

Independence movements in Europe: What claims do they make and how do they justify them?

CONTEXT

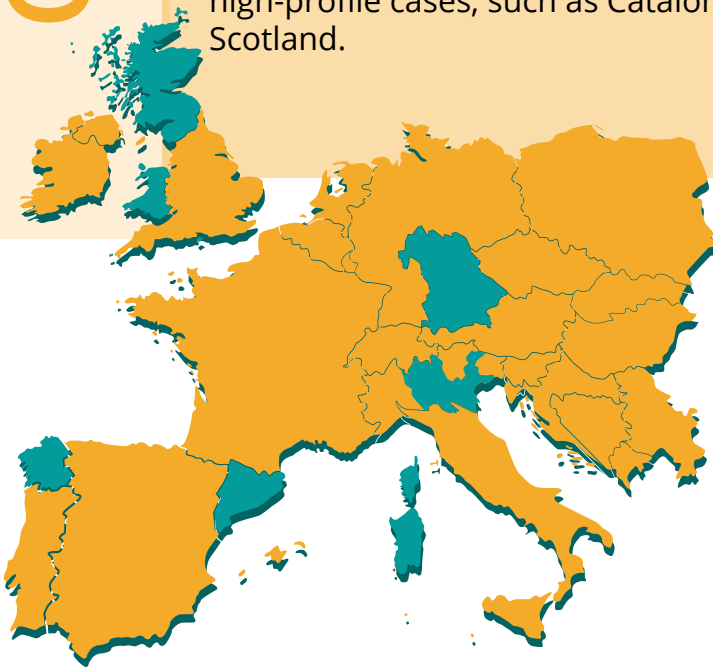
Pro-independence movements have become significantly more prominent across Europe during the last decade. These movements challenge the territorial and constitutional integrity of existing states with a view to establishing new, independent states of their own.

Despite the increasing prominence of pro-independence movements, most of the academic research and media analysis discussing these movements has, so far, tended to focus on a few high-profile cases, such as Catalonia and Scotland.

Little attention has been paid to specifying the constitutional goals of pro-independence movements, as well as the arguments used to justify their demands.

Therefore, although pro-independence movements are increasingly trying to shape political debate in several established European democracies, their objectives and political strategies are not generally well understood.

This limits the ability of different political actors to engage constructively with pro-independence movements, regardless of whether they are broadly supportive or opposed to their constitutional agenda.



The research examined the political discourses of these pro-independence movements over a period of three decades, from 1990 to 2021:

- What kind of constitutional changes do independence movements want?
- What kind of arguments are used to justify independence?

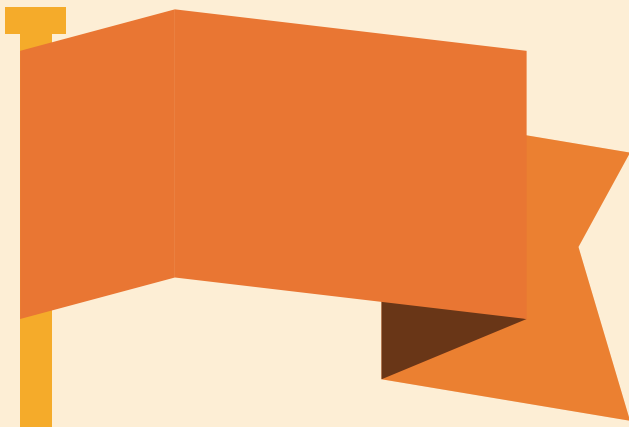
FILLING THE GAP

The IMAJINE project carried out an in-depth comparative study of independence movements in nine European cases – **Bavaria, Catalonia, Corsica, Galicia, Lombardy, Sardinia, Scotland, Veneto and Wales**. In each of these locations, the movements studied included a mix of pro-independence political parties and civil society organisations.



Key finding 1

Calls for independence have become increasingly prominent



In the cases we analysed, there has been a clear increase in independence demands over the past decade. They have become more prominent than demands for self-government and calls for policy intervention by higher levels of government, which were dominant in the 2000s.

