

# Catalan Identity and Independence: conflict or cohesion?

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## What is Catalan identity?



A 'Catalan Republic' sticker added to a street sign in Poble Sec, Barcelona (J.Horsnell)

**What is an identity?** Discussions about identity in the discipline of International Relations (IR) have ballooned since the 1980s alongside an emergence in constructivist theories. Our identities are formed through our associations and relationships with the international, the national and sub-national - and our collective notions of 'selfhood'. A **nation** is popularly described in IR by Benedict Anderson, who suggested that it is a socially-constructed community comprised of individuals who imagine themselves to belong - an *imagined community* (Anderson, 1983).

Ask a Catalan 'with which nationality do you most identify?' and you may receive a confused expression in return - 'Catalan, of course!'. Those in favour of and vehemently against the prospect of independence often claim ownership of a Catalan identity in equal measure. My research has focused on various and wide-ranging components of Catalan identity and their relationship with the separatist ideology of the Catalan independence movement. Just how intrinsic is the notion of support for independence? Former Catalan President Carles Puigdemont suggested to me in September 2019 that 'Catalanness' is an attitude and a feeling. He impressed upon me the emotional component of 'owning' one's nationality. Throughout this research poster, I will attempt to provide an insight into my work over the last two years. It will cover the political construction of what it means to be Catalan through an exploration of history, linguistics, national character and symbolism - an overarching theme will be one of **emotionality**.

**Language matters hugely in Catalonia.** The Catalan language is both a marker of the region's uniqueness and its status as distinct from Spain. The politics of language has historically played a big part in how Catalans identify with one another and the relationship between this identity and Spain. Under the dictatorship of General Franco, Catalonia experienced a period of significant oppression and violence, with the Catalan language having been banned and expressions of Catalan identity severely restricted. Participants in my research often referred to this historical oppression when discussing their current situation as a nation.

90% of those surveyed explicitly mentioned their language when asked what makes Catalans 'different' to Spaniards. This is highly significant for understanding what it means to be Catalan. A perceived, shared linguistic struggle has taken place over several centuries - Catalans inextricably link their language (and its history of oppression) to their personal connection to Catalonia and each other. The timeline below highlights some significant turning points in Catalan history, referred to by many of my participants.



## The Catalan language



Rally for the Liberation of Catalan political prisoners in Girona, Catalonia (J.Horsnell)

## A shared history of violence

The **Francoist Dictatorship** weighs heavily on Catalan politics and culture. Between 1939-75, General Francisco Franco ran a brutal campaign against Catalan freedom of expression which resorted to the removal of democratic liberties, censorship, suppression of political parties, the banning of the Catalan language and regional government, and even the use of concentration camps.

Middle-aged contemporary Catalans experienced, first-hand, the suppression of their language and cultural expression. This helps to explain why the dictatorship - forty-five years on - acts as a collective, national scarring upon the Catalan psyche.

*"Sometimes you are forced to use violence in a very, very prudent way - **defending**".*

- Carles Puigdemont  
Former Catalan President

The region experienced deep atrocities during the Civil War and significant economic collapse resulting from Franco's autarkic policies.

As a highly industrialised region of the Iberian peninsula, Catalans have traditionally been far more unionised and left-wing than other communities. Trends in anarchism are long-established (from the General Strikes in 1917-19 to contemporary clashes between protesters and the Guardia Civil in Barcelona). Catalan politicians and officials will tell you that **violence is legitimate in politics - for defence**.

Of course, such a statement is highly contingent upon what one believes to be worth defending. Catalans are bound by their mutual and shared relationship with violence and oppression.

## The role of Catalan independence

Unlike in Scotland, Catalan Independence was a fairly widespread ideology amongst the population before it became a political project. Catalans are a strikingly political and activist nation - turnout in the 2017 Catalan parliamentary elections was just shy of 80% and pro-independence marches regularly bring over one million Catalans onto the streets of Barcelona. Has the notion of a Catalan identity become inextricably linked to support for independence?

*"The Spanish Government's lack of empathy is unbelievable. The root of the problem is a lack of empathy with the Catalan identity".*

- Isidre Sala Queralt  
Director General of Global Affairs, Catalan Government

The extreme left-wing fringes of the independence movement do argue this to be the case. Activists from the anti-capitalist, pro-independence party CUP argued that loyalty to one's homeland and identity requires one to fight for self-determination and against contemporary Spanish oppression. I argue that mainstream political figures and most Catalans see an **engagement in the political discussion** around independence as a requisite for claiming to be Catalan (rather than picking one side or another).

The independence cause acts as an outlet for the Catalan identity. It is a political expression of difference, perceived oppression and a historical struggle against the Spanish Government.

Since 2010, I would argue that the actions of the Spanish Government (in particular those of the *Partido Popular*) have reinvigorated the necessity for this outlet. The Spanish state has attempted to frame the Catalan identity as diametrically opposed to the Spanish institutionalised ideal of *unity above all else*.

*"Spain gives way on a whole range of international issues to prevent the Catalan issue becoming international".*

- Spokesperson  
Unrepresented Peoples & Nations Organisation (UNPO)



Anti-Spanish Government and pro-independence symbols in Central Barcelona (J.Horsnell)

The events of the **1st October 2017** (widely known in Spain as 1-O) had a seismic effect on the Catalan identity and was a turning point for the pro-independence movement. The Catalan Government, led by Carles Puigdemont, held a referendum on Catalan independence which had been ruled illegal by the Spanish Constitutional Court. Despite the ruling, the vote went ahead. Catalan police forces did not stop the referendum, as ordered, and the Spanish national forces (the Guardia Civil and Policia Nacional) raided polling stations, beat citizens and clashed with protestors. The Catalan Health Department recorded 991 injuries among citizens, 12 among officers (CatSalut, 2017). The Spanish Government disbanded the Catalan Government; the President fled to Belgium and many ministers were arrested and put on trial for sedition. Nine of the twelve charged were handed prison sentences ranging 9-13 years.

My fieldwork in Catalonia took place in 2019. I interviewed tens of participants who had experienced or recalled seeing violence on 1-O. The word **oppression** was repeated by participant after participant. For these Catalans, echoes of the historical oppression experienced by their 'imagined community' are impossible to ignore. 85% argued political discourse in Catalonia and Spain is becoming more polarised; 40% argued it was not healthy at all. The impact of 1-O and the trials is likely to have a long-term effect and continue to build the sense of identity many Catalans derive from their collective struggle over centuries.

## The impact of 1-O and trials



A Spanish flag, attacked with paintball pellets in Barcelona, Catalonia (J.Horsnell)

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Fieldwork was conducted in June 2019 in Catalonia and July & September 2019 in Brussels, Belgium. All images used on this research poster were taken by Joseph Horsnell. My research will conclude in 2021 with a final trip to Catalonia.