

## The rise of research on independence referendums

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# The Rise of Research on Independence Referendums

## Introduction

The recent organisation of independence referendums in Scotland (2014), Crimea (2014), Kurdistan (2017), Catalonia (2017), New Caledonia (2018) and Bougainville (2019) has demonstrated that the geopolitical map of the world is still evolving under the pressure of ethnonationalism. In all these cases, independence referendums were proposed to overcome the conflict between two principles. On the one hand, sovereign states have the legitimate right to protect their borders – as recognised by article 2.4 of the Charter of the United Nations which guarantees the ‘territorial integrity or political independence’ of its member countries. On the other hand, seceding sub-state units usually invoke the Charter’s article 1.2 which affirms the ‘principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples.’ Beyond the ideological orientation of the actors involved in independence referendums, electoral consultations must be handled with caution. As stressed by Horowitz (2003), there is usually no possibility to step backwards after an independence referendum has been held and its results have been implemented on the ground.

These developments have been reflected by the publication of several books, chapters and articles tackling secessionist dynamics in Europe and the rest of the world (Atkinson, Blick and Qvortrup 2021). The first academic mention of independence referendums could be found in Mattern’s (1921) doctoral thesis *The Employment of the Plebiscite in the Determination of Sovereignty* followed by the study of Wambaugh (1933) *Plebiscites Since the World War*. This research line faded before being re-activated in the late 1970s by the volume edited by Butler and Ranney (1978) entitled *Referendums: A Comparative Study of Practice and Theory*. In the 1980s and 1990s, the independence referendums in Quebec and in the former Soviet Union caught the attention of scholars like Farley (1986)

and Beigbeder (1994) who collectively transformed independence referendums into a mainstream research object.

Nevertheless, the proliferation of analyses has increased the difficulty in understanding the main positions within this academic field. The purpose of this review consists in providing an intellectual map to help researchers find their way within the current state-of-the-art. In order to do so, this paper followed the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology.<sup>1</sup> For doing so, we conducted a bibliographical search through four combinations of keywords among the abstracts of articles, books, book chapters and conference papers of the Web of Science Core Collection from January 1900 to December 2020.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, ‘independence and referendum’ produced 449 items, followed by ‘sovereignty and referendum’ (177 items), ‘self-determination and referendum’ (65 items) and ‘secession and referendum’ (63 items).<sup>3</sup> After excluding 117 duplicates and irrelevant publications, the system produced a final list of 637 items in different languages. These items provided a useful starting point for identifying additional references cited in our initial sample. Following the PRISMA outlines, we classified these references into nine analytical categories. To elaborate some of these categories we used the classical distinctions appearing in the literature. For the rest, we completed the picture in a more inductive way by producing our own categories.

This paper presents these findings. It is divided into nine sections tackling successively the relevance of independence referendums, the authorship of studies on independence referendums, the definition of the phenomenon, the technical features of referendums, the elaboration of datasets, the legitimacy of these consultations, the drivers leading to the organisation of independence referendums, the impact of referendums on

settling ethnic violence and their capacity to ease state recognition. We conclude with several related theoretical reflections.

### **A Relevant Issue**

As shown by our research in the Web of Science Core Collection, independence referendums have become a fashionable object in recent years. The time distribution of the 637 identified publications demonstrates that the great majority of literature was published between the early-2010s and 2020 (85 publications in 2019). The evolution of the number of citations followed the same trend, reaching a peak in 2020 with 775 cites (Figure 1).

[Figure 1 about here]

The organisation of an independence referendum tends logically to enhance the publication of relevant studies. Nevertheless, not all the referendums produce the same outputs. Broadly speaking, we observed three clusters within the ‘ranking’ of the most analysed secession consultations. The first group includes the 2014 Scotland referendum (107 publications), followed by the 2016 Brexit issue (92 items), the 2017 Catalan consultation (60 items) and the 1980 and 1995 Quebec ballots (53 items). The studies on the referendums held in Sudan, Kurdistan, New Caledonia and former Yugoslavia form the second set with about 16 publications for each case. Lastly, the third cluster comprises the consultations with fewer than six publications each – like those held in Ukraine, Australia, the Baltic republics, Western Sahara, East Timor, Taiwan, the Basque Country, Jura, New Guinea, Malta, Mongolia or Bougainville (Figure 2).

[Figure 2 about here]

### **A Biased Authorship**

The analysis of authorship confirms these data. In terms of record count, the top ten authors includes researchers like Stuart Whigham, David McCrone, Matt Qvortrup, Marina Dekavalla, Daniel Cetrà, André Lecours, Bahar Baser, Kelly Shaw, Stephen Tierney and Graeme Baxter. The remaining authors have generally published no more than two items, and few invisible colleagues can be identified. Beyond the gender and language biases of this ranking (with only one female researcher and almost none non-English speaking researchers), this list also reflects the geographic concentration of investigations on secession referendums in the areas affected by this phenomenon. Thus, the ten most productive universities in this field are Scottish (Edinburgh, Stirling, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Strathclyde, West Scotland and Saint Andrews), English (Oxford and King's College of London) and Canadian (Montreal and Ottawa). In terms of countries, Figure 3 illustrates the interest of British, Spanish, Canadian, Australian or Russian universities for the secession processes occurring in their country (Figure 3).

