

# Nation-Building In A Multinational State: Between Majority And Minority Aspirations

## Abstract

*Given the existence of distinct communities with different and often contradictory aspirations, multinational states are used to witnessing some rivalry between the majority and the minority groups. This contribution explores the nation-building dynamics in this context, with a particular focus on the majority group's rhetoric. In this regard, the dominant nationalism identifies the status quo and the official symbols of the state as neutral, therefore accusing the nation-building efforts of the minority as partisan and divisive. Nevertheless, we know that both are trying to "nationalise" its citizens and gain support for their own nationalist cause. Drawing on the case of Spain to illustrate these remarks, I argue that the acknowledgement of this reality is the first step to settle a constitutional framework where both nationalisms can flourish and coexist.*

## Introduction

In October 2012, the former Spanish Minister of Education, José Ignacio Wert, opened a bitter controversy by stating that the central government intended to “making Catalan children Spanish”. In Spain, the education system is mainly left to the regions, that have large room to establish the contents of sensitive subjects such as history or social sciences. The regions ruled by minority nationalists usually conceive the devolved powers as tools for nation-building, fostering a distinct national consciousness amongst the target population. Conversely -such as the example of Minister Wert shows-, majority nationalists want to retain the loyalty of the citizenry towards the whole nation-state, therefore engaging in majority nation-building as well. In the multinational state, where two or more national projects are competing for the hearts and minds of the same citizens, the possession of the tools for nation-building and its actual use by political actors is by no means a minor question.

The present article is intended to explore these nation-building dynamics in plural polities, with a particular emphasis on the majority group’s rhetoric. The dominant nationalism identifies the status quo and the official symbols of the state as neutral, therefore accusing the nation-building efforts of the minority as partisan and divisive. Nevertheless, we know that both are trying to “nationalise” their citizens and gain support for their nationalist cause. I argue that the acknowledgement of this reality is the first step to settle a constitutional framework where both nationalisms can flourish and coexist. This article is structured as follows: first, I briefly account for the majority/minority dynamics in multinational decentralized states. Second, I explain the rationales behind the rhetoric around the state’s neutrality on nation and ethnicity. Third, I draw on the Catalan conflict in contemporary Spain to illustrate these remarks. Finally, I highlight the importance of these observations for the integrity and stability of plural states, and I give some tips for different nationalisms to coexist in functioning, multinational states.

## Majority/Minority Dynamics in the Multinational State

In contrast to those countries that are composed of a single nation, we can understand plural or multinational statehood as the coexistence of two or more self-aware national groups within a single polity (Keating 2001, Gagnon, Tully 2001). In these cases, there usually exists a majority group together with one or more minority communities. The relationship between them can be complicated since they used to pursue different goals: while state institutions are often used as means to incorporate minorities into the larger group, the former try to promote their particular identity and thus resist assimilation (Norman 2006). In decentralized polities, where the tools for nation-building are divided between the central government and the regions, it is rather usual to witness some kind of competition between different national groups (Miller 2000).

This clash between competing nationalisms can be understood both in terms of self-determination and in terms of nation-building. Regarding the former, the main goal of nationalism is to render the boundaries of the nation congruent with those of the political unit (Gellner 1983). While minority nationalism ultimately seeks its own state, that of the majority would be concerned about strengthening the state with which it so strongly identifies (Coakley 2011), removing the competing national projects that could threaten the country’s national unity. However, nationalist behaviour sometimes precedes self-determination-seeking goals since it is necessary to define, first, who is the “self” of this claim. This self has to be “created, nurtured, shaped, and motivated” (Norman 2006: 25). Therefore, it is expected that both minority and the majority nationalisms would try to “nationalize” the citizenry to gain more support for their cause, engaging in nation-building activities to this effect.

The majority nationalism, however, is distinct from that of the minority mainly because it controls the state’s apparatus. This fact enables the dominant community to institutionalize its national ambitions -such as the territorial integrity of the state-, as well as its national identity, practices and culture as if they were the common features of the country as a whole. Following Billig (1995), this enables the nationalism of the majority to be invisible and projected in banal forms -as in the

famous example of the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building (Ibid, 8). Contrary to the minority or stateless groups (Guibernau 1999), which must necessarily refer to nationalist principles to defend its cause, the majority nationalism can simply invoke the law under a rhetoric of neutrality to enforce its national aspirations. The next section deepens these ideas.

