

2021

## The Referendum for Independence in Catalonia and Newspaper Coverage: The Importance of Regional and Political Factors

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## The Referendum for Independence in Catalonia and Newspaper Coverage: The Importance of Regional and Political Factors

Sofia N. Julien

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the role of the news media in the Referendum for Independence in the Spanish autonomous region of Catalonia. More specifically, I seek to shed light on if a newspaper's geographical location or political views result in biased media coverage. Based on communications theory, I argue that news coverage can shape the public's political opinion and attitudes. My research analyzed the reporting of two core newspapers by sampling articles from a major newspaper based in Madrid, *El País*, and a newspaper based in Catalonia, *La Vanguardia*. My results suggest that the newspaper's location and distribution had a greater impact on coverage compared to its political and ideological leanings.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A 2018 research paper published by Oxford University states that there has been a total of 46 EU-related referendums since 1972 (Beach 2018). Moreover, 14 new states have been successful at achieving independence in Europe since the 1990s (Puig and Ginebra 2020). Despite this, few researchers have considered how predisposed political leanings to one's ideology and/or regional location can shape the public's opinion of a referendum.

The Catalan independence movement has been around since the 1870s, however the 1978 constitutional provisions created a highly decentralized system of government that allowed for a reemergence of strong sub-state nationalities to arise within Spain. As a result, many Catalans have transitioned from demanding more autonomy, linguistic, and cultural representation to demanding complete secession from the Spanish state (Wilson 2019).

The shift in priorities in Catalonia were evident in its 2003 election campaign. At that time, four out of five parties agreed that the statute of autonomy at that time was outdated (Davis 2004). Thus, the primary focus for many of the politicians campaigning was to propose measures for increased autonomy in the region. The CIU (a center-right national coalition in Spain), for instance, advocated for the Central Government to increase Catalonia's judicial powers through the ability to issue pardons and by increasing the region's role in protecting the international border (Davis 2004). Conversely, the Socialist PSC pushed the idea of a "networked" Spain rather than "a radial Spain, where all the connections lead to and from Madrid," (Davis 2004). And the ERC (a left-wing, republican, pro-independence party) claimed that the CIU's and PSC's ideas would halt Catalonia's progress towards achieving greater autonomy and proposed the idea of "a highly decentralized free-association within Spain" (Davis 2004).

While CIU was seen by the last seen by the last generation of Catalans as the stable, nationalist option- preserving democracy and Catalanisme during the democratic transition- these elections demonstrated, by contrast, an ERC fueled by a younger generation in which fear of political instability no longer dominates their decision-making process (Davis 2004).

The increase in seats the ERC gained in the election despite claims that the proposed idea could “bring about the destruction of the unity of Spain” reflects Catalan nationalist’s sentiment on achieving greater autonomy (Almendral 2005).

Given this pretext, it is no surprise that the most recent surge of longstanding territorial crisis began in 2006 following a Constitutional Court ruling to strike down a proposed Catalan statute of autonomy (Calamur 2017). The decision resulted in the Catalan Parliament issuing an illegal referendum in 2017 that advocated for the region to break away from the Spanish state (Puig and Ginebra 2020).

As attention to the referendum rose amongst activists, political leaders, and the general citizenry, the independence movement became a prominent topic of coverage in the media.

Thus, this thesis will analyze how the Spanish media used methods such as priming, loaded diction, and gatekeeping to advance agenda-setting effects of the Catalan independence movement on the audience.

To perform this content analysis, I choose to investigate a major newspaper based in Madrid, *El País*, and a newspaper based in Catalonia, *La Vanguardia*. Through my research, I hope to evaluate whether newspaper outlets express a bias towards to one side of the political conflict or the other. This will be based on the journalist’s political predispositions (content bias), or on their ideological leanings, such as a newspaper’s Code of Ethics (decision-making bias). I will also analyze if the newspaper’s regional base and distribution (Madrid and across the country vs. based in Catalonia and regional) contributed to the production of biased content in the months leading to the Catalan independence referendum.



Through using the online database, Atlas. Ti, I uploaded all the editorial articles that I found on *La Vanguardia*'s and *El Pais*' archives that were published on Tuesday and Sunday from July 2017 through October 2017. By entering this data into the software, I was able to use the language lexicon I created to identify passages of the text that were linked to a common theme. I was also able to track the qualitative count of the codes to "establish a framework of thematic ideas about it" (Gibbs 2007). In conclusion, I found that geographical location plays a larger role in shaping coverage than political leanings. Suchlike Beach's *Referendums in the European Union* journal, I found that the emotional aspect of "of belonging to a cultural and territorial community which has suffered and rejoiced together throughout time," affected *La Vanguardia*'s subjectivity in coverage. More so, the periodical expressed that it faced pressure by nationalists in Catalan Parliament to write positively about the referendum. There is not enough evidence to make the deduction that *El Pais*' coverage was directly affected by the political elite in Madrid. Rather, the thematic analysis accentuates the idea that the newspaper defends the integrity of the democratic Spanish state by questioning the legality of the referendum per the 1978 Spanish Constitution.

The thesis unfolds as follows. Chapter 2 introduces communication theory and how partisanship in the media affects news coverage. Chapter 3 provides a brief background of Spanish history related to the Catalan independence movement. Chapter 4 and 5 delve into the composition of my research design and the bulk of the analysis. I discuss the conclusions of my research in Chapter 6

## CHAPTER 2: COMMUNICATIONS THEORY: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND POLITICAL OPINION

Catalonia's secession from Spain has been a major topic in the Spanish media since it made national coverage in 2012. The frames and biases that were developed during the coverage of the event were essentially set by the politically active elite and reporters through actions such as gatekeeping, agenda-setting, and agenda-meddling. In this case, the politically active elite were the individuals who are well-versed with politics and can pass along public affairs information to the media through press and video news releases, news conferences, and briefings (Stacks et al., 2019). An example of an elite would be Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, who delegitimized the Catalan Independence Movement by calling it "anti-democratic" (Landa, 2016). Furthermore, reporters are people who are employed by news organizations to be watchdogs for society by observing and exposing important events, as well as, attracting audience members through storytelling in the media. As a result, the media has the power to make the decision to highlight issues they perceive to be more salient than others. In turn, the public's need for orientation of the issue is affected which also influences its communication priorities. Thus, shedding light on the various frames the media uses to report the news is key to understanding the political communication that took place in Spain during the referendum discussion. Moreover, analyzing the word choice, tone, and overall content used to frame the topic will highlight the influences agenda-setting had on the outcome of the referendum itself.

Many scholars believe that influence comes with power, thus the citizenry turns to the fourth estate to get their information while the news goes to influential people in government (Guibernau 2006). This two-step flow approach, also known as the two-step flow of communication model, emphasizes the complementary role interpersonal conversations has

between the political elite (through interviews, etc.) and the media (Stacks et al., 2019). Through this exchange, the political elite sets the media's agenda, which then allows politicians to create messages that will comply with their electoral goal and their desire to hold power.

Correspondingly, although the media is supposed to provide unbiased coverage in an ever-shifting political environment, the fact of the matter is that various news organizations carry a partisan slant in a competitive media marketplace. In reference to the Catalan Independence Movement, two of Spain's most widely-read daily newspapers, *La Vanguardia* and *El País*, are for-profit businesses and need to attract a substantial audience to be profitable. However, constrained newsroom budgets have led to "less investigative reporting, more reliance on public relations, and more office-bound, derivative journalism," (Curran, 2019: 192). As a result, coverage of the referendum was often written in fragments that highlighted "self-contained dramatic capsules [of the event that resembled something much like] a jigsaw puzzle that was out of focus and missing many pieces," (Stacks et al., 2019). Audience metrics also led reporters to search for events with dramatic properties rather than providing the holistic coverage that was needed to preserve Spain's democracy during the Catalan nationalists push to pass the independence referendum (Ginosar and Cohen, 2019: 8).

Aside from these motives, another factor that plays an integral role in shaping a news story is gatekeeping. In chapter seven of *An Integrated Approach to Communication and Research*, the author states, "from the news organization's standpoint, gatekeeping largely consists of selecting events, shaping news items, and disseminating them," (Stacks et al., 2019). Correspondingly, the process of selecting or discarding a story for it to meet deadlines, production requirements, and societal standards is a form of gatekeeping. In effect, Spanish news outlets provided fragmented coverage of the referendum because there were no clear advances

that were considered “newsworthy”. Another form of gatekeeping between gatekeepers and their environment can be seen when a reporter is dependent on a political elite to get quality information (Chibnall, 1977). Oftentimes, reporters are limited to cover a story if he or she cannot find credible sources of information to back up his or her findings. In such cases, “sources are often frontline gatekeepers, deciding to pass along some bits of information and not others when seeking to establish the frame for a story,” (Reese, 2009; Soley, 1992). Another prevalent form of gatekeeping is profit maximization (Stacks et al., 2019). Contemporary journalism has become a financially struggling profession. There are limited resources to fund watchdog journalism that requires a substantial amount of long-term funding for a long period with no immediate reward. This form of gatekeeping goes hand in hand with decisions many news organizations make based on the audience’s preference (Tandoc, 2014).

