Democrats. In the Labour Party’s view, the needs of the working classes transcend issues of individual nations. The argument in favor of Union is therefore an argument for sharing, pooling, and redistribution. In his introduction to the 2015 Scottish Labour manifesto, then UK Labour leader Ed Miliband defined the Union in purely functional terms:

The United Kingdom is a union of pooling and sharing resources and risks. We believe that Scotland benefits from being part of the United Kingdom economically, financially, socially and culturally.⁹⁰

Labour MP Paul Sweeney defined the Union in functionalist terms, illustrating the economic benefits in a debate on *Strengthening the Union*. While he spoke to more aspirational motives he also argued:

If nothing else holds true, Scotland benefits every year from £9 billion that it would not otherwise have to invest in the provision of public services that ensure that quality of life

for people in Scotland is better than it otherwise would be. That is equivalent to £1,470 per person in Scotland every year. For as long as that figure is correct, there can be no socialist analysis for unpicking and destroying a Union that delivers that economic and social benefit for the people of Scotland.⁹¹

This is consistent with the Labour Party's overall framing of the Union and the state as a vehicle for the delivery of economic and social good, an argument that is however dependent on them being in power. Implicit in Labour's argument is that the SNP's independence objective was both narrow, favoring the working class of Scotland over the working class throughout the United Kingdom, and fraught with danger, leaving Scotland without the economic safety net provided by the United Kingdom, a remnant of the 2014 independence debate in which Better Together stressed the risk of economic shocks.⁹²

The Liberal Democratic argument for the Union was developed along similar lines but with reference to both the United Kingdom and the European Union. Former party leader Jo Swinson drew parallels between the two:

Our economy is more successful and our influence is greater. We can pool risks. Our businesses benefit from selling to a larger market, without barriers. We share values. We share our history. We share a desire for our loved ones in different parts of the country to be able to live, work and travel where they want with ease.⁹³

Notions of sharing are largely absent from the discourse of the Conservative Party, with the notable exception of Theresa May's final speech as Prime Minister, when she spoke of the Union as one of solidarity. She emphasized a common community with a common interest, without suggesting the redistributive policies of her Labour counterparts:

At its heart is the principle of solidarity – that we are one people. That we have a commons take in each other's success. That the happiness of someone in Belfast is the care and concern of someone in Bolton or Brecon or Bridge of Allan.⁹⁴

The final argument made by unionist parties was one exclusive to the Conservative party, one which suggests the strength, power, and influence of the United Kingdom. The country is continually framed as both bigger and stronger together, able to weather the storms of the global economy and assert its influence in the world. Theresa May described an "alchemy" present in the Union, allowing the "achievement of something greater because our four nations worked together"⁹⁵ while other Conservative colleagues were more pragmatic, speaking of economies of scale, the role of the United Kingdom in global institutions and in delivering international aid, and industrial and sporting achievements.⁹⁶ Luke Graham described the advantages of the United Kingdom, with an emphasis on current challenges:

We are looking at a 21st century world: we are racked with challenges from climate change to technological developments to international fracture from various countries all around the world. Would it not be great if somehow we could look to a place that would bring neighbours together, enable us to pool our resources, decide how to advance our NHS and our welfare, make sure we get £20 billion extra for the NHS, and make sure we forward the cause of science and international diplomacy and international aid? We have it: it is this Parliament; it is this United Kingdom.⁹⁷

This focus on the United Kingdom's economic, diplomatic, and military might harkens back to expressions of the United Kingdom in an imperial age. It also reflects the

Conservative Government's desire to position the UK as possessing ties, linkages, and influence beyond the European Union, which it was attempting to depart. The implicit argument is that an independent Scotland would be weaker and more vulnerable to threats, both in economic and political form.

