



Kent Academic Repository

Ferreira, Carles (2024) *Pro-independence party frames and public opinion: do they work?* Ethnopolitics, 25 (3). pp. 207-221. ISSN 1744-9057.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/106995/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2024.2386875>

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives)

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal**, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).



Pro-Independence Party Frames and Public Opinion: Do They Work?

Carles Ferreira

To cite this article: Carles Ferreira (2026) Pro-Independence Party Frames and Public Opinion: Do They Work?, Ethnopolitics, 25:3, 207-221, DOI: [10.1080/17449057.2024.2386875](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2024.2386875)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2024.2386875>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 14 Aug 2024.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 1015



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 1 [View citing articles](#)

Pro-Independence Party Frames and Public Opinion: Do They Work?

CARLES FERREIRA 

Politics & IR, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

ABSTRACT By employing an experimental design in Catalonia and Scotland, the present article explores whether citizens' exposure to different pro-independence party frames helps shape people's attitudes to secession. The results indicate that individuals hold strong pre-existing beliefs on independence, and the way parties frame secession does not seem to influence public opinion. These insights suggest that secessionist parties might prioritise the attainment of vote and office goals over policy outcomes when choosing their rhetorical strategies. The findings have wider implications for the field of territorial party politics by showing the limits of secessionist parties' rhetoric in shaping policy preferences.

Introduction

Secession or independence is a constitutional option aimed at withdrawing a territory and its population from an existing state to create a new state on that territory (Pavkovic & Radan, 2007, p. 1). In multinational democracies, citizens tend to be divided over the issue of independence—in regions such as Catalonia or Scotland, voters remain evenly split over whether they support secession (Liñeira & Cetrà, 2015). Although the importance of social movements, NGOs or the media should not be underestimated, political parties are the main actors in fuelling secessionist demands (Alonso, 2012; Barrio & Rodríguez-Teruel, 2017). Minority nationalist parties focus on mobilising the centre-periphery cleavage to aggregate and articulate the interests of stateless nations (Hepburn, 2009; Rokkan & Urwin, 1983). Although we know that they also place great emphasis on other dimensions of political competition, territorial politics is widely considered their 'core business' (Alonso et al., 2015; Massetti & Schakel, 2015; Meguid, 2008).

The academic literature has extensively explored the way these parties make their case for independence (Dalle Mulle & Serrano, 2019; Elias et al., 2023; Ferreira, 2023). However, the effects of these framing strategies on people's attitudes towards secession has not been explored yet. By employing an experimental survey design in Catalonia and Scotland, the present contribution takes a first step in addressing this question. Territorial party politics scholars have recently identified an increasing trend towards a

Correspondence Address: Carles Ferreira, Politics & IR, University of Kent, Canterbury CT2 7NP, UK. Email: ctf2@kent.ac.uk, X: [@carlesferreira](https://twitter.com/carlesferreira); Website: carlesferreira.com

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

socioeconomic case for independence by secessionist parties (Dalle Mulle, 2016; Dalle Mulle & Serrano, 2019; Elias, 2019; Elias & Franco, 2021). They argue that these framing strategies might help secessionist parties achieving their goals, which include the capacity to sway public opinion in favour of independence. The literature on secession further supports this idea: the cost–benefit economic calculations trump identity issues when people take sides in the independence debate (Agneman, 2022; Blais & Nadeau, 1992; Hierro & Queral, 2021; Muñoz & Tormos, 2015; Muñoz & Tormos, 2015). The paper aims to test this theory, namely, whether parties increasingly frame independence in instrumental terms to enhance people’s support for secession.

The results of the experiment, however, show that people hold strong pre-existing beliefs on independence, and the way parties frame secession—focusing either on identity, economic or political matters—does not seem to influence people’s attitudes. Party frames might have an effect in the long run through repetition and prolonged exposition instead. More research is needed to fully capture framing dynamics in the territorial party politics domain. Therefore, this article opens up a promising new avenue of scholarly research on minority nationalist parties’ rhetoric and public opinion.

Beyond its academic importance, the study of secessionist framing strategies is relevant for the stability and territorial integrity of established states. High levels of secessionist support challenge the very existence of multinational countries, which cannot properly function under the constant threat of secession by their regions. Hence, to know whether parties’ framing strategies boost support for secession is crucial to facing the challenges of territorial politics in these countries. The article is organised as follows: the next section reviews the literature on framing analysis and party politics. Section three outlines the theoretical framework and the main hypotheses of the research. Section four describes the research design and the methodology. Section five presents the results of the experiment and section six discusses and summarises the contributions this paper makes.

Party Frames and Public Opinion: Insights from the Literature

Frames are arguments aimed at describing and justifying a particular political position (Basile, 2016; Helbling, 2014). They present a policy or political choice by emphasising certain relevant features of reality and ignoring others (Oxley, 2020). A frame ‘suggests what [a] controversy is about, the essence of the issue ... [and] generally implies a policy direction or implicit answer to what should be done about the issue’ (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). In sum, they ‘provide meaning to an issue and suggest how to understand and think about it’ (Slothuus, 2008, p. 3). The analysis of frames stems from the disciplines of social psychology and sociology (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019), and most of the research so far has focused on the effects of media frames on public opinion (de Vreese, 2009; Price et al., 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999).

Such effects are well-documented in the literature. For instance, a classic study on framing analysis shows that public tolerance for the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) is higher when the media frame a KKK rally as a matter of free speech rather than public order (Nelson et al., 1997). Similar media frame effects have been found across a broad variety of issues such as gun policy (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001), welfare spending (Druckman, 2001; Nelson & Oxley, 1999) or climate change (Spence & Pidgeon, 2010; Wiest et al., 2015). The academic consensus underlines the potential of frames in swaying public opinion, but the studies on political parties as a specific source of frame

production are relatively scarce, and heavily US-based (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010).