Transitioning to audience gatekeeping, chapter seven of *An Integrated Approach to Communication and Research* state, “an entirely new gatekeeping process begins when audience members make their decision about which news items, if any, to listen to, or read, and which to comment on or pass along through social media,” (Stacks et al., 2019). Correspondingly, the selective process to make personal decisions based on individual factors such as likes and dislikes, sexual orientation, and race is a form of gatekeeping known as agenda-melding. “The core process of agenda-melding is that a distinctly identifiable audience values issues and attributes them differently. In turn, each audience melds agendas from various media into a comfortable, but different, mix of issues and attributes,” (Shaw, McCombs, Tran, & McKeever, 2010). Thus, as an individual chooses what organizations make up his or her news diet, that person is priming their opinion on a particular issue while meeting the partisan newspaper’s agenda and their point of view.

When one is flooded with an overwhelming amount of information about an event receiving national coverage, one is more prone to form an opinion about it (Fortunato and Martin 2016). The conclusion that the “correlation between aspects of public affairs that are prominent in the news becomes prominent among the public” was derived by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw in a study performed at UNC Chapel Hill in 1972 (Stacks et al., 2019).

Correspondingly, the large amount of information presented to the public when an event makes national coverage allows the audience to learn the basic facts about an in a timely matter. In light of this, the transfer of salience from the media’s agenda to the public’s agenda happens rather quickly- this process is known as the agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Consequently, the media’s role in public agenda-setting “suggests to new audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments,” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In other words, “judgments and attitude formation are directly correlated with the ease in which instances or associations could be brought to mind,” (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Thus, events that are receiving extensive media coverage can shape readers to form opinions on issues.

While some individuals are satisfied with the surface-level information they receive through breaking news, other members of the audience develop a psychological need for further orientation of the issue and have an innate desire to learn more (Stacks et al., 2019). In such a case, an individual’s need for orientation varies based on two components: relevancy and uncertainty. If an individual perceives a topic as irrelevant, then their orientation or need to learn more about that event is low and agenda-setting will be low because they are receiving less information about said topic. However, if an individual believes the issue being covered is relevant to them, moreover, they are not well-versed on the issue, their need for orientation is

high, so the individual will typically consume a large amount of news and demonstrate strong-agenda setting effects as they look further into it. Due to the redundancy of the media's agenda, these individuals tend to use shortcuts to formulate an opinion that correlates to the news outlets agenda subsequently priming the way the person thinks about the issue at hand. Likewise, the tone and attributes a reporter uses to develop a storyline plays a role in shaping a person's opinion of the event.

In reference to the Catalanian referendum, if a Spaniard's need for orientation was high during that time and they were reading a newspaper that was based out of Madrid, I believe their subconscious may associate common words used in articles to describe the independence movement such as "anti-democratic", "criminal", "secessionist" and "unionist". That being the case, I believe the negative tone the diction carried in the article framed the reader's opinion of the independence movement as unethical and undermined the legitimacy of the Catalan fight against the Spanish central government.

When framing an issue, "a reporter selects some aspects of a perceived reality and make[s] them more salient, in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, [and/or] more evaluation" (Stacks et al., 2019). Therefore, news frames can suggest how a reader should think about an issue, evaluate who the victim is, or whom to cast blame on. As mentioned above, the negative diction consecutively used by the media framed the Catalan Independence Movement as unethical. However, the ethical frame is one of many that arose during the coverage of the Catalan referendum. In *The coverage of the international press in framing the Catalan sovereignty process: Analysis of ten leading EU and US newspapers* three generic frames were analyzed in their study: 1) the right to decide; 2) the main character associated with the right to decide; 3) the main sources side. Aside from that, there were issue-

related frames such as- conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality, legality, and desire to vote. Amongst all newspapers being studied, the most popular frame was *conflict* (56 percent), which suggests that the main discussion in newspapers was the conflict between the Catalan and Spanish government amid the referendum (Pont-Sorribes, Perales-García, Mauri-Rios, & Tulloch, 2019).

When looking further into the analysis, the study shows that 41.1 percent of the sources used by foreign correspondents to explain the conflict between Spain and Catalonia were political sources, both separatists and unionists. It must be noted that there was a huge discrepancy in sentiment between the Generalitat and the Madrid government when being interviewed about the issue. As said prior, when asked to give an opinion about the Catalan Independence Movement, Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, stated that the Catalan Independence Movement was “anti-democratic” and a criminal offense (Landa, 2016). The legal-judicial framework Rajoy uses to describe the referendum defends the quasi-federal structure established in the Spanish 1978 Constitution. By doing so, Rajoy’s argument primes people to think of the referendum as anti-democratic and illegal, in which case it was.

Correspondingly, the political elite who were spearheading the Catalan independence movement were aware of their disregard for the Spanish law and did not offer arguments to gain support for their cause in Madrid. At a meeting held by the ANC, Urban at the *Suddeutsche Zeitung* reiterated, “I told them they needed to increase their power in the political center of debate and to explain what the advantage for Madrid would be, not for Catalonia, of separation. Nobody answered me,” (Pont-Sorribes, Perales-García, Mauri-Rios, & Tulloch, 2019).”

Furthermore, statistics show that a mere 8 percent of information came from pro-independence civil society associations suchlike the ANC and OC while 13 percent came from

anonymous citizens (both for and against the movement)- which confirms a lack of information being presented by the Catalan activists (Pont-Sorribes, Perales-García, Mauri-Rios, & Tulloch, 2019). NYT Correspondent, Raphael Minder, acknowledged the lack of information as well by mentioning, “many secessionists avoid Madrid like the plague,” in an opinion-editorial published in the New York Times (Pont-Sorribes, Perales-García, Mauri-Rios, & Tulloch, 2019).

*The press in Catalonia: between the digital challenge and nation building* delved deeper into the fourth estate’s role by stating,

Besides their editorial input to this process, unlike radio and television, the high circulation of newspapers produced in Catalonia suggests an intimate engagement with the problems and issues of its readership, in contrast with the more limited engagement of the newspapers produced in Madrid. Moreover, the fact that four newspapers with national distribution can be read in Catalan, apart from showing the cultural normalization of the language, also bespeaks their central role in the process of building Catalan national identity (Prado, 2015).

In Catalonia, the two major print publications, *La Vanguardia* and *El Periodico*, sell about 208,000 and 163,000 copies per issue (BBC Monitoring, 2006). Amid the turmoil with the Spanish state, Catalan newspapers played a prominent role in developing frames dealing with sovereignty, justice, and cultural oppression throughout the course of the referendum.

When describing what coverage in Barcelona was like, Minder stated in an interview, Catalan reporters made foreign correspondents feel “as though they were at the pocket of the Generalitat writing for the independence propaganda machine” (Pont-Sorribes, Perales-García, Mauri-Rios, & Tulloch, 2019).

A comparative study done in 2015 that analyzed *La Vanguardia* and *El Pais* (Prado, 2015), two of the most popular newspapers in Spain, emphasizes the idea that coverage between the media outlets could not be more different. The study explains that *La Vanguardia* is clearly against succession, although their position is moderately pro-Catalan. *La Vanguardia* openly



criticized “the entire push for sovereignty has been riddled with errors” arguing that the PP “underestimated and ignored Catalan discontent,” while the pro-independence leaders “fueled popular protest despite knowing as admitted in their documents, that they could not implement the new state,” (Prado, 2015). As a result, the newspaper argues that leaders of the Catalan Independence Movement and the Central government have caused “parliamentary and social fragmentation” which took away from focusing on “Catalonia’s central problems” (Prado, 2015). Arguing that Spain needs to “focus on achieving a ‘new government’ that can ‘restore coexistence’ and ‘pacify the political arena,’” the newspaper states that the solution for the conflict lies with the government prioritizing “[reducing the social fracture within Spain, [setting] common goals for progress, and [agreeing] on the right policies to achieve them. In sum, it must govern for all.” (Prado, 2015)

In contrast, *El Pais* showed no regard towards the Catalan cause when it stated the independence movement was “torturous in nature,” a “populist and radical drift,” and linked the movement to the far-right Italian Lega party, the Flemish nationalist party, Vlaams Belang; “Xenophobic LePenism”, and other anti-Europe extremists (Prado, 2015). Besides that, the newspaper argued that the independence movement made the world question “Spain’s democratic reputation using random, contradictory arguments” while also jeopardizing Spain’s political and economic stability in an “alarming and catastrophic fashion” (Prado, 2015). Thus, it openly supported the enactment of Article 155 in the Spanish Constitution, which allows the Spanish government to dissolve regional parliaments if they do not comply with the law (Art. 155 of *the Spanish Constitution*).

