

Examining Motivations for Secession in North America and Europe

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Research Puzzle

Secessionist movements – movements which seek to detach a region from a state – have emerged in many regions around the world, representing an important challenge to the authority of nation-states. These movements have taken root in both authoritarian and democratic contexts, in wealthy and developing states, and in unitary and federal political systems. Notable examples of secessionist movements include Scotland in the United Kingdom, Catalonia in Spain, Quebec in Canada, and Kurdistan in the Middle East (primarily Turkey and Iraq).

Substantial attention has been focused on understanding why these secessionist movements emerge. However, comparatively less attention has been directed toward the microlevel of secessionism: understanding the behavior of individuals who live in regions where secessionist movements have emerged.

Research Question

This paper seeks to explore motivations behind support for secession. Specifically, I ask: **In contexts in which secession is a salient issue, what motivates support for secessionist movements?**

Overview

This study seeks to understand what motivates individuals to support secession in regions in which secessionist movements have emerged. I introduce a theoretical framework that introduces the role of secession-related arguments from political elites into the process

of developing a stance on secession. I outline two broad types of arguments that elites have used in favor of secession: culturalist arguments that highlight differences in cultural identity and practice between the population of a secessionist region and the rest of the population of the host state, and materialist arguments that contend that secession is necessary in order to improve the economic situation of the region. I use data from the 2014 Scottish Referendum Study to test the relevance of each type of argument (culturalist and materialist) for supporters of Scottish independence.

Literature Review

Much of the extant literature on individual preferences regarding secession has focused on how personal characteristics make an individual more or less likely to support secession. For instance, scholars have dedicated considerable attention to national identity as a driver of secessionist support, positing that individuals who feel a stronger connection to their region or social group than to the nation-state are more likely to support secession (Blais, Martin, and Nadeau 1995; Burg 2015; Costa-Font and Tremosa-Balcells 2008; Faller 2011; Hierro and Queralt 2020; Howe 1998; McCrone and Paterson 2002; Muñoz and Tormos 2015; Rodon and Guinjoan 2018; Serrano 2013). Scholars have also identified individuals' material status (Cuneo and Curtis 1974; Hayes and McAllister 2001; O'Gara 2001; O'Loughlin and Tuathail 2009), political ideology (Muñoz and Tormos 2015; Sarigil and Karakoc 2016), and tolerance for risk (Morisi 2016) as helping to shape preferences, but the direction of the correlation between these factors and support for secession varies by study. Scholars have reached these conclusions primarily through surveys conducted on individuals living in secessionist regions, such as Catalonia (Hierro and Queralt 2020; Muro and Vlaskamp 2016; Rodon and Guinjoan 2018; Serrano 2013; Torcal and Mota 2014), Quebec (Bélanger and Perrella 2008; Blais, Martin, and Nadeau 1995; Blais and Nadeau 1992; Clarke and Kornberg 1996; Cuneo and Curtis 1974; Mendelsohn 2003), or Scotland (Daniels and Kuo 2021; Morisi 2016; Muro and Vlaskamp 2016).

While these efforts have yielded important insights, general theories that can explain

support for secession in comparative perspective are still lacking. The extant approach to studying secession at the individual level can be characterized as a “pillarization” of secessionist movements, whereby scholars focus on one case without seeking to generalize their findings to other secessionist cases. Moreover, the literature on public opinion highlights that individuals do not form their political preferences in isolation (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Zaller 1992). Instead, they look toward elite cues and messages to help structure their preferences on an issue. Personal characteristics are indeed relevant, but only insofar as they can predispose an individual to accept or reject a message from elites. Therefore, it is important to include an analysis of the types of arguments related to secession to which individuals are exposed to derive a more complete picture of individual preferences regarding secession.

Theoretical Framework

I aim to develop a theoretical framework to examine individual support for secession in comparative perspective across different secessionist contexts. As a first step in developing my theoretical framework, I conducted interviews with secessionist elites in eight regions with currently or recently active secessionist movements: Catalonia, Montenegro, Northern Ireland, Puerto Rico, Quebec, Republika Srpska (one of the three entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina), Scotland, and Wales. These secessionist elites included members of political parties, civil society and advocacy groups, and media. During these interviews, I asked my participants about the arguments in favor of secession that these entities advance in an effort to bring their target audiences to support secession. I also conducted text analysis of advertisements and speeches of pro-secessionist groups in each region. Additionally, I conducted interviews and informal conversations with non-elites (“ordinary citizens”) to get a sense of the types of arguments on secession that they have heard.