We know that political parties engage in framing strategies to advance their vote, office, and policy goals (Elias et al., 2015; Rovny & Edwards, 2012). Framing is one of the strategic tools available to parties to compete in the electoral market and to persuade voters of the policies they promote (Elias et al., 2015). The use of frames by political parties aims to change people's cognitive understanding of a given situation in a way that benefits them (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Most of the research on party framing effects, however, revolves around *who* frames—source credibility and party cues—rather than what they frame (Bechtel et al., 2015; Mullinix, 2016; Slothuus, 2010; Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021).

The literature has nevertheless documented party frame effects on public opinion in issues such as income redistribution and European integration (Maier et al., 2012; Somer-Topcu et al., 2020) or welfare policies (Jerit, 2009; Slothuus, 2010). A meta-analytic assessment of framing effects in the political realm—including parties and political elites as frame-producers—revealed that framing exerts medium-sized effects on citizens' political attitudes and emotions (Amsalem & Zoizner, 2022). The success of party framing is moderated by contextual and individual conditions such as the existence of a priori opinion, age, gender, or risk-aversion attitudes (Adams et al., 2014; Miller & Fagley, 1991; Slothuus, 2010). All these insights are based on framing strategies in a wide variety of policy domains. Although there exist some studies in the field of territorial politics (e.g. Dekavalla, 2016, 2018a, 2018b), none of them have analysed the effect of party framing on public attitudes to secession.

Surprisingly, the subfield of territorial party politics has not focused on this aspect either. Recent publications have started to identify the pro-independence frames put forward by secessionist parties (Dalle Mulle & Serrano, 2019; Elias et al., 2023) and the conditions under which these frames are produced (Dalle Mulle, 2017; Ferreira, 2024; Griffiths, 2021). A growing body of scholarship establishes that minority nationalist parties increasingly focus on the economy and welfare rather than identity when making their case for sovereignty (Dalle Mulle, 2016; Dalle Mulle & Serrano, 2019; Elias, 2019; Elias & Franco, 2021). Scholars argue that these framing strategies might help secessionist parties achieve their goals, which include the capacity to sway public opinion in favour of independence. However, the actual effects of secessionist parties' rhetoric on people's attitudes towards the constitution have not been addressed yet. This is the first contribution aiming to address this issue, and thus opens up a promising new research agenda on minority nationalist parties' framing strategies and public opinion.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

By employing the classic conceptualisation by Rokkan and Urwin (1983), the present article identifies three different party frames deployed to justify the change of constitutional status: identity, socioeconomic, and political. The frames that fall under the 'identity' category are the justifications for independence based on nationhood and the protection of a regional language and culture. For instance, the *Parti Québécois* in its 2008 manifesto justified the right to self-determination by stating that 'there is a thing Quebecers have never doubted: that they are a nation'.¹ The economy, welfare, and the environment constitute the socioeconomic dimension of party rhetoric. The Basque party *EH Bildu* in 2016 offered an example of this: 'we want to develop our own

Labour Relations Framework to [...] achieve better salary conditions, starting with a minimum wage of €1,200'.² Finally, political frames are rhetorical statements around self-government, democracy, governance, and values—the latter meaning the envisioning of either a progressive or a traditional society. For instance, the Catalan JxC wrote in 2015 that secession is 'an opportunity to build a Catalan administration which would be simplified, efficient, agile, and modern; continuously evaluated and at the service of citizens'.³

Recent insights suggest that pro-independence parties increasingly frame independence in instrumental terms, emphasising the economic and political benefit it would deliver for the population they claim to represent (Dalle Mulle, 2016; Dalle Mulle & Serrano, 2019; Elias & Franco, 2021). Instead, identity issues are far less prominent in their campaigns (Elias & Franco, 2021; Sanjaume-Calvet & Riera-Gil, 2022). Hence, the literature has identified a strategic shift towards a socioeconomic and political framing of secession. Although parties often pursue competing goals—they navigate between office, policy and vote-seeking strategies (Strom, 1990)—we expect secessionist parties to be particularly concerned about convincing constituents of independence and thus advancing their case for self-determination (Meguid, 2023). Their rhetorical choices ultimately seek to make a change in terms of policy—delivering independence once most of the population support it. From this perspective, parties would increasingly frame secession as means to improve people's lives because they believe these arguments will increase support for independence. This is the theory to be tested in this paper.

The literature on secession further supports this hypothesis: cost–benefit economic calculations trump identity issues when people take sides in the independence debate (Agneman, 2022; Blais & Nadeau, 1992; Fullaondo & Zabalo, 2022; Hierro & Queralt, 2021; Muñoz & Tormos, 2015). Beyond the economy, political issues such as the desire for self-government or the existence of democratic grievances against the host state also play an independent role in explaining people's attitudes towards secession (Blais & Nadeau, 1992; Mendelsohn, 2003; Serrano, 2013). Altogether, socioeconomic, democratic, and governance-based arguments for secession would help parties persuading people of independence. I therefore hypothesise that a discourse based on fuelling economic and politic arguments should persuade more people of independence than a rhetoric based on identity and culture.

H₁: People exposed to an identity-based pro-independence frame will display a lower level of support for secession than those exposed to economic or political frames.

However, I also hypothesise that different forms of pro-independence discourse do not affect everyone equally. I pose that national identity moderates the relationship between secessionist frames and pro-independence attitudes. As previous studies suggest (Liñeira & Cetrà, 2015; Muñoz & Tormos, 2015), individuals with strong and exclusive national identities would not be easily swayed by the way independence is presented to them—as national identity and constitutional preferences largely correlate (Blais & Nadeau, 1992; Burg, 2015; McCrone & Paterson, 2002; Serrano, 2013). Conversely, a discourse based on delivering 'material' benefits to the population in the event of independence would persuade more individuals of secession, particularly those with dual or ambivalent identities (Muñoz & Tormos, 2015; Zabalo & Iraola, 2022). Since their territorial attachments are ambiguous, this segment of the population is more likely to make decisions on secession based on democratic or socio-economic benefits with which the case for independence is

presented to them. Therefore, a political or socioeconomic discourse for independence would be more appealing to them compared to a rhetoric based on identity and culture.

H₂: A socioeconomic and political discourse or frame for independence will have a stronger impact among those citizens with ambivalent identities and less on those with exclusive identifications either with the region or the state.

