

# Secessionist Urges in Catalonia: Media Indoctrination and Social Pressure Effects

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## Abstract

Recent tensions between Catalanian secessionism and Spanish central state erupted during the deep economic downturn that hit Southern European countries around 2010. The rapidly growing rise of a secessionist movement which demanded an immediate vote for self-determination became a major political conflict when the Regional Government decided to lead the claims to achieve secession using devices provided by Catalanian Statute of Autonomy (Home Rule). Different analyses have been used to understand such challenge: from comparisons about economic and fiscal inequalities among Spanish regions to descriptions of perceived neglect or mistreatment from the central State. Strategic models have been also applied to foresee plausible scenarios for the ongoing conflict. Despite their virtues, these attempts were unable to explain the abruptness of secessionism and they failed to identify the triggers that converted an old but convivial tension into a potentially damaging clash among neighbors. Here I present data pointing towards two psychological factors that have played an important role on the mounting wave of demands of self-determination: Intensive persuasion by local media and continuous social pressure through monopolizing the public space with secessionist symbols. If the present depiction is correct the recent secessionist campaign in Catalonia will be remembered as an example of mass indoctrination and social intimidation within a democratic context.

## Keywords

Secessionism, Mass Demonstrations, Social Intimidation, Media Influence, Indoctrination, Catalonia, Spain

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## 1. Introduction

Recent tensions between Catalanian secessionism and Spain appeared at the wake of the deep economic recession that hit Southern countries of the European Union around 2010. The rapidly growing force of a secessionist movement

which organized massive demonstrations demanding an immediate vote for self-determination acquired attributes of a major political conflict when the Regional Government began to lead the claims for secession using the instruments provided by Catalanian Statute of Autonomy (Home Rule), warranted under the Spanish Constitution of 1978. Current secessionism represents an abrupt exacerbation of Catalanian aspirations for self-government that gained relevance within the region, at the end of nineteenth century, with the creation of nationalistic leagues and parties which have been playing an oscillating but always prominent role within contemporary Spain. In recent years the quickly rising demands for secession escalated to the point of creating a major fracture that threatens to terminate an intertwined and centuries old conviviality between Catalans and the rest of Spaniards (Gat & Yakobson, 2013; Fontana, 2014; Amat, 2015).

According to Griffiths et al. (2015) the deep economic recession that Spain and the EU are starting to leave provided Catalonia with a window of opportunity to secede. The necessary condition was to successfully pass a pro-independence referendum celebrated in a peaceful manner. With the resort to force excluded in a democratic country of the European Union, the central Spanish government apparently only had two options to confront such a challenge: to persuade the breakaway region that the joint interests are better served by staying together or use its influence to block international recognition of the new secessionist state. But this had to be dealt through bargaining interactions in which aspiring nations negotiate with their central state under a wider context demanding full respect for democratic rules (Barceló-Soler, 2013). In Catalanian case, the severity of the economic crisis had created a situation in which the home state veto might have been too costly. Griffiths et al. (2015) warned that the window of opportunity could pass, but insisted nevertheless that it continued open when they wrote their essay. They proposed, in fact, that Catalonia “*would represent a particular breed of secessionist movements, one that may well become more common in the future in advanced democracies*”. Unlike the violent secessionist conflicts in nondemocratic states, Catalanian claims for secession have erupted, grown and matured “*in a remarkably peaceful and institutional manner*”, using their words.

Secessionist conflicts in multicultural states arise as a response to a tangled variety of mainly local factors which require analyses from many different perspectives to be properly discerned (Lustick et al., 2004; Sorens, 2005; Hale, 2008). The sudden and unexpected challenge of Catalanian secessionism has awakened research interest and different analyses have been advanced to understand it: from the description of economic disparities or systematic fiscal grievances during the crises, to the role of real or unreal mistreatments by an inefficient and parasitic central State (Crameri, 2014; Boylan, 2015). Strategic models have also been used to try to foresee plausible paths and future scenarios for the conflict (Barceló-Soler, 2013; Griffiths et al., 2015). Despite the virtues of these approaches they are unsatisfactory because none of them explains the abruptness of the recent wave of secessionism and they have also failed at offering tools to

identify the crucial triggers that might have helped to convert an old but convivial tension into a potentially dangerous clash among neighbors. It is noticeable, in this regard, that with the exception of Cramer (2014, 2015) these approaches have neglected to address obvious ingredients that can have a strong influence on public opinion.

Although the evolvement of such a forceful political movement involves many factors, my aim, in this paper is limited: I will accrue data about some ingredients that can help to put light on the eruption of the recent secessionist tensions in Catalonia. I will discuss findings pointing towards two main factors: intensive media indoctrination and social intimidation through monopolizing the public space with secessionist symbols and signs. I will argue that they have crucially contributed to trigger the implosive wave of secessionism claims. My departing point will be the results obtained on systematic surveys, political consultations and recent electoral contests, but I will also present data that depicts peculiar skewness of media influence in Catalonia, and about the intensity of social pressure through contextual signs. If the present depiction is correct the recent secessionist campaign in Catalonia will be remembered as an example of mass indoctrination and intimidation within a democratic context.

## 2. The Strength of Secessionism

### 1) The simulated referendum:

An impressive and orderly consultation about independence was celebrated the 9<sup>th</sup> November of 2014 under the auspices of the Regional Government of Catalonia who had officially called the citizenry to vote for or against secession, despite repeated warnings by the Spanish Government, which were substantiated by the Constitutional High Court, that such a vote would be illegal and devoid of consequences. Ignoring such warnings, ballot boxes were distributed by volunteers and poll stations opened on the whole network of Secondary Schools in all Catalan territory (education is a competence of the Autonomous Government). Thousands of persons patiently waited in lines to vote, under an atmosphere of festive celebration which was covered by the international media operating from a glamorous Press Center erected for the occasion at downtown Barcelona. Poll stations had been settled as well in seventeen main world cities, in commercial legacies of Catalonian Government, to allow fellow citizens working or travelling abroad to vote.