On the basis of my findings, I identify two broad sets of pro-secession arguments: culturalist and materialist. Culturalist arguments in favor of secession contend that secession is necessary because of the distinct cultural identity of the region’s inhabitants. Some examples of culturalist arguments that I encountered during my fieldwork include:

- Quebec: The French language, which is central to Québécois identity since the 1600s, has been threatened by the dominance of the English language in Canada. If Quebec secedes from Canada, the Québécois government would be in a stronger position to enact legislation to safeguard the use of French.
- Puerto Rico: The United States has tried to Americanize Puerto Rico's culture, namely by replacing Spanish as the language of instruction in public schools with English and prohibiting the public celebration of Roman Catholic traditions. An independent Puerto Rico would be able to protect its culture from the onslaught of American influence.
- Wales: For centuries, the Welsh language has been a target of official and unofficial discrimination, to the point that it has become a somewhat stigmatized language for many. Independence would allow Wales to implement policies that would revitalize Welsh.
- Republika Srpska: The majority of the population of Republika Srpska is ethnically Serbian and was opposed to the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina from Yugoslavia. Many Serbs in Republika Srpska ask why they should have to share a state with ethnic out-groups (Bosniaks and Croats) when they could secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina and join the rest of the Serbs in Serbia. Independence would be a way of (re)unifying ethnic kin.
- Scotland: Scotland is, after all, a nation, just like Ireland. Nations deserve to be independent. Therefore, Scotland should be an independent state.

As these examples illustrate, the heart of the culturalist argument rests upon the distinct identity of the region's population as a justification for secession. In some cases, people feel that the mere existence of a distinct identity entitles them to statehood, as illustrated by the example for Scotland above. In other cases, there is a specific perceived threat to elements of the practice of the regional population's culture, such as formal policies that restricted the use of minority languages (as in the case of Puerto Rico in the early years of US occupation) or informal pressures that lead members of the regional population

to adjust their cultural practices (like the language shift to English away from Welsh in Wales). In other cases, the culturalist argument is framed as a way to unite individuals who ostensibly belong to the same cultural unit, such as the ethnic Serbian population of the former Yugoslav states in the case of Republika Srpska.

The second broad set of arguments that I identify are materialist arguments. These arguments emphasize that secession is necessary for the region to obtain material benefits. Some examples of materialist arguments that I encountered during my fieldwork include:

- Catalonia: Under the status quo, Catalonia contributes much more to the government in Madrid than it receives from Madrid. Catalan money is spent in poorer regions of Spain, like Andalusia and Galicia, instead of in Catalonia. Independence would allow Catalonia to keep the money generated in the region within Catalonia.
- Scotland: The UK government benefits economically from the exploitation of Scotland's oil reserves by being in control of the bulk of oil and gas legislation. An independent Scotland would be in control of these oil reserves and the money generated from them and could spend this revenue as it wishes.
- Montenegro: When Montenegro was in union with Serbia, Serbia collected the revenue from Montenegro's tourism industry. Independence was a way for Montenegro to control its own finances.

The centerpiece of the materialist argument is that secession is an instrument toward improving the local economy. In some cases, the argument focuses on the control of local natural resources, such as oil in Scotland. In other instances, the materialist argument focuses more on the broader decision-making process, and points out that under the status quo, the host state – rather than the region – makes the decisions and reaps the benefits. The implication is that the regional government could do a better job of making policies that are relevant to the region and will benefit the regional population. This is illustrated by the Montenegrin example, where economic decisions concerning Montenegro were made in faraway Belgrade rather than in Podgorica while Montenegro was in union with Serbia. In

these cases, secession is presented as an opportunity for the region to achieve material gains.

I also identify a potentially third set of arguments that I categorize as the “representation” argument, which holds that secession is necessary for the “interests” of the region to be better represented at the national level. Some examples of the representation argument include beliefs that the region is underrepresented in politics at the national level or that the policy preferences of the region are being ignored. This argument has been particularly present in Scotland and Northern Ireland after the results of the 2016 referendum on European Union membership in the United Kingdom (“Brexit”). A majority of voters in Scotland and Northern Ireland voted for the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union, but they were outnumbered by voters in England and Wales who opted for the United Kingdom to withdraw from the European Union. Thus, Scotland and Northern Ireland had to leave the European Union despite the wishes of the majority of their voters.