Research Design and Methods

To estimate the causal effect of different forms of discourse on constitutional preferences, we need to move beyond observational research towards an experimental design. Unlike survey designs, experiments allow researchers to actively manipulate a treatment and thus clearly distinguish cause and effect (Gaines et al., 2007; Mutz, 2011). Respondents are assigned randomly to control and treatment conditions. By comparing the decisions of the respondents in the treatment groups, experiments reveal the causal effects under investigation. In this case, I compare the answers given by respondents when exposed to identity, socioeconomic and political pro-independence frames, as well as those in the control group—which have not been exposed to any frame.

Case Selection

The experiment has been run in Catalonia (Spain) and Scotland (UK), the regions in Western democracies which display the highest level of support for secession.⁴ These two cases are often compared in the literature due to their similarities, as key cases of minority nationalism and support for secession (Dalle Mulle & Serrano, 2019; Keating, 1996; Muro et al., 2020). Furthermore, the debate on independence was salient both in Catalonia and Scotland during the time the survey experiment was designed and administered in January 2023. Before we go any further, it is important to briefly account for the context in which the research was conducted.

In the case of Catalonia, gaining ever greater degrees of autonomy within Spain was the main goal of the nationalist movement until the late 2000s. However, the failure to achieve a new autonomy arrangement for the region—overruled by the Constitutional Court in 2010—radicalised the movement and ultimately led to the so-called Catalan ‘process’ for independence (Anderson, 2020; Barrio & Rodríguez-Teruel, 2017; Ferreira, 2022; Serrano, 2015). In 2017, the regional parliament unilaterally declared independence while the Spanish senate temporarily imposed direct rule from Madrid. The consequences of this failed secession divided the pro-independence camp between the moderate republican left (ERC) and the radical *Together for Catalonia* (JxC). They ruled together until October 2022, when JxC decided to leave the government because ERC—the senior partner—favoured a strategy of dialogue with Madrid. By the time the survey was administered, ERC promised to convince the Spanish government to call a binding referendum on independence inspired by Canada’s 2000 Clarity Act.

Concerning Scotland, the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) benefited from the 1999 devolution arrangement and achieved office in 2007 after decades campaigning in favour of secession (Dardanelli, 2013; Elias, 2019). They have been in power ever since. In 2014, they managed to convince the British prime minister David Cameron to allow a referendum on independence (Cetrà & Harvey, 2019). Most Scots

voted to remain in the UK. However, the departure of the UK from the European Union reignited the constitutional debate—most Scots voted to remain in the EU—and led the former Scottish first minister Nicola Sturgeon to propose a second independence referendum. However, this time the British government rejected the proposal, and the Supreme Court ruled that Scotland does not possess constitutional powers to hold a referendum unilaterally. By the time the survey was administered, the SNP proposed to turn the next general elections—to be held by late 2024—into a ‘plebiscite’ on a second independence referendum.

Therefore, the two cases share many features: both regions are ruled by a centre-left pro-independence party, the level of secessionist support amongst the population is close to 50%, and by the time the survey was administered the debate on independence was salient and revolved around the holding of an independence referendum. However, the two regions are also different in a couple of respects that are relevant for this research. First, unlike Catalonia, Scotland does not possess a widely spoken regional language as a key element of its national identity (Argelaguet, 2006). Second, while Catalonia is one of Spain’s wealthiest regions—hence, its economic viability as a hypothetical independent state is often taken for granted—the Scottish economy relies on the North Sea oil and its GDP falls slightly below the UK average (Dalle Mulle, 2017).

Experimental Design and Data Analysis Technique

I designed and administered two online experimental surveys—one in Catalonia and the other in Scotland—with 426 participants in the former and 446 in the latter. A power analysis using G-Power suggested 400 participants in each region.⁵ The analysis was based on a medium effect size ($f=0.25$), a significance level of 0.05 and a desired power of 0.95. The critical F-value for the specified effect size, significance level and power level was 1.85. I selected a 0.25 effect size because it allows for a balance between sensitivity and realism. Furthermore, the population under investigation is expected to exhibit moderate variability in the responses. The supplement to this article—Part B—displays the full results of the power analysis.

To avoid responses from participants who paid insufficient attention to the treatment, I removed respondents who took less than 30 s to complete the survey in Scotland and less than 40 s in Catalonia.⁶ Recruitment to the panel was via Prolific Academic (PA),⁷ an online crowdsourced survey recruitment service. Each participant received 0.75 GBP for their time. The use of PA provides higher quality data than similar data collection platforms because, compared to other crowdsourcing providers, participants tend to pay more attention to instructions and consistently complete questionnaires carefully (Peer et al., 2017).

Concerning demographics, in Scotland, 53% participants were female and 47% male, with 77.3% holding a university-level qualification or above. The age range was 18–79 years (mean = 42.7; std deviation = 13.12). In Catalonia, 44% participants were female and 54% male. The remaining individuals identify as non-binary or prefer not to answer (1.7%). 64.1% of participants in Catalonia held a university-level qualification or above, and the age range was 18–80 years (mean = 31; std deviation = 10.43).⁸ These samples are not representative of the wider populations of Catalonia and Scotland. This is not a drawback for the purposes of the current study, however. The goal is not to estimate the precise effects of the treatments in the real-world—for which purposes samples representative of the populations would be required. Rather, the purpose is simply to identify

whether a fairly simple framing experiment produces any discernible effect on people's attitudes to secession. For this purpose, a convenience sample is appropriate. Any extension of the research—towards more precise estimates of any framing effects—would require testing on representative samples.

Before administering the survey, a pilot was run through the 'Qualtrics' platform to ensure that people appeared to understand the core treatment and could answer questions on the key variables. The pilot showed that respondents effectively navigated the survey smoothly and made informed choices. The PA samples were selected without using quotas. The respondents answered the survey in English in Scotland and in Catalan in Catalonia. While PA allows the researcher to select one of the four UK nations as the target population, in Spain the recruitment service is state-wide. The use of Catalan as the language of the survey aims at overcoming this obstacle, as most non-Catalan Spaniards do not understand Catalan.⁹ Therefore, the first question in the survey asked whether the respondent held Spanish citizenship and lived in Catalonia. If not, the respondent was not allowed to take the survey. Both decisions were taken to ensure that the respondents were actual Catalans.

The survey included three demographic questions at the beginning—age, gender, and educational level. After this, the survey experiment randomly assigned respondents to different treatments: three groups were given a short vignette displaying a pro-independence frame—based on either identity, socioeconomics, or politics—and a fourth control group did not receive any vignette.¹⁰ The vignettes shown to the respondents were real-case statements made by secessionist parties in political manifestos. While it is true that very rarely people read manifestos, these are written in a language akin to politicians' speeches, meetings, and press releases. The fact that these are actual frames—as opposed to invented ones—enhances the external validity of the results (Barabas & Jerit, 2010).

The vignettes did not specify which party made the statement to avoid bias—particularly in Catalonia, where three different secessionist parties coexist. In the case of Catalonia, I employed the 2015 *Junts pel Sí* ('Together for Yes') manifesto, as it was the only time when the two major secessionist parties ran together in a coalition. In Scotland, I used the 2013 'Scotland's future' document, launched by the SNP's government—and endorsed by the Scottish Greens—to justify independence. All the vignettes are provided in the supplement to the article. Below I display an example of a vignette, shown to the Scottish respondents assigned to the socioeconomic frame treatment:

Please read the following text which comes from a pro-independence political party's election manifesto:

The Scottish economy has key strengths in growth industries such as food and drink, energy, creative industries, tourism, and life sciences. Per head of population, we have more top universities than any other country in the world. We perform strongly as a location for inward investment, and we have a strong financial services industry. However, under the Westminster system Scotland is treated as a regional economy within the UK. We are locked in to one of the most unequal economic models in the developed world. With independence, we can make Scotland the fairer and the most successful country we all know it should be. We can make Scotland's vast wealth and resources work much better for everyone in our country.

Following the administration of treatments, the survey recorded individuals' preferences on independence by employing a 0–10 scale ranging from 'very strongly against independence' to 'very strongly in favour of independence'. People's attitudes towards secession are the dependent variable of the study. Using a numerical scale allows for precise analysis and statistical testing. Moreover, it is easy for participants to understand and respond to, enhancing the likelihood of obtaining reliable data. Finally, the survey recorded respondents' national identity by asking the well-known Linz-Moreno question (Guinjoan & Rodon, 2016; Linz, 1993), allowing individuals to classify themselves as feeling 'Only Catalan/Scottish', 'More Catalan/Scottish than Spanish/British', 'Both Catalan/Scottish and Spanish/British', 'More Spanish/British than Catalan/Scottish' or 'Only Spanish/British'. This question was only asked at the end of the survey to avoid priming participants before the treatment.

I employed the software R to perform the data analysis. I performed an analysis of variance or ANOVA, which is a statistical method that identifies any differences in the means of two or more groups (Sthle & Wold, 1989). I run first a one-way ANOVA to test whether the exposure to a particular pro-independence party frame affects people's opinions on secession. This analysis tests hypothesis 1. After this, I run a two-way ANOVA by including the national identity variable in the model. I did this to assess whether national identity moderates the association between frame exposure and attitudes towards independence. This analysis tests hypotheses 2. I recoded the 'national identity' variable into three main categories: 'very strong' identity—exclusive identification either with the region or the state—, 'strong' identity—predominant identification either with the region or the state—, and 'weak' identity—equally identification with the region and the state.

Concerning the methodological limits of this research, the fact that there is no impact of frames on public opinion does not necessarily mean that framing strategies do not have an effect at all on the population as a whole. Due to the experimental design, the article does not fully capture the dynamics of framing in the real world. For instance, we know that frames are more powerful when repeated over time and people are exposed to them extendedly. The present research design exposes people to secessionist frames only once, and in a rather artificial setting. As it has been stated before, the added-value of this contribution is that it opens a new promising research agenda on party frames and public opinion in the field of territorial politics—irrespective of whether the results of this article are inconclusive.

Results

I begin by assessing whether the respondents' exposure to different pro-independence party frames affect their opinion on secession. As we can see from [Figure 1](#) (Catalonia) and [Figure 2](#) (Scotland), the mean values of support for independence of participants exposed to different frames are very similar. One-way ANOVAs showed that these differences are not statistically significant (Scotland: $F(0.261)$, $p = 0.853$; Catalonia: $F(0.125)$, $p = 0.946$).¹¹ Therefore, hypothesis 1 is rejected: people exposed to an identity frame does not display a lower level of support for secession than people exposed to a socioeconomic or political frame.

Given these null effects, it is unlikely that any moderation effects by national identity exist. Indeed, there is no evidence that people with weak national identities are more