Despite both papers being against succession, there continues to be a clear distinction between centre-left *El Pais*’ and empathetic *La Vanguardia*’s liberal-conservative coverage.

Among 70 editorials being studied on the Catalan Independence Movement, only one common denominator was found: the Catalan referendum was one of the most important events in Spanish history and was covered by multiple media outlets during an extended amount of time. As I continue to delve deeper into my thesis, I am eager to investigate whether political and ideological factors are more widely reflected in the way the newspapers reported on the referendum than where they were based. In order to achieve this goal, the next chapter provides a historical timeline that works to answer the following questions: 1) What sparked the referendum in the first place? Why is it an important event in Spanish politics? And, what was the result? Once these questions are answered, the reader will gain a better understanding on how newspaper political ideologies and/or regional location can play a prominent role in shaping the public's political opinion and attitudes during the content analysis.

### CHAPTER 3: CATALAN AUTONOMY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Following the death of the Spanish dictator General Francisco Franco in 1975, King Juan Carlos I declared Spain a constitutional monarchy and ordered democratic elections for the Spanish lower house of parliament, the Cortes Generales, for the first time since the 1930s. Shortly afterwards, members of the new Spanish democratically elected parliament continued paving the path towards democracy by drafting a Constitution that they hoped would start repairing the trust, basic rights, and public liberties of the Spanish people, which had been damaged during the dictator's regime (1939-1975).

Attempting to stay away from a highly centralized system of government model, the founders of the 1978 Constitution wrote that the Spanish state “recognized and guaranteed the right to autonomy of the nationalities and regions of which it is composed, and the solidarity amongst them all,” (Art. 2 of *the Spanish Constitution*). As a result, 17 self-governing regions (also known as autonomous communities) were created within the years that followed.

To this day, each autonomous community has its own unique arrangement with the Spanish Government. The autonomous communities of Catalonia, Galicia, and the Basque Country enjoy a higher degree of autonomy and have more devolved powers than the others due to their historic and cultural representation within the Spanish state.

For example, aside from having control over its finances, education, health and social services the autonomous community of Catalonia enjoys a higher degree of autonomy than the other regions through having its own civil code and police force. Yet, Spain's asymmetric organized system of government ensures that the national government remains the highest institution of the state through a checks and balance system. Per Article 155 of the 1978 Spanish Constitution, the Senate retains the responsibility to keep autonomous communities in check by

disciplining regional presidents (Art. 155 of *the Spanish Constitution*) and dissolving regional parliaments that do not comply with the law (OECD 2000).

The Senate had to enact these powers two times in history: once in 2006 when it dissolved Marbella's city council for indulging in corrupt practices (Muñoz, 2002) and, most recently, in October 2017 to bring an end to the Catalan referendum (*Catalonia profile - Timeline* 2018).

The most recent surge of the independence movement began in August 2003 when Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (PSOE) made an agreement with the President of the Government of Catalonia Artur Mas (CDC) that he would not oppose any revisions of Catalonia's current statute of autonomy as long as it was passed by the Catalan Parliament (McLean 2006).

Thus, the Catalan parliament endorsed a 2006 statute of autonomy plan that called for more economic freedom, greater control over immigration issues, the implementation of Catalan as a co-official language in the region, and finally, the request that the regional government "could base its right to self-govern on the will of its people rather than on Spain's Constitution" (Mclean, 2006).

Despite PM Zapatero's agreement with Mas, the conservative Popular Party (one of the two predominant parties in Spanish politics) challenged the statute's legality before the Constitutional Court (Calamur 2017). After four years of deliberation, the court decided to strike down 14 of the statute's 223 articles and curtail another 27 (Calamur 2017). As a result, thousands of Catalans went to the streets to protest holding signs that read, "We are a nation, we decide" (Vox, 2017).

A 2011 survey conducted by the Centre for Opinion Studies in Catalonia reported that 45.4 percent of Catalans were in favor of independence, 24.7 percent were against it, and 23.8 percent of the people studied chose not to answer (*Baròmetre d'Opinió Política. 3a onada 2011*). Correspondingly, there was an 11.6 percent increase in favor towards secession the following year (*Baròmetre d'Opinió Política. 3a onada 2012*). Thus, one can deduce that support towards the referendum seemed to grow after 2011.

The increase in numbers of supporters the independence movement acquired at the early stages of the referendum suggests that “the secessionist movement depended to some degree, at least, from factors that trigger transient affective changes in public opinion,” such as economics and culture (*Tobeña 2017*).

In an interview with Vox media, a pro-independence Catalan said, “We pay a lot of taxes, they take them away, and they do not return it in better infrastructure, or better living conditions” (Vox, 2017). Another person argued, “We are Catalan, we feel Catalan, we speak Catalan, and it is another culture” and “Although we feel solidarity, we need to have enough for ourselves,” (Vox, 2017).

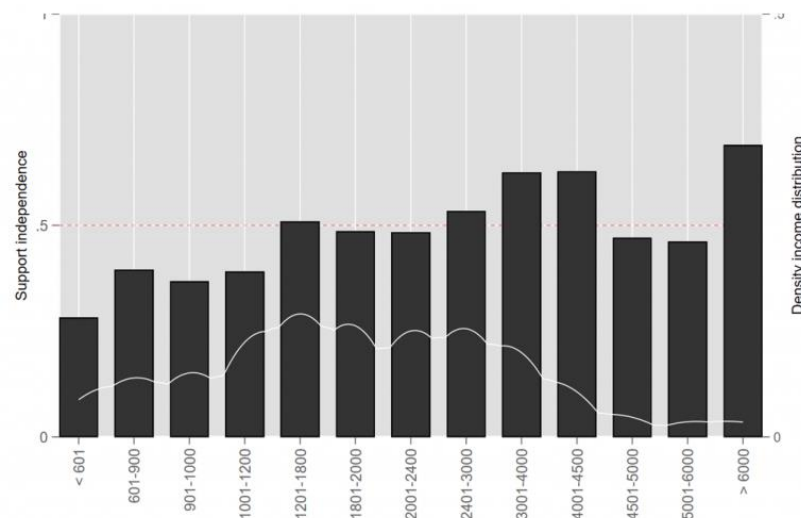
As time progressed, Vox reported that opinions regarding the secessionist movement continued to become more polarized.

A Vox interviewee expressed, “I do not think being independent from Spain is a good idea, not because we depend on Spain, but because we depend on Europe” (Vox, 2017). This sentiment alludes to the idea that EU leaders have made it clear that an independent Catalonia would have to apply for an EU membership if they ever successfully succeed from Spain, a process that would take years and is mostly likely impossible due to the fact that Spain is able to

veto it from joining (Sen 2019). Moreover, secession would affect Catalonia’s ability to trade with other European states, travel, and their relationship with the Euro (Sen 2019).

Figure 1 below enforces the idea that many low-income families share similar reservations, as data collected by the Catalan Centre of Opinion Studies shows that this population is less likely to support the independence movement than Catalans who are in the middle range of the continuum (Pardos-Prado, 2020).

*Figure 1 Reproduced with permission from Sergi Pardos-Prado “Relationship between likelihood to support secession from Spain and income” (Pardos-Prado, 2020)*



Correspondingly, the graph also shows that support for independence drops among the upper-class members of society and surges again at the ultra-rich. As a result, Pardos comes to the conclusion that one cannot associate support for the Catalan Independence movement exclusively with “the rich” because that only includes a very small portion of society. Instead, Figure 1 attests to the fact that highly-populated, middle-class areas are where the movement gains its support (Pardos-Prado, 2020).

In fact, President Mas recognized that he would have more success at winning the election if he focused on populated middle-class areas as opposed to other social classes. As a result, Mas stated that if he were re-elected in 2012, he would issue a symbolic independence

referendum to achieve “greater fiscal independence” from Spain (*Catalonia profile - Timeline* 2018). By gaining more economic and political freedom, middle-class Catalans can advocate to improve government spending on public services they heavily depend on.

