

Secession in the Twenty-First Century



The United Kingdom is planning a referendum on whether it should withdraw from the European Union. At the same time, Scots are preparing to vote on whether to secede from the UK. Thousands of Americans have signed secession petitions that have been sent to the White House. The decades-long debate over Quebec leaving the Canadian union continues, as do similar debates in the Kashmir region of India, the Basque Country in Spain, and other areas around the globe. Kosovo seceded from Serbia in 2008—but Serbia and Serbians living in Kosovo still refuse to acknowledge Kosovo’s independence. South Sudan seceded from Sudan in 2011.

With secession on the minds of people nearly worldwide, taking a closer look at this twenty-first century phenomenon is worthwhile.

What Is Secession?

Secession is the act of formally withdrawing from a political entity or union. The Southern states’ attempt to secede from the United States in the mid-nineteenth century is a good example of the term.

It can sometimes be difficult to differentiate between a secession movement and an independence movement. For example, some people say that East Timor seceded from Indonesia when it became an independent nation in 2002. However, East Timor, part of the island of Timor northwest of Australia, had been colonized by Portugal and then invaded by Indonesia in 1975 after the Portuguese left. Thus, some observers argue that the efforts to achieve nationhood might, in this case, be better described as an independence movement.

What Are Seen as Legitimate Reasons for Secession?

There are two different schools of thought on secession. Choice Theory holds that people should have the choice to secede for any reason. Since consent is an important democratic principle, if a majority of people in an area withdraw their consent, they should be allowed to secede. For example, under this theory if people believe the union is not achieving the goals it was created to pursue or it has become too large to operate efficiently, they should have the choice to opt out of the union.

The second theory, called Just Cause Theory, says secession should only be allowed if necessary to correct serious injustices. Under this theory, secession would be acceptable in such cases as the following:

- When people's basic rights are denied, including their right to self-determination
- When the larger group presents a threat to the security of the smaller group
- When the culture and language of the smaller group is threatened with assimilation or destruction by the larger group
- When the smaller group suffered a past injustice at the hands of the larger group
- When the smaller group is economically oppressed by the larger group

What Are the Arguments against a Right to Secede?

The following are general arguments that are made against secession:

- Losing part of a nation or confederation might make it difficult to defend the rest of the nation/confederation.
- Majority rule is a principle of democracy that minorities must adhere to.
- If some areas are allowed to secede, others may do so also, leading to chaos. In addition, once one area secedes, others may threaten to do so as a way of gaining concessions from the nation/confederation.
- Small areas may not have the resources needed to succeed as independent nations.
- The investments (e.g., infrastructure) of the nation/confederation should not be taken by the smaller area without compensation.
- If secession is allowed, wealthy areas might secede to rid themselves of the burden of poorer areas.

Case Study: The United Kingdom and the European Union

According to Article 50 of the Treaty of Lisbon, which went into effect on December 1, 2009, any member can withdraw from the European Union "in accordance with its own constitutional requirements." Many in the United Kingdom want the UK to withdraw from the EU. Pro-secession feeling has increased since the European financial crisis—even though the UK is not part of the euro zone. Prime Minister David Cameron has pledged to hold a national vote on Britain's membership in the EU by the end of the year 2017.

Among the British who favor secession, the primary argument is that Britain's economy is being hurt by interference and overregulation from the EU. They also argue

that the European market is no longer important enough to outweigh the costs of belonging to the EU. Freed of EU requirements, Britain could become more prosperous and more engaged globally. In addition, since the founding of the EU, many Brits have been skeptical about giving up any national sovereignty. Thus, they see secession as a way of reclaiming sovereignty.

Supporters of the EU within Britain argue that the problems with the British economy are not related to EU regulation, but to internal British fiscal and development policies. They further claim that EU membership is having no significant effect on the extent to which the UK is able to sell to non-European markets. In addition, they point out that the goal of maintaining peace is still important. Rather than withdrawing from the EU, they say, the UK should work for more flexibility for members because “one size doesn’t fit all.”