**2,305,000 persons** had voted at the end of that November day, and from those **1,861,753 (80.76%)** voted for secession. These figures represented a **37% - 38% of the estimated census of the whole region** on an occasion in which voting was allowed from the age of 16 years and foreign residents without Spanish citizenry could vote as well. The final voting count had to wait till the 25<sup>th</sup> of November, 2014, when ballot stations at some offices of the Autonomous Government finally closed. In the end, there were **1,897,244 votes for secession, 80.9% of the total final of 2,344,828 participants, very close to 38% of the estimated whole census<sup>1</sup>.**

<sup>1</sup><http://www.participa2014.cat/>

This referendum lacked proper democratic warrants (i.e. absence of a formal census; polling committees formed by self-recruited volunteers/activists; counting with no independent observers), so the final figures carry the stain of doubt. But it is impossible to ignore that this gigantic and person by person survey (participants had to present their ID cards, which were registered in *ad-hoc* on-line-files, to avoid repeated voting), fully **confirmed the existence of a big sector of Catalan citizenry formed by approximately 1,800,000 persons who were unequivocally in favor of secession**. This represented a 35% of the ordinary census and could surpass a 45% of voters in an official election with a high turnout.

## 2) Mass demonstrations

The para-legal consultation of the 9th November, 2014, was preceded by a series of massive street demonstrations celebrated on the occasion of the National Catalan Day, the 11<sup>th</sup> September. The first one in 2012 was a march of hundreds of thousands walking through avenues of Barcelona under the slogan “*Catalonia, new state of Europe*”, demanding the “*right of self-determination*” and shouting “*pro-independence*” calls which were the dominant claim. The second and third ones, on the following years, were tremendous challenges which had been devised to advertise Catalan secessionist claims worldwide: in 2013 an unbroken human chain from the French border, in the North, till Valencian border, at the South, was successfully laced uniting a distance of almost 400 km. with people filling routes, streets and highways with flags and banners. The third, on 2014, culminated a stunning and gigantic mosaic with the strips of the Catalan flag formed by a procession of around one million of individuals wearing red or yellow shirts, aligned on perfect columns along several kilometers, fusing two of the main avenues of central Barcelona till its confluence with a colorful and spectacular “V” of Victory, creating an image which was reproduced all over the world by the media.

On 11<sup>th</sup> September of 2015 and 2016 the series of colorful street demonstrations continued with massive gatherings. Those events were organized by two main secessionist funds<sup>2</sup> which receive support from all kind of local activists, societies, clubs and municipalities (Cramer 2014, 2015). The Regional Government backed them and tried to lead the movement after the first massive demonstration, at 2012, which was followed by a hurried election to the Regional Parliament that resulted in a coalition between the main right and left secessionist parties which had been sustaining a stable majority of (previously) moderate nationalists.

The first part of the eruptive period punctuated by these gigantic street dem-

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<sup>2</sup>ANC: Assemblée Nacional Catalana <https://assemblea.cat/>; Omnium Cultural <https://www.omnium.cat/>. The first one, ANC, was created at 2011 and has served as the main engine and network for agitation and secessionist campaigns. The second, OC, is an old trust created to support Catalan culture and language, and entered into secessionist agitation to work along ANC. In addition of financial help by individual supporters both have received backing by Regional Government and many Municipalities. Leaders of both organizations are now prominent politicians at the Catalan Parliament.

onstrations (2012-2014)<sup>3</sup> that culminated with the mock referendum of 9<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2014, covered the years in which the backing of secession by citizens had grown to an enormous degree according to regular and official surveys (**Figure 1**). The proportion of those who expressed a clear preference for secession jumped from less than 30% at the start of 2012, to over 40% one year later reaching maximums close to 50% through 2014. Maximums that remained stable till shortly after the simulated referendum, when a very small reflux started.

As the final scores attained by secessionist voters who had crowded the ballot stations on the 9<sup>th</sup> November 2014 were far from reaching a clear majority of Catalan electors (despite the outstanding mobilization and the powerful campaign by the Regional Government), and since the legal and practical consequences of that consultation were null, the expectations and enthusiasm began to recede a bit. This immediate rebound suggests that the secessionist movement depended to some degree, at least, from factors that trigger transient affective changes in public opinion. Answers to the simple question “*Do you want Catalonia to be an independent state?*”, were YES (45% to 47%) and NO (42% to 48%) along several CEO surveys on 2015-2016. The window of opportunity depicted by Griffiths et al. (2015) might have started to vanish shortly afterwards the nonbinding referendum since the prospects for immediate secession did not materialize.

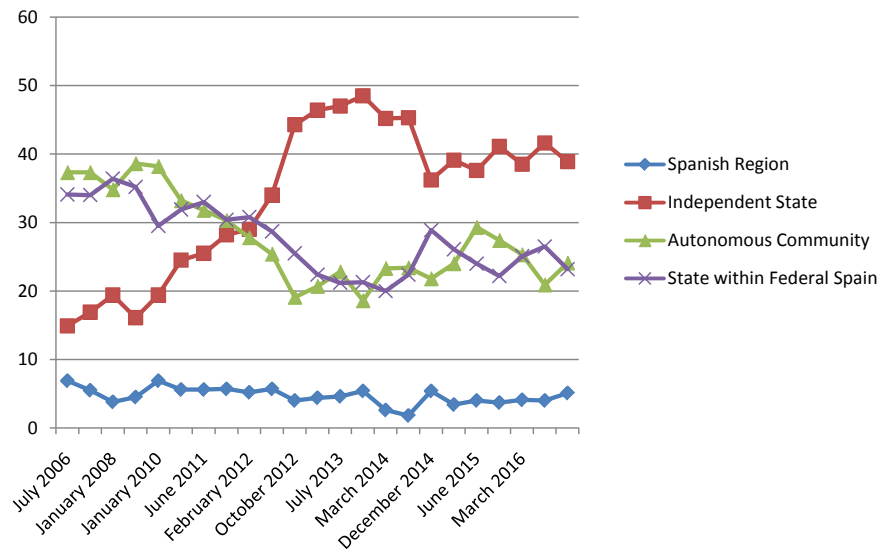
### 3) Electoral results

The results of the regional elections of September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015<sup>4</sup>, confirmed a scenario that had crystallized two years earlier. Compared with the elections of 2012 the turnout jumped till the 77.4% of the electorate (4,115,807 of votes cast, from a total of 5,352,786 potential voters: a historical record on such a regional contest). Abstentions were 1,119,106 (22.56%) and the sum of blank and null votes were 47,873 (1.16% of total)<sup>5</sup>. That large turnout was probably the result of an election raised as a “plebiscite” for or against secession. This was the tactic advocated by the great secessionist coalition (“*Juntspelsi*”: *Together for Yes*), encompassing the two main nationalist parties along with the major secessionist associations. They obtained a total of 1,620,973 votes (39.54%). Adding to that the 336,365 votes (8.2%) obtained by a radical secessionist formation (CUP, Popular Unity, far left), makes a **total reach of 1,957,348 votes in favor of secession (47.8% of all votes)**. The sum, on the other hand, of all the votes that went to **non-secessionist formations got a total of 2,110,586 votes (51.28% of**