Notwithstanding, Mas’ promise to deliver Catalan nationalists’ greater economic freedom if the symbolic independence referendum was passed is illegal per Article 145 of the 1978 Spanish Constitution. The article explicitly states that regions have no say in reforming the Constitution, unlike states in a federation, because the Constitution itself does not establish or give these powers to the autonomous communities (Art. 145 of *the Spanish Constitution*). Instead, regions are granted these powers through statutes written and enforced by the central government. And yet, after winning the regional election, Catalan President Artur Mas (2010-2016) called for an illegal, symbolic referendum to be held on November 9, 2014.

Shortly after President Mas made this announcement, hundreds of thousands of people joined hands to form a human chain that stretched 250 miles in support of Catalonia’s independence from Spain. Despite the demonstration receiving national recognition and legitimizing the separatist fight for freedom amongst the general public, the unresponsiveness of the Spanish state made it seem as though the Catalans did not pose a threat to the national security and sovereignty of the country.

When November came, the ballot asked the voters two questions: “1) Do you want Catalonia to become a State? And, if yes, 2) Do you want Catalonia to be an independent State?” (Calamur 2017). The results reported that 80 percent of participants voted “yes” to both questions, however, only a mere 32 percent of the Catalans showed up at the polls (Dewan et al., 2017).

As news of the “successful” referendum flooded the media, the Spanish Central Government quickly reacted and disclaimed the legality of the vote. The newly-elected Spanish Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy (PP), also threatened to arrest Mas accusing him of contempt to overthrow the Spanish State (Martí & Cetrà, 2016).

Reflecting a similar sentiment, a Catalan court acknowledged Mas’ disregard for the Spanish law as he continued to push the secessionist cause in the months that followed and barred him from holding public office for two years in attempt to resolve “Spain’s worst political crisis in decades” (*Ex-Catalan president Artur Mas steps down as leader of Separatist Party* 2018).

Subsequently, the pro-independence groups formed an absolute majority obtaining 72 seats in Parliament in the 2016 regional elections.

The main political party who contributed to the nationalists rise in power was the separatist alliance Junts Por Si (JxS), a coalition between the Convergencia and the ERC that “won 39.59% of the votes (over 1.6 million) and 62 seats” (Lopez-Basaguren 2019). The 2016 result was 9 seats less than the party won running alone in 2012.

The reason JxS formed a coalition in Parliament as opposed to running alone was because it has been very hard for national political parties to win a majority in parliament due to high levels of unemployment and partisan views of the Catalan Independence movement (Nardelli 2015). Therefore, political parties have had to resort to coalition partners in attempt to take over (Nardelli 2015).

Despite its efforts, the only way pro-independence parties could reach its goal of achieving a major parliamentary was with the 10 seats the far-left separatist party, Candidacy of Popular Unity (CUP) won in the regional election. But the party expressed that they opposed nominating



Mas once again as President, so Jxs has to make a decision. Soon enough, Mas stepped down as the leader of the separatist party in 2017 and the former mayor of Girona, Carlos Puigdemont, was elected to be the new face of the movement (Requejo et al., 2019).

In a conference with Reuters, Mas stated, “This new stage requires new leaders, it is necessary to leave open spaces so that certain people can lead this project for the future,” (*Ex-Catalan president Artur Mas steps down as leader of Separatist Party* 2018).

The separatist alliance win, along with Mas’ support of the movement, encouraged the newly elected Catalan Parliament to call citizens to vote in a binding referendum that would take place on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. If passed, Catalan President Carles Puigdemont stated that he would unilaterally declare independence from Spain.

As the secessionist movement began to gain momentum once again, EU institutions and countries became fearful of the possibility of Catalonia’s succession becoming a reality and how it would affect European economics and politics (Cetin, 2017). EU member states such as Belgium, France, and Italy who have all had running referendum’s in their own countries have stated that the Catalan referendum was illegal and that “they will not recognize any unilateral declaration of independence”, so nationalists in their own country do not follow Catalonia’s lead (Cetin, 2017).

Before the vote took place the Spanish Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, ruled the vote illegal and sent the national guard to the polls to stop it. Despite the central government’s opposition, 42 percent of the region’s population showed up to vote which eventually descended into full-blown violence between civilians and the national guard (Dewan et al., 2017).

An article published by a CNN Spanish correspondent the day after the referendum took place captured the hysteria that occurred at the polling stations. The article reads,

On Sunday, the day of the disputed vote, national police launched a concerted effort to prevent people from casting their ballots. Police fired rubber bullets at protesters and voters trying to take part in the referendum and used batons to beat them back. Police smashed their way into polling stations and were seen pulling voters out by the hair and restraining elderly people. The scenes shocked Catalans and reverberated around Europe. Almost 900 people were injured, Catalan officials said (Dewan et al., 2017).

Due to the violent nature of the confrontation, various supporters of Catalan independence became resentful after the event occurred. Notwithstanding, Puigdemont blamed PM Rajoy for attempting to block the vote and announced he was declaring independence from Spain anyway.

As a result, Spain's national government dismissed Puigdemont and his cabinet, dissolved the Catalan Parliament, and called for snap elections by the end of October.

Once it was clear that the Central Government was going to take control of Catalonia and that rebellion and sedition charges were on the line, Puigdemont and some of his colleagues fled to Brussels (Schreuer 2017).

In contrast, the other nine major leaders of the separatist movement that stayed in Spain were arrested in 2019 and received prison sentences once convicted of their crimes.

In the years that followed, the Supreme Court held a tight grip on Catalan politicians adding to the longstanding history of territorial conflict. For example, in September 2020, Catalan President Quim Torra (2018-2020) was barred from holding office for 18 months for disobeying an order to remove a pro-independence symbol that was on a government building (*Quim Torra: Spain's top court bans Catalonia leader from office* 2020). "Once more, the Spanish state interferes in our democratic institutions," Puigdemont tweeted after the ruling (*Quim Torra: Spain's top court bans Catalonia leader from office* 2020).

Correspondingly, Spain issued a warrant for Puigdemont's arrest in October 2019 and has been trying to extradite him for the past four years on charges of rebellion,

sedition, and misuse of public funds (*Catalan separatist leader Puigdemont arrested in Italy* 2021).

In June 2021, PM Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) (2018-Present) offered pardons to the nine separatist leaders who were arrested in 2019 with the intention of beginning to try to make amends with the Catalan citizenry (*Spain pardons Catalan leaders over Independence bid* 2021). The following action opened up a space where the pro-independence Catalan government felt comfortable discussing political reform with the Spanish state to bring the regions closer together. Although both governments are still in disagreement regarding Catalan independence, having cordial debates is a step closer to repairing the basic trust between the governments and its constituents. At the same time, former President Carles Puigdemont continues to cause a strain in Spanish politics as the warrant for his arrest has not been rescinded.

Most recently, the European Parliament rescinded Puigdemont's immunity in March, which led to his arrest at Alghero, Sardinia's airport in September, where he was expected to attend a popular Catalan festival (*Catalan separatist leader Puigdemont arrested in Italy* 2021). After being held for a brief period of time on a Spanish arrest warrant, the Italian Court released him, ruling that the immunity given to him by the European Parliament allows him to travel to Brussels to attend meetings of the Parliament (Pianigiani & Bubola, 2021).

As he was leaving the Italian prison, Puigdemont tweeted a picture of himself with the caption, "Spain never misses an opportunity to embarrass itself #NoSurrender," (Pianigiani & Bubola, 2021).

Currently, Puigdemont's legal status continues to be a matter of debate. That being so, it is unlikely for Italy to comply with Spain's warrant arrest, as the Italian law protects Puigdemont from Spain's efforts to prosecute him (Pianigiani & Bubola, 2021).

BBC Madrid Correspondent, Guy Hedgecoe comments on the matter,

Mr. Puigdemont embodies a relatively uncompromising strain of Catalan separatism, and his detention fuels claims by pro-independence Catalans that their leaders, and ideology, are being persecuted. It all inhibits the Spanish leader's attempts to calm tensions surrounding the Catalan issue (Hedgecoe, 2021).

Reflecting this sentiment, PM Sánchez deliberately stated that discussions of whether or not Puigdemont would benefit from the pardon granted to the other separatist leaders would begin once he was convicted of his crimes and faced trial in the Spanish Constitutional Court (Minder, Bubola, & Pianigiani, 2021).

The divide one has seen in Spanish politics when dealing with the independence referendum is reflected in print newspaper coverage. The Methodology Chapter that follows provides an explanation as to how this thesis will evaluate the relative impact of the newspaper's location and distribution compared to its political and ideological leanings when covering the Catalan independence movement in the months leading to the October 2017.

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

The media can be seen as a privileged forum that has the ability to divert the public's attention towards a certain issue. When breaking news stories receive national coverage, the various frames media outlets present becomes evident to the public as people are fed the same content through a different storyline. According to Harrison and Windler, this is known as the communication framing theory (Harrison & Windler 2020). A common example of this is when a journalist practices "selection bias" or uses emotionally-loaded diction to frame an article towards the newspaper's agenda. (Trumper, Castillo, & Lalmas, 2013).

A 2018 study from the European Journalism Centre argued that "Spanish institutions are frequently accused of interference in the editorial line of their media" (Salaverría & Baceiredo 2020). Further accentuating this point, a Digital News Report in 2016 showed that Spain was among the top 5 out of 24 countries surveyed in which the people believed that the online media was "subject to improper political and government influences" (Reuters Institute, 2016; Center for Internet Studies and Digital Life, 2016). The same report in 2017 stated that approximately half of the people in Spain do not trust the news overall (Reuters Institute, 2017). Given this interpretative framework, one can conclude that if the coverage of an event matches a Spanish newspaper's agenda, there will be less framing and selection bias. Similarly, one can draw the conclusion that a newspaper editor will spend more time choosing the diction he or she uses to write an article if it does not fit the newspaper's liberal or conservative stance (Harrison & Windler 2020).

In light of this, I was curious to see where popular Spanish media outlets placed themselves on a political scale and if the newspaper's coverage of Catalan Independence reflected underlying bias that agreed with their political orientation. Based on communications

theory, I argue that news coverage can shape the public's political opinion and attitudes. Moreover, my research analyzes the reporting of two core newspapers by sampling from a major newspaper based in Madrid, *El País*, and a newspaper based in Catalonia, *La Vanguardia*. Through this comparative analysis, I evaluate the relative impact of the newspaper's location and distribution compared to its political and ideological leanings.

All news stories published by *La Vanguardia* and *El País* during July 2017- October 2017 were retrieved from their online archives (<https://elpais.com/archivo/>) (<https://www.lavanguardia.com/hemeroteca>). For the sake of time, I chose to build a lexicon and analyze editorial articles that were published every Tuesday and Sunday. Since July 2017- October 2017 where pivotal months of coverage for the Catalan referendum, I hoped the time frame would provide me a holistic summary of the main events that happened each week. Although I wanted to select a representative time frame, major events often cause a distortion of media coverage that would make it difficult for me to truly analyze the degree of bias in my comparative case study. Thus, choosing to analyze articles on Tuesday (at the beginning of the week) and Sunday (at the end of the week) gives the periodicals times a grace period to correct any differences in the news that happen naturally. As a result, this selection will accentuate the extent regional location and/or political influences shape a newspaper's coverage.

Once I sorted the material, I was left with a sample total of 72 articles- *La Vanguardia* (30) and *El País* (42).

I meticulously chose *El País* and *La Vanguardia* several reasons.

First, the top-five print news outlets that provide readers daily coverage of Spain's current events at that time were: *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Vanguardia*, *ABC*, and *La Razón* (Cunha, Duatis, & Garcia, 2015).

However, I wanted to test whether readership targeted primarily towards Catalan readers made a difference in shaping newspaper coverage. Thus, being that *La Vanguardia* is located in Barcelona and *El País* is located in Madrid, these two newspaper outlets made the most sense to analyze in a comparative case study.

Given the emphasis on the newspaper's regional location; It would be helpful to think about regional independence as not being clearly linked to left-right political stances. Although a left-wing paper, it would make little sense for *El País* to support secessionism since its support base is not concentrated in Catalonia. Moreover, despite aligning with leftist issues supported by the PSOE government in the past, none of the major parties' support secession. Therefore, it would not be surprising if *El País* did not either.

By a similar token, research published by Politico in 2017 states that *La Vanguardia* receives subsidies to publish the newspaper in the regional language as an incentive to promote local culture (Hedgecoe 2017). The language factor, as well as the longevity of the newspaper, suggests that newspaper has an intimate connection with its readers. In turn, one can make the assumption that the newspaper attracts a readership that is predominately Catalan, many of whom take a divided stance on the independence issue. Thus, suggesting that *La Vanguardia* will take a moderate position on the referendum.

That being said, I would like to point out that one of the drawbacks of using *La Vanguardia* is that the newspaper is in Catalan. So, despite me wanting to analyze all the articles in its traditional Spanish language, I had to run the articles through the online translator DeepL. I am aware that the translation may threaten the validity of the study, but I continued to feel both publications were best fit to answer my research question

Moreover, I wanted to make sure that the newspaper outlets I chose had a substantial number of articles stored in their archives online so that I could read a lot of content and provide a comprehensive analysis of my findings. As I began my research to locate online records, I found that *La Vanguardia* and *El País* were very easy to navigate and allowed me to add filters in the search engine so I could find relevant information to add to my case study, while I found that it was very difficult to locate old articles about Catalan Independence in *La Razon* and *El Mundo*'s website.

Third, *El País* and *La Vanguardia* are also the oldest, and continue to be two of the leading, newspapers in Spain. CEC explains, "Among regional markets, Catalonia has a strong print media sector, which is dominated by the group owned by the Godo family, publisher of newspaper *La Vanguardia* (launched in 1881). [In a like manner,] Promotora de Informacion (Prisa), owns the daily newspaper *El País* (created in 1984) [and has] over €1.28 bn in revenue" (Compose-Freire et al., 2020). Due to the longevity of the newspaper's success, one could assume that the outlets have created a strong sense of credibility and prominent presence in Spanish coverage.

And finally, the moments leading up to and following the 2017 referendum classify the Catalan Independence movement as an "emotionally-charged" event that would be susceptible to communication framing in the media.

In summary, Catalan president Artur Mas began the year calling for a regional election following an "informational poll" in 2014 to see if the people of Barcelona would support seceding from Spain. The vote was taken in September of 2015, and the answer was "yes". Following this poll, Catalonia's regional parliament began to formulate a plan in November of that year to become independent. As a result, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy sent the Guardia



Civil from Madrid to restore order in Catalonia, but it only led to chaos and caused great divide within Spanish regions (Minder & Barry, 2017). The conflict intensified as a majority of Catalans voted in favor of independence on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, but the Spanish government proceeded to suspend Catalonia's autonomy, declared the referendum unconstitutional, and the separatists' votes ineffective.

The Catalan crisis erupted again in 2019 when the Spanish Central Government sentenced nine separatist leaders to thirteen years in prison in for their role in the referendum. In turn, thousands of people responded to "a call from the Tsunami Democràtic movement designed to bring the airport to a standstill," in protest of the decision (Jones & Burgen, 2019). The article *Violent clashes over Catalan separatist leaders' prison terms* also mentions various protestors being beaten with batons by the police and foam bullets being fired (Jones & Burgen, 2019).

Rather than letting the violence that erupted over the separatists' prison sentences further deepen the rift between the two regions; The protests encouraged Prime Minister Sánchez and Catalan President, Quim Torra, to begin looking for ways to resolve the region's ongoing political conflict (Perez 2019). In 2021, Sánchez pardoned the nine separatist leaders for the role they played in the referendum (Perez 2019). In an interview with Politico, Sánchez explains,

I understand that there might be compatriots in Catalonia and across the country who have qualms about the possibility of pardoning the Catalan prisoners, but I ask them to have faith because we have to aim for coexistence. We have to aim for reparation for those mistakes made in 2017 ... and which I have inherited from the previous administration (Hedgecoe 2021).

As Sánchez concludes in the statement above, the separatism advocated by nationalists in Catalan Parliament created a long-standing territorial and cultural crisis that reached its peak October 2017 shortly before the referendum took place. Thus, I meticulously chose to gather articles shortly before (the beginning of July 2017) and after the referendum (through the end of October 2017).

Taking regional location, time period, credibility and accessibility into consideration; Both *La Vanguardia* and *El País* meet the criteria I am looking for to move forward with a pivotal aspect of this work: the content analysis.

In reference to this paper, content analysis can be defined as a research tool that allows a person to make valid inferences from qualitative data through analyzing diction and themes that emerge in a text (Columbia University 2019).

Through using a web-based software known as ATLAS.ti, I am able to upload the articles and record how many times a particular word, phrase, or theme appears. By doing so, I am able to group the articles into categories to investigate if a newspaper's predisposed political biases outweigh the affect regional location has on coverage.

