

Current discourses and attitudes in favour of the independence of the Basque Country

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Abstract

With the aim to win support for its political project, Basque nationalism has traditionally sought to get an increasingly larger number of people to share a national identity. However, in the twenty first century, we can appreciate another discourse, which goes beyond national sentiment, and includes aspects that are more related to social and personal wellbeing. This second discourse has given rise to a new attitude to the independence of the Basque Country, which can now be shared by people who are not necessarily Basque nationalists, but are, on the other hand, interested in a project for a state as it could afford them personal benefits. This study explores how both discourses are spread and whether there has been a perceptible change in the attitude to independence in non-Basque nationalist sectors.

Keywords

Nationalism, Basque nationalism, national identity, Basque Country, secession

Introduction

Each secessionist process has its own characteristics, one of which is the type of discourse that the nationalist movement spreads in order to justify the need to separate from a state. In other words, what is the motivation for citizens of a given territory to want to separate from the state in which they live? Logically, this motivation is subject

to change, depending on how the historical context is interpreted and the strategies deployed by the movement.

In relation to Basque nationalism, the object of our study, why do some Basques wish for independence? The discourse, herein called *classical*, developed by Basque nationalism to justify the desire for independence, has focused on national identity, and on the fact of feeling only Basque. With this discourse, Basque nationalism seeks to convince citizens of this national reality, and needs the greatest number possible of Basque nationalists. However, at the same time, we can appreciate a discourse open to issues like personal and social wellbeing, which, apart from trying to win over new adherents to nationalism, seeks the support of citizens who are avowedly not Basque nationalists, but who might be interested in a pro-independence process depending on said social or personal interests.

These two discourses should not be confused with the analytical distinction between ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism. The truth is that, on the one hand, both ethnic and civic variants are possible in the classical discourse put forward; and, on the other, the second discourse seeks not only to create nationalists but to also win over people who may even have another national identity.

The aim of the present article is to learn more about the reality of these discourses in the Basque Country today, and to see if the second discourse has given rise to a new, more open attitude to independence in sectors previously opposed to and, above all, undecided about the question. To this end, we shall examine the origin of these discourses, analyse the written documents of the main Basque nationalist players and, in particular, we shall use the information gathered during our own research in the Basque Country.

As we shall see, in the European context of secessionism in the twenty first century, the

first, classical discourse still retains most of its former vigour, but fired by the experience in Catalonia and Scotland, the second discourse is becoming increasingly popular within the Basque nationalist movement. In this way, the base for possible commitment to the independence of the Basque Country would feed not only on followers of Basque nationalism. A mass of undecided people with no specific position regarding the issue, but not closed to the independence of the Basque Country, would get on board, if this implied some personal benefit.

The classical discourse: national identity as a way towards independence in Basque nationalism

As with other *great ideas* of modernity, peripheral, nationalist movements in Europe sought to gain converts to their tenets, and, to this end, a *strong* national identity had to be built, to differentiate them from other national identities (on the role of the *Other* in the construction of the *National we*, cf. Triandafyllidou, 1998). When we speak of national identity, we refer to a collective identity, understood in a variety of ways. According to Anthony D. Smith, in Western tradition, it “involves some sense of political community, however tenuous” (1991: 9).

The main elements of this identity have always been diverse and forever changing depending on the reality of each nationalist movement and each territory (see Guibernau, 2007; Özkirimli, 1999). Moreover, the elements on which it is based need not always be explicit and rationalised but are often symbolic or banal (as understood by Michael Billig, 1995). Thus, in Catalonia, language, given its widespread use, has been used as the main element to define the nation, whereas, in Scotland, arguments of a more historical and socio-economic nature have been used, and language is rarely mentioned (see, among others, Barrera, 1997, for Catalonia; and McCrone, 2001, for

Scotland).

In the Basque case too, in its efforts to attract adherents, a variety of channels have been used in the classical discourse. First of all, following the emergence of the Basque Nationalist Party, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a first discourse based on *race* was presented (for the peculiar perception of *race* in the first form of Basque nationalism, Douglass, 2004), and then gradually evolved towards more open stances. Subsequently, Basque nationalism came under the influence of the socialist movements popular in the nineteen sixties, particularly the anti-colonialist trend. Insurrectional nationalist movements emerged within these processes, and they rapidly turned into pressure movements to negotiate certain improvements for their respective regions (see, e.g., McCrone, 1998: 128 and following; Núñez Seixas, 1998; or Rubiralta, 1997). From then onwards, Basque nationalism has developed two great national agendas: a cultural one, linked to the defence of the Basque language, and common to the two main political currents at the time (PNV and ETA); and the second, at the political level, class oppression, developed by ETA.

Both agendas became highly relevant. The first gave rise to an extremely active cultural movement: in a merging of cultural and political interests (opposed to Franco's dictatorship), a large number of associations and groups were founded to promote music and dance, mountaineering and trekking, and festