Nationalism case study: Catalan independence

Using recent examples of nationalism can bring an essay to life and demonstrate to the examiner that you really understand what nationalism means in all its complexities and varieties. It will also make your essay much more thought provoking and original to read.

But first watch these: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=__mZkioPp3E>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaiO4l6f2bA>

Background

Catalonia is a province of Northern Spain. Its capital city is Barcelona. It has its own language, traditions, literature, history and culture (including food and music), clearly distinct from that of Spain and dating back hundreds of years. The province has a population of 7.5 million. In Spain (as well as in many other nation states such as Italy), regional identity is as important as national identity, and for many Catalans, it is more important. The movement for Catalan independence goes back to the nineteenth century.

Catalonia can be described as a **nation** — a group of people bound together by a shared history, culture and identity, but it is not a state, which is the cause of the current tensions. A **state** is a defined self-governing area with sovereignty over its areas.

The modern independence movement seeks to make Catalonia into a self-governing **nation state**, where Catalans can be in control of their own destiny.

There is a long history of Catalonia seeking and receiving autonomy. However, this was crushed by General Franco, the dictator who ruled Spain from 1939 until his death in 1975. Under the Franco regime, the independence movement operated secretly or outside of Spain, and the Catalan language was banned from official use. After the end of the dictatorship, Catalonian nationalism was revived and a 2006 statute described Catalonia as a ‘nation’. In an unofficial referendum in 2014, 80% of the Catalan population backed independence.

Catalonia now has a high degree of autonomy along the lines of Scotland. It has a police force, a flag and a parliament and controls most public services as one of the 17 autonomous regions of Spain. However, many Catalans do not see this as adequate and are seeking a complete break from Spain. On 1 October 2017, the Spanish national police and the Guardia Civil forcibly tried to prevent Catalan voters from taking part in an unauthorised referendum. Many people were injured. Around 90% of those taking part in the referendum voted in favour of independence. The Catalan government declared independence and in response the Spanish government imposed direct rule. The Catalan government, including President Carles Puigdemont, was dismissed and eight members remanded in custody. The leaders of which fled Spain before coming to trial and are now in Belgium whilst the Spanish government seek to extradite them.

Should Catalonia gain independence?

Catalonia is the richest region of Spain and also has high levels of employment and education. This is one reason why the Spanish government objects to the idea of Catalan independence. It can be argued that for a rich region to want to break away from poorer regions is a selfish form of nationalism. It is also unclear whether the majority of Catalans actually want independence anyway. Clearly those who took part in the referendum do, but the turnout was below 50% and many of those against independence boycotted it. Those opposing independence fear that it could lead to further independence movements across Europe, for example in the Basque country, leading to conflict and damage to EU cooperation and solidarity.

Those in favour of independence argue that Catalonia is a distinctive nation, whose culture has not been valued or respected by the Spanish government. As a wealthy part of Spain, they also complain that they are forced to contribute a lot more money to central government than they get back in services. Like those involved in the Scottish independence movement, they also argue that they can and would retain membership of the EU. Finally, they insist that the majority of Catalans want independence, although this has not been proven.

What type of nationalism is Catalan nationalism?

**Cultural nationalism** is usually linked to a shared language, history and culture. For example, in Wales, music and the Welsh language are at the heart of nationalism, rather than the focus being a desire for political independence. This form of nationalism can be **exclusive**: you are born a member of the nation (or not). Catalan nationalism can be linked to this outlook.

**Civic nationalism** is linked to liberal ideas. Civic nationalists focus on the significance of a nation’s political institutions and values, and does not exclude anyone, including recent immigrants, in its aims to achieve autonomy. Catalan nationalism can also be linked to this form of nationalism, as it has some claims to be **inclusive**.

Is Catalan nationalism a reactionary or progressive form of nationalism?

According to supporters, Catalan nationalism is inclusive: you do not have to be born in the state and it can and does include immigrants. Critics argue that it is not, and that it represents powerful Catalan speakers, excluding poorer Spanish speakers who reject independence.

The movement is not either left or right wing and it includes people from all parts of the political spectrum. In fact, many left-wing Catalans (and those on the left in general) are suspicious of nationalism.

The European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker has described Catalan nationalism as ‘separatist poison’, suggesting that it is damaging to the unity of the EU. If and when Catalonia becomes independent, which seems unlikely at the time of writing, it could lead to other calls for independence. Many European nations are made up of more than one nation state and it appears that many people are tired of being ruled by governments far away, be that Brussels or Madrid.

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**Student questions:**

1. Would you describe Catalan nationalism as liberal or conservative?
2. Would you describe Catalan nationalism as Progressive or regressive?
3. Would you describe Catalan nationalism as Civic or ethnic?

*(Ensure you explain why in your answers)*

1. Should Catalonia be allowed to become an independent nation state? Write one paragraph on either side of the argument, which includes nationalism theory and at least one thinker.

**Extension task:**

1. Research another separatist movement: the Basque Country, Flanders and Wallonia, Scotland, Bavaria, Brittany, Cornwall or another of your choice.