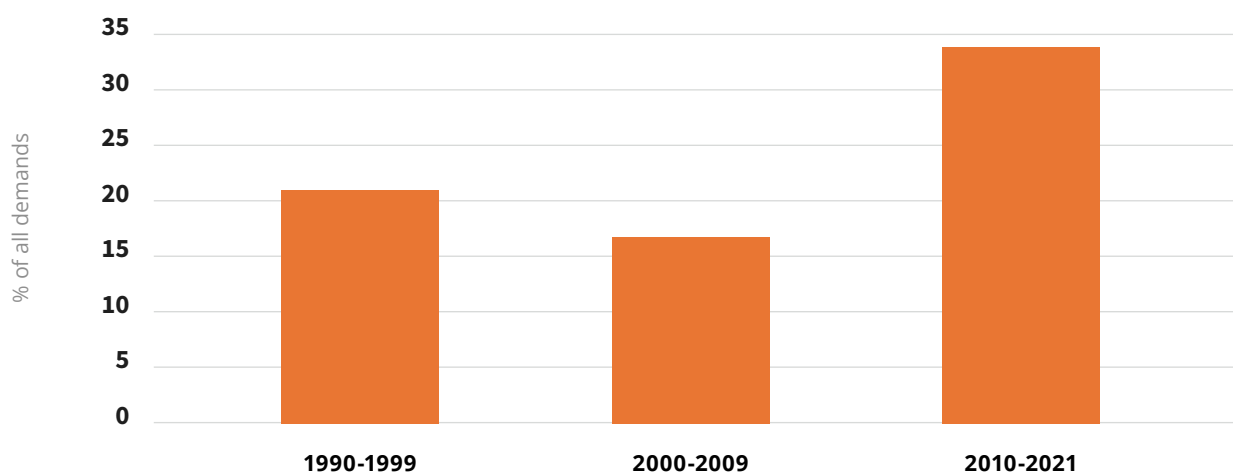
Calls for independence accounted for only 20% of the constitutional demands identified in the documents studied during 1990-99, before falling further to 16% during 2000-09.

However, calls for independence increased significantly during 2010-21, accounting for 33% of the constitutional demands advanced by the movements studied (Figure 1).

This points to a trend of European pro-independence movements shifting from pursuing 'moderate' political strategies during the 1990s and 2000s, to more 'radical' strategies where their demands for independence feature much more prominently.

In Scotland or Bavaria, demands for independence are made over the three decades studied. Yet in Wales, Catalonia, Galicia and Sardinia, independence claims are less salient during the 1990s and early 2000s, but increase in prominence from about 2010 onwards.

Figure 1: Independence demands (1990-2021)



Key finding 2

Pro-independence movements are not only interested in securing independence

Our analysis demonstrated that calls for independence are not the only type of constitutional demand advanced by pro-independence movements.

Independence was the exclusive constitutional demand in 23% of the documents analysed. In most documents, calls for independence were advanced alongside other, more limited, constitutional demands (Figure 2). These included:

- constitutional reforms such as:
 - fundamental changes to the nature of the state (e.g., that the state formally adopt a more federal structure)
 - more moderate changes (e.g., that powers in specific policy areas are

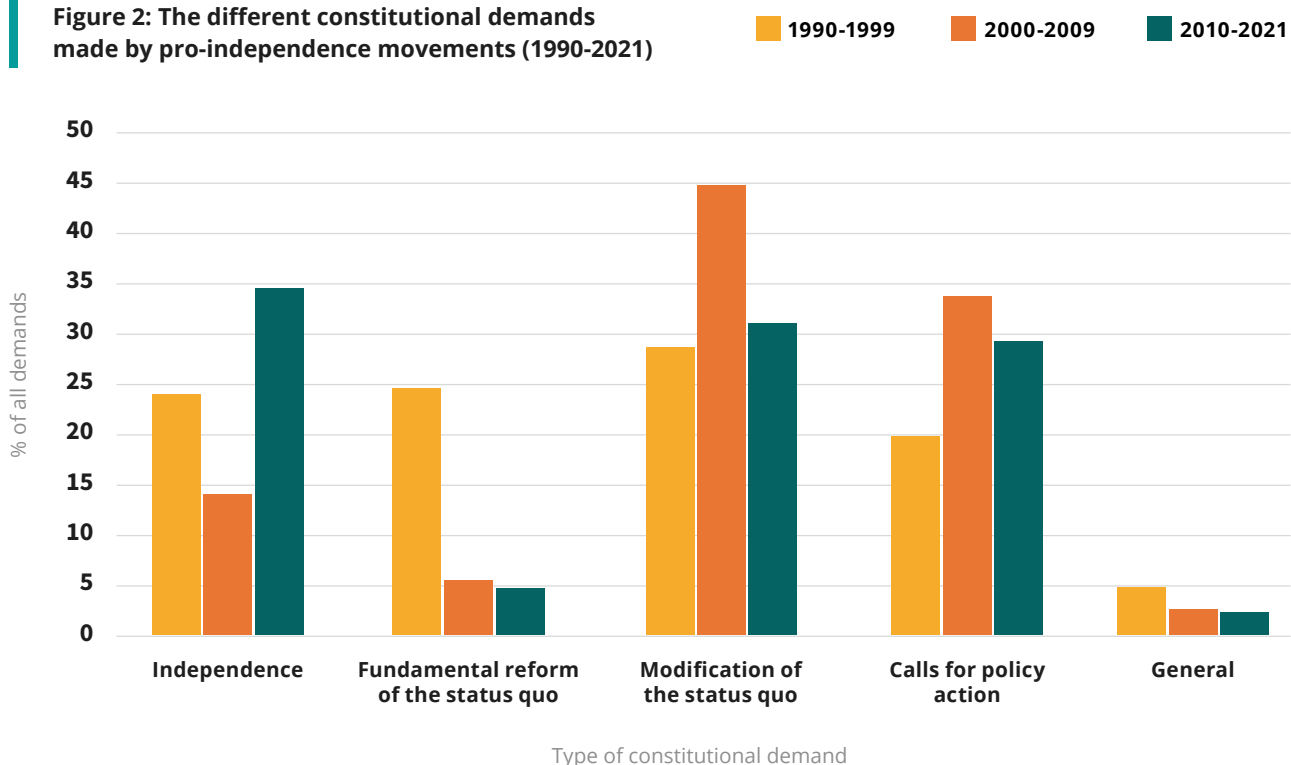
transferred from the central state down to the territory)