[Figure 3 about here]

Research on independence referendums is dominated by the perspective of political science and international relations (49.4 per cent of the whole production), followed by law (12.3 per cent), history (7.2 per cent), communication (5.9 per cent), area studies (5.7 per cent), economics (4.2 per cent) and a series of humanities' sub-disciplines. In sum,

this research field lies at the crossroad between international affairs and regional politics, and it attracts a broad range of academics from different disciplines.

### **A Matter of Definition(s)**

The notion of independence referendum is complex since it sometimes overlaps with other similar phenomena. Indeed, does the 2014 referendum in Scotland fit in the same category as the 2016 Brexit referendum? Surprisingly, few authors have paid attention to the definition of independence referendums. The majority of case studies composing our sample take it for granted as a self-evident notion. Fortunately, some scholars have provided interesting typologies questioning the nature of this phenomenon. This effort of conceptualisation is not easy. As Sussman (2002: 7) emphasised ‘several of these categories [...] are not mutually exclusive categories and are indeed often practically and theoretically linked.’

The comparison of definitions found in our dataset shows the relevance of three key elements: 1) a direct popular vote 2) a transfer of sovereignty from a host-state to a sub-state unit 3) the conversion of the sub-state unit into an independent country. Appendix 1 synthesises the main theoretical approaches of independence referendums. For example, He (2002) focussed on ‘national identity/boundary-related referendums’ and classified them into four categories. In He’s words (2002: 74) the independence referendum group includes ‘referenda on separation, secession, and the endorsement of constitutional independence. Such referenda have played a prominent role in establishing new member states.’

In the same vein, Sussman (2002: 1) identified six types of ‘sovereignty referendums’ [...] ‘characterised by the participation of the *demos* in determining the shape of the *polis* or the nature of its sovereignty.’ Within this framework, Sussman considers that

independence referendums are those used to celebrate the independence of a nation state. According to this author, this specific type of referendum can be held either after the independence of a region has been formalised, or as a symbolic event organised before the real independence in order to claim international recognition. In turn, Laponce (2010) prefers to use the concept of 'separation referendum' to refer to independence referendums that he distinguishes from those involving a 'limited separation' leading to more decentralisation in his six category taxonomy on 'sovereignty referendums'. From a more public law-oriented perspective, Şen (2015) also proposed a typology of 'sovereignty referendums' that he subdivided into six sub-categories. According to him, independence referendums include the consultations about the secession of a territory. Three kinds are then identified. The first one is the *de facto* independence referendum held by secessionist movements. The second is the *de jure* consultation ruled by international treaties for facilitating the decolonisation process. The last one is the *de jure* referendum held out of the colonial context.

Despite the interest of such inductive definitions, Qvortrup (2014) reversed this logic by proposing his own deductive nomenclature. In his analysis of 'ethnoterritorial referendums' this author elaborated a two-by-two typology by crossing the territorial level of a referendum (national or international) with the aim of the consultation (national homogeneity or heterogeneity), plus an *ad hoc* category for European Union referendums. Within this broad framework, referendums on independence would correspond to the situations of national (when referring to seceding regions) and international homogenisation referendums (when referring to post-colonial secession). Mendez and Germann (2018) followed this approach and established a classification of 'sovereignty referendums' by considering two main concepts: the scope (full, pooled or partial) and the logic (integration or disintegration) of the sovereignty shifts. Consequently, these

authors identified six ideal-types of sovereignty referendums. According to this theoretical frame, the category of independence referendums covers the consultations involving disintegration and full sovereignty.

### **Comparing Datasets**

The question of datasets can seem secondary given that small-N analyses represent 95 per cent of the 637 items found in the Web of Science Core Collection (Table 1). However, though large-N and quantitative publications are less common, their datasets are important to draw lessons from comparison. From this viewpoint, the selection of the cases composing the datasets is essential since it influences heavily the conclusions of studies: more cases allow researchers to have a broader perspective on independence referendums, but they also increase their internal variety, and *vice versa*.

[Table 1 about here]

Indeed, the initial dataset designed by Wambaugh (1933) was first updated by Butler and Ranney (1978) through a series of country-based case studies. Years later, He (2002) investigated 173 independence referendums from 1791 to 1998, Sussman (2006) examined 45 consultations of this type from 1791 to 1997, Laponce (2010) compared 48 cases between 1791 and 2009, while Qvortrup (2014) featured up to 56 votes on secession from 1791 to 2012. Mendez and Germann (2018) broadened this dataset to 97 independence referendums held between 1776 and 2012 (Table 2). All of them include data about the year, the host state and the seceding territories, the level of turnout, the Yes direction, the number of options, and of course the results.<sup>4</sup> But the datasets also differ on a series of aspects.