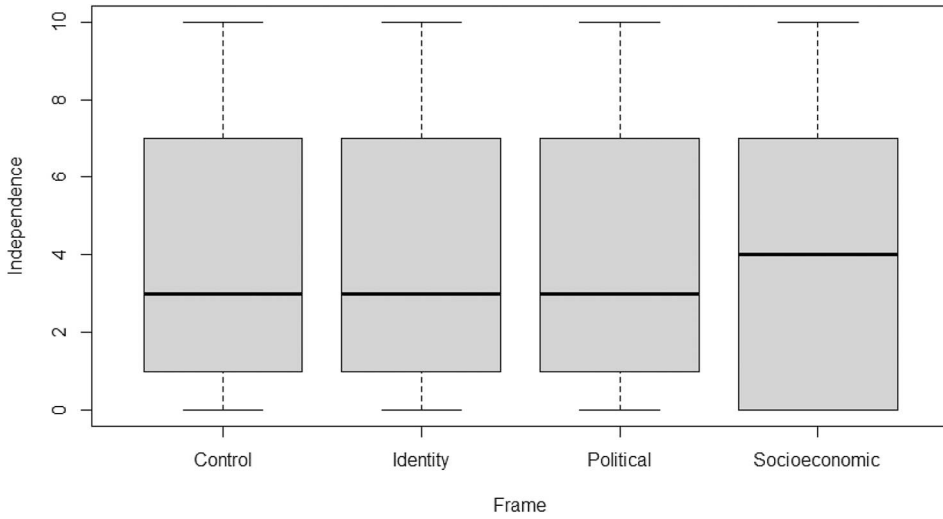


Figure 1. Support for independence by type and frame exposure in Catalonia

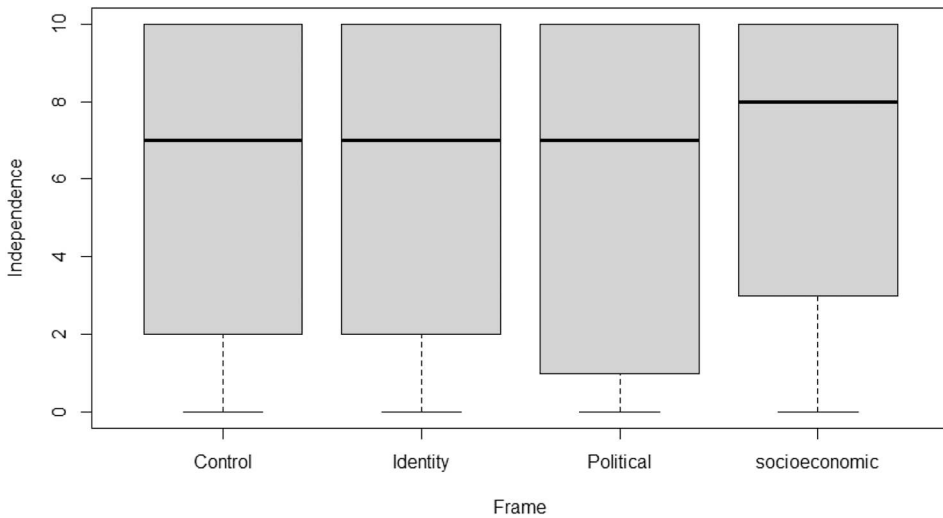


Figure 2. Support for independence by type and frame exposure in Scotland

swayed by political or socioeconomic frames than people with strong national identities. Two-way ANOVAs show statistically insignificant results for the frame*identity interaction term in Scotland ($F(0.623)$, $p = 0.712$) and Catalonia ($F(1.397)$, $p = 0.215$).¹² The full results are presented in the supplement to the article. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is also rejected: national identity does not moderate between pro-independence rhetoric and pro-independence opinions. Individuals do not respond differently to party frames depending on the strength of their territorial attachments.¹³

Discussion and Conclusions

Party frames have been found to have an effect on attitudes to a wide range of political issues, so it is reasonable to hypothesise that they may have an effect on attitudes to independence as well. By employing an experimental survey design in Catalonia and Scotland, the present contribution takes a first step in addressing this question. It tests whether people's exposure to different pro-independence party frames—identity, socioeconomic, and political frames—sways their opinion on secession. The results find no effects across the board, meaning that contextual and individual conditions trump party rhetoric in shaping people's constitutional preferences.

However, we should take these findings with caution: the fact that this research has not found any effect in an experimental setting does not mean that we would not be able to find effects in the real world. More research is needed to fully capture framing dynamics in the territorial party politics domain. For instance, previous research has shown that frames are more effective when repeated over time (Lecheler and De Vreese 2016) and people are exposed to them extendedly. Furthermore, the experiment has been run in a very artificial setting, which impacts on the external validity of the study. Other relevant elements such as the expected effect size, employed to run the power analysis, might have led to these results. Further studies should assume that the effect of frames is smaller than expected, and thus work with larger samples. These methodological choices and limitations impede us to definitely establish null effects. Scholars should build their research up from here to further explore secessionist parties' framing effects on public opinion.

Although the results are not conclusive, they suggest however that people hold strong pre-existing beliefs on independence, and thus party potential to persuade citizens of secession is severely limited by these beliefs. One key pre-condition is national identity: people more attached to the state tend to be against independence, and individuals more attached to their region tend to be in favour, irrespective of the type of frames they are exposed to. Furthermore, the contribution shows that national identity does not moderate between secessionist rhetoric and people's attitudes towards independence. Economic and political party frames do not shape policy preferences of individuals with dual or ambivalent identities. This finding clashes with previous research on framing by non-partisan actors and constitutional preferences, which established that economic arguments trump identity ones in people's support for independence (Agneman, 2022; Druckman, 2001; Muñoz & Tormos, 2015). Scholars should explore further why party frames do not work the same way. One possible explanation might be related to source credibility; as political parties are not as renowned as university professors or business associations, which might have more potential to sway people's opinions (Druckman, 2001).

These findings inevitably trigger another question: if socioeconomic and political pro-independence party frames do not sway public opinion, why do secessionist parties increasingly emphasise these frames in their campaigns (Dalle Mulle & Serrano, 2019; Elias & Franco, 2021)? The results suggest that minority nationalist parties might trade votes and office-seeking goals over policy: By presenting independence as means of achieving better standards of living, secessionist parties aim to increase their electoral appeal and to enhance their credibility as reputable ruling parties (Elias, 2019; Ferreira, 2024). The socioeconomic case for secession might not seek to convince people to support independence, but to convince people to support these parties. In light of the

evidence, should shape and mobilise identities if they want to increase the support for the independence of the region they claim to represent.