## The Rhetoric on the State's Neutrality

Excluding ideologies such as the radical right from this analysis, there is a long tradition in liberal political thought about the desirability of the state's neutrality in most policy areas. Since there is no single right conception of what a "good life" means, states must remain as "blind" as possible in issues such as gender, religion, sexual orientation and similar (Rawls 1971, Rawls 1987). Therefore, the role of institutions is that of remaining neutral by enabling individuals to pursue their ideals in their private lives, whatever they may be. Allegedly, this could be extended to ethnicity and nationalism as well, under a framework in which the state would not benefit any particular ethnic or national group. Following these remarks, modern states would overcome cultural differences by setting up a community made of individual voluntary ties and based on a set of "nationally blind" rights and liberties enshrined in the legal order -such as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Canada or the 1978 Constitution in Spain.

In multinational polities, this perspective is particularly beneficial for the majority group for two reasons. Firstly, because the state is still projecting the majority group's self-image, since it is impossible for institutions to be utterly neutral on ethnicity and nationalism (Kymlicka 1995) -fundamental decisions such as the language to be used or the public holidays to be celebrated are deeply rooted in specific national perspectives. Because these elements are already institutionalised, the dominant community tends to see itself as the bearer of shared national characteristics and rarely discusses identity issues (Dupont 2011). Its attachment to the state is perceived as patriotic rather than nationalist, and based on the ideas of democracy, liberal values and even some sort of cosmopolitanism. The minority group, conversely, possesses fewer tools to foster its nationalism and thus challenges the state by stressing its particularism. Therefore, the majority claims to be interested in deepening democracy and achieving a peaceful coexistence, while the minority is seen as a narrow-minded, ethnic-based source of instability (Ferreira 2019).

The second benefit of this perspective, even more important than the former, is the idea of national unity. The democratic and liberal values claimed by the majority are not operating in a vacuum but within a specific national framework. Moreover, juridical regimes such as that in Spain even settle the indivisible unity of the nation as the cornerstone of the constitutional package. In this context, neutrality means supporting a status quo that ultimately refers to the national unity and the territorial integrity of the state. Deliberately or not, the rhetoric of the state's neutrality is thus meant to protect the national ambitions of the dominant community (Dieckhoff 2011), which is first and foremost about preventing secessionism. To sum up, when majority nationalism makes a case for neutrality, it is underpinning the official -not necessarily neutral- symbols and narratives of the state, closely related to the majority group; and the unity of the country as that group sees it.

## Framing the (Majority) Nation: The Case of Spain

Spain constitutes an example of an historical nation-building failure for both the majority and the minority nationalisms, which have been unable to impose an exclusive national identity over the citizens they target. In regions such as Catalonia or the Basque Country, the people are used to having split identities and loyalties towards their region and Spain as a whole. In this context, regional nationalist rulers have used devolved powers to engage in nation-building practices, just as the state has done with the opposite purpose. The recent secessionist attempt in Catalonia has raised many concerns amongst the Spanish nationalist elites regarding the use of the nation-building tools as means of fostering separatism. However, the use of the state's mechanisms to enforce unity and foster a sense of loyalty towards the country as a whole is not seen as a

form of nationalism at all. I will explore this rhetoric hereunder.

For the period 2017-2019, I have counted 46 interventions in the Spanish Parliament by the three main state-wide parties (PSOE, PP and C's) that have explicitly referred to ensuring neutrality in Catalonia. Although they have different approaches concerning the territorial issue, all of them hold that the national sovereignty resides in the Spanish people as a whole, and implicitly believe that institutions can be and ought to be nationally neutral (Brown Swan, Cetrà 2020). They also claim to be "constitutionalists", meaning that Spanish unity should be enforced – as the constitution states. For reasons of space, I will restrict the analysis to some paradigmatic examples by the Popular Party, the largest group in parliament for the period under analysis. Many centralizing claims in several policy fields such as education or public media have been made in the name of institutional neutrality against the "indoctrination" practised by the regional rulers. For instance, the conservatives promised to "pass a law on national symbols to defend coexistence and institutional neutrality. The penalties for the authorities that do not comply with the duty to display the national flag in official buildings will be hardened, as well as for those who do not display the portrait of the Head of State in the local plenary meetings" (Partido Popular, 2019: 13).

