

# Democratic Norms Remain Stronger than Ethnic Ties: Defending “Foreign Interventions and Secessionist Movements”

LOUIS BÉLANGER *Université Laval*

ÉRIK DUCHESNE *Université Laval*

JONATHAN PAQUIN *King’s University College at the  
University of Western Ontario*

## Introduction

The original article criticized by Stephen Saideman in this issue pursued two objectives (Bélanger, Duchesne, and Paquin, 2005). First, it attempted to move the study of external support for secessionist movements away from case studies and a monadic level of analysis to a series of dyadic investigations. Second, we set out to test the impact of political regime types on the decision of states to support secessionist movements abroad. Our central conclusion was that democracies rarely support secessionist groups emerging from democratic states. We are extremely pleased that Stephen Saideman has decided to follow us along the “dyadic path” (2007). We also welcome Saideman’s challenge and remain convinced that our original article was on the “right path.” In the following paragraphs we defend our methodology and explain why, in our view, the

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Louis Bélanger, Professor, Political Science Department and Institut Québécois des hautes études internationales, Université Laval, Québec, Québec, Canada G1K 7P4; Louis.belanger@pol.ulaval.ca

Érik Duchesne, Associate Professor, Political Science Department and Institut Québécois des hautes études internationales, Université Laval, Québec, Québec, Canada G1K 7P4; Erick.duchesne@pol.ulaval.ca

Jonathan Paquin, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, King’s University College, University of Western Ontario, 266 Epworth Avenue, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 2M3; jonathan.paquin@uwo.ca

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alternative research design offered by Saideman in his effort to contest our results is seriously flawed.

### **A Puzzling New Case Selection**

The opening argument developed by Saideman against our research design concerns case selection. First, Saideman argues that hypotheses on international support for secessionist movements can be tested on a greater selection of cases concerning ethnic movements that may not necessarily be secessionists or do not discriminate between secessionists and non-secessionists. Nevertheless, if one wants to limit his case selection to secessionist cases, Saideman argues that the minorities at risk (MAR) dataset offers better selection criteria than those we used. We strongly disagree on both accounts.

In defence, Saideman suggests that there is nothing in the logic of our theory on democratic norms that prevents its extension to non-secessionist ethnic conflicts. His implication is incorrect. Our theory explicitly states that it is because secessionism in a democratic context breaks with the accepted norm of internal self-determination that other democratic states will refrain from supporting it. Therefore, cases of ethnic minorities with other goals considered as legitimate under the same norm, such as the promotion of linguistic rights or decentralization, cannot be used as substitutes for secessionist movements for testing our theory. Using non-secessionist movements to test our model would create a distortion between the object of our study (that is, the motives behind third-states' intervention in secessionist crises) and the observable outcomes.

Moreover, literature that focuses on the internationalization of ethnic conflicts unanimously recognizes the specificity of secessionism (and irredentism) over other types of ethnic conflicts (Carment et al., 2006; Heraclides, 1991). Secessionism qualitatively differs from conventional ethnic conflict. It is a specific instance of intra-state conflict that has unique domestic and international implications. Donald Horowitz explains that "secession ... is a special species of ethnic conflict" because it lies "at the juncture of internal and international politics" (2000: 230). Robert Young argues that "even peaceful secessions are times of much disruption and uncertainty. They mark profound changes in the relations between peoples and between states" (1994: 782). Saideman even acknowledged the specificity of secessionism while writing that secessionist conflicts "have perhaps been the most controversial and internationalized form of ethnic conflicts" (1998: 127). Therefore, it would be misleading to pretend testing hypotheses that clearly refer to secessionist movements while in fact using cases including non-secessionist

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**Abstract.** This article is a response to Stephen Saideman's criticism of our research findings on third state intervention in secessionist crises, which was published in this journal in 2005. Here we defend our methodology and the validity of our results. We also explain why, in our view, Saideman's criticisms and the alternative research design that he offers are seriously questionable. More specifically, our reply focuses on his problematic case selection and on his measurement of ethnic ties, which is methodologically inconsistent and biased.

**Résumé.** Cet article constitue une réponse à la critique de Stephen Saideman concernant nos résultats de recherche, paru dans cette revue en 2005, sur les interventions des États tiers dans les crises sécessionnistes. Nous défendons ici notre méthode et la validité de nos résultats. Nous expliquons aussi pourquoi, selon nous, il est possible de remettre en question les critiques et le devis de recherche de Saideman. Plus précisément, notre réponse se concentre sur sa sélection de cas douteuse et sa mesure des liens ethniques, puisque nous jugeons celle-ci méthodologiquement incorrecte et biaisée.

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minorities. We have to be faithful to the logic of our argument and consistent in our research ambitions. We are astounded that Saideman now treats secessionist and non-secessionist movements without any distinction in the name of scientific progress. Saideman has the right to change the focus of his research from the issue of third-state intervention in secessionist crises to the broader international relations of ethnic conflicts, but this should be clearly stated, and his theoretical and empirical shift should not (and cannot) be used to criticize the validity of our work, which focuses on secessionism *per se*.

The second issue Saideman raises relates to the first. Saideman finds our criterion for selecting secessionist claims from the MAR dataset to be too restrictive. Instead, he uses a "more inclusive" measure, which permits him to raise the number of cases from (our) thirty-two to "more than ninety." His criterion, which he used in earlier works, is MAR's "separatism index" (SEPX3). The problem is that, in spite of its name, this index is not a discriminating measure of separatism. According to the MAR codebook, ethnic minorities receive a SEPX3 value if they gave rise to "separatist *or* autonomy movements" (2003: 26). As the logical operator "or" indicates, separatism is not a necessary criterion for receiving a SEPX3 score, and by using it Saideman persists in including non-secessionist minorities in his dataset.

But what does this indicator represent? SEPX is one of the databank's "lost autonomy indicators," which provide information on past changes in the status of a minority. Therefore, a SEPX3 appears to indicate that the selected minority lost its autonomy in the past, giving rise to an autonomist *or* secessionist movement that was still active "in the 1980s or 1990s." Thus, a recently extinguished movement could receive a SEPX3 score, while a new one that did not enjoy autonomy in the past would not. Secessionism not only is an unnecessary condition to be included in the SEPX3 group, but there are good reasons to suspect it is not even a sufficient condition to be included. This is clearly not a valid procedure to select secessionist cases. It is certainly not better than ours.

Consider, for instance, the four following cases taken from Saide-man's sample. The Mizos in India have a history of lost autonomy, but their desire to regain power was satisfied by the creation of the Indian state of Mizoram in the mid-1980s. The Mizos did not have a secessionist agenda. The Buryat in Russia is another case of an autonomous rather than secessionist movement. In the post-Soviet era, Buryatia has achieved extensive autonomy but never attempted to secede. A similar scenario occurred in Niger with the Tuareg, which is another case of an autonomous movement retained by Saideman. This tribe demanded more autonomy in the 1990s for the protection of its culture and nomadic lifestyle but did not express secessionist ambitions. Finally, the Miskitos of Nicaragua struggled for more autonomy throughout the 1990s and still did not have secessionist ambitions.<sup>1</sup> These sample cases show that Saide-man's selection is problematic and that SEPX3 is inadequate for being "too inclusive." Note that Saideman also uses SEPX3 as a measure for his "vulnerability" variable, which is equally problematic.

If Saideman's first criticism of our theoretical argument on non-secessionist minorities was correct, his move toward a more inclusive selection of cases would remain confusing, but not fatal. Technically speaking, he would have introduced ontological but not causal heterogeneity in his selection. But, since the theory in fact implies specific causal attributes to secessionism, an unrecognized ontological and causal heterogeneity contaminates the dataset. This confusion originates from Saide-man's persistence in testing hypotheses that have clearly been crafted to address the secessionist phenomenon on datasets that do not discriminate between secessionist and non-secessionist ethnic claims. In doing so, he ignores the basic rule that should govern increasing the number of observations in a research design: to make sure that the new units are appropriate instances within which the theoretical process entailed by the hypothesis applies (King, Keohane and Verba, 1994: 219–22).

### **A Flawed and Biased Measurement of Ethnic Ties**

Saide-man also criticizes our research design for not correctly operationalizing ethnic ties. His main argument is that we focus our measure exclusively on the possible existing ethnic affinity between a third state's government and secessionist movements, therefore ignoring what he describes as the other side of the ethnic ties argument: "Politicians will seek foreign policies that assist the secessionists if their supporters have ties to them, BUT the foreign policy will be aimed at assisting the host governments who are seeking to protect their territorial integrity if the relevant constituents have ties to the people governing the host" (2007: 3). If by this Saideman wants to suggest that the ethnic ties literature has

ever developed a separate theory or hypothesis on the external support in favour of host governments facing secessionist movements, we must strongly disagree. If this was the case, his new article and previous works would include a measure of such assistance or support toward host states, but we have not found such a measure. Saideman's only dependent variable remains support to ethnic groups, not host states. If, on the other hand, what he means is that a logical statement of the ethnic ties argument should consider that an ethnic affinity with a host state can indeed *impede* an ethnic affinity with a secessionist movement when third states evaluate the possibility of giving their support to the separatist side, then we agree with him. Unfortunately, the methodology he has designed in order to add this important dimension to our operationalization of ethnic ties suffers from a serious validity problem, one which introduces a bias in his results. Simply put, his research design helps him find support for impediment in cases where there is nothing to impede.