However, upon closer inspection, many of these representation-related arguments can be collapsed into the culturalist-materialist dichotomy. Arguments about representation often touch upon cultural or materialist dimensions, or even both simultaneously. For instance, when people in a region complain that their political preferences are not being enacted at the national level, it could be that there is a difference in cultural values between themselves and others living in the host state. For instance, many of my Scottish interviewees emphasized to me that they perceived that the Scottish and the English have different cultural values, which according to them explained why Scotland tended to vote for left-wing parties while England tended to vote for conservatives. Thus, in this case the representation argument can be linked to the culturalist dimension. The lack of representation itself may not be a cause: it may simply be a manifestation of broader cultural differences. In other cases, the representation argument is linked to materialist dynamics. It could very well be the case that a region’s policy preferences are not being implemented due to material concerns by the host state, such as the Spanish government’s awareness that Catalonia is a major contributor to the state budget, and thus Madrid may be wary of granting Catalonia too much fiscal

autonomy. Whatever the “true” reason for these dynamics, it can be difficult to extract the representation argument from the culturalist and materialist arguments. Therefore, for the time being, I have not designated the representation argument as its own separate category.

Of course, secession is a multifaceted phenomenon in which the local context matters. I do not imply that it is only culturalist arguments or material arguments that matter in a specific case. Indeed, individuals may rely on a mix of these arguments when explaining their stance on secession. It is possible that the most logical strategy of secessionist activists would be to link these culturalist and materialist arguments together in order to build a broad coalition in support of independence. Individuals may have different motivations for supporting independence, so it is important to understand which arguments resonate with certain sectors of the population.

Methodology

Case Selection

I aim to test the validity of the culturalist and materialist arguments in motivating support for secession in real-world secessionist contexts. I have identified the general types of arguments that pro-secession elites use to try to amass support for secession, but how relevant are these arguments among the target population?

I turn to evidence from Scotland, where a referendum on independence from the United Kingdom was held in September 2014. 55 percent of voters rejected independence, whereas 45 percent supported the secession of Scotland from the United Kingdom (Hassan 2022). Scotland is an excellent case for study because secession has been a salient issue for several decades. Moreover, Scotland held a legally sanctioned referendum on independence, a relatively rare occurrence in most secessionist contexts. I examine data from the 2014 Scottish Referendum Study, an independent academic study of Scottish political behavior funded by the University of Edinburgh Economic and Social Research Council (Henderson et al. 2019). This survey, conducted in the aftermath of the referendum, asks individuals about their views on the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence and Scottish and UK politics

more broadly.

Survey Questions and Operationalization of Variables

The Scottish Referendum Study contains several questions that enable me to test the relevance of culturalist and materialist arguments. One question asks respondents to indicate which argument from a list of pro-independence arguments they find the most convincing:

- Independence will improve Scotland's economy
- Independence would free Scotland from the current government coalition in Westminster
- Independence will enable Scotland to protect public services
- Independence is necessary because the Westminster system is rotten
- Independence would enable Scotland to get the government it votes for
- Independence is natural for nations like Scotland
- Some other reason

Some of these arguments are related to the culturalist argument (such as independence being natural for nations like Scotland), while others are more clearly materialist arguments (independence improving the Scottish economy or giving Scotland the ability to protect public services). Thus, the responses obtained should demonstrate the persuasiveness of culturalist and materialist arguments.

Respondents were also asked about the strength of their attachment to "Scottish" and "British" identities. I use this question to examine the weight of the culturalist argument that contends that a distinct cultural identity can motivate the desire for a region to secede. Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 7 their attachment to the "Scottish" and "British" identities, with 1 indicating a weak attachment to the identity and 7 indicating a strong attachment to the identity.

Other questions concerned economic issues within Scotland and the United Kingdom, which reflect the materialist argument in favor of independence. Respondents were asked whether they believed that Scotland received its fair share of funding from Westminster, Scotland contributed more in taxes than it received from the national government, or Scotland

received more than it contributed. A five-point scale was used to measure these responses, with 1 indicating that Scotland received a lot less compared to what it contributed and 5 indicating that Scotland received more than it contributed to the central government. I also examined responses to two further questions related to economic performance. Respondents were asked whether they agreed with the argument that Scotland's union with the United Kingdom is making the Scottish economy worse. They were also asked whether they perceived that their personal economic situation would improve if Scotland remained within the United Kingdom. These questions reflect arguments from the pro- and anti-independence camps. Both sides have argued that the fate of Scotland's economy and of ordinary citizens is inextricably linked to Scotland's status within the United Kingdom. The pro-independence movement argues that Scotland's economy is hampered by being part of the UK, whereas the anti-independence movement contends that independence would threaten Scotland's economy.

The dependent variable (outcome of interest) of this study is an individual's support for secession. The Scottish Referendum Study asks respondents to indicate how they voted in the 2014 referendum: in favor of independence or against independence. I use the response to this question as a measure of the respondent's stance on Scottish independence.

