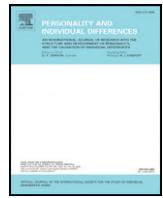




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The association between agreeableness, extraversion, and support for secessionist movements: Evidence from a large survey of more than 33,000 respondents in Catalonia[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Does personality influence attitudes toward secessionism? Personality traits are important determinants of a wide range of political attitudes and behaviors. Prior work has mainly focused on the study of personality during regular processes of democratic political systems (e.g., vote choice, turnout, information acquisition, etc.). By contrast, this paper assesses that personality traits have an influence over the decision of individuals to support a secessionist movement. To test this, I rely on a survey distributed to more than 33,000 respondents in Catalonia, a region with a salient secessionist movement. Beyond the effects of demographic characteristics, political factors, descent-based attributes, economic considerations, and even identity attachments, the results confirm that the personality trait of Agreeableness is associated with supporting the Catalan secessionist movement. Although less consistently, there is some preliminary evidence that extraverted individuals are more likely to support the movement. I conclude that combining insights from political science, sociology and psychology in the study of dispositional and situational determinants of attitudes toward secessionism is fertile research ground.

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1. Introduction

A secession is defined as a formal separation from a larger organized body to which the secessionist region has been tied to. In a world dominated by states, it is not surprising that the study of secessionism is of vital importance. The number of countries in the world has tripled during the second half of the twentieth century due to a process of decolonization and separation from larger entities. Today, some recent successful secessionist cases such as East Timor, Montenegro, South Sudan or Kosovo, have been paralleled by increases in the demands for secession in advanced democracies. Even though political elites tend to play a substantial role in these processes, mass support for independence usually becomes a crucial driver for the successful culmination of a secessionist project.

A wide range of factors have been found to influence an individual's attitudes, preferences and behaviors concerning secessionism. Demographic, political variables, descent-based, as well as identity variables are common predictors in most empirical models of secessionism in advanced democracies (Barceló, 2014, Burg, 2015, Orriols & Rodón, 2016, Serrano, 2013). Moreover, some scholars suggest that economic considerations such as future expectation in the current compared to the new

regime may also underlie the surge in secessionist movements (Burg, 2015, Muñoz & Tormos, 2015). Alternatively, other scholars also suggest that elite-led cuing is the major driving force behind people's support for a secession (Fernández-Albertos & Lago, 2015, Miley, 2014, Torcal & Mota, 2014).

In addition, there is a growing body of scholarship which debates the impact of psychological factors such as moral sentiments (Lewis & Brown, 2015) or risk attitudes (Nadeau, Martin, & Blai, 1999; Verge, Guinjoan, & Rodón, 2015) on secessionist aspirations. Nevertheless, scholars have not considered the potential impact of individuals' personality in their support for secessionist movements. To fill this gap, I provide a systematic analysis of the role of personality traits in supporting secessionist movements.

1.1. Personality as a disposition for attitudes and behavior

Personality is the psychological organization responsible for the way individuals react to external stimuli. Everyone has a unique personality, which influences how we think and behave (Allport & Odbert, 1936). Personality psychologists have accumulated much evidence suggesting that individuals are characterized by dispositional personality traits that can be categorized under the umbrella of the Big Five Factor Model, or simply, the Big Five: Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Neuroticism (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008; McCrae & Costa, 1999).

[☆] I thank James L. Gibson, Chris Dawes, Dawn Brancati, Nicole Simonelli, Vera Heuer, and Luke Cooper for helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. All remaining errors are my own. Replication data and code are available on the author's website.

Extraversion is linked to facets such as gregariousness, activity and emotion-seeking, and people who score high in this trait have an energetic, optimistic and active way of looking at the world. *Openness* to experience characterizes individuals by their curiosity, attraction to the unknown, and willingness to explore new experiences, which includes facets like imagination and artistic interests. *Agreeableness* assesses facets related to sincerity, altruism and modesty. *Conscientiousness* includes dispositions that tend toward impulse control and facets such as orderliness, self-discipline and achievement striving. Lastly, *Neuroticism*, or emotional stability, defines individuals by their tendencies toward anxiety, self-consciousness and angry hostility.

The salience of the 5-factor structure lies in its capability to reduce personality to this small number of universal core traits that are robust across time and space, highly stable over time (Costa & McCrae, 1988) and comparable across different languages and cultures around the globe (McCrae & Terracciano, 2005).

Social scientists have increasingly paid major attention to the role of personality traits because of two major reasons. First, they are endogenous basic tendencies that remain rather stable across individuals' lifespan (Anusic, 2016). Preferences were traditionally thought to appear as a combination of both more immediate considerations and long-standing acquisitions as a result of socialization processes (Zaller, 1992), especially those that occurred early in childhood (Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2009). Recent research on personality came to complement traditional insights which shed light on the interactive nature of the relationship between dispositional traits and the situational environment to determine attitudes and behavior. Second, personality traits are powerfully associated with a wide range of attitudes and behaviors, including political participation and ideology (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2011a).