<sup>3</sup>These huge “performances” had adequate continuity in 2015 and 2016, with new choreographies in other main Barcelona avenues. All of them succeeded to create splendid chromatic impacts that the international media covered and commented on front news. The secessionist civil organizations that organized and lead these liturgies were able to show, over successive calls, that they could mobilize troops of about one million and make them display and form disciplined parades in a festive and peaceful manner.

<sup>4</sup>Next regional election was scheduled for 27 September 2015 through an agreement between the main secessionist organizations (ANC,OC) and the Regional Government. A systematic campaign started with the aim to convince the citizenry that this election will be a “plebiscite” that will be used to proclaim independence if the secessionist parties reached a majority of seats at the Regional Parliament.

<sup>5</sup>[www.parlament2015.cat/ca/inici/index.html](http://www.parlament2015.cat/ca/inici/index.html)



**Figure 1.** Preferences of Catalan citizens (in percentages) concerning the status of the region along the last decade. Derived from C.E.O. Surveys (Barometer of Political Opinion, 39, November 2016), the official polling agency of the Catalanian Regional Government. Data gathered from personal interviews to representative samples of 1500-2000 citizens, depending on each survey. The series starts at 2006 with preferences showing a rather stable pattern till 2010, when the secessionist segment started a gradual increase for two years followed by an abrupt eruption from October 2012 that peaked around the start of 2014. From December of that year there was a small decline which has stabilized the secessionist preference at about 40% of surveyed people (the last survey published on 18<sup>th</sup>. November 2016). *Autonomous Community: current Catalanian status within Spain, meaning a highly decentralized region with Home Rule.*  
<http://ceo.gencat.cat/ceop/AppJava/pages/estudis/categories/fitxaEstudi.html?colId=3;6008&lastTitle=Bar%F2metre+d%27Opini%F3+Pol%EDtica%3BBar%F2metre+d%27Opini%F3+Pol%EDtica.+3a+onada+2016>

**all votes**). So, a narrow margin of 150,000 votes separated the non-secessionists from the secessionists. But if support for secession is expressed in terms of the whole census, that gives 36.6% of electors in favor of independence.

This suggests that the Spanish state had more options than the ones devised by Griffiths et al. (2015) and by Barceló-Soler (2013) in their assumptions when modeling the conflict between the Regional Government and the Spanish administration. The central government opted for sheer patience and repeated exhortations to respect the law with the implicit expectation that time will erode a transient and artificially induced mood within Catalan citizenry. The big secessionist coalition (*“JuntspelSi”*) won those elections without reaching the majority of seats at the Regional Parliament, while losing the “plebiscite” for independence since the sum of all votes in favour of secession was 47.8%. The 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, after months of internal litigations, the first Regional Government entirely formed by secessionist parties was formed and the challenge continued.

The political tension between Spain and Catalanian secessionism has remained unsettled, but the oscillations in political preferences demand a dissection of the drivers that might have contributed to the impulsive augmentation of

the secessionist movement in addition to factors linked to the deep economic downturn or to parties' fights and bargaining strategies.

### 3. Indoctrination by the Media

“Catalan nationalists always complain that Spain does not understand Catalonia. The true story, however, is that day after day and for many years the main Catalan media have devoted enormous efforts to reach just the opposite result. To convince the citizenry that trying to understand Spaniards is useless and to assure indeed the naissance of apprehension, hostility and even hate against them. The trench which has been excavated during these thirty years in order to build an affective gap between Spain and Catalonia, a gap that is reaching a peak during current weeks, is not a natural and spontaneous distance but a deliberate and intentionally induced antipathy”

Francesc de Carreras, An induced antipathy, *El País*, p. 10, 1-10-2014.

The major street demonstrations of Catalonian secessionism were so spectacular along an iterated “*crescendo*”, accompanied by an increasing international visibility (Guardiola et al., 2014), that they ought to be the result of a professionally orchestrated campaign<sup>6</sup>. Herding, social conformity or obedient gregariousness around a political movement which had created the appearance to be able to reach soon its ultimate goals, with a triumph, could have been a factor (Cramer, 2014; Tobeña, 2016). But if passive automatism have played a part, their influence must have been minor in comparison to the merciless and overwhelming indoctrination performed by the media.

The main suspect is the systematic work of local media directed towards modeling the audiences: the permanent and unidirectional propaganda from communication platforms which depend, directly or indirectly, from the Regional Government in an emulation of the bubbles imposed by authoritarian regimes (De Carreras, 2014; De España, 2014; Morán, 2014). The bulk of political analysts agree on this issue<sup>7</sup>: the major driver of the recent wave of secessionism would have been the relentless indoctrination by the media directly controlled by the Regional Government and by web-based platforms which depend on various forms of subsidies arriving either from the Autonomous Government itself or from allied economic and cultural elites (Cramer, 2014).

Nevertheless, this denunciation even if correct is easily dismantled because nobody is free of such allegations, since sectarian propaganda is used by all parts. The rule in Spanish politics is that the media under direct or remote control

<sup>6</sup>The impact on the international media has been substantial and continued with editorials or comments dedicated to the issue of Catalan secessionism by leading world newspapers and TV channels. The visibility was maximal around 9<sup>th</sup> November 2014, the date of the simulated referendum for independence that came only two months after the vote against independence in Scotland (18-9-2014).

<sup>7</sup>Main Spanish newspapers have series entirely devoted to the analyses of the “*Catalan rebellion*” between 2012-2014 (see, for instance; “El País”: “*El desafío soberanista*”).

[http://politica.elpais.com/tag/referendum\\_autodeterminacion\\_cataluna\\_2014/a/](http://politica.elpais.com/tag/referendum_autodeterminacion_cataluna_2014/a/); with some of the papers grouped in a book “*Cataluña: derecho a discutir*”, Madrid: El País-Libros, 2014 ). The flood of interpretations was enormous.

from political parties apply strong and systematic bias with the aim to indoctrinate audiences (Buck, 2015). This is not only an accepted but an expected behavior. Voices from the secessionist camp proclaim, with indignation, that mass indoctrination is impossible in Catalonia because there is free press and citizens have full access to all kind of (biased) media, and that the really influential TV channels, broadcasting stations and web platforms and networks depend, in most cases, from firms which are antagonistic to Catalan secessionism. The usual response to the accusation of “intoxication” by local media is to affirm that there is more pluralism in Catalan media than in the uniform chorus of centralist voices on Spanish media and digital platforms. These debates avoid all contrast of empirical data and prefer to engage in rounds of sterile attacks and counterattacks.

This confusing state of affairs does not eliminate the need to examine the data since there is available evidence on this issue which is readily accessible and not particularly difficult to interpret. The same surveys which I have used previously from CEO (the Opinion Polls agency of the Regional Government) and also CIS studies (the Spain’s main official polling agency) provide, with strict regularity, estimations of the patterns of media following which can be used as approximate descriptions of consumption trends by Catalan citizens. These findings can be summarized as follows taking into account that the scores reflect trends on recent surveys, though the proportions have been rather constant during the last five years (*CEO Barometers 2013-2016; CIS 2013-2016*)<sup>8</sup>:

1. “Preferred TV channel to follow political and general news”: **53% of responders bestowed TV3 an unchallenged lead** (TV3 is the public TV station dependent from the Regional Government). Adding to this the audience who prefer other local TV channels, this gives a total score of **60% of citizens who prefer to follow political news from Catalan channels**. On this issue, **the sum for the Spanish TV channels does not reach a 33% of followers**.

2. “Preferred Broadcasting station to follow political and general news”: **62% of radio followers** preferred either *Catalunya Ràdio* (station dependent from Regional Government) or *RAC1* (private station: Godó-Vanguardia Group), both leading with a huge advantage the radio audiences in Catalonia. **Catalan is the only language used, by both**. All Spanish stations reach a meager **25% of radio followers**.

3. “Preferred Newspaper to follow political and general news”: “*La Vanguardia*” and “*El Periódico*” (Barcelona newspapers with regional scope and with distinct daily editions in Spanish and Catalan languages –this last predominant), alternate the lead and they reach, summed, a quota of **57%** of readers. “*El Punt-Avui*” and “*Ara*”, two secessionist newspapers added to several local ones exceed a score of **20%** of readers. **The proportion of readers of Spanish newspapers does not reach a humble 10% of people**.

4. “Preferred webs, blogs or social media”: despite the absence of comparable

<sup>8</sup>CEO: Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió (<http://ceo.gencat.cat/ceop/AppJava/pages>); CIS: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas ([http://www.cis.es/cis/opencm/ES/11\\_barometros/index.jsp](http://www.cis.es/cis/opencm/ES/11_barometros/index.jsp)).

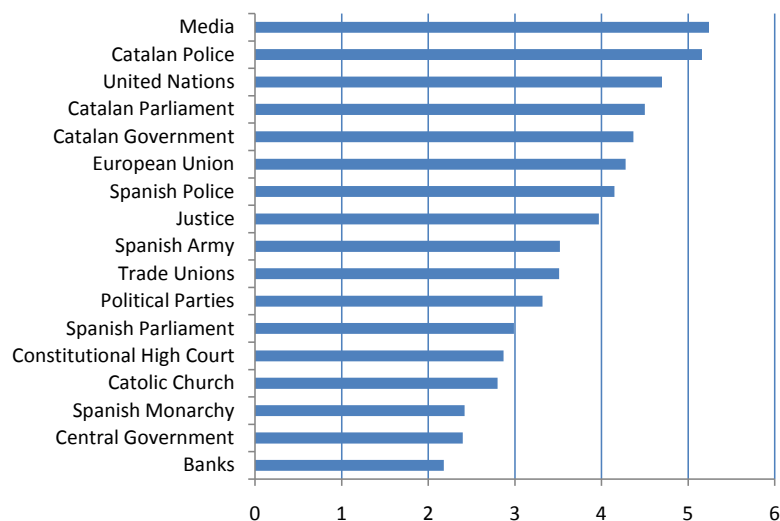


data from official CEO surveys, the scores are probably more biased towards pro-secessionist sources because the webs and blogs launched by the secessionist media and organizations have been particularly successful and very active on social networks (Cramer, 2014, 2015).

These figures for consumers of news and political information depict the routine operation of a “**regional bubble**”: A **big and encapsulating umbrella** which concentrates the contents of the daily news and discussion of current political affairs through local media, reaching a **60% of Catalan citizens with an active interest in politics**. Another **20% of Catalans prefer, on the contrary, to follow news and politics from Spanish media**. And there is still a **nontrivial rest of another 20% of aloof citizenry**, with no interest in politics and who does not follow those topics with regularity.

To summarize, the major segment of the informed citizenry who follow the domestic, national and international news does so through local or regional platforms: those directly dependent from the Regional Government and those which work in areas under its supervision with obvious possibilities to be patronized, subsidized or marginalized. The opportunities for helping allies or harming opponents are substantial indeed. These informative bubbles exist in other Spanish regions with a native language (i.e. Basque Country, Galicia, Balearic Islands), though their size and influence is less preponderant.

Moreover, Catalan media is the social institution which receives a maximum score of trust by public opinion: a mean total of **5.24 points (on a scale from 1 to 10, of trust)** presiding, surprisingly, from the very top the scores given to a wide spectrum of institutions (Figure 2). This is a curious result because journalists are not well valued on similar measures, when they are compared with other professionals. The rest of Spanish citizenry is not so indulgent with their



**Figure 2.** Trust of Catalan citizenry in their Institutions. Responses to the question: “Please indicate your degree of trust (from 1 = None to 10 = Maximum) in the following Institutions”, N = 2000 persons, direct interviews (CEO, 33, Barometer of political opinion, October 2014). Similar results on October 2015 and only minor changes on 2016 Barometers.

media: using a similar evaluation the score attains only a total of 4.5 points and descends several steps on the trust ladder, at the corresponding CIS studies.

So, Catalan citizens who answer political surveys not only prefer to follow news and politics from their regional and local media, neglecting other sources, but they have a particularly good opinion about their media and they put them at the summit of trust. It is important to underline this characteristic because these findings from CEO polling agency suffer an acknowledged sampling bias: there is an over-representation of responders from some social strata—professionals, middle classes and low-middle classes with stable jobs—, and the results do not reflect a fair display of opinions of the whole population. This induces a double biasing effect: these people are the preferred source to detect oscillations of “public opinion” and they are, as well, the main propagators of informed and educated opinion in their areas of influence. So, all things considered, the indoctrination bubble works through optimal paths because the majority of clients are satisfied with the role and influence of Catalan media.

It is also remarkable that these citizens award the Regional Government a trust score of **4.4** points, which almost doubles the **2.4** granted to Spanish Monarchy and the Central Government. This outstanding contrast between the evaluations of the regional power versus the State is truly diagnostic of a deeply entrenched opinion gap. To summarize, for these social segments the media they usually follow is highly appreciated, the policies of the Catalan Government not so much, though close to an approval, and the origin of all difficulties and hardship comes from the core of the central State and the Crown. Apparently all trouble in Catalonia comes from the parasitic habits of Madrid bureaucracy and the exploitative profits that Spanish elites derive from their closeness and promiscuity to central power. This scenario reflects a story of reciprocal affect between Catalan middle classes and the journalistic and entertainment platforms which nourish their wisdom and leisure<sup>9</sup> (Crameri, 2014, 2015).

The systematic bias to present society faults and economic troubles as the result of foreign (Spanish) factors changed towards an overwhelming propaganda when the secessionist challenge became also a pulse between the Regional and the Central Governments, from the fall of 2012 onwards (Alvarez, 2012; Crameri, 2014). Tools to manipulate dropped all veils and the tactic changed towards overcrowding of informative flows, from all sources, with the aim to create an unstoppable wave and reach complete social obedience. On summer-autumn 2014, when the rush to claim for a referendum of self-determination was maximal, the devotion of local *media* towards feeding and amplifying the secessionist activism reached such levels that Unions from the main Regional TV-Broadcasting channel (*TV3*) formally protested, denouncing a permanent transgression of informative impartiality (Sacristán, 2014). The merciless insistence on heralding the slogans and announcements of the secessionist organizations and Regional Government claims, trespassed the tolerance of professionals who worked on public media to the point of demanding a “*stop the hate speech*” with

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<sup>9</sup>Arruñada By Lapuente-Giné V (2015) El cisma entre burguesía y clerecía, *El País-Opinión*, 4th. September.

banners exhibited at the entrance of *TV3* headquarters<sup>10</sup>.

Doctrinal pressure by public media and also by private firms aligned with secessionism has been practiced in Catalonia with such stubbornness that the agnostic citizenry (in relation to secession), has been pushed to routinely breath in the middle of a perennial cloud of propaganda (De España, 2013; Crameri, 2014), accompanied, in addition, by an exhibitionist occupation of all corners at urban spaces by symbols of the secessionist movement.

#### 4. Flag Pressure and Intimidation

“First fundamental lesson after the simulated referendum of 9th November 2014: secessionism in Catalonia embraces a fraction of the citizenry that barely reaches two million persons. Nevertheless, this huge minority controls in an almost exclusive way a good portion of the social life in the region, starting with the main media and finishing with a constant and overwhelming exhibition of their slogans and their attempts to present the part as a whole. This minority *is* Catalonia and the remaining citizenry are enemies to be petrified by fear”

Gregorio Morán, The miraculous ballot boxes, *La Vanguardia*, p. 30, 15-11-2014.

Catalonian urban and rural landscapes have been garnished with a colorful forest of secessionist flags and banners waving from balconies, windows and poles in all corners of the region. Since 11<sup>th</sup> September 2012, the flag of four red-yellow strips with a five points star, the “*estelada*”, a “*Cuban-like*” version of the official Catalanian flag<sup>11</sup>, dominates public scenarios in streets, squares and crossroads, and also highlights the whole countryside from outstanding points at nearby hills. This obeys a slogan born in secessionist webs that reads “*hang the estelada on the balcony and do not remove it until independence*” (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** A banner from Catalanian secessionist webs. The slogan says: “hang the secessionist flag on the balcony and leave it there till Independence”.

<sup>10</sup><http://www.eleconomista.es/catalunya/noticias/6064933/09/14/El-sindicato-de-TV3-denuncia-parcialidad.html#Kku8LGrPdNHcyeOA>; [http://www.redacciotvc.blogspot.com.es/2014\\_09\\_01\\_archive.html](http://www.redacciotvc.blogspot.com.es/2014_09_01_archive.html)

<sup>11</sup>The “*estelada*” is not the official Catalanian flag though its presence is now dominant and uncontested everywhere in official and private places. The addition of a star to the traditional four yellow-red strips of Aragon-Catalonia flag heralds secessionism and was inspired by Cuban War of Independence, at the end of XIX century.

The contextual pressure by the “*perennial estelades*” has not receded in years, and it increased when many municipalities decided to use them as their “official” flags waiving not only in the mainmast of the town halls but in many urban corners. Circulatory roundabouts at the entrances of towns and villages are now the preferred place: glittering masts have been erected in its center, where magnificent “*estelades*” salute the daily life of residents and visitors<sup>12</sup>.

It is common to consider flags as banal urban signs or home decor items. Exposure to them is so regular in many contexts that it is difficult to view them as vectors of political influence. Due to their use as a kitsch ornament of clothing and undergarments it is tempting to think that they lost value as symbols of communal affiliation. It is a mistake, however, to see flags as negligible icons and suffice it to note its pervasive use on solemn occasions by powers in any field. Flags never had the relevance they convey today, in societies characterized by relentless competition heralded through visible marks. Big corporations have all created their flags and banners to proclaim territory and proudly wave them from the main headquarters to their branches everywhere.

National emblems are brands with a vast representational field: the mosaic of features, customs and values of a national community. Hence its representational value persists despite the apparent degradation by irreverent uses. Important studies about flag influence on attitudes and political behavior come from Israel, a country where exhibition of national emblems is overwhelming. In a series of experiments Ran Hassin demonstrated that flags waving in the environment had appreciable effects although contact with them was ultra-short or unnoticed (Hassin et al., 2007, 2009). The first one was carried out with Israelis who, while taking a verbal task on a computer screen received flashes with pictures of the national flag with a duration so short (16 milliseconds), that they could not detect them. That is, flashed flags fell below the perceptual threshold for recognition and could not be “seen” despite entering into the brain. Subliminal non-flag drawings were also presented and the effects of both entries on political at-

<sup>12</sup>By midmorning of November 9<sup>th</sup> 2014, the day marked to celebrate the long-awaited referendum on self-determination which was transmuted into a paralegal of political consultation, the President of the Regional Government, Mr. A. Mas, headed at downtown Barcelona proud to express his “*opinion on the future of Catalonia*”, at a polling station in a school. He was talking to a famous TV comedian, Mr. J. Évole, when he stopped for a moment just to comment looking at the balconies: “*I see many flags today*” ..., Évole replied: “*Are you sure? ... they’ve been hanging for years!*”, “*No...*”, corrected Mr. Mas: “*today there are many more*”, changing topic towards another matter. This brief interchange denotes the spontaneous cognitive processing of both characters. They did quick and contrasting estimations about the approximate count of the surrounding flags. They were coming from a long and friendly conversation, for TV cameras, in the private quarters of the official residence of the Presidency

([http://www.atresplayer.com/television/programas/salvados/temporada-9/capitulo-4-9-n-catalua\\_2\\_014110700426.html](http://www.atresplayer.com/television/programas/salvados/temporada-9/capitulo-4-9-n-catalua_2_014110700426.html)). It was the TV program with the highest share, for the whole Spain, that night: Cadena SER-Madrid: A perfect “*Salvados*”, the most seen program on the 9<sup>th</sup>-N; The program of Jordi Évole, with an interview with Mr. A. Mas, wins on the day of Catalan consultation ([http://cadenaser.com/ser/2014/11/10/television/1415608299\\_612013.html](http://cadenaser.com/ser/2014/11/10/television/1415608299_612013.html)). It is probably natural for a politician and a journalist to be alert for signs of social effervescence, though I suspect that such brief exchange hinted more than curiosity about signs of political exaltation. It denotes a tendency to diagnose the relative magnitude and persistence in the display of secessionist symbols. Such scrutiny on the density of the secessionist flags presence is not unusual among Catalans.

titudes were registered. Under the (unconscious) influence of the Israeli flag individuals veered towards intransigent positions on hot issues concerning the endless litigation with the Palestinians, a variation that did not happen with non-flag images. This unconscious shift in political positioning was then tested on voting behavior. The same procedure was repeated by measuring political preferences before *Knesset* elections of 2006, followed later on by a cross-examination of the voting options. Participants who had got the subliminal priming showed a bias for nationalist and right-wing formations and, a few weeks later, voted more for them. These findings were reproduced in Italy, before a general election at 2008, and also in Russia, at 2009, with concordant results: receiving inadvertent priming with the national flag while conducting a laboratory task led to a decanting of the vote to conservative parties or to those with programs of national unity in both countries (Hassin et al., 2009). The effects, therefore, are not restricted to the peculiar circumstances of a troubled Middle East.

Flag influence on USA elections was also studied when Barack Obama was leading the presidential race of 2008 (Carter et al., 2011). Several hundreds of individuals were recruited to answer questionnaires, via Internet, to win a small gift. After completing the test, two hundred subjects who came from states where polls gave a clear advantage to Obama's candidacy over that of John McCain, indicated their voting intention two weeks in advance of election. In half of them the answer sheets had a small American flag printed in color on the upper left margin, so that it entered their brains consciously but inadvertently, while they were answering. In the other half, the sheets were devoid of that. A week after the election, they were contacted again and had to refer their actual vote. The presence of such miniature flags, caused a shift toward Republicans in voting intentions and in the friendliness toward the Republican ticket. That shift was then reflected on the actual vote: McCain-Palin reached a 27.2% of votes in those who had been primed with the flag, while in those non-exposed McCain-Palin ticket only got 16.5% of votes. Such increase over 10% of actual vote continued eight months later.

Two years later these results were replicated in a context where the Democratic Party had the majority in both USA Chambers. Participants had to complete a visual discrimination task which involved priming with the American flag: While looking at a series of white and black pictures of urban landscapes they should estimate whether they corresponded to the morning, midday or evening. Some of the photos had flags flying on poles or balconies, while identical others did not have flags. The task was to guess, based on light and shadows, the moment of day the photo was taken. The results showed a shift toward conservative and pro-Republican positions in subjects who had watched images with flags. These shifts were similar for individuals who had earlier expressed sympathy either for Democrats or Republicans. Carter et al. (2011) interpreted that as an example of the effect of the national emblem in uniting opinions about the symbolic representation of common citizenship, fostering cohesion towards patriotism. It is, in short, a nontrivial effect that springs from minimum flashing

entrances (priming) despite living surrounded by flags.

Advertising techniques have repeatedly shown that in order to influence public audiences there is nothing better than perceptual saturation. Minimum priming has clearly appreciable effects but systematic occupation of the everyday scenarios with emblems, marks and logos convert them in defining elements of the landscape: unavoidable attributes of everyone domestic geography that the brain processes, day after day, through passive but tenacious processes. A saturating “flag environment” of this kind has prevailed in many localities across Catalonia for years. Only in inner cities or in poor neighborhoods dominated by people from various migratory waves the systematic marking with secessionist flags is absent. In the rest of the region the “*perennial estelades*” (Figure 3) give the landscape an ever present chromatic pressure: in small and medium size villages of inland Catalonia these flags hang everywhere whereas on the urban districts of middle and upper classes, at cities, the marking is more sporadic.

## 5. The Crouched and Expectant Segment

The intensity of the indoctrinating pressure applied by the alliance between local media, the skilled activism and persistent campaigns of pro-secession funds, and the resources of the Regional Government can be explained, in all likelihood, by the never recognized but strong suspicion that the real obstacle for secession was and is at home. These different actors were perfectly aware of the size of the silent Catalan citizenry with familial, affective or economic links with Spain and contemplated with apprehension their potential reactions, although that population has remained expectant all along the secessionist festivals and massive demonstrations. There are, in fact, around three millions of Catalan citizens with capacity to intervene in politics who have not been convinced to join the secessionist adventure despite the contextual intimidation that they have had to endure. They are very heterogeneous though they predominate in towns that make up the industrial rings of Barcelona and Tarragona’s conurbations, as well as in many other suburban neighborhoods and villages across the network of medium-sized towns scattered through the whole region. They have remained stoically silent, without expressing themselves loudly or emphatically through demonstrations or by exhibition of identity signs (the Spanish flag is almost absent in Catalonia), and this may have increased the perception that they constitute a fragmented, submissive and negligible part of the citizenry.

They do not have anything like strong parties or a common leadership and they have been politically under-represented in Catalan Parliament because they have typically failed to appear in successive electoral contests at the regional level<sup>13</sup>. They voted with turnouts similar to the rest of the citizenry at Spanish gen-

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<sup>13</sup>This changed on the regional elections of 27<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2015. A unionist liberal-center party “*Ciutadans*”, became the first force of opposition at the Regional Parliament as a result of its victory on towns and neighbourhoods were that “silent” population was majoritarian. In subsequent Spanish general elections of 20<sup>th</sup> December 2015 and 26<sup>th</sup> June 2016, a new leftist and non-secessionist coalition (“*En Comú-Podem*”) won the majority of Catalan seats at the Madrid Parliament, leaving the secessionist parties behind.

eral elections, but expressed a meager interest in Catalan elections (Riba, 2000; Fernández-i-Marín & López, 2010; Riera, 2012). But they had not bought the glittering promises of secessionism despite the apostolate, lures and bribes received. They have been waiting still, scanning the horizon and trying to live as if there were no pressures from the secessionist campaign. As it was possible to organize the routines of daily life avoiding or ignoring the surrounding inputs, they traded and worked while they expected crouched.

This is probably one of the most important drivers of secessionism urgency. For pro-independence forces, it was mandatory to keep these people silent, demobilized and resigned while the “*window of opportunity for secession*” (Griffiths et al, 2015) endured. At the time of writing this paper the social fracture<sup>14</sup> among those confronted communities has not arrived near to the threshold of an open conflict, despite a perfectly visible landscape where a part of the citizenry gains and the rest loses in the event of secession. The borders at which the forces of one side encounter the adversaries are well defined: flags and banners have been erected to mark territories at every condominium and neighborhood.

## 6. Discussion

I have accrued concordant data pointing towards two crucial ingredients that might help to explain an abrupt and tumultuous eruption in secessionism force: intensive indoctrination by local media and social intimidation by an overwhelming occupation of the public space by secessionist symbols. All these facts suggest that despite the value of analyses of Catalanian secessionism using strategic modeling (Barceló-Soler, 2013; Griffiths et al., 2015), or descriptions of economic grievances rooted on perceived mistreatments by the central State (Boylan, 2015; Amat, 2015), they are unsatisfactory because they leave elements of influence on public opinion untouched (Crameri, 2014, 2015). These approaches usually depart from oscillations in elections results or from the nuances of parties’ fights and tactics, without offering hints about what might have been the itineraries and proximate inducers that have converted an old though contained tension into a potential clash.

I have discussed figures showing that popularity of the media in Catalonia is strongly skewed. Repeated findings from official surveys show that TV channels, newspapers and broadcasting stations which are directly under control of the Regional Government or within its field of influence clearly dominate the audiences and they operate, only or mostly, in Catalan language. This represents a curious mismatch as Spanish is the language of daily use of more than half of citizens who live in the region<sup>15</sup> and reflects the operation of a peculiar “*communication bubble*” that nourishes the most influential fraction of Catalan so-

<sup>14</sup>Pau Mari-Klose (2015) “Un solo pueblo”, *El País-Opinión*, 6-10-2015, described the obvious cleavages that still separate the two larger communities which coexist in Catalonia (natives and assimilated vs. long-settled migrants from Spanish origins not completely assimilated), in terms almost identical to those used here. He commented as well that any reference to that is taboo.

<sup>15</sup>Usos lingüístics de la població de Catalunya: Enquesta 2013, Generalitat de Catalunya: Departament de Cultura.

[http://llengua.gencat.cat/web/.content/documents/publicacions/altres/arxiu/eulp2013\\_fullet.pdf](http://llengua.gencat.cat/web/.content/documents/publicacions/altres/arxiu/eulp2013_fullet.pdf)

ciety. Such fraction is formed, mainly, by Catalan natives and assimilated people who are both over-represented among middle classes: citizens who use Catalan language, almost exclusively, in their daily routines and get their opinion from local media. It is also the same fraction that tends to preferably respond to political polls thus producing biased portraits of opinion trends. This large fraction has been the major force behind the recent secessionist wave. Using the entire data from CEO surveys (**Figure 1**), during the period 2011 to 2013, **Boylan (2015)** showed, in fact, that national identity (being a native or assimilated Catalan) was a much stronger predictor of the desire for secession, than perceived grievances resulting from an unfair fiscal treatment or other economic and political factors.

Such “*communication bubble*” is a main component of the “*Catalan-centered frame of reference*” which guides the political options of this citizenry segment, in opposition to a “*Spanish-centered frame of reference*” which characterizes another big population fraction (**Fernández-i-Marín & López, 2010**). Both distinctive frames of reference were the main factor explaining the outstanding difference in abstention behavior, when comparing the turnouts on general elections versus regional elections. **Muñoz and Tormos (2013)** contrasted these opposed cognitive frames in relation to secession and showed that national identification and economic considerations were the main vectors behind support for independence. The effect of TV influence was less relevant, but his measure was crude: To follow or not the news on *TV3* channel. A better depiction of media preferences would have been more informative. In fact, when the tilt of the media is notorious and segmentation effects are large there is no need to use a fine-grained analysis of contents (front pages, agenda settings, minutes of coverage, diagnostic phrases), to measure bias (**Gerber et al., 2006; Entman, 2007; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010**). But systematic studies through the whole period of the secessionist wave will surely be very helpful.

There was, in addition, a noticeable concordance between the turnout distribution in the consultation of the 9<sup>th</sup> November 2014<sup>16</sup>, and the map of turnouts built by **Muñoz and Guinjoan (2013)** from the series of unofficial referendums for independence held across Catalan municipalities, in the period 2009-2011, as a warming up of the secessionist wave. 58.3% of Catalan municipalities representing 77.5% of the whole population organized these unofficial referendums. The overall turnout was 18.1% quite unevenly distributed, reaching a 32.5% in the average municipality. Only secessionist voters were attracted to ballot stations while the non-secessionists failed to appear. The turnout on the simulated referendum of 9<sup>th</sup> November 2014 was 38%, not far from that 32.5% achieved at these local unofficial referendums (2009-2011), despite the 9<sup>th</sup> November consultation was held in all Catalonia with backing from both regional and municipal authorities. **Muñoz and Guinjoan (2013)** showed that differences in turnout across municipalities and counties were explained by local factors: the resources of the secessionist movement, activism intensity and the magnitude of the nationalist “sentiment pool” in each locality. Media attention, size of locali-

<sup>16</sup><http://www.participa2014.cat/avencos/ca/part-com.html>



ties and origin of the citizenry were also important. Thus, the simulated referendum reproduced, at a bigger scale, a secessionist map which had appeared, previously, in two thirds of localities across Catalonia. The results of the regional elections of 27<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2015 came to fully confirm it<sup>17</sup>.

Finally, the almost complete absence of “counteracting campaigns” orchestrated by the Spanish central administration or his Catalanian allies, deserves a comment. The Spanish government has been strangely static and cautious all along this period of strong secessionist activism and demonstrations. It has avoided entering into the political ring using tools to seduce, convince or negotiate. While offering an image of hesitation and uneasiness it has preferred the option of “*wait and see*”, complemented with iterated warnings to respect the democratic law and calls to the Constitutional High Court, whenever the decisions of the Regional Government or the secessionist organizations trespassed limits. Even the systematic and perennial deployment of secessionist flags at official places in many municipalities has been permitted without action<sup>18</sup>. This curious paralysis may have contributed, as well, to invigorate secessionism strength. Expected disputes among separate factions within the secessionist movement may have been the main reason behind the inactivity from the central Government: dissensions among secessionist parties were frequent after the para-legal referendum of 9<sup>th</sup> November 2014, and particularly after their non-sufficient victory at the regional elections of 27<sup>th</sup> September of 2015. The small decline in secession enthusiasm that polls reflect since then (see **Figure 1**), could support this attitude of prudence from the central State, although it remains to be seen if this was a good option in the long run.

## 7. Conclusions

The political tension between Spain and Catalanian secessionism is unsettled and all signs indicate that it is going to continue for long. There is a huge fraction of Catalan citizenry with an active secessionist agenda who knows that reaching a social majority is at hand. The Regional Government announced a deployment of a pre-secession schedule with legislative steps and deadlines that will contribute to keep the tension high<sup>19</sup>. The final figures for the votes in favor

<sup>17</sup>[www.parlament2015.cat/ca/inici/index.html](http://www.parlament2015.cat/ca/inici/index.html)

<sup>18</sup>On the event of local elections celebrated the 24th May 2015, the Electoral Authority issued an order to withdraw the secessionist flags waving at the façades of town halls during the campaign. Several municipalities resisted the order till the voting day. The day after, the secessionist flags were reinstated. The order was issued responding to a demand of a private organization (*Societat Civil Catalana*), and not under an official indication. To give another example: The UEFA fined Barcelona F. C. team for permitting massive exhibition of secessionist flags at the stadium on important matches with worldwide TV following; this happened again without central government indications. The matter is on court and not settled.

<sup>19</sup>The Regional Government announced a formal compromise to celebrate a fully legal and binding referendum for secession, fixing the deadline for September 2017. This was approved by the secessionist majority at the Catalanian Parliament, the 29<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2016, on a session in which the Government received a confirmation vote. Nobody, again, responded to that from the Central Spanish administration which had been almost paralyzed along 2016, after two general elections which finished without a sufficient majority to form a Government. A new Cabinet was finally formed at the start of November 2016.

or against secession in a legal, fully agreed and constitutionally sanctioned referendum for independence are an enigma, but Spain's politics will probably revolve about this issue since the Constitutional Law does not permit self-determination of its regions. All the data, however, from regular opinion surveys to the unofficial referendum of 9<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2014, and the results of the last two regional elections (Autumn 2012 and 2015), confirm that the division of the Catalan citizenry in two halves (Zabalza, 2014) is solidly established.

My aim in this paper was to put the focus on two prominent triggers that have helped to ignite the implosive growing of the secessionist movement. Other inducers have contributed as well, for sure, but media indoctrination and contextual intimidation cannot be ignored. Their influence has been relevant and they are still operating at full force. They provide, by the way, a portrait much less benign than the “*remarkably peaceful and institutional*” depiction of Catalanian secessionism that Griffiths et al. (2015) and many others have presented.

### Public Interest Statement

The secessionist campaign recently lived in Catalonia has been contemplated with puzzlement because it erupted in an advanced society, without intolerable abuses from Spanish state or deep social inequalities. Despite a bulk of interpretations the dominant feeling has been bewilderment: Why did it happen?, why at this time and with such a display of urgency and enthusiasm?, and why, especially, in that European corner and not in others? Diagnostic attempts have focused on economic and socio-political factors linked, mostly, to context: economic recession, weakness and rigidities of the old nation-state framework, fragility of the European Union. There has been, however, a neglect of obvious psychological vectors. The outbreak of movements for conquering long dreamed horizons of national sovereignty, convey ingredients that require a dissection from the psychology of political behavior. In this essay, I present data pointing towards two of these factors that have played an important role on the mounting wave of demands of self-determination: Intensive media indoctrination and social pressure through monopolizing the public space with secessionist symbols. If this depiction is correct the recent secessionist wave in Catalonia will be remembered as an example of mass indoctrination and social intimidation within a democratic context.

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