Hypotheses

I develop hypotheses rooted in my theoretical framework but tailored to the Scottish case to test the strength of culturalist and materialist arguments for Scottish independence.

The culturalist argument posits that cultural differences between a region and the rest of the host state justify the quest for independence. In the Scottish case, as opposed to other cases like Quebec or Puerto Rico, elites have not made a case that Scottish culture is threatened by Scotland's position in the Union. Indeed, the Scottish are united by language to the English, and there are many similarities in culture between Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom, namely northern England and Northern Ireland. In the Scottish context, the main cultural argument is that the Scottish constitute a nation and thus are entitled to independence. This relates to the survey question on an individual's attachment

to Scottish and British identities. Thus, I develop the following hypothesis on strength of national identity and support for independence:

- Hypothesis #1: Individuals who identify more strongly as “Scottish” will be more likely to support independence, whereas individuals who have a stronger attachment to “British” identity will be less likely to support independence.

The pro-independence camp has also put forth a materialist argument, stressing that Scotland is being economically shortchanged under its current political status. Pro-secession elites have argued that Scotland is contributing more in taxation revenue to Westminster than it receives, and also that Scotland’s natural resources (oil and natural gas) are under the control of the UK, rather than the Scottish, government. This leads me to the following hypothesis on materialist arguments and stances on independence:

- Hypothesis #2: Individuals who believe that Scotland is receiving less than its fair share of revenue from the UK government will be more likely to support independence, whereas individuals who believe that Scotland is receiving adequate or above adequate funding will be less likely to support independence.

Another frequent pro-independence materialist argument is that the regional economy is underperforming due to the political status of the region within the host state. The Scottish Referendum Study presents individuals with the argument that “unionism [Scotland remaining part of the United Kingdom] will make the Scottish economy worse”, a common argument presented by the pro-independence camp. From this question, I develop another hypothesis:

- Hypothesis #3: Individuals who agree that Scotland’s economy is being hurt by Scotland’s continued status within the United Kingdom will be more likely to support independence. On the other hand, individuals who disagree with the argument that remaining in the United Kingdom harms Scotland’s economy will be less likely to support independence.

Data Analysis

I begin my analysis by examining which pro-independence arguments the survey respondents found most convincing. I then use three logistic regression models to test the relationship between cultural and materialist arguments for secession and support for Scottish independence. The first model tests culturalist arguments, examining the relationship between an individual's attachment to "Scottish" and "British" identities and how an individual voted in the 2014 referendum. The second model tests materialist arguments, focusing on the relationship between whether an individual feels that Scotland and England each receive their fair shares of funding from the UK government, the belief that Scotland remaining in the UK hampers Scotland's economy, the expectation that an individual's personal economic situation will improve if Scotland remains part of the UK, and the vote cast in the 2014 referendum. I also run a third logistic regression model that combines both the culturalist and materialist variables. For each of these models, I include controls for an individual's age, gender, income, education, and political ideology. These controls are frequently included in studies of individual preferences on secession. I also calculated the predicted probability that an individual would support independence for Scotland given certain characteristics. I examine the predicted probability that an individual would support independence given the strength of their attachment to "Scottish" and "British" identities and also based on their perception of the amount of funding that Scotland receives from the UK government.

Results

The results evince support for the relevance of both culturalist and materialist arguments in shaping support for Scottish independence. As shown in Figure 1, when respondents were presented with various culturalist and materialist arguments on independence, the argument that was rated as the most convincing was that with independence, "Scotland would get the government that it votes for". This argument refers to the fact that in recent years the UK government has been dominated by the Conservative Party, whereas the Conservatives have not achieved a majority of votes in Scotland. Thus, the Scots feel that they are governed by a national government that does not reflect their preferences. This could reflect both

culturalist and materialist arguments, as votes for political parties could reflect differing cultural values and/or economic preferences. The next most common argument was that “independence is natural for nations like Scotland”, which reflects the culturalist argument that a distinct social group is entitled to its own state. Other arguments that respondents found convincing included “Westminster system is rotten” and that independence would “improve [Scotland’s] economy”, both of which reflect at least partially materialist arguments. Thus, it seems that Scottish voters respond to a mix of culturalist and materialist arguments in deciding to support independence.