As has been stated before, there is an identification between neutrality and legality. The defence of the Spanish national flag and the King is presented as some sort of bureaucratic duty aimed at ensuring coexistence and neutrality, not as a nationalist aspiration. Similarly, the spokeswoman of the PP in Parliament, while defending this law, stated that "we should uphold *la Senyera* [the official Catalan flag] and not *l'Estelada* [the non-official secessionist flag], which is this latter a symbol of hate [...] and neither defend nor represent all Catalans" (Congreso de los Diputados, 2018a: 14). In other words, the symbols that fall into the margins of the law are tolerated and framed as representative of all citizens, while those which challenge the constitutional order are depicted as a source of hate and confrontation. Nevertheless, we know from several surveys that the Spanish national icons such as the flag or the crown are, at least, as contested as the pro-independence symbols in Catalonia.

This paradigmatic example is highly relevant since it is the larger community, which by definition forms an electoral and political majority, the body that has the capacity to settle what it is legal/official and what it is not. Unlike minorities, the majority can wrap its nationalist goals in liberal-democratic rhetoric because these are already enshrined in the juridical order, so there is no need to invoke abstract nationalist principles -but merely the Law. For instance, another parliamentary intervention by the same spokesperson defined the constitution as the element that "defends us all", representing the values of "freedom, coexistence and the Spanish unity" (Congreso de los Diputados, 2018b: 46). Again, Spanish unity is not presented as a nationalist goal, but as a (neutral) legal principle that must be enforced in the same way that we should fine a driver after misconduct on the road.

## Acknowledging Nationalism, Ensuring Coexistence

In multinational states, minority nationalism engages in nation building to strengthen demands for more political autonomy, and then requests an even higher degree of autonomy to obtain more tools for nation building. Sometimes, it is reasonable for the majority group to be wary of giving more powers to the regions because it is fearful of this vicious circle, that can ultimately lead to secession. Conversely, minorities are reasonably concerned about their accommodation within the larger state since their status ultimately depends on the political will of majorities in the centre. This latter point is reinforced by the lack of nationalist self-awareness of the dominant community, which often faces minority demands as a dangerous threat to the state's liberal-democratic order.

In this sense, I argue that the first step to ensure coexistence in multinational states is the need for both groups -especially the majority- to acknowledge their nationalism. As has been previously explored, the rhetoric of the dominant community does not refer to nationalist principles because they do not need to do so, but under the idea of neutrality there is clearly a nationalist goal to be achieved. Following this, any functioning political arrangement in plural states will be the outcome of negotiation between both groups (Norman 2006), that must discuss the ownership of powers in several policy fields,

including those that are more sensitive for their projects. The limits and ethics of nation-building also have to be discussed to ensure both the flourishing of their respective nationalisms as well as the loyalty towards the polity as a whole. In this regard, majorities must not be the “owners” of the state (Brubaker 1996), and minorities should not perceive the state as something alien.

The institutional translation of these ideas has been largely explored in the literature, pointing to different versions of plurinational federalism and shared sovereignties. With this contribution, I have particularly stressed the crucial role of the majority in building a stable political framework where different national groups can coexist. In the end, it is the larger group which possesses most of the tools to accommodate diversity, given its majoritarian condition concerning constitutional and legal amendment processes. The willingness of building trust between the moderates of both groups can be a good starting point to reach a framework of healthy coexistence, after recognizing -if I may repeat- that they are not free of nationalism, and that not all forms of nationalism are intrinsically tyrannical or dangerous. Difficult, but not impossible.

Suggested Citation: Ferreira, C. 2020. ‘Nation-building in a Multinational State: Between Majority and Minority Aspirations’. *50 Shades of Federalism*. Available at:

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## Further Reading

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