

Nationalist Movements in Western Democracies

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The last federal elections constituted an important reminder of the strength of nationalism and regionalism in Canada. While the good performance of the Bloc Québécois clearly indicated that nationalism in the province was still alive and well, the formation of a Liberal government despite a domination of the Conservatives in Western Canada reinforced feelings of Western alienation that even led to the expression of separatist sentiments in Alberta and, to a lesser extent, Saskatchewan. Canada is not the only democracy to have to manage significant nationalist movements. Countries such as Spain, Belgium, and the United Kingdom are also in this situation. This series of five lectures will examine nationalist movements in established democracies, with six cases being examined: Catalonia and the Basque Country (Spain); Scotland (the United Kingdom); Flanders (Belgium); Puerto Rico (the United States); and Québec and Alberta (Canada).

Lecture 1: For the first lecture, we go to Spain, where two significant nationalist movements exist. In the last few years, the Catalan government has looked to hold a referendum on independence. The response of the Spanish state has been to consider such referendum illegal and illegitimate, and to jail political leaders responsible for the separatist project. The other significant nationalist movement in Spain is in the Basque Country, where the end of the terrorist organization ETA has marked a transition towards less separatist objectives.

Lecture 2: In the second lecture, we look at Belgium, a deeply divided country between Francophones and Flemings. Flemish nationalism has for decades sought to further decentralize the Belgian state while Francophones have attempted to counter this decentralist pressure. The result is a fascinating and original political system that allows a deeply divided European democracy to survive.

Lecture 3: For the third lecture, we focus on Scotland, which already had an independence referendum in 2014 but whose First Minister has announced she wants a second in 2021 or 2022. Scottish nationalism has a complicated relationship with the United Kingdom, and Brexit (which a majority of Scots opposed in the 2016 Brexit vote) has added to the level of complexity. Will Scotland eventually leave the UK?

Lecture 4: For the fourth lecture, we go to the Caribbean. Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States; it belongs to the United States but is not part of it. The island's status (formally called 'Commonwealth' in English) has been considerable undesirable for some time, as Puerto Rico has been experiencing one disaster after the other (debt crisis, hurricane, earthquakes). The constitutional debate is lively and complex: some Puerto Ricans want the Commonwealth to be enhanced; others want the island to become the 51st state of the United States; yet others want independence.

Lecture 5: We finish at home with a discussion of both nationalism in Québec and alienation in Western Canada. What is Québec nationalism today? What does the recent success of the Bloc Québécois mean? What is the new party (CAQ) governing the province all about? And in Western Canada? Are these references to independence serious? Where do they come from and what do they mean?