Fig. 1. Reasons for Independence

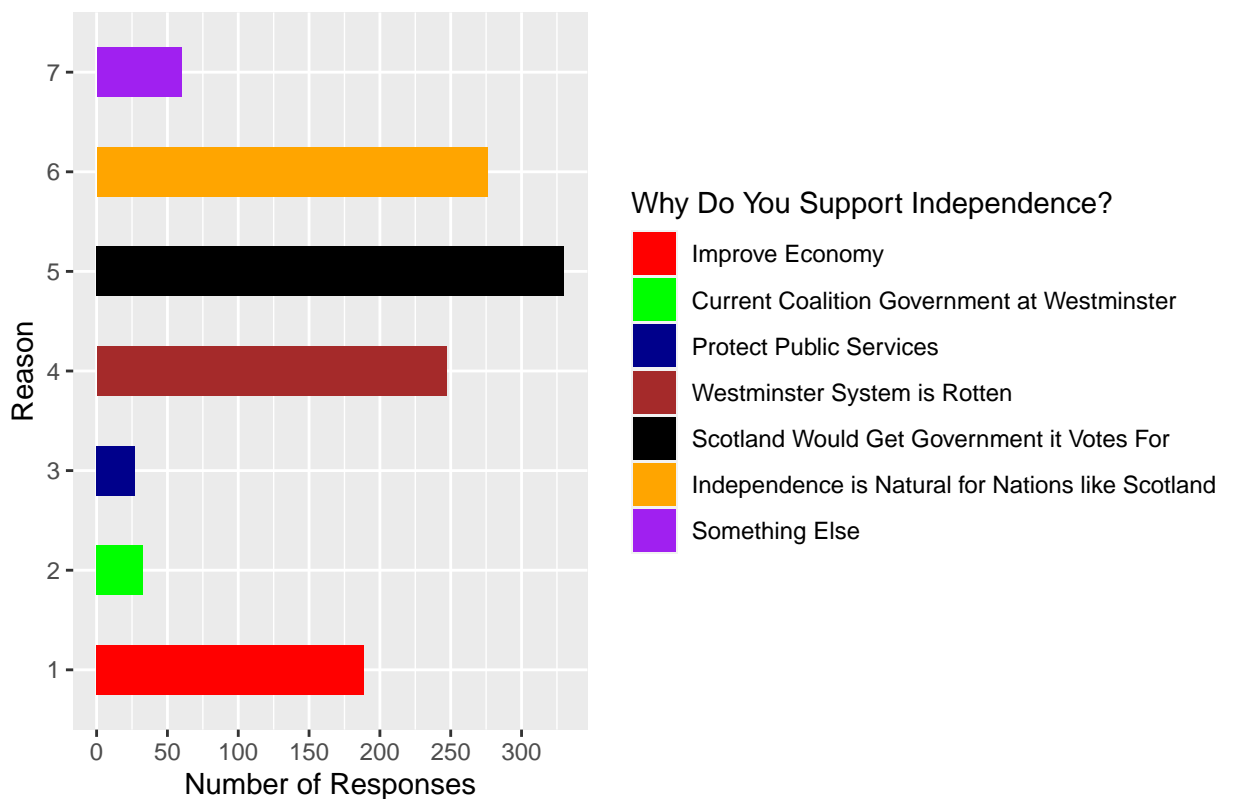


Table 1 displays the results of three logistic regression models: the culturalist model, the materialist model, and the model that combines both culturalist and materialist variables, while Figure 2 shows the regression coefficients and confidence intervals from the combined model. The results show that attachments to both “Scottish” and “British” identities are highly statistically significant predictors of voting behavior in the 2014 referendum. The regression and the predicted probabilities in Figure 3 show that individuals with low

attachments to “British” identity were much more likely to support independence, while the reverse was true of respondents who reported a weak attachment to “Scottish” identity. The predicted probability of an individual supporting independence steadily rises the stronger the attachment to Scottish identity. Thus, there is substantial evidence for the relevance of culturalist arguments for supporting independence in the Scottish case. Of course, it is possible for individuals to feel a strong attachment to both Scottish and British identities, so further research is needed to examine how individuals balance their attachment to both identities.