As it has been noted earlier, nobody tested before which are the effects of secessionist party frames on public opinion. Hence, the present contribution opens up a promising new line of research. Null results contribute to the body of knowledge by indicating what does not work, and thus preventing other researchers from retracting unsuccessful paths. In this regard, the methodological transparency of this article might guide future contributions that will explore this issue further.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. Own translation from the original French: 'Il y a une chose dont toutes les Québécoises et tous les Québécois n'ont jamais douté, c'est qu'ils forment une nation'.
2. Own translation from the original Spanish: 'Marco Propio de Relaciones Laborales [...] para así conseguir universalizar mejores condiciones salariales y laborales comenzando por un salario mínimo de 1.200€'.
3. Own translation from the original Catalan: 'estructurar una administració catalana propera, simplificada, eficient, àgil i moderna, que s'avalui contínuament i que estigui al servei de la ciutadania'.
4. Excluding the undecided, recent polls in late 2022 show 49% support for independence in Scotland (Savanta, Dec 2022) and 46% in Catalonia (CEO, Nov 2022). The numbers in other regions with a strong nationalist sentiment are lower, such as in the Basque Country in Spain (42%, SV78, Oct 2022), Quebec in Canada (39.5%, Léger, Oct 2022) or Wales in the UK (29.5%, YouGov, Nov 2022).
5. Testing for main effects and interactions.
6. The survey in Catalonia included an extra filter question, this is the reason why I added 10 s more as a low participant attention criterion.
7. For additional information, see <https://www.prolific.co>
8. In actual Scotland, there are 51% females and 49% males, 26% hold a university degree and the mean age is 43 years old (source: Scotland's census, 2022). In Catalonia, there are 51% females and 49% males, 34% hold a university degree and the mean age is 43 years old (source: IDESCAT, 2023).
9. Instead, in Catalonia most of the population is able to read in Catalan—even if their mother tongue is Spanish. According to the regional statistical institute, about 85% of the population was able to read in Catalan in 2018. The remaining 15% are either migrants—many of them do not possess the right to vote—or old people who was schooled in Spanish and came to Catalonia from other parts of Spain. It is noteworthy to mention that Catalan is the only working language in schools since the 1980s.
10. In Scotland, 126 participants randomly received a vignette on identity, 97 on socioeconomics and 121 on politics. 102 participants were assigned to the control group. In Catalonia, 103 participants randomly received a vignette on identity, 119 on socioeconomics and 111 on politics. 93 participants were assigned to the control group.
11. Please note that, in Scotland, the mean number of independence support is 6.1. In Catalonia is 3.9. As it has been noted in section four, the sample is not representative of the wider population.
12. After this analysis, I recoded the 'national identity' variable again into three categories: 'predominantly attached to the state'—feeling only or more British/Spanish—, 'predominantly attached to the region'—feeling only or more Scottish/Catalan—and 'equally attached to the state and the region'. The results of the joint effects of frame exposure and national identity on secessionist attitudes came negative again in both regions: The *p*-value of the joint effects was 0.588 in Scotland and 0.832 in Catalonia.
13. As most studies show, however, national identity and constitutional position do largely correlate. Respondents more attached to the region display more pro-independence opinions than respondents more attached to the state.

Notes on Contributor

Carles Ferreira is a PhD candidate in Comparative Politics at the University of Kent. He is Associate Lecturer at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC). His research revolves around party strategies and discourse, and territorial politics. He has published in high-impact journals such as *Nations and Nationalism*, *Regional and Federal Studies* and *Party Politics*.

Supplemental data

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2024.2386875>.

ORCID

Carles Ferreira  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9985-7818>

References

- Adams, J., Ezrow, L., & Somer-Topcu, Z. (2014). Do voters respond to party manifestos or to a wider information environment? An analysis of mass-elite linkages on European integration. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(4), 967–978. doi:10.1111/ajps.12115
- Agneman, G. (2022). How economic expectations shape preferences for national independence: Evidence from Greenland. *European Journal of Political Economy*, 72, 102112. doi:10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2021.102112
- Alonso, S. (2012). *Challenging the state: Devolution and the battle for partisan credibility: A comparison of Belgium, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom*. Oxford University Press.
- Alonso, S., Cabeza, L., & Gómez, B. (2015). Parties' electoral strategies in a two-dimensional political space: Evidence from Spain and Great Britain. *Party Politics*, 21(6), 851–865. doi:10.1177/1354068815597576
- Amsalem, E., & Zozner, A. (2022). Real, but limited: A meta-analytic assessment of framing effects in the political domain. *British Journal of Political Science*, 52(1), 221–237. doi:10.1017/S0007123420000253
- Anderson, P. (2020). Decentralisation at a crossroads: Spain, Catalonia and the territorial crisis. *Ethnopolitics*, 19(4), 342–355. doi:10.1080/17449057.2020.1795470
- Argelaguet, J. (2006). Subjective national identities in Catalonia. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 12(3–4), 431–454. doi:10.1080/13537110600882643
- Barabas, J., & Jerit, J. (2010). Are survey experiments externally valid? *American Political Science Review*, 104(2), 226–242. doi:10.1017/S0003055410000092
- Barrio, A., & Rodríguez-Teruel, J. (2017). Reducing the gap between leaders and voters? Elite polarization, out-bidding competition, and the rise of secessionism in Catalonia. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(10), 1776–1794. doi:10.1080/01419870.2016.1213400
- Basile, L. (2016). Measuring party strategies on the territorial dimension: A method based on content analysis. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 26(1), 1–23. doi:10.1080/13597566.2016.1141767
- Bechtel, M. M., Hainmueller, J., Hangartner, D., & Helbling, M. (2015). Reality bites: The limits of framing effects for salient and contested policy issues. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 3(3), 683–695. doi:10.1017/psrm.2014.39
- Blais, A., & Nadeau, R. (1992). To be or not to be sovereignist: Quebecers' perennial dilemma. *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de Politiques*, 18(1), 89–103. doi:10.2307/3551558
- Burg, S. L. (2015). Identity, grievances, and popular mobilization for independence in Catalonia. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 21(3), 289–312. doi:10.1080/13537113.2015.1063912
- Cetrà, D., & Harvey, M. (2019). Explaining accommodation and resistance to demands for independence referendums in the UK and Spain. *Nations and Nationalism*, 25(2), 607–629. doi:10.1111/nana.12417
- Chong, D. and Druckman, J. N. (2007). Framing theory. *Annual Review of Political Science* [Online] 10(1), 103–126. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.072805.103054>.