[Table 2 about here]

The first one is the independence referendum retained as the starting point of this tradition of direct popular consultations. Since Wambaugh's study, the majority of authors consider that the first independence referendum was held in 1791 in Avignon and Comtat Venaisin when their citizens decided if they wanted to join Revolutionary France or remain a Vatican fiefdom. But Mendez and Germann (2018) disagreed with that view and reincorporated the referendums held in the United States in the 18th Century. The second difference lies in the roster of cases adopted by the authors. Some scholars consider that the referendums not explicitly held for reaching independence – but leading to sovereignty – must be taken into account (e.g., those organised in former French colonies and just after the dissolution of the Soviet Union) (Mendez and Germann, 2018 for instance). In turn, others believe that only *de jure* independence referendums matter.

### **Procedural Aspects**

The technical features of independence referendums are fundamental given their rarity and irreversible character. Five issues have been specifically tackled by experts. The first one deals with the electoral commissions in charge of independence referendums. There is now a broad consensus among authors about the nature and function of such boards. Specialists in electoral studies have shown a strong preference for plenipotentiary commissions rather than delegated committees (by the United Nations for instance), because of the limitations of power of the latter (Beigbeder, 1994). In the same way, the neutrality of electoral commissions can be reached in different manners, but hiring

international observers supported by local experts is generally considered as the most efficient way to create an atmosphere of trust according to scholars like Farley (1986).

Secondly, the electoral campaigns preceding independence referendums have also been assessed. From the perspective of voting behaviour, LeDuc (2002) demonstrated that electors facing an independence referendum were involved in an individual process of cue-taking about the future implications of their decision. Consequently, he concluded that the referendum campaigns can decrease volatility when electors are familiar with the referendum's issue. Other aspects of campaigns have also been considered, such as the rhetoric of candidates and the changing frames used by ethnonationalists to legitimise their struggle (Huszka, 2014). Likewise, Morisi (2016) pinpointed the influence of mass media on voters' perceptions. Drawing on prospect theory, he suggested that – in such a context of uncertainty – economic expectations and risk-based calculations deeply influenced the voting decisions.

The third feature examined by the literature is electoral franchise. First of all, do host states recognise the right to secede? As Radan (2012) emphasised, very few constitutions protect this right.<sup>5</sup> But – under certain conditions like the decisions of constitutional courts – some legal provisions can be adopted to facilitate the organisation of a secession referendum. In those conditions, who is entitled to vote? The vast majority of experts consider that the seceding region's citizens are more legitimate than the host state's whole population to decide upon their own future. However, this answer is not totally satisfying according to Bauböck (2019), since the *demos* (the citizens living in the secessionist jurisdiction – including non-native residents) does not necessarily coincide with the *ethnos* (the imagined community populating the secessionist territory – including native non-residents).

From a similar perspective – and though they are quite infrequent in reality – the quorum and turnout thresholds imposed in independence referendums have also been investigated (Tierney, 2004). In fact, turnout in referendums is not lower than in general elections, though, under certain circumstances, electoral restrictions tend to boost abstention (Aguar-Conraria and Magalhães, 2010). In the same way, the 2014 Scottish consultation opened an interesting debate about the impact of voting age (lowered to 16) on the results of independence referendums (Hill, Lockyer, Head and MacDonald, 2017).

Finally, the wording of the referendum question has long been neglected by the literature. However, since the 1998 decision of the Supreme Court of Canada on the Clarity Act, a growing number of studies have started to analyse the terminology of independence referendum questions in terms of extension, intelligibility, ideological neutrality and the number of options proposed. All these elements are supposed to bias the perceptions of voters. On the one hand, Qvortrup (2014) found little statistical evidence supporting this view. According to him, neither the use of emotive words (like ‘do you accept’ or ‘freedom’) nor the length of the sentences seem to have a decisive influence on the final results. On the other hand, Reilly (2018) stressed that more difficult-to-read questions tended to increase roll-off (ballot noncompletion). In sum, the debate remains open and other variables like the level of education of voters and the type of electoral issue must be investigated.

### **The Question of Legitimacy**

At first sight, the normative debate about the legitimacy of independence referendums opposes the supporters of direct democracy to those backing representative democracy, following a populist (and superficial) division line between people and elites (Morel, 2007). Insofar as the classical arguments in favour of popular vote are concerned,

independence referendums are basically held to resolve territorial tensions when political parties are not able to do so (Wambaugh, 1933). In line with this argument, Hug and Tsebelis (2002) underlined the relevance of the promoters of referendums as 'veto players' able to overcome the parliamentary mechanisms. From another viewpoint, Chambers (2001) highlighted the role of referendums in facing the current crisis of representation. In the cases of constitutional referendums, some authors consider that direct democracy could be a form of reconnection between the political elite and citizens through popular deliberation about the new rules of the game (Barber, 1984).