Figure 2. Support for Independence

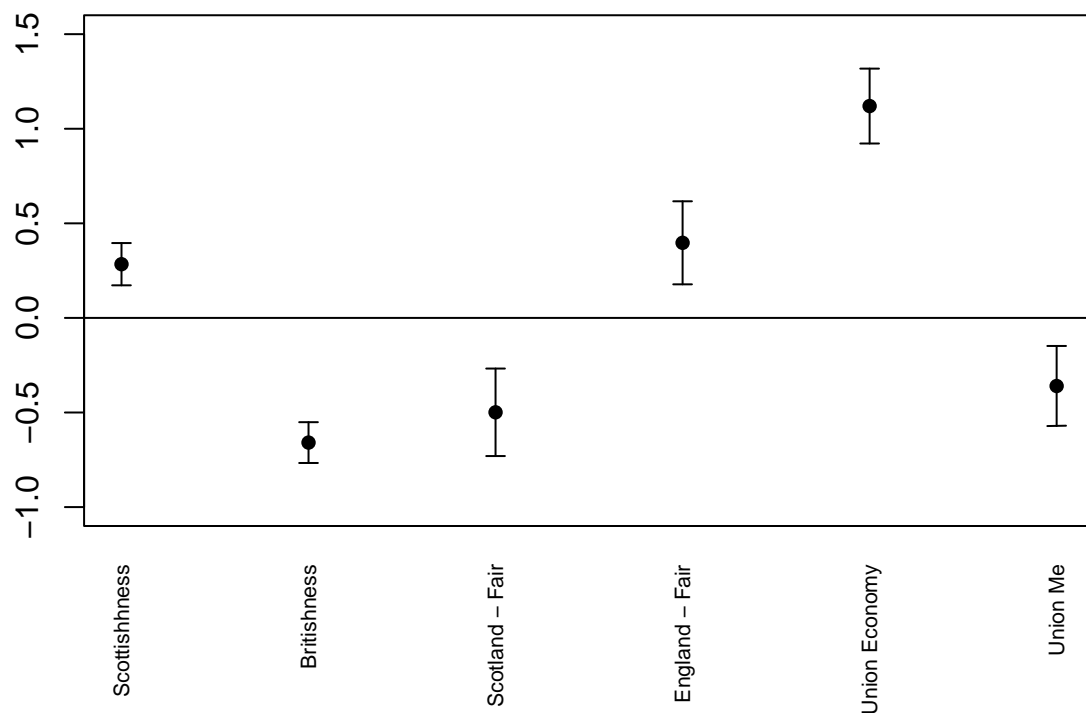
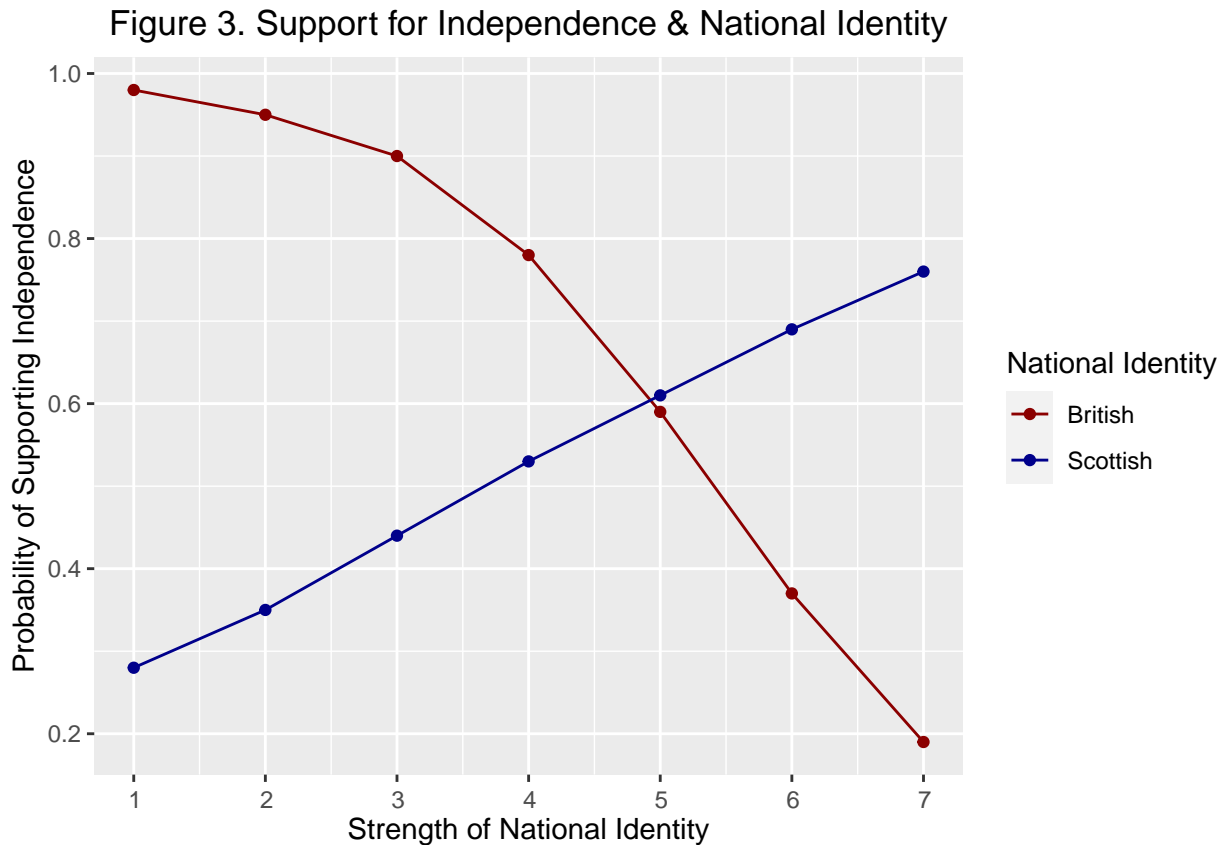