Of course, people outside of the UK have views on its possible secession. Some argue that the UK isn’t of critical importance to the EU because it has already opted out of the euro zone. Furthermore, within the EU, the UK acts in obstructionist ways that harm other European nations. For these reasons, some observers say secession of the UK would not, on balance, be a problem. Others disagree, arguing that the EU risks its economic power and ability to protect the peace if countries start to withdraw. If the UK withdraws, they say, other countries may follow suit, leading to disintegration of the EU. The end result could be severe economic problems across Europe and a rise in extremism.

Interestingly, as the UK contemplates withdrawing from the EU, Scotland is considering becoming independent of Britain. In 2014, Scots will be asked to vote on the question: “Should Scotland be an independent country?” If the referendum passes, Scotland and the British government will have to work out a series of complicated questions about the relationship between the two countries. One interesting question that has been raised: Because Scotland was in the EU as part of the UK, would Scotland automatically be part of the EU or would it need to petition for membership?

Case Study: Secession Movements in the United States

According to a 2008 poll, only 22 percent of Americans believe a state should have the right to secede from the union. Still, there are many Americans who support secession; they point to a quotation from Thomas Jefferson to support their view: “If any state in the Union will declare that it prefers separation . . . to a continuance in union . . . I have no hesitation in saying, let us separate.”

Serious secessionists in the United States have been driven, in large part, by a belief that the federal government has become too powerful, unresponsive, and unworkable. Secessionist sentiment is strongest in Alaska, Hawaii, Vermont, and Texas. In Texas, even Governor Rick Perry has hinted at the possibility of secession, although he has recently backed away from those comments.

To gain an idea of the differing views on this issue, the secessionist movement in Vermont, which began in 2003. This movement has as its goals: “(1) the peaceful breakup of meganations such as the United States, Russia, and China; (2) the self-determination of breakaway states such as Quebec, Scotland, and Vermont; and (3) a strategic alliance with other small, democratic, nonviolent, affluent, socially responsible, cooperative, egalitarian, sustainable, ecofriendly nations such as Austria, Finland, Sweden, and Switzerland which share a high degree of environmental integrity and a strong sense of community.” Historian and lawyer Paul Gillies, who worked in the Vermont Secretary of State’s office, has said of the movement, “It doesn’t make economic sense, it doesn’t make political sense, it doesn’t make historical sense. Other than that, it’s a good idea.”

Following the election of 2012, people unhappy with the results submitted petitions regarding secession to the White House (the White House has a page specifically designed for citizen petitions: <https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/>). The people signing petitions are generally regarded as venting rather than as having serious intent to leave the Union.

Case Study: Canada and Quebec

The serious intent of French Canadian separatists in Quebec has never been in doubt. Within Canada, Quebec’s culture is unique, largely because it has a French-speaking majority (80 percent). Tension between French- and English-speakers has been a theme throughout Canadian history. Those who support Quebec’s secession believe that becoming an independent country would have social, political, and economic benefits for the people of Quebec. Being different from the English-speaking majority of the rest of the country results in a disadvantage to Quebec and also threatens the survival of its Francophone culture. Opponents of secession argue that other Canadian provinces have cultures different from the majority (e.g., First Nations) and maintaining those differences will make Canada a more diverse and stronger nation; indeed, they point out that the Quebecois have not always respected the culture of the First Nations. Opponents also argue that becoming an independent nation will not help the economies of either Quebec or Canada.

Referenda on secession were held in 1980 and 1995. In 2012, the Parti Quebecois, which favors secession, formed a minority government in Quebec when no party won a majority of the seats in the legislature. This development suggests that the question of separation may again be seriously discussed.

Case Study: The Secession of South Sudan

The previous case studies have dealt with nations or provinces/states that are discussing secession, but South Sudan is an example of an independent nation formed through secession. Both South Sudan and Sudan in Africa were part of Egypt until 1956, when the two areas became one independent nation, Sudan. The understanding at the time was that people in the South Sudan would have political equality with those in the northern part of the country. This did not prove to be true, and years of violent strife followed. Finally in 2005, the southern part of the country was granted six years of autonomy. That six-year period would be followed by a vote on secession. In 2011, 98 percent of the people in South Sudan voted for secession. South Sudan became an independent nation on July 9, 2011.

Independence has not been easy. South Sudan has struggled to establish good government, to control rebel militia groups, and to keep the economy moving forward.