- greater policy intervention in the territory by higher levels of government (e.g., that the state government allocates more financial resources to support the territory's development).

This shows that pro-independence movements pursue a pragmatic political strategy that combines the long-term goal of independence with more moderate, short-term objectives aimed at empowering their territories in the meantime.

In short, their eventual goal may be independence but they also call for constitutional gains short of independence.

Figure 2: The different constitutional demands made by pro-independence movements (1990-2021)



Key finding 3

Demands for independence are mainly based on political and socio-economic arguments

Our evidence challenges the popular assumption that pro-independence movements are primarily concerned with issues of culture and identity.

The analysis revealed that arguments stressing cultural or identity factors – such as the existence of a distinct territorial identity or protecting a distinct language or culture – play a marginal role in calls for independence. Cultural and identity-based arguments have also become increasingly marginal over time.

Rather, pro-independence movements are more likely to justify their claims by using arguments that stress political factors. These arguments justify independence based on political considerations, such as:

- addressing failings in the current system of government
- leading a form of government that is more efficient, representative or democratic.

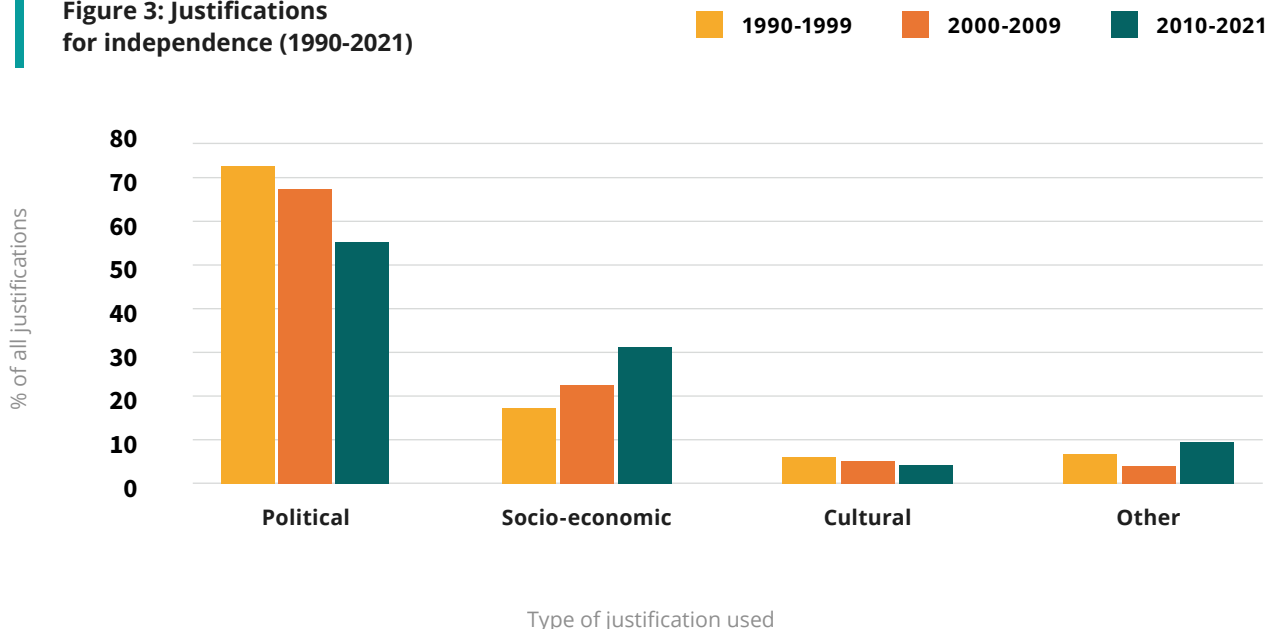
The use of such arguments declined over the three decades studied, yet they remain the most used across all periods (Figure 3).