Table 1: Logistic Regression Results

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Support for Independence		
	Cultural Model	Material Model	Combined Model
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Scottishness	0.356*** (0.037)		0.284*** (0.057)
Britishness	-0.893*** (0.042)		-0.659*** (0.055)
Scotland - Fair Funding		-0.734*** (0.099)	-0.499*** (0.118)
England - Fair Funding		0.460*** (0.094)	0.397*** (0.112)
Unionism Makes Economy Worse		1.308*** (0.088)	1.120*** (0.101)
Unionism Helps Me		-0.397*** (0.092)	-0.360*** (0.108)
Age	-0.005 (0.004)	-0.015*** (0.006)	-0.003 (0.007)
Gender	-0.283** (0.122)	-0.492*** (0.164)	-0.403** (0.187)
Income	-0.026 (0.018)	-0.002 (0.024)	-0.014 (0.027)
Education	-0.003 (0.013)	0.029* (0.017)	0.039* (0.020)
Ideology	-0.188*** (0.028)	-0.111*** (0.036)	-0.075* (0.042)
Constant	4.484*** (0.477)	-1.185 (0.784)	-0.601 (0.977)
Pseudo-R ²	0.439	0.492	0.604
Observations	2,591	1,553	1,547
Log Likelihood	-927.511	-546.495	-424.316
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,871.022	1,112.990	872.631

Note:

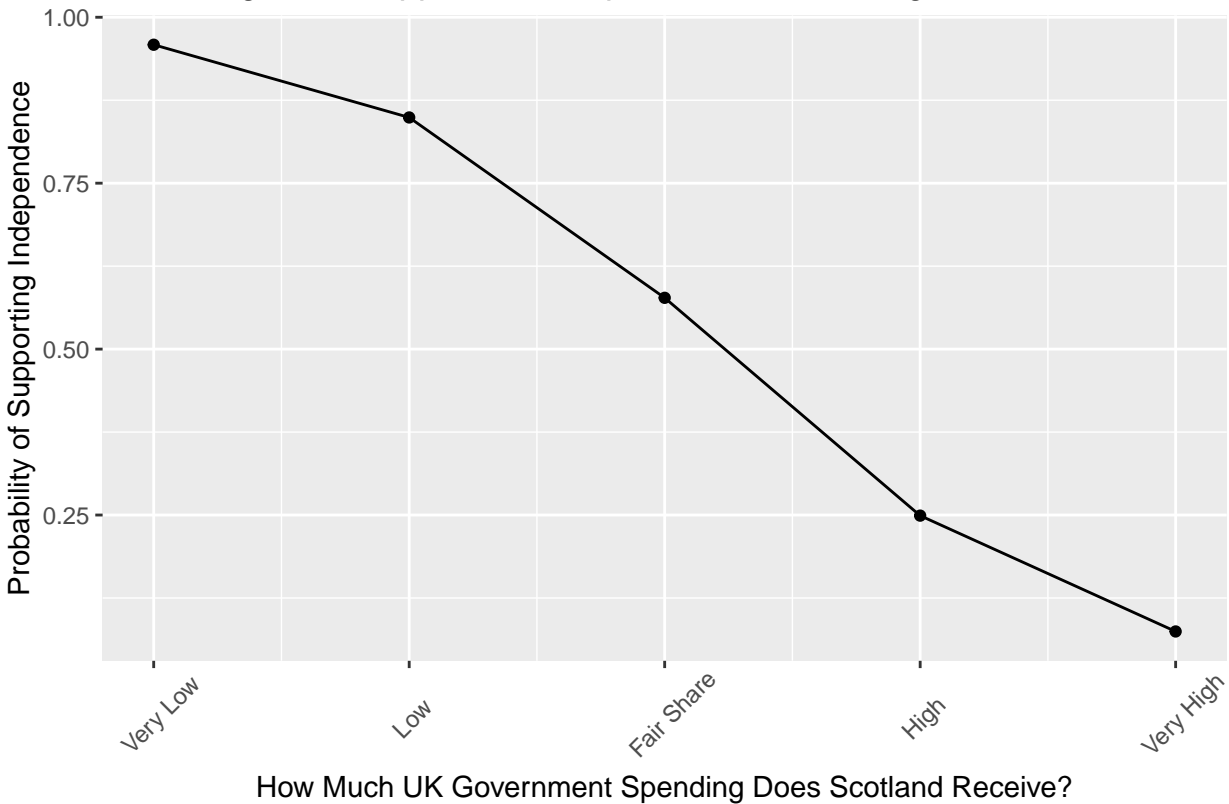
*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01