1.2. The present study: rationale and predictions

Thus far, there has been no attempt to integrate personality characteristics to explain the fundamental question of why some people want to secede from their host country. While personality traits provide us with some leverage to understand this question, we should not expect all traits to exert an effect on secessionism. In particular, I expect Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Conscientiousness to exert effects on the likelihood of supporting a secessionist movement.

The personality trait of Agreeableness comprises my strongest expectation. Agreeableness reflects inter-individual differences in people's tendencies to cooperate, their generalized interpersonal trust, and concern about others' well-being. For this reason, agreeable people tend to strongly exhibit positive ties with others, which lead them to have a profound dislike for disagreement and an avoidance to put themselves in a position of conflict. When a region considers secession, it becomes a highly controversial political issue. In the political arena, individuals are pressed to respond to this environment by standing favor of or against a hypothetical referendum. Thus, individuals are asked to decide whether they would rather uphold the *status quo*, seek a policy change within the system, or support the anti-system position of the independence. In this context, we should expect that agreeable individuals would rather move away from anti-system positions, that is, political positions that "aim to overhaul a country's existing political system" (Aksoy & Carter, 2014: 187–188) such as supporting irredentist and separatist groups.

Secondly, Extraversion is a personality trait that manifests itself in sociable and excitement-seeker individuals. Extraverted people are more likely to have an active social life, leading them to join more civic groups (Weinschenk, 2014), participate more in politics, especially in those activities that involve social interaction (Gerber et al., 2011b). In this regard, pro-secessionist movements could be viewed as belonging to a larger family of collective action movements and, as a consequence, extraverted people would be more likely to join pro-independence movements.

Finally, I also expect a high score of Conscientiousness to decrease an individual's propensity to support secessionist movements. People high in Conscientiousness are characterized by norm compliance, deliberateness, sense of responsibility and status-quo-preserving attitudes, which should be negatively associated with a political enterprise that involves radically changing a country's constitutional order. In this vein, Lewis and Brown (2015) have recently investigated the relationship between moral sentiments and support for Scottish independence. The authors found that the binding dimension of moral sentiment, which has to do with people's concerns of norm compliance, is negatively related to support for secession in the Scottish case. Therefore, I expect that an individual's willingness to comply with the current social and political norms would lead to a negative association between Conscientiousness and secessionism.

While my expectations for Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Extraversion are directional, my expectations for the other personality traits are mixed in their directionality. To begin with, emotionally unstable – or neurotic – personalities may more easily feel hostility and anxiety regarding economic, political or socially disadvantageous policies. Furthermore, they may react more emotionally toward a threat and hold more prejudice against the social out-group when they feel threatened by them. However, the effect can go both ways since individuals may feel uneasy and anxious in the situation within their current country, leading them to pursue a different territorial solution such as secession. At the same time, they may also be more likely to support staying in their current country due to their fear of an uncertain transitional period. Therefore, I do not have strong expectations of the effect of Emotional stability or Neuroticism.

Support for secession could also be influenced by Openness to experience. On the one hand, individuals who score high in Openness tend to be more accepting of social diversity and be more involved in heterogeneous social networks, which increases their exposure to different groups and depresses their willingness to break bridges across groups. Therefore, the self-selection of individuals who score high in Openness to environments that are more heterogeneous leads me to expect a negative relationship between this trait and support for secession. However, open individuals are also more likely to explore new things, and obviously moving their country toward a secessionist path should excite them. These two hypotheses, thus, appear to lead to contradictory expectations with respect to the role of Openness; thus, no hypothesis was made regarding its effect on pro-secessionist attitudes.

2. Materials and method

2.1. The survey context

Catalonia has historically been an economically advantaged region within Spain, with a linguistic singularity, and a strong competition between state wide parties and non-state wide parties in both national and regional elections since the advent of Spain's democracy. Therefore, Catalonia provides a prototypical case study of secessionism that captures most of the variables that are common in secessionist movements, at least, among developed countries.¹

¹ Evidence for the cross-sectional determinants of secessionism from Sorens (2005) shows that the list of variables that are more strongly correlated with a region having a secessionist movement include identity-based attributes such as history of independence or a regional language, but also a "lack of irredentist potential, relative affluence, geographical noncontiguity, and multiparty political system" (304). Catalonia is a prototypical case of secessionism since it contains most of the variables that make a region more likely to have a secessionist movement. Obviously, this statement is probabilistic and, consequently, there may be important secessionist movement such as in Quebec or Scotland that are not relatively affluent.

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