In addition to setting out the positive case for the Union, a negative case is also clearly present in the UK. Arguments focus on the SNP, described as "pursuing an agenda of separation."⁹⁸ The party has "one reason for existing, and that is separation and division."⁹⁹ All three parties position themselves in opposition to another referendum, making instrumental arguments against independence. Independence would leave Scots poorer, less secure, cut off from their British friends and family, and less influential in the broader world.¹⁰⁰

Unionist parties point to the weak economic case for independence, unanswered questions over currency, and the collapse of oil prices as well as the economic dilemmas posed by Brexit. Gordon Brown argued that the vision of independence put forth by the SNP after the EU referendum was a more extreme, and more damaging one:

Now they are committed to a wholly separate Scottish pound and to abandon, in a quiet, almost furtive way, the UK customs union and single market which has given us tariff-free, tension-free trade across the four nations for 300 years and prevented what now seems inevitable under independence: a hard border at Hadrian's Wall separating Scotland and England and life reduced to an unending battle between "us" and "them."¹⁰¹

Like in Spain, British unionists argued that independence would create more borders. Former LibDem leader Jo Swinson explained "In this day and age, we should not be putting up new borders. We should recognise that we live in an interconnected world. It is much easier to tackle our shared problems."¹⁰² Scottish Labour MP Hugh Gaffney described his opposition to borders:

I do not believe in a border at Carlisle, nor in a border at Calais, and I never will. I believe in socialism, not nationalism. I believe in the people. I believe in solidarity. I believe in sharing and fighting together for a better future for our children and grandchildren.¹⁰³

For Conservatives, Brexit has to be more cautiously mobilized, but they too reject the idea that the EU referendum legitimates another independence vote. Unionist politicians are critical of Sturgeon's calls for another independence referendum, arguing that her aims are disingenuous. Former Conservative Secretary of State for Scotland David Mundell was critical of the SNP Government's position, saying "Unionists like me, who supported Remain, are just numbers whose votes can be hijacked and used as a pretext for a second independence referendum."¹⁰⁴

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have compared the ways party elites in the UK and Spain debate issues of nation, self-determination and unity in response to Catalan and Scottish demands. We have identified similarities and differences in the plurality of conceptions of the state and arguments for state integrity present in the two contexts. We have placed a special emphasis on the differences in the case for state unity, which is primarily negative in Spain, with self-determination viewed unconstitutional and independence

divisive and backwards, and more positive in the UK, with the Union seen as the instrument to facilitate the success of the four nations of the United Kingdom.

We contend that this variation in the case for the state unity is shaped by the dominant construction of the political “we,” a single nation in Spain and a plurinational Union in the UK. In other words, we suggest that there is an affinity between national recognition and instrumental justifications of the political union, and vice versa. In Spain, the widespread view of a single, equal sovereignty across members of the Spanish nation facilitates the framing of Catalan demands as a fundamental and existential threat and the deployment of a more emotive and reactive vocabulary to prevent the “dissolution of the nation.” This is accentuated by the fact that the Constitution codifies the view of a single nation and the principle of state unity. As a result, self-determination demands may be deemed unconstitutional and articulating a compelling case about state maintenance is less necessary.

Self-determination demands impact the UK state differently, as the political “we” is primarily discussed in terms of Union rather than nation. We contend that the emotional weight of breaking up a union may be different from breaking up a nation, as suggested in statements by party elites arguing that, while they would regret Scotland deciding to become independent, it was a legitimate choice to be made by the Scottish people. The recognition of different peoples within the state contributes to a more dispassionate political debate on these issues, although in the UK national recognition coexists uneasily with the view of a single sovereignty lying in Westminster. In fact, the national question is not a matter of party competition at the state-wide level in the UK to the same degree as in Spain.

More generally, our findings suggest that party elites find it difficult to articulate well-developed cases for state integrity. This is partly due to the fact that it is difficult to make the case for something that is already there, but it also reflects the pervasive view of states as “natural” and the common-sense, taken-for-granted character of dominant state nationalisms. Party elites tend to present their national projects and state maintenance as self-evidently desirable. Faced with sub-state nationalism and active demands for self-determination, elites in the UK and Spain are forced to legitimize and explicate their state projects more forcefully, supplying explicit arguments about the union. However, our findings point at the struggles and difficulties to rethink and articulate the core beliefs and normative foundations of the Spanish and British national projects.

These dynamics are worthy of further study. The case for state unity will continue to be needed as the national question remains unsolved in Spain and the UK. Beyond these two paradigmatic plurinational states facing critical challenges from below, all states try to nurture the view that the population living within their borders form a “people” and seek to preserve their territorial integrity. Yet, we do not know enough about how states legitimize their reason for being as they face challenges from groups within their borders and from broader global forces.

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