Instead of simply adding an independent variable for ethnic ties between potential supporters and host states, which would have allowed to verify if affinity with host state impedes affinity with secessionist groups, Saideman creates a single index in which two different levels or dimensions of ethnic ties are compressed. The result, presented in Table 2 of his article, is an interval scale going from  $-3$  to  $+3$  with no meaningful zero point. The zero point is arbitrary, since it does not represent a null measurement (no ethnic ties) but rather the product of different combinations of positive ties (with ethnic group) and negative ties (with host state).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, all dyads are coded for a certain degree of ethnic ties with no way to isolate null cases, and more importantly cases where no ethnic ties between the third state and the secessionist movement have been found. As Table 2 shows, scores of  $-2$ ,  $-1$  or zero are all indicative of a situation where such a tie may or may not have been registered. Since the index makes it impossible to isolate cases where an ethnic tie between a third state and the secessionist group exist from cases where there is no tie, how can the hypothesis be tested? Isn't the existence of a primordial tie with the secessionist movement a necessary condition for the impeding effect produced by ties with the host state to take place?

Saideman's indexing procedure has two fatal invalidating consequences: it artificially boosts statistical support for his argument and, at the same time, it operates under a logic that contradicts this same argument. The first consequence should already be clear; the measure permits observations to be counted as supporting the ethnic ties argument even if they should, in fact, be considered as irrelevant. Take, for example, a case where we have a third state that does not have any ethnic tie with the secessionist movement but has ethnic tie(s) with the host state and no support in favour of the secessionist movement is found for this

dyad. Should such a case be counted as supportive of Saideman's ethnic ties argument? Yes, because an absence of ethnic ties with the secessionist group is linked with the absence of support. But should the presence of ethnic ties with the host state boost the relevancy of this case for Saideman's argument? No. It should be considered as irrelevant, because the absence of ties at the ethnic group level, from the point of view of his theory, is in itself sufficient to explain the absence of support and adding links with the host state is not expected to change anything.<sup>3</sup> However, with his index, Saideman attributes higher statistical relevancy among null cases to the ones that show ethnic ties at the host state level (with a score of  $-1$  to  $-3$ , depending on the number of ties, instead of zero). In these conditions, it is not surprising that Saideman finds strong statistical support for his theory. The bias is obvious: all cases (probably a lot) where a "negative" ethnic tie is linked to an absence of external support, even in the absence of a "positive" ethnic tie between a third state and a secessionist movement, reinforces the correlation when its effect should be neutral.

Furthermore, the logic by which such reinforcement is allowed is inconsistent with the theory it seeks to support. As we have mentioned, by not properly registering null cases and by therefore giving relevancy to ethnic affinity at the host state level even when there are no ties at the ethnic group level, the index operates on an implicit logic that contradicts the ethnic ties argument. Again, if the ethnic ties theory holds, the absence of ethnic ties between a third state and a secessionist movement should be *sufficient* to explain the absence of support from the first to the second, *whatever the level of affinity the third state has with the host state*.<sup>4</sup> To suggest otherwise, that is that host state/third-state affinity can be at play in the causation (by impeding) even without the presence of a primordial ethnic tie between the third state and the host state, is to recognize that support (even impeded support) for secessionism is triggered by other factors than ethnic ones. With his index, Saideman is therefore embedding a substitutive hypothesis that contradicts the ethnic ties argument in a measure that he uses in support of that same argument.

Unfortunately, there is also no way to tell, with certainty, how much Saideman's new measure affects the statistical relationship between other independent variables, particularly joint democracy and external support. When his ethnic ties variable replaces ours in the original 1990–1992 dataset, the joint democracy variable stays significant. However, under the same conditions but for the period of study 1994–1995, the joint democracy variable loses its statistical significance. What this means is that we do not know if this loss of significance is due to the introduction of Saideman's variable or due to a different temporal domain. One way to sort out these two possibilities would be to use our affinity variable for the 1994–1995 period of study. This would require a data col-

lection effort lasting over several months. Given the short period to reply to Saideman's rejoinder, it was impossible for us to undertake this task. As we noted in our original piece, the best way to solve this quandary would be to build datasets that allow for longitudinal studies instead of being incompatible with one another.