There is also compelling evidence for the role of materialist arguments in motivating support for independence. Individuals who believed that Scotland received less than its fair share of funding were more likely to support secession, which is in line with the materialist argument that secession is a way to correct an economic injustice that the host state is allegedly perpetrating against the region. Indeed, the predicted probability of an individual supporting secession given that he/she believed that Scotland received much less than its fair share of funding from the UK government was extremely high (see Figure 4). The probability of supporting independence plummets the higher the fair share of funding an individual considered that Scotland receives. Those who felt that England received more than its fair share of funding from the UK government were also more likely to support secession, which could be suggestive of resentment against the host state government's economic policy. When confronted with the argument that remaining within the United Kingdom is holding back Scotland's economy, those who agreed with this statement were indeed more likely to

support secession, a classic manifestation of the materialist argument that secession is a way to improve the local economy. Finally, individuals who considered that their own personal economic situation would improve under the current UK economic system were less likely to support Scottish independence.

Figure 4. Support for Independence & Funding for Scotland



Thus, it appears that culturalist and materialist arguments do play an important role in shaping support for secession in Scotland. The findings suggest that both types of arguments are important for shaping individuals' preferences on secession. The combined model has the highest pseudo-R-squared, which suggests that a model that combines both culturalist and materialist variables has higher explanatory power than a model that focuses exclusively on either culturalist or materialist variables.

Limitations and Future Research

This study examines only one case – Scotland – and focuses only on cross-sectional data from one period of time, the aftermath of the 2014 independence referendum. I aspire to gather a more complete view of the role of different culturalist and materialist arguments

by examining longitudinal survey data from a variety of cases. An excellent comparison case to Scotland is Wales, which also has an independence movement. Unlike the Scottish case, an important dynamic in the Welsh independence movement is the protection of the Welsh language. Thus, I aim to examine arguments that address attitudes toward the status of Welsh to test the relevance of culturalist arguments for Welsh independence. Extensive survey data is also available from Catalonia, where culturalist arguments about the status of the Catalan language and Catalan identity coexist alongside materialist arguments. Thus, Catalonia is an excellent case for testing culturalist and materialist arguments.

Ultimately, I aspire to examine which types of arguments bear the most relevance for different segments of the population. Individuals often have different motivations for supporting secession. For instance, some of my interlocutors referenced economic reasons for supporting independence, while others instead said that they did not care what the consequences of independence would be, but their feeling of possessing a distinct identity was what motivated them to support independence. Therefore, I would like to discover for which segments of the population certain types of arguments bear the most weight. For instance, are culturalist arguments strongest among the elites? Who is motivated most by materialist arguments? My future research will develop a typology within the population of a secessionist region to assess how persuasive each set of arguments is for individuals in each category.

Intellectual Merit

Despite the limitations of the present study, it is still possible to draw important conclusions from this analysis. I have taken the first steps toward developing a theoretical framework to understand what motivates individuals to support secession across different secessionist contexts. This strategy improves upon existing research that has employed a more *ad hoc* approach to examining individual preferences toward secession and has also tended to study cases in isolation. While this study examines only Scotland, I plan to use this theoretical framework to examine survey data from other secessionist cases, such as Catalonia and Wales.

Secession has enormous consequences for global security, economics, and humanitarianism. Many secessionist movements have turned violent, as shown by the examples of these movements in Biafra, Yugoslavia, Chechnya, the Basque Country, and Burma. It is estimated that the Yugoslav Wars, triggered by secessionist crises, caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians and displaced more than four million people. Even in cases where secession remains peaceful, such as in Scotland and Quebec, these movements have the capacity to cause significant political, economic, and social dislocation. For instance, the turmoil of the post-Brexit era in the United Kingdom can be further compounded by a Scottish attempt at secession. Moreover, secessionist movements observe each other, and thus movements in other parts of Europe, North America, and the world can feel emboldened if the movement in Scotland, Catalonia, or Quebec makes important inroads. For these reasons, it is important to understand what motivates individuals to support secession.

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