- Dalle Mulle, E. (2016). New trends in justifications for national self-determination: Evidence from Scotland and Flanders. *Ethnopolitics*, 15(2), 211–229. doi:[10.1080/17449057.2015.1008786](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2015.1008786)
- Dalle Mulle, E. (2017). *The nationalism of the rich: Discourses and strategies of separatist parties in Catalonia, Flanders, Northern Italy and Scotland*. Routledge.
- Dalle Mulle, E., & Serrano, I. (2019). Between a principled and a consequentialist logic: Theory and practice of secession in Catalonia and Scotland. *Nations and Nationalism*, 25(2), 630–651. doi:[10.1111/nana.12412](https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12412)
- Dardanelli, P. (2013). *Between two unions: Europeanisation and Scottish devolution*. Manchester University Press.
- de Vreese, C. H. (2009). Framing the economy: Effects of journalistic news frames. In P. D'Angelo, & J. A. Kuypers (Eds.), *Doing news framing analysis* (pp. 187–214). Routledge.
- Dekavalla, M. (2016). Framing referendum campaigns: The 2014 Scottish independence referendum in the press. *Media, Culture & Society*, 38(6), 793–810. doi:[10.1177/0163443715620929](https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715620929)
- Dekavalla, M. (2018a). Issue and game frames in the news: Frame-building factors in television coverage of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. *Journalism*, 19(11), 1588–1607. doi:[10.1177/1464884916674231](https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916674231)
- Dekavalla, M. (2018b). *Framing referendum campaigns in the news*. Manchester University Press.
- Druckman, J. N. (2001). On the limits of framing effects: Who can frame? *The journal of politics*, 63(4), 1041–1066. doi:[10.1111/0022-3816.00100](https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-3816.00100)
- Elias, A. (2019). Making the economic case for independence: The Scottish National Party's electoral strategy in post-devolution Scotland. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 29(1), 1–23. doi:[10.1080/13597566.2018.1485017](https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2018.1485017)
- Elias, A., Basile, L., Franco-Guillén, N., & Szöcsik, E. (2023). The framing territorial demands (FraTerr) dataset: A novel approach to conceptualizing and measuring regionalist actors' territorial strategies. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 33(3), 355–370.
- Elias, A., & Franco, N. (2021). Justifying secession: Resolving grievances or a means to a better future? *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 453–464. doi:[10.17645/pag.v9i4.4561](https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v9i4.4561)
- Elias, A., Szöcsik, E., & Zuber, C. I. (2015). Position, selective emphasis and framing: How parties deal with a second dimension in competition. *Party Politics*, 21(6), 839–850. doi:[10.1177/1354068815597572](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068815597572)
- Ferreira, C. (2022). Entrapped in a failing course of action: Explaining the territorial crisis in 2017 Catalonia. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 32(5), 573–592.
- Ferreira, C. (2023). 'Improving people's lives': The socioeconomic turn in party justifications for constitutional change. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 29(3), 294–312.
- Ferreira, C. (2024). Identity, money, or governance? Explaining secessionist parties' rhetorical strategies. *Party Politics*, 30(1), 179–189.
- Fullaondo, A., & Zabalo, J. (2022). In favour of a Basque state. A paradigm shift? *Nations and Nationalism*, 28(3), 924–940.
- Gaines, B. J., Kuklinski, J. H., & Quirk, P. J. (2007). The logic of the survey experiment reexamined. *Political Analysis*, 15(1), 1–20. doi:[10.1093/pan/mpj008](https://doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpj008)
- Gamson, W. A., & Modigliani, A. (1987). The changing culture of affirmative action. *Research in Political Sociology*, 3(1), 137–177.
- Griffiths, R. D. (2021). Secessionist strategy and tactical variation in the pursuit of independence. *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6(1), ogz082. doi:[10.1093/jogss/ogz082](https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz082)
- Guinjoan, M., & Rodon, T. (2016). A scrutiny of the Linz-Moreno question. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 46(1), 128–142. doi:[10.1093/publius/pjv031](https://doi.org/10.1093/publius/pjv031)
- Haider-Markel, D. P., & Joslyn, M. R. (2001). Gun policy, opinion, tragedy, and blame attribution: The conditional influence of issue frames. *The Journal of Politics*, 63(2), 520–543. doi:[10.1111/0022-3816.00077](https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-3816.00077)
- Helbling, M. (2014). Framing immigration in western Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40(1), 21–41. doi:[10.1080/1369183X.2013.830888](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.830888)
- Hepburn, E. (2009). Introduction: Re-conceptualizing sub-state mobilization. *Regional and Federal Studies*, 19(4–5), 477–499. doi:[10.1080/13597560903310204](https://doi.org/10.1080/13597560903310204)
- Hierro, M. J., & Queralt, D. (2021). The divide over independence: Explaining preferences for secession in an advanced open economy. *American Journal of Political Science*, 65(2), 422–442. doi:[10.1111/ajps.12549](https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12549)
- Jerit, J. (2009). How predictive appeals affect policy opinions. *American Journal of Political Science*, 53(2), 411–426. doi:[10.1111/j.1540-5907.2009.00378.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2009.00378.x)
- Keating, M. (1996). *Nations against the state: The new politics of nationalism in Quebec, Catalonia and Scotland*. Springer.
- Leeper, T. J., & Slothuus, R. (2014). Political parties, motivated reasoning, and public opinion formation. *Political Psychology*, 35(S1), 129–156. doi:[10.1111/pops.12164](https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12164)