On the opposite side of the spectrum, researchers have also highlighted the threats involved by independence referendums. Firstly, the complexity of secession – in terms of public debt sharing or ethnic accommodation for instance – casts doubt about the technical competence of voters to judge whether the independence of their region is a good or a bad thing. Additionally, is it possible to prevent the manipulation of public opinion by elites in such high-stake consultations (Wheatley, 2012)? More profoundly, though recent publications suggest that ordinary voters do understand arguments about policies, is it legitimate to resolve such complex issues through two or three oversimplified options (exit, remain or an eventual increased decentralisation), without any possibility of evaluating the intensity of citizens' preferences? The second argument against independence referendums has to do with elites' responsibility. By bypassing parliaments and governments, direct democracy considerably reduces the accountability of elected representatives to reach decisions adopted in the name of the People. In the special case of independence referendums, the risk of a tyranny of the majority is even more present if minorities have not been secured previously (McEvoy, 2018).

Nevertheless, as stated by Setälä (2006), the strength of these pro or con arguments largely depends on the institutional design of the referendum and its outcomes.

Government-sponsored consultations involving a binding result without any parliamentary control can be potentially harmful in comparison with advisory referendums promoted by local authorities under the strict supervision of the national parliament. Accordingly, there is now a large agreement among scholars about the ideal conditions to increase the legitimacy of independence referendums. The need for a pre-accord between political elites, the organisation of a transparent information campaign, a multi-option design or the broader involvement of citizens from the very beginning of the process are often mentioned in the literature (Landemore, 2018).

Similarly, this question leads us to tackle the issue of protection mechanisms of minorities ‘within minorities’ – that is, in the new state created after secession. Historically speaking, new states’ authorities have dealt with their inner minorities through a broad range of policies including ethnic cleansing, population transfer, boundary alteration, assimilation or accommodation (Coakley, 1992). Despite the difficulty in balancing the principles of self-determination of internal minorities and the need to guarantee the integrity of new sovereign states, the literature considers that minorities ‘within minorities’ must enjoy at least three rights: a specific recognition in the constitution leading to protect their ethnic, religious or language specificities (Choudry, 2007), some form of territorial autonomy (Requejo, 2001), and a system a power-sharing at the state level (Gagnon, 2001).

However, this does not mean that the intellectual consensus is absolute. As an example, the binding nature of referendum is criticised by Chambers (2001) while Cheneval and el-Wakil (2018) consider it a *sine qua non* condition for improving the referendum *praxis*. In the same way, He (2002) believes that qualified majority requirements can avoid the problems related with the tyranny of the majority while Laponce (2010) is opposed to this view. Eventually, the potential repetition of the

referendum in Scotland has raised a new debate about the legitimacy of ‘neverendums’ as occurred in Quebec thirty years ago (Qvortrup, 2014).

### **Why Independence Referendums?**

Theoretically speaking, independence referendums can be proposed by the separatist movement of a given region (or by some of its factions) and/or by the central government of the host state. The former has great incentives to organise a secession referendum – even a unilateral one – since they aim to create a new sovereign state. Their support for irredentism has been explored from diverse angles. Dion (1996) hypothesised that this phenomenon seems to arise when citizens from a seceding area fear the *status quo* and have confidence in the future management capacity of their regional elites. Further analyses have shown that the presence of a separate culture does not suffice to enhance separatist attitudes. Other factors are necessary, such as local economic growth, violence with the host state and territorial concentration, distance from the host state, a large population and a multi-party system and feelings of discrimination (Sorens, 2005). But more recent studies have provided evidence that irredentist backing also depends on the ability of political elites to make this issue politically salient (Richez and Bodet, 2012), as well as the probability of winning the referendum (Werner, 2020).

But what about the host states? Which factors lead a state government to risk losing a part of its territory through a popular consultation? The first answer to resolve this paradox was brought by Smith (1976) who affirmed that referendums can be ‘controlled’ or ‘uncontrolled’ depending on the capacity of state authorities to start and drive the electoral process. Regarding the outcomes, Smith added that researchers should also pay attention to the ‘pro-hegemonic’ or ‘anti-hegemonic’ dimension of the referendum. In the first case, voters are supposed to confirm the outcomes desired by the central government,

while in the second one, voters are opposed to the central government's view. This strategic approach was followed by Oppermann (2013) who affirms that a central government holding a consultation can be more or less 'defensive' (when it aims to minimise an electoral defeat) or 'offensive' (when it anticipates an electoral success). Previously, Morel (2007) had already argued that even in the absence of any legal requirement, central governments can have the political obligation to call for the verdict of people in order to avoid the cost of not holding a referendum. Nonetheless, this defensive perspective must not be exaggerated. Though central governments can certainly lose control of the agenda-setting process with the organisation of a referendum, they also have significant instruments for converting this electoral event into a victory through super-majority requirements, multiple options or campaigning.

Qvortrup (2014: 6) formalised this rational choice perspective through his 'competition-proximity model. Such a model states that independence referendums are more likely to occur when political, military or electoral pressures are exerted on state decision-makers, and when those actors believe the seceding region's public opinion will support their view. One could argue that this model lacks enough precision to define the degree of competition and proximity; nevertheless, it remains currently the most robust explanation to predict the holding of an independence referendum (López and Sanjaume-Calvet, 2020).