To sum up this section, Saideman's point of departure is perfectly correct; research designs built to test the ethnic ties hypothesis should take into account its "other side." Unfortunately, the two-dimensional index he has conceived to achieve this legitimate goal is methodologically inconsistent and biased. His results, therefore, cannot be interpreted as contradicting ours.

### **Much Ado about an Inconsequential Scaling Error**

Finally, Saideman accuses us of using the MAR coding of external support as an ordinal one. As his rescaling of this measure shows, the 1 to 14 categorization offered by MAR is not perfectly ordinal and we obviously should have seen it. But this error is irrelevant or inconsequential for our analysis. First, all sensitivity analyses reported in Tables 5 and 6 of our original text are still valid, considering that they were based on the *occurrence* and not the *level*, of external support (robust logit model). The results presented in the left-hand side of Table 4 were not significantly affected by our misreading of MAR categorization. To test it, we recoded our variable by using Saideman's subjective rescaling of the variable. The switch does not affect our main original results. The levels of significance for democratic dyads (.006), dyadic conflict/co-operation (.005), and contiguity (.003) remain unchanged. The ethnic affinity (.790) and vulnerability (.844) variables are still far from reaching significance. The only change is that the regime durability variable now reaches statistical significance and is positively related to the level of external support.

Saideman also disputes our use of the "dyadic level of co-operation and conflict" variable in our study, due to a potential problem of endogeneity. We conducted a Hausman specification test to dismiss endogeneity between external support and dyadic level of co-operation and conflict. The results indicate the absence of endogeneity between these two variables.<sup>5</sup> In short, this means that a high level of co-operation between states in a dyad diminishes the likelihood of external support for a secessionist group—which is what we demonstrate in our study—but that the existence of external support does not negatively affect the overall relationship between these states, contrary to what Saideman assumes. We considered using a "relative power" variable, as does Saideman, but found it too problematic, considering that we were using rele-

vant dyads (that is, contiguous states and/or including a major power). Considering that major powers are more likely than others to be relatively more powerful than other states in a dyad, our case selection already largely controls for the effects of relative power.

## Conclusion

We are pleased that our initial article stimulated such a lively debate and we very much enjoyed being challenged by Saideman. This gave us the opportunity to develop a convincing defense of our research and to reaffirm the significance of the regime type factor. We remain puzzled, however, by such a strong reaction and wonder how to interpret it at the epistemological level. Once published, journal articles are rarely greeted with the scrutiny with which Saideman treats ours. Maybe an explanation can be found in the dynamic of the research program on ethnic ties at the core of which Saideman's work belongs. This research program appears to be an "effects of a cause" type. That means a program driven by the willingness to prove how significant a specific factor, here ethnicity, on which there is a strong level of agreement among members of the program, is to explain different outcomes. We can oppose to this a "causes of an effect" type of research program. That kind of program shows a high level of agreement on the phenomenon to be explained while maintaining a more relaxed attitude toward a multiplicity of possible causations and their related theories. For example, the democratic peace research program in international relations clearly belongs to this later type. While both types have their strengths, it has been convincingly suggested that "effects of a cause" programs are often less productive because they do not always consider the value of different theoretical arguments (Amenta, 2003). We think that Saideman's reaction to our article can be interpreted as a typical "effects of a cause" research program. We remain hopeful, however, that this passionate and constructive debate will eventually lead to a better integration of our respective research programs for the sake of scientific progress.

## Notes

- 1 For more, consult the "risk assessment" for each cases selected by Saideman in the minorities at risk dataset.
- 2 There are nine possible combinations leading to a zero score. Table 2 lists 4, but does not take into consideration the different kind of ties that can get involved (linguistic, racial, or religious).
- 3 It worth repeating that while Saideman brings in host states on the independent variable side of the equation, he leaves them out as far as the dependant variable is concerned. Thus, the design does not permit to see how ethnic ties affect level of support for the host states in the same way it does for the secessionist movements.

- 4 The index reduces two dimensions in one without considering this fundamental difference in the causal effect expected for each, which is always problematic (Barton, 1955: 46). In this case, the failure to recognize the fact that the two dimensions logically operate under different conditions of sufficiency and necessity (for example, the absence of an affinity at the group level is sufficient under the ethnic ties argument to explain the absence of support, while the absence of an affinity at the host level is not sufficient to explain the presence of support) severely invalidates the measure (Goertz, 2006: chap. 4; Adcock and Collier, 2001).
- 5 The results are available from the authors. We used Saideman's recoded "external support" variable in our test. For more information on the Hausman specification test, see Gujurati (2003: 754–57).

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