- Linz, J. (1993). Los nacionalismos en España: una perspectiva comparativa. In E. d'Aura (Ed.), *El Estado Moderno En Italia y España* (pp. 79–87). CNRS/Universitat de Barcelona.
- Lífeira, R., & Cetrà, D. (2015). The independence case in comparative perspective. *The Political Quarterly*, 86(2), 257–264. doi:[10.1111/1467-923X.12157](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12157)
- Maier, M., Adam, S., & Maier, J. (2012). The impact of identity and economic cues on citizens' EU support: An experimental study on the effects of party communication in the run-up to the 2009 European Parliament elections. *European Union Politics* [Online], 13(4), 580–603. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116512453957>.
- Massetti, E., & Schakel, A. H. (2015). From class to region: How regionalist parties link (and subsume) left-right into centre-periphery politics. *Party Politics*, 21(6), 866–886. doi:[10.1177/1354068815597577](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068815597577)
- McCrone, D., & Paterson, L. (2002). The conundrum of Scottish independence. *Scottish Affairs*, 40(1), 54–75. doi:[10.3366/scot.2002.0036](https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2002.0036)
- Meguid, B. (2008). *Party competition between unequals: Strategies and electoral fortunes in Western Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Meguid, B. (2023). Adaptation or inflexibility? Niche party responsiveness to policy competition, with evidence from regionalist parties. *European Journal of Political Research*, 62(2), 355–376. doi:[10.1111/1475-6765.12540](https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12540)
- Mendelsohn, M. (2003). Rational choice and socio-psychological explanation for opinion on Quebec sovereignty. *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique*, 36(3), 511–537. doi:[10.1017/S0008423903778743](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423903778743)
- Miller, P. M., & Fagley, N. S. (1991). The effects of framing, problem variations, and providing rationale on choice. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 17(5), 517–522. doi:[10.1177/0146167291175006](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167291175006)
- Mullinix, K. J. (2016). Partisanship and preference formation: Competing motivations, elite polarization, and issue importance. *Political Behavior*, 38(2), 383–411. doi:[10.1007/s11109-015-9318-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-015-9318-4)
- Muñoz, J., & Tormos, R. (2015). Economic expectations and support for secession in Catalonia: Between causality and rationalization. *European Political Science Review*, 7(2), 315–341. doi:[10.1017/S1755773914000174](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773914000174)
- Muro, D., Vidal, G., & Vlaskamp, M. C. (2020). Does international recognition matter? Support for unilateral secession in Catalonia and Scotland. *Nations and Nationalism*, 26(1), 176–196. doi:[10.1111/nana.12557](https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12557)
- Mutz, D. C. (2011). *Population-based survey experiments*. Princeton University Press.
- Nelson, T. E., Clawson, R. A., & Oxley, Z. M. (1997). Media framing of a civil liberties conflict and its effect on tolerance. *American Political Science Review*, 91(3), 567–583. doi:[10.2307/2952075](https://doi.org/10.2307/2952075)
- Nelson, T. E., & Oxley, Z. M. (1999). Issue framing effects on belief importance and opinion. *The journal of politics*, 61(4), 1040–1067. doi:[10.2307/2647553](https://doi.org/10.2307/2647553)
- Oxley, Z. (2020). *Framing and political decision making: An overview*. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.
- Pavkovic, A., & Radan, P. (2007). *Creating new states: Theory and practice of secession*. Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Peer, E., Brandimarte, L., Samat, S., & Acquisti, A. (2017). Beyond the Turk: Alternative platforms for crowd-sourcing behavioral research. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 70, 153–163. doi:[10.1016/j.jesp.2017.01.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2017.01.006)
- Price, V., Tewksbury, D., & Powers, E. (1997). Switching trains of thought: The impact of news frames on readers' cognitive responses. *Communication Research* [Online], 24(5), 481–506. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365097024005002>.
- Rokkan, S., & Urwin, D. W. (1983). *Economy, territory, identity: Politics of West European peripheries*. Sage Publications.
- Rovny, J., & Edwards, E. E. (2012). Struggle over dimensionality: Party competition in Western and Eastern Europe. *East European Politics and Societies: and Cultures* [Online], 26(1), 56–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325410387635>.
- Sanjaume-Calvet, M., & Riera-Gil, E. (2022). Languages, secessionism and party competition in Catalonia: A case of de-ethnicising outbidding? *Party Politics*, 28(1), 85–104.
- Serrano, I. (2013). Just a matter of identity? Support for independence in Catalonia. *Regional & federal studies*, 23(5), 523–545. doi:[10.1080/13597566.2013.775945](https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2013.775945)
- Serrano, I. (2015). Catalonia: A failure of accommodation? In K. J. Nagel (Ed.), *Catalonia in Spain and Europe: Is there a way to independence?* (pp. 97–113). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG.
- Slothuus, R. (2008). More than weighting cognitive importance: A dual-process model of issue framing effects. *Political Psychology* [Online], 29(1), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2007.00610.x>.

- Slothuus, R. (2010). When can political parties lead public opinion? Evidence from a natural experiment. *Political Communication*, 27(2), 158–177. doi:10.1080/10584601003709381
- Slothuus, R., & Bisgaard, M. (2021). How political parties shape public opinion in the real world. *American Journal of Political Science*, 65(4), 896–911. doi:10.1111/ajps.12550
- Slothuus, R., & de Vreese, C. H. (2010). Political parties, motivated reasoning, and issue framing effects. *The Journal of Politics*, 72(3), 630–645. doi:10.1017/S002238161000006X
- Somer-Topcu, Z., Tavits, M., & Baumann, M. (2020). Does party rhetoric affect voter perceptions of party positions? *Electoral Studies*, 65, 102153. doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102153
- Spence, A., & Pidgeon, N. (2010). Framing and communicating climate change: The effects of distance and outcome frame manipulations. *Global Environmental Change* [Online], 20(4), 656–667. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378010000610>
- Sthle, L., & Wold, S. (1989). Analysis of variance (ANOVA). *Chemometrics and Intelligent Laboratory Systems* [Online], 6(4), 259–272. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0169743989800954>
- Strom, K. (1990). A behavioral theory of competitive political parties. *American journal of political science*, 34(2), 565–598. doi:10.2307/2111461
- Tewksbury, D., & Scheufele, D. A. (2019). News framing theory and research. In J. Bryant, & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Media effects* (pp. 17–33). Routledge.
- Valkenburg, P. M., Semetko, H. A., & de Vreese, C. H. (1999). The effects of news frames on readers' thoughts and recall. *Communication research*, 26(5), 550–569. doi:10.1177/009365099026005002
- Wiest, S. L., Raymond, L., & Clawson, R. A. (2015). Framing, partisan predispositions, and public opinion on climate change. *Global Environmental Change* [Online], 31, 187–198. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378014002155>
- Zabalo, J., & Iraola, I. (2022). Current discourses and attitudes in favour of the independence of the Basque Country. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 32(1), 73–93. doi:10.1080/13597566.2020.1831475