Table 2 below displays the language lexicon I created to categorize the articles into themes. Being that I am bilingual in Spanish, I was able to analyze' *El País*' articles in its traditional form. As I mentioned earlier, one of the limitations of my study was having to translate *La Vanguardia*'s articles from Catalan to English, hence the two languages.

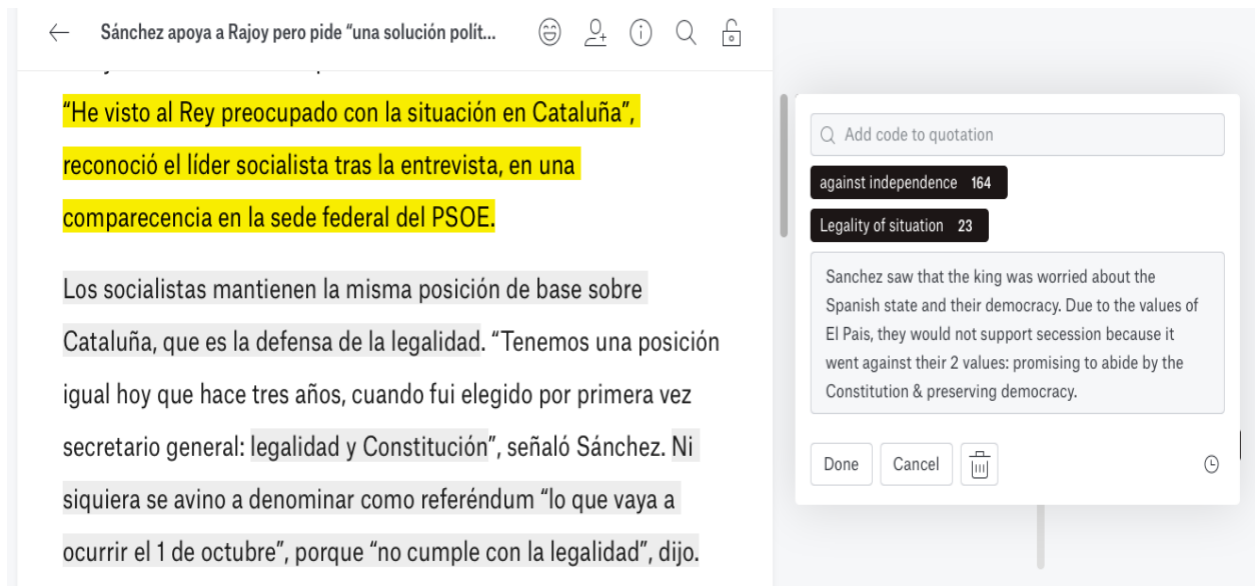
Table 1 Language Lexicon created with most common, partisan words in media Language Lexicon created with most common, partisan words in media

Global Theme	Basic codes
➤ Against independence	Merged from younger voters, universal suffrage, trump, PSC= CATALAN SOCIALISTS, PSOE, PSOE = center left, rajoy, respeto a la ley, Sánchez, Podem, political parties, political pessimism, preservar, Izquierda Unida, Josep Rull, Itlaia, Junts pel Si, lack of confidence, Madrid publisher, Margallo, Miguel Valls, Felipe VI, francia, gamberrismo injustificado , independiente , Challenge, Ciudadanos = for reform, legalidad, Ciudadanos, civil guard, conflict , references the Constitution, constitutional court, contraproducentes, coup de etat, crida per la democracia, CUP, deception, Delegitimizing movement, division, drama, Acciones delictivas , Against Independence, Albert rivera, alemania, arms, arrest, Article 155, autonomic elections, Call to reform, Catalan journalist, catalan source and central government
Partisan Opinions	Merged from democracy, demonstration of the people in white in Madrid, criticism over government / politics, against spain, Abstiene sus opiniones personales, angry, anguish, Center, choose side, completamente insentatos, derechos fundamentales de la persona humana, equal blame, ethos, fear, fuerza, gestion de la respuesta, hate, ILLEGAL, how it affects academics, in the middle, inclusive, independence movement, individual, intimidation, logos, majority silent, manipulation, metaphor of penguin, No pertenece a un grupo politico, negative, oppression, partisan, pressure, pride for country, relates to spainards, silenced and schools, negative word choice, loaded diction
Support for independence	Merged from support, unidad, puigdemont, reelection goal, respuesta a los ataques, spain nationalists, sovereignty resides with the people, national sovereignty, Parliament, PDECat, peaceful way forward is increasing, positive, for independence, "puede gobernar independientemente de Madrid"., angry at government / police and booed
Call to reform	Merged from coalition and call to reform.
National emergency	Merged from terroristas, supremacy, violence, war, national emergency, police, propoganda, punishment, radicales, radicalidad, Rechazan opiniones insultantes, repression, rights, rupture, article 11, and Atentados
Economic Debate	Merged from UN code and economic debate
Legality of Situation	Merged from legitimate, legalidad, law, Constitution, and Article 155

Prior to performing the bulk of my content analysis, I sifted through the articles and took initial notes of my preliminary findings. In as such, the basic themes listed in Table 2 are shorthand labels or codes that describe the key findings of the articles. By taking this approach, I was able to familiarize myself with the content and condense several codes into global themes that provided a condense overview of the data.

Figure 2 below, is an example of an excerpt in which I highlighted various phrases corresponding to different codes and grouped it into an overarching theme.

Figure 2 Example of El País Article Analysis, Sánchez apoya a Rajoy pero pide “una solución política” para Cataluña (Diez & Marcos 2017)



The article explains that Sánchez (PSOE) saw King Felipe VI worried during an interview when he was being asked about the independence referendum. Thus, the following sentence is grouped under the "Legality of situation" theme. This theme is created from the codes: legitimate, legalidad, law, Constitution, and Article 155.

In a similar manner, the article quotes Sánchez stating that whatever happens on October 1<sup>st</sup> is not in accordance with the law, therefore, he does not agree with it. By the same token, the overarching theme of "Against Independence" is created from references of political pessimism, political parties and young who stated they opposed the referendum, and groupings of loaded diction to describe the referendum such as "drama", "Coup de etat", and "deception". In the quote above, the theme is created from the codes: delegitimization, Sánchez, references of the constitution, and conflict.

Although various researchers have used thematic analysis as a tool to analyze the coverage of the independence movement, very little research has been done to investigate the degree of media coverage that is affected by the region's geographical location as opposed to political influences. Bearing that in mind, I aim for my global themes to become a representation of my

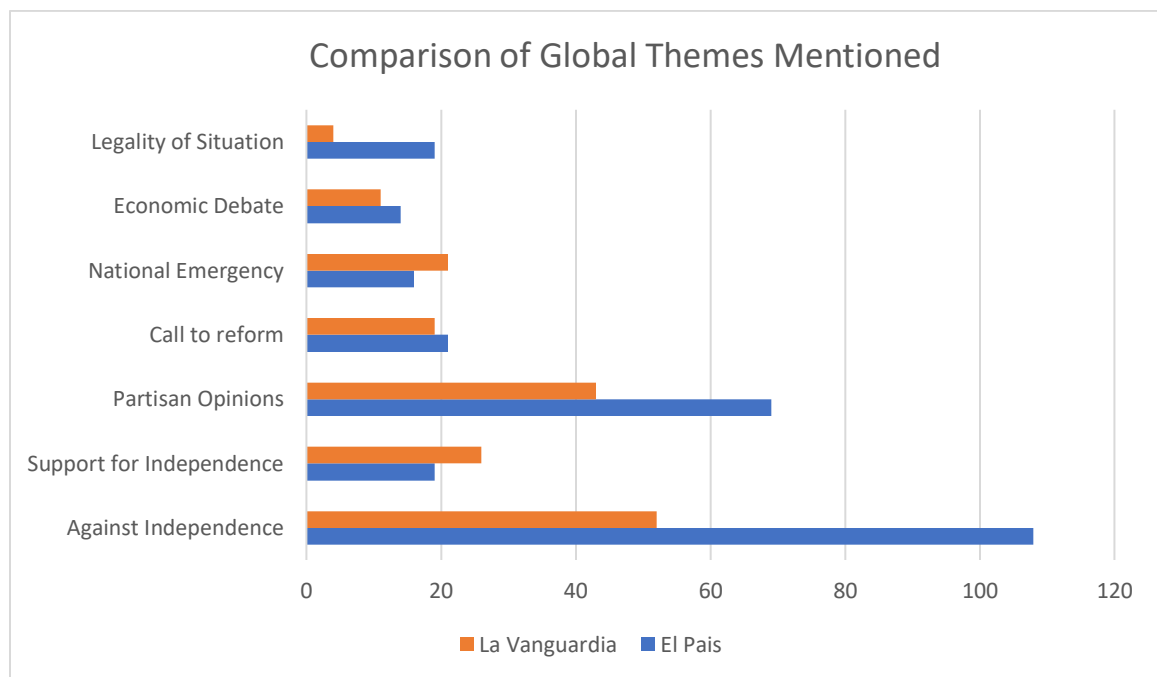
research question through highlighting the prominent frames brought up in coverage during the nationalists for independence.