Pro-independence movements also make substantial and increasing use of arguments stressing socio-economic factors when justifying their claims. These arguments justify independence based on socio-economic considerations, such as:

- leading to an improvement in the territory's economic prosperity
- helping to address particular social injustices and allow for the development of a fairer, more just society.

The use of socio-economic arguments has grown consistently over the three decades studied (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Justifications for independence (1990-2021)



Key finding 4

Independence is often presented as a means to a better future

Our analysis revealed that pro-independence movements make increasing use of more positive arguments to justify their constitutional demands, such as presenting it as a route to a better, more prosperous or more democratic future.

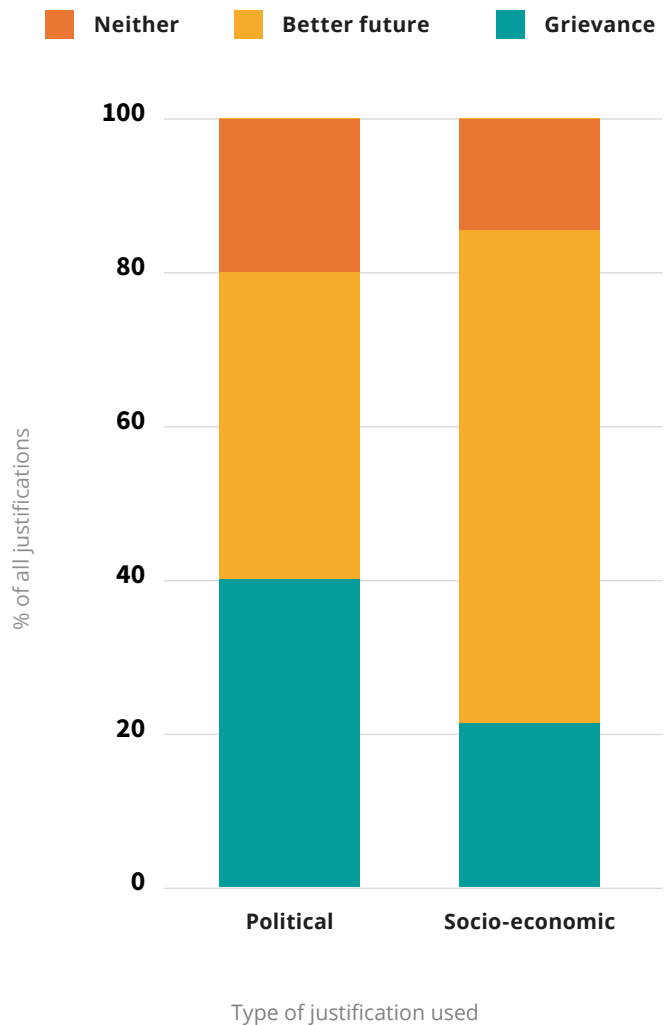
This is a striking finding because it is generally assumed that pro-independence movements are primarily motivated by a sense of discontent with, or grievance against, the state. Being part of this political system may thus pose a threat to their territory's traditional language, culture and identity, or it may undermine their territory's economic prosperity or the political rights and representation of the territory in some way.

Whilst our analysis uncovered many instances of such grievance-based arguments being used by pro-independence movements, it also revealed that use of such arguments has declined over time.

In Catalonia, for example, when independence was justified based on political arguments, just over 50% of the examples framed independence positively as a means to a better future (Figure 4).

When independence was justified by stressing socio-economic considerations, the use of positive arguments was even more pronounced: in 65% of the examples independence was framed positively, with a future independent Catalonia being presented as a means of creating a more prosperous and just society (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Catalan pro-independence parties' justifications of independence (2008 - 2018)




These findings challenge the widely held assumption that demands for independence are based primarily on a sense of grievance against the state and the existing constitutional order.

The findings suggest that European pro-independence movements are conscious of the fact that their success depends on being able to mobilise broad popular support, and that positive arguments that look to the future are more likely to succeed.

Key conclusions

1. **Demands for independence have become more prominent across Europe, particularly since 2010.**
2. **Pro-independence movements are not just interested in securing independence for their territories – they also want constitutional gains short of independence.**
3. **Contrary to traditional assumptions, arguments that stress issues of culture and identity only play a marginal role in how these movements justify their demands for independence.**
4. **Pro-independence movements build arguments that stress political and socio-economic considerations, and justify independence in positive terms as a means to a better future.**

Please get in touch if you'd like to know more about this research and its key findings, or to discuss how our work can benefit your organisation.

This visual summary is based on research led by Aberystwyth University, in partnership with the University of Basel, University of Siena, Dresden Technical University, University of Groningen and the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization Polish Academy of Sciences. For more information contact Dr Anwen Elias at awe@aber.ac.uk 

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