Despite the success of these government-centred arguments, alternative explanations have also been proposed. Among the external factors affecting the state support for organising independence referendums, only the impact of dramatic international upheavals (like decolonisation or the fall of the Soviet Union) has been proven to boost the number of independence referendums, along with a political context of ethnic tension and competitive autocracy (Qvortrup, 2014).

## **Violence Prevention**

Violence prevention constitutes a major research line since the break-up of the Soviet Union. In Qvortrup's (2014, 60) words, it consists in questioning the potential of independence referendums to reroute armed conflicts 'from bullets to ballots.' Yet, this debate relies on contradictory evidence. Several scholars have cast doubt on the capacity of popular consultations to foster peace and security. This is the case of Mac Ginty (2003) who affirms that the majoritarian bias of independence referendums – usually limited to two options – tend to cleave artificially the political debate by creating winners and losers. The first negative consequence is that winners have little incentive to take the losers' interests into account. The second one is that losers have no other option than to keep fighting, at the risk of exacerbating violence as exemplified by the dissolution of former Yugoslavia.

From a diametrically opposed perspective, Pavković and Radan (2007) maintain that independence referendums can also be used as instruments for restoring peace. In their books *Creating New States*, those authors compared six cases of secession: three involving violence and three leading to peace. They found that in the three peaceful cases, a referendum had been held previously. This (partial) finding was then supported by the Qvortrup's (2014) quantitative analysis of 50 secession attempts from 1900 to 2011. Qvortrup confirmed that violent conflicts were less likely to break out after an independence referendum had been organised. But this author also added that the risk of war was reduced by other factors as negotiation between the two parts and a low level of ethnic fractionalisation.

A more fine-grained examination demonstrates that the mode and context of independence referendums are key issues to prevent violent conflicts. The first point tackled by the literature is the existence of a previous agreement on the procedural



features of the referendum in order to avoid any future dispute about the interpretation of results (Şen, 2015). Secondly, Loizides (2014) paid attention to the timing of referendums and settled that ‘mandate referendums’ held before a peace treaty can legitimise the negotiators. Conversely, ex-post referendums can endanger the peace process – especially in case of rejection by voters. For their part, Kathman and Benson (2019) emphasised the relevance of voter education campaigns and the need to impose a ceasefire during the electoral process – sometimes through the United Nations involvement. Lastly, Qvortrup (2014) has also called attention to the importance of international backing and the presence of a ‘civic’ nationalism able to include minorities in the decision-making process.

### **State Recognition**

The last issue addressed by the literature deals with the capacity of independence referendums to facilitate the recognition of new states by the international community. Although the aim of secession referendums consists in creating new sovereign states with a seat in the United Nations, not all of them attain their goal. The first studies about statehood achievement were published during the early-1900s. They were initially monopolised by a public law/formal approach stressing the existence of a constitutional right to secede – a rarely met requirement (Cassese, 2015). Then, the assessment of recognition processes evolved according to the vicissitudes of international politics and the context of each referendum (Sureta, 1973).

In the context of decolonisation, scholars started to consider that two criteria must be fulfilled for reaching recognition (Fabry, 2018). On the one hand, territorial minorities had to hold an independence referendum with a clear question, a well-identified *demos*, a high percentage of the official yes vote and a high level of turnout. On the other hand,

territorial minorities had to act as a state by raising tax, monopolising legitimate violence and controlling their borders. These two dimensions constitute the bases of the so-called declaratory theory of statehood, which stresses the importance of fulfilling certain minimal conditions to become a recognised state.

The next wave of countries attaining independence after the fall of Communism modified this perception. Consistent with the just cause approach, it became commonly admitted that the territories threatened by a non-democratic host state should reach sovereignty and international recognition through a referendum – even a unilateral one. As evidence, the majority of former Communist countries were fully recognised, but a small group of territories only enjoyed a limited recognition. This is the case of Kosovo, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Northern Cyprus or Transnistria which became ‘parastates’ depending on a patron state and without any grip on international politics. These developments completed the evolution of the doctrine from declaratory to constitutive theories of recognition, the latter stressing the need to be formally recognised by the rest of the international community (Agné, 2013).

For this reason, recent studies have assumed that recognition through referendums has become more difficult to obtain since the disintegration of Yugoslavia. To a great extent, *realpolitik* has been converted into the most compelling factor of recognition, to the detriment of legal and humanitarian arguments. Firstly, Lindemann and Ringmar (2011) have highlighted the importance of pre-referendum agreements between seceding minorities and their host state to negotiate the future of the two countries. Secondly – and more importantly – Coggins (2014) has shown that the support of the three democratic permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (United States, United Kingdom and France) was much more decisive than popular consultations for avoiding the trap of partial recognition.