## CHAPTER 5: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

There are several arguments that Spanish newspapers use to frame the conflict in Catalonia such as: the legality of the referendum based on the context of the 1978 Constitution, the right to decide, economic consequences that may prevail, and the focus on parliamentary and social fragmentation derived from the matter. Correspondingly, the agenda-setting theory reiterates that the news frames mentioned above present readers a shortcut as to how they should think about an issue, moreover, who to cast the blame on.

Once I sorted the material, I was left with a sample total of 72 articles- 30 from *La Vanguardia* and 42 from *El País*.

Figure 3 Global themes Comparison.



As seen in Figure 3, both newspapers most common theme is the issue of “against independence”. However, the coverage of the two papers when referencing the issue could not be more different.

Table 2 Major Themes found in *El País*' Coverage

Global Theme	Times per month
Against Independence (108)	July 2017 (49) August 2017 (59) September 2017 (38) October 2017- (19)
Partisan Opinions (69) Note: predominately negative.	July 2017 (11) August 2017 (22) September 2017 (29) October 2017- (8)
Call to reform (21)	July 2017 (9) August 2017 (7) September 2017 (4) October 2017 (1)

To begin the analysis, I think it is important to mention what drives *El País*. Research conducted at Barcelona's Universitat Pompeu Fabra explains that Prisa, El Planeta, and Vecente were the three major conglomerates that dominated the market at that time (Cano, 2021). "Grupo Prisa's links with politics and power run parallel to *El País*' strong reputation as "a bastion of the reinstatement of democracy in Spain during the 1981 coup d'état," (Mas-Manchón et al., 2020). Thus, *El País*' code of ethics explicitly states that the newspaper sides on the side of legality and defends the integrity of the democratic Spanish state through supporting liberal and social causes (Yuste, 2021). Furthermore, the findings suggest that Prisa was heavily intertwined with anti-secessionist London stockholders who held a majority of their shares since 2016 (Cano, 2021).

Thus, the politically active elite is seen to influence *El País* in two ways: 1) The media conglomerate, Prisa, encourages the newspaper to argue the legal-judicial framework when mentioning coverage of the referendum, and 2) the European stockholders bring up the argument of the rich vs the poor.

Henceforth, it is no surprise that the newspaper's most common theme when covering the independence movement throughout July 2017-August 2017 is the theme of "Against Independence" (referenced 108 times).

In fact, Media Bias Analyst Gamson (2006) alludes to the positive correlation between a newspaper's outlet opinion being influenced by social elite's agenda stating that "the media [is] also serving the interests of the capitalist economic system" (Bretones, 2001: 227).

That being the case, it makes sense that *El País* framed the Catalan Independence movement as a process that would negatively affect the development of the country. In an interview with *El País*, Madrid correspondent Miguel Aguilar states, "This is not a war between Madrid and Barcelona or between Catalans and Spaniards, but between Catalans. Half of Catalonia is oppressing the other half and, moreover, it is a revolt of the rich against the poor, as Javier Cercas wrote," (Ordaz, 2017).

However, the reproduction of Sergi Pardo-Prados graph in Figure 1 shows that *El País* framing the conflict as a "revolt of the rich against the poor" is incorrect, because his research concludes that the poor and wealthier classes are the ones against the independence movement.

A study from Mas-Machon, Guerrero-Sole, Ramon and Grande analyze the following deduction by stating,

Remarkably, the alleged social rupture or clash is always reported as occurring within Catalan society or the Catalan police ("The *Mossos*, cut in half"), never within Spain as a whole. We should note here that the fact that the second most populated and richest region of Spain (Catalonia) is represented by a parliament with a majority of independentists indicates a social rupture within Spain as nowadays conceived. This is the case not only because Catalonia is Spain, but also because one can easily find a clear divide between "nationals" and the "others" across Spain (as is evident within the Basque Country or with movements in Galicia, Valencia, or Balears). Instead, *El País* places this divide within Catalonia, where one can find a diversity of positionings independently of the national divide (Mas-Manchón et al., 2020).



Case in point, I identified negative verbs and adjectives such as “illegal”, “supremacist”, “deceitful”, “selfish”, and “aggressive” to describe the independence movement and its leaders while sifting through *El País*’ coverage. More so, when the secessionist cause began to receive national recognition in 2017, the periodical transitioned to describing the Catalan government in more radical terms such as “participants in a coup d’état”, “populists”, “disorganized hooligans” and an “extension of the terrorist group ETA”. These words were classified under the theme “partisan opinion” through the merging of the negative diction code, the second most popular theme seen in the study (69).

The subsequent ranking of negative “partisan opinions” as a popular theme demonstrates strong-agenda setting effects through highlighting the argument the newspaper is making of the “detrimental” effect the referendum has had on the parliamentary and social fragmentation of the Spanish state.

It was also interesting to see the dichotomy in descriptions between Rajoy and Puigdemont in *El País*’ reporting. In the article *No era una bomba nuclear, sino un misil certero*, the article describes Rajoy dissolving the Catalan Parliament as a “dazzling success” and that “[Rajoy] has given prestige to Spain as a society and to Spain as a rule of law,” (Bassets, 2017). In juxtaposition to the praising word choice, the reporter continues to write that the only thing the dissolution was missing was “the bizarre vicissitudes of Puigdemont and his fugitive advisors in Belgium,” to witness the “accurate blow to independence” (Bassets, 2017). Needless to say, the differentiation of diction the reporter chooses to describe each leader is completely different. The reporter transitions from conveying a tone of Spanish pride when speaking of Rajoy’s enactment of Article 155 of the 1978 Constitution to portraying cynical feelings of mockery when describing the Catalan separatist leaders’ failure.

While sifting through coverage, I also noticed that the newspaper primarily quoted leaders who opposed the referendum such as PM Rajoy, Pedro Sánchez (PSOE), and Albert Rivera (Ciudadanos). Another study done at Pompeu Fabra University derived at a similar conclusion by reiterating,

Three days after the referendum, a story in *El País* reported that teachers in schools were “indoctrinating” children by playing fragments of the Mel Gibson film *The Patriot*. In this story, a witness states that “most of the staff meeting is spent by pro-independence teachers confronting the other half” and that “one has to remain silent when a separatist gets in” (Mas-Manchón et al., 2020).

By doing so, *El País* advanced the parliamentary and social fragmentation theme by using front-line gatekeepers to shape the reader’s perspective. This two-step flow approach makes it easier for readers to be misinformed on the territorial crisis and to form an uneducated opinion on the matter.

Despite *El País* rarely representing pro-Catalan views in their articles, the idea of a silent majority opposing the referendum is abundantly present throughout its coverage (Noguer, 2017). In an interview with *El País*, a Madrid correspondent stated,

There are several reasons for the silence of the dissidents: Neither are we as cohesive as they are, nor is the fight against independence the only goal of our lives: It is a silent majority against a vocal, highly organized and highly subsidized minority. We do not have a single answer to solve the problem and they do: independence (Ordaz, 2017).

However, *La Vanguardia* counters the argument that anti-secessionists do not have a single answer to solve the problem. The Catalan newspaper includes various quotes of Sánchez proposing a parliamentary mission on Catalonia fueled by political discussion way before October 1<sup>st</sup>’s referendum (Ellakuria, 2017). This is yet another example of *El País* priming its readers to agree with their predispositioned political ideas of the Catalan Independence movement.

Lastly, something that I noticed that was very different between *El País*’ and *La Vanguardia*’s coverage was how it referenced the August 2017 terrorist attack. In Las Ramblas, one of the busiest streets in Barcelona, an Islamic State group (IS) killed 16 people by running them over with a van (*Three sentenced over Barcelona and Cambrils jihadist attacks*).

While *La Vanguardia* focused on acknowledging all the political parties’ effort to come together, despite their differences, to support the Catalan region (Del Riego, 2017), *El País*’ coverage conveyed that separatists used the nationalist fury sparked from the jihadist attack to their advantage by fueling support towards the illegal referendum (Casqueiro, 2017).

Moreover,

A story on 2 October stated that the movement behind the referendum had been “beheaded” (an expression used three times) [9], a type of expression that usually refers to groups of terrorists, particularly ETA in the Basque Country. In an interview published the same day, the interviewer asked a witness whether “there were Basque youngsters” among the protesters at schools on 1 October (Mas-Manchón et al., 2020).

The supplemental analysis provided by Mas-Manchón is rather interesting as it accentuates the contrast in scope between *La Vanguardia*’s empathetic coverage and *El País*’ negative sentiment towards the movement. In as such, the negative remark the interviewer made asking whether there were “Basque youngsters” in the crowd is referencing a conflict that stems back to the 1950s. Up until 2017, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA, a Basque terrorist group, “carried out hundreds of attacks (killing 829 people), aimed at forcing the creation of a separate Basque state,” (Torrats-Espinoso & Balcells, 2018). Despite the terrorist group disarming prior to the jihadist attack in Las Ramblas, *El País* connects the referendum to the terrorist group to prime its readers to associate the referendum with people and/or entities who are violent or dangerous.

Transitioning to *La Vanguardia*'s coverage of the referendum, the codes that were discussed were sovereignty, justice, history, and cultural oppression. The findings derived from the content analysis study suggest that *La Vanguardia* went from advocating for peaceful protests and a call to reform to transitioning to an ambiguous stance.

*Table 3 Major Themes found in La Vanguardia's Coverage*

Global Theme	Times per month
Against independence (52)	July 2017 (18) August 2017 (4) September 2017 (18) October 2017- (12)
Partisan Opinions (43)	July 2017 (10) August 2017 (8) September 2017 (13) October 2017- (12)
Support for independence (26)	July 2017 (5) August 2017 (2) September 2017 (8) October 2017- (11)

At the earlier stages of the referendum, the publication wrote articles such as *Los Hechos de Octubre* that provided a historical overview expressing the roots of Catalan nationalism as a political, cultural, and economic struggle that has been going on for decades (Juliana, 2017). Through this, the newspaper brought attention to the central problems of the region rather than making the referendum out to be a fight for sovereignty.

In a like manner, the grouping of codes derived from the “partisan theme” such as: the fundamental rights of a human, the silent majority, and nationalist pride portrays a pattern of editorial decisions and coverage being influenced by the reporter’s empathy of living through a long-standing territorial conflict amongst other Catalan people.

The contrasting frames and partisan coverage published by the newspaper outlets directly reflects the polarization of the Spanish state.

Evidently, the newspaper began taking an ambiguous position towards the referendum around late September and pushed for Catalan officials to commit to dialogue and mediation rather than violence (Navarro 2017).

The newspaper hints that the switch in its position was a result of environmental tensions escalating in Barcelona and the pressure of private newspapers having to advance a pro-sovereignty editorial line to avoid possible legal actions (Juliana, 2017).

Statistics derived from *La Vanguardia*'s content analysis on Atlas.ti supports this finding as it shows a 20 percent decrease of pro-independence articles the last two months leading up to the referendum.

The reader can note the change of *La Vanguardia*'s position through the sources it quotes in its articles. For instance, the newspaper editorial *Obrir la porta al diàleg* began with a quote of a Catalan woman who was upset at the Guardia Civil for “unjustifiably” and “disproportionately” attacking Catalans peacefully gathering at polls in October. The Catalan woman states,

I can understand those who say that this is not the way to pass a referendum law. I could even understand that so much expense had to be justified and they could not afford to go empty-handed, but what I saw on Sunday is pure hatred. It is "let's get them!" made real. It is unacceptable that at eight o'clock the minister says for the umpteenth time that this is not a referendum and that the day ends with almost 900 injured (MASBAGÀ & RODRÍGUEZ, 2017).

In the quote above, the interviewee mentions the “let’s get them” frame, which is typically a theme that emerges amongst Catalan nationalist to criticize the central government for justifying the use of force and hate speech against Spaniards who support the referendum. When reading the quote by itself, one assumes that the newspaper will continue to forward the activists cause by providing supplemental information that would relate to the idea of nationalist police being blamed for inciting chaos at the polling stations on October 1. Instead, the article

progresses to state the opinion of another Catalan who openly criticizes that the entire push to sovereignty has been infiltrated with stubborn leaders who fuel popular protests despite knowing the referendum to be illegal.

Circumstances like these bring out the best and the worst in all of us: solidarity, fear, violence and pain. It was a hard, terrible and, above all, very sad day. And I hold both Rajoy and Puigdemont responsible, both entrenched in their positions. Catalonia is broken by their idleness and unreason. If you do not know how to do your job, both of you should leave (MASBAGÀ & RODRÍGUEZ, 2017).

Through this approach, *La Vanguardia* provides the space for the “silent majority” of Catalans who are sick and tired of having to choose a side to express their frustrations with the various officials involved in the country’s system government- unlike *El País*, which for the most part solely cites the opinions of Spanish political leaders.

At the later stages of the referendum, the publication directly addresses its Catalan readership people by stating “We must find a way out. Those of us who agree that it is not possible to attack the Mossos, the public police, Catalan institutions and the legitimate government of Catalonia have to show our faces and that is why we are willing to talk about a Country Agreement in the City Council of Barcelona,” (NAVARRO, 2017). In other words, the publication issues a cry for healing through political discussion between the Spanish regions. Thus, emphasizing the emotional position, it takes when covering the referendum.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This thesis analyzes the role of the news media in the referendum for independence in the Spanish autonomous region of Catalonia.

In *the Art of Reframing Political Debate*, Ryan and Gamson states, “there’s a positive correlation between convenient measures adopted by government and the state of consensus by which leaders are supported in the media,” (Ryan and Gamson 2006). The comparative analysis between *El País*’ and *La Vanguardia*’s coverage of the Catalan independence referendum reinforces this statement by deriving at the conclusion that regional location plays a more prominent role in agenda-setting than the periodical’s predisposed political leanings.

In as such, *El País*’ relationship with the media conglomerate, Prisa, headquartered in Madrid plays a critical role on how the newspaper frames coverage of an event. Through Prisa’s economic ties to London stockholders, there seems to be financial pressure for *El País* to write articles that reflect the opposing stance taken by the stakeholders when reporting on the Catalan referendum. The decrease in funding over the years paired with the recovery of the 2010 Spanish economic crisis heightens the idea that the media has a responsibility to please those in power if it wants to stay open for business.

As a result, one can conclude that because *El País* and its political influencers side on the side of democracy; The publication will receive more freedom from the Central Government to post what they want about the legality of the referendum. Nonetheless, the negatively-charged loaded diction *El País* uses to describe the referendum and Catalan nationalists such as “terrorists”, “Coup de etat”, and the phrase “breaking the rules of the game” emphasizes the idea that newspaper does not provide neutral coverage of the event.

Likewise, *La Vanguardia*'s regional location affected the response it had to the independence referendum. During the early stages of the referendum, the newspaper's coverage discussed the topics such as sovereignty, justice, and cultural oppression in support of the nationalist's right to vote. Phrases such as "I understand" and "It was a hard, terrible and, above all, very sad day," reinforces *La Vanguardia*'s Catalan roots and conveys the idea that the newspaper has suffered and celebrated important events with its Catalan readership throughout time. As a result, the major print publication has developed strong ties with readers who deeply support Catalan nationalism.

In light of this, at the early stages of the referendum, the newspaper's coverage discussed the topics such as sovereignty, justice, and cultural oppression in support of the nationalist's right to vote. Even after the Central Government threatened to take action, the periodical emphasized its connection to the community through including emotionally-loaded quotes in its coverage to try empathizing with its readers.

Being that the newspaper is headquartered in Barcelona and distributes its content to the Catalan population; It does not make sense for *La Vanguardia* to condemn the movement.

Aside from that, it makes sense that editors decided to portray a sense of nationalist pride in its coverage. Various Catalans may be more open to listening to suggestions and critiques from a prominent voice in their home base. As a result, the newspapers location and prominent voice in Catalonia can be a determining factor in minimizing damage through advocacy for peace amid political instability in the region.

That being so, it is evident that *La Vanguardia*'s regional location played a prominent role in shaping media coverage of political events. One can also see the regional factors affecting *El País*' coverage through its ability to cover the event more freely and its lack of responsibility



to abide to Catalan nationalists' perspective. Rather, the periodical argues the legality of the matter to defend the democracy of the Spanish state. This position is reinforced through political influences, such as Prisa's economic ties.

Despite political factors adding pressure to shape coverage of the referendum, one can derive at the conclusion that regional factors are more widely reflected in the way the newspapers reported on the referendum and the editorial decisions that they made.

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