## **Conclusion**

The increasing number of independence referendums in the world has boosted academic production on this topic. This interdisciplinary effort has engendered a complex overlap of theories, methods and data. This review aimed to provide an intellectual map to understand positions within this field. Drawing on the PRISMA methodology, we led a bibliographical search into the Web of Science Core Collection from January 1900 to December 2020. The 637 publications identified for the purpose of this investigation were used as a starting point to find the most accurate references in this field. Then, we divided these publications into nine sections tackling successively the relevance of independence referendums, the biased authorship, the definition of such a phenomenon, the technical feature of referendums, the elaboration of comparative datasets, the legitimacy of those consultations, the drivers leading to the organisation of independence referendums, the impact of referendums to settle ethnic violence, and their capacity to favour state recognition.

As demonstrated throughout the article, these studies have substantially advanced our knowledge about this phenomenon, both analytically and normatively. Firstly, the evolution of the number of publications clearly shows that referendums occurring in Western countries (e.g., Quebec, Scotland and Catalonia) tend to catch more attention than the rest. Secondly, the universities producing this research are mainly located in areas affected by processes of secession like Scotland, Catalonia, and Quebec. Thirdly, the majority of scholars characterise independence referendums as consultations based on: 1) a direct popular vote 2) a transfer of sovereignty from a host-state to a sub-state unit 3) the conversion of the sub-state unit into an independent state. Fourthly, despite the predominance of qualitative case studies in this field, some authors like Mendez and

Germann (2018) have developed useful datasets allowing to compare quantitatively independence referendums in the world since 1776.

Fifthly, a series of analyses has demonstrated the importance of technical features for guiding these electoral processes. In particular, experts have pointed out the need to guarantee the independence of electoral commissions, to ensure public neutrality during electoral campaigns and to clarity of the referendum question. These elements are usually combined with a *demos* including all citizens living in the seceding region, without any quorum and/or turnout threshold. Sixth, the legitimacy of independence referendums largely depends on the institutional form of the consultation. A pre-agreement between central and regional political elites, the organisation of a transparent information campaign, a multi-option design and the involvement of citizens from the very beginning of the process are usually considered as good practices by the literature. Seventh, the motivations of the initiators of referendums have also been investigated. The motivations of secessionist movements are obvious, but those of the host state's leaders are more complex to understand given what is at stake. The most convincing framework remains the strategic set of theories drawing on the tradition initiated by Smith (1976) and formalised by Qvortrup (2014) through his 'competition-proximity' model.

Eighth, it is now commonly accepted that the organisation of an independence referendum cannot prevent the eruption of violence. Secession referendums can help to resolve armed conflicts only when they are activated from the very beginning as a way to legitimise the negotiations between elites, and in parallel with a ceasefire and a voter education campaign. The inclusion of minorities in the final accord under the tutelage of an international organisation as the United Nations is also considered as an indispensable requirement.

Finally, since the collapse of former Yugoslavia, specialists of state recognition admit that pre-referendum agreements can help to soften the relationship between a seceding region and its host state. The context of the referendum (e.g. held in a democracy or in an authoritarian regime, following a process of implosion or decolonisation, unilateral or not, to create a democracy or not, etc.) obviously shapes the probability for a new state to be recognised. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that having ‘friends in high places’ (Coggins, 2011) – namely the three democratic permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (United States, United Kingdom and France) – remains the best way to enjoy international recognition as part of the United Nations system.

Nonetheless, independence referendums remain major political events that do not occur frequently. This is why it is so difficult to map their contours and to propose definitive theories. Moreover – despite significant exceptions – the multiplication of studies from such different academic backgrounds as law, political science, sociology, ethnology, history or economics has not favoured the conversation between experts. This condition is necessary to ease the adoption of a common vocabulary, validation methods and consistent datasets allowing the accumulation and replication of analyses for establishing robust theories – and to avoid the constant reinvention of the wheel. The atomisation of authorship can also be considered as evidence of lack of institutionalisation: only a few authors and invisible colleges have published more than three articles/chapters/books dealing specifically with independence referendums and no research centre monopolises this literature.

Furthermore, some facets of independence referendums are still poorly known. This is the case of the drivers of electoral victory which remain largely unexplored. The effects of the repetition of referendums on electoral behaviour (as in Quebec in 1980 and 1995, and maybe in Scotland in the near future) could also be analysed in greater detail, just as

the reasons leading state authorities to authorise or to ban independence referendums in their territory. Future research on independence referendums ought to investigate the existence of ethnic tensions, the quality of democracy of the host states, the peripheral location of seceding territories, the reputation theory, the link with decentralisation and the secessionism of the rich hypothesis. In the same way, the political uses of independence referendums and the cost of not organising them have not yet received the attention they deserve. In accordance with this future research agenda, we conclude that more investigation is needed to enlighten these blind spots.

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### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> The details about the PRISMA model can be found at <http://www.prisma-statement.org/>. This method consists in five steps: identification of a source > definition of exclusion/inclusion criteria > elimination of duplicates > quantitative analysis > qualitative analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Other options were also available like the Scopus database for instance. But the Web of Science Core Collection (currently maintained by Clarivate Analytics) is one of the most comprehensive datasets in the world. It contains over top-level 21,000 articles, books and book chapters extracted from sub-sets as the Science Citation Index Expanded, the Social Sciences Citation Index, the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, the Conference Proceedings Citation Index-Science, the Conference Proceedings Citation Index-Social Science and Humanities, the Book Citation Index-Science, the Book Citation Index-Social Sciences and Humanities and the Emerging Sources Citation Index. Saying this, it is important to keep in mind that the use of the Web of Science Core Collection introduces two biases in this research. Firstly, as a private company, Clarivate is free to include and exclude some publications from its rankings. As a consequence, some journals, books or reports are not present in its lists. Secondly, the huge majority of the publications handled by the Web of Science are written in English. This supposes the eviction of several publications in French, Spanish, Catalan and German, among others.

<sup>3</sup> This led us to use the concept of independence referendum as the most-common and neutral denomination in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> We should add that the majority of those authors extracted information from the same databases on direct democracy like the Centre for Research on Direct Democracy, the Suchmaschine für direkte Demokratie or the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

<sup>5</sup> The Soviet Union, former Yugoslavia and Ethiopia are the most frequently cited examples.

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Table 1. Comparison of Definitions of the Concept of Independence Referendum (Online Supplementary Material).

Authors	Logic	Referendums typology	Category used by the authors to refer to independence referendums
<b>He (2002)</b>		National identity/boundary-related referendums =	Independence referendums
		Union of nation-states (to link two territories)	
		Independence (to secede from a territory)	
		European Union (to join, expand, ratify or withdraw from the Union)	
		Autonomy (to increase home rule)	
<b>Sussman (2006)</b>	< Rather deductive Rather inductive >	Sovereignty referendums =	Independence referendums
		Independence (to celebrate the independence of nation states)	
		Upsizing/incorporation (to decide if a region joins another country)	
		Border (to resolve border conflicts)	
		Status (to manage relations between colonies and metropolis)	
		Transfer of sovereignty (to transfer state competences to supranational or subnational level)	
<b>Laponce (2010)</b>		Secession/downsizing (to ease the secession or cession of territories)	Separation referendums
		Sovereignty referendums =	
		Transfer (to move from a country to the other)	

<b>Şen (2015)</b>	Union (to create a new state with different regions)	Independence referendums
	<i>Status quo</i> (to keep the borders as they are)	
	Separation (to create a new state)	
	Limited sovereignty (to enhance regional self-government)	
	Sovereignty referendums =	
	Accession and border (to decide the incorporation of a region into a state)	
	Unification (to merge different regions into a single state)	
	Status (to determine the status of a colonial territory – excluding independence)	
	Transfer of sovereignty (to transfer power to a supranational or subnational organisation)	
	Subnational territorial modification (to modify the legal division of a federal state)	
<b>Qvortrup (2014)</b>	Independence (to secede from a country and create a new state)	National and international homogenising referendums
	Ethnoterritorial referendums =	
	International/homogenising (for secession referendums)	
	International heterogenising (for right-sizing referendums)	
	National/homogenising (for difference-eliminating referendums)	
	National/heterogenising (for difference-managing referendums)	
<b>Mendez and Germann (2018)</b>	European Union referendums (ad hoc category)	Disintegrative/full sovereignty referendums
	Sovereignty referendums =	
	Integrative/partial (to incorporate sub-state units)	
	Integrative/full (to unify territories)	
	Integrative/pooled (for supranational accession)	
	Disintegrative/partial (to increase the autonomy of sub-state units)	
	Disintegrative/full (to declare independence)	
Disintegrative/pooled (for supranational withdrawal)		

Table 2. Methods used in Research on Independence Referendums.

<b>Method</b>	<b>N (=637)</b>	
	<i>Small</i>	<i>Large</i>
<i>Qualitative</i>	605 (95%)	6 (0.9%)
<i>Quantitative</i>	10 (1.60%)	16 (2.5%)

Table 3. Comparison of Datasets on Independence Referendums.

	<b>He (2002)</b>	<b>Sussman (2006)</b>	<b>Laponce (2010)</b>	<b>Qvortrup (2014)</b>	<b>Germann and Mendez (2018)</b>
<b>Time span</b>	1791-1998	1791-1998	1791-2009	1791-2011	1776-2012
<b>Total number of sovereignty referendums</b>	173	240	190	218	602
<b>Number of independence referendums identified within the total dataset</b>	52	45	48	56	97

Figure. 1. Publications and Citations about Independence Referendums (absolute numbers).

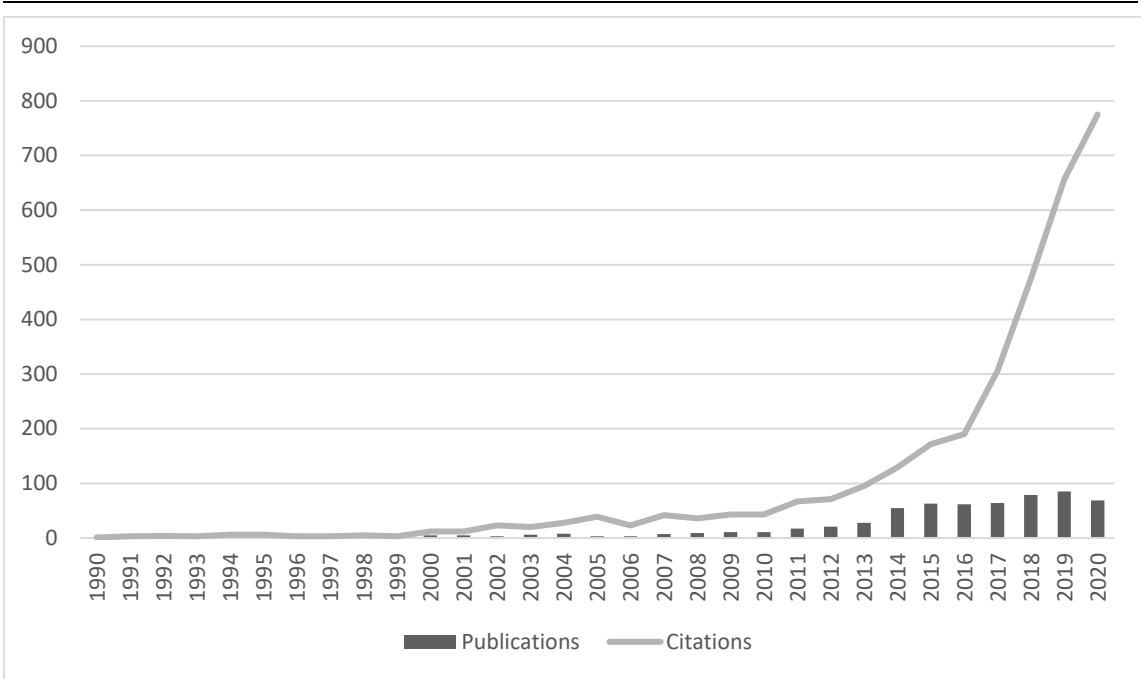


Figure. 2. Ranking of Independence Referendums' Publications by Topics (absolute numbers).

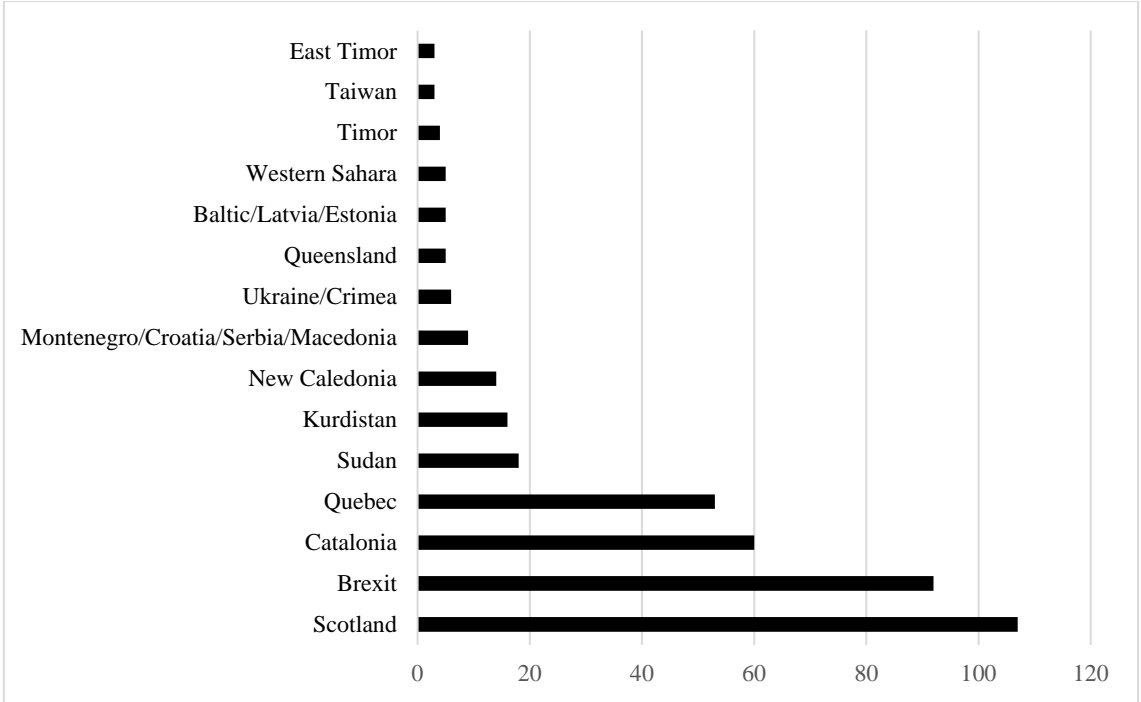


Figure. 3. Ranking of Independence Referendums' Publications by Universities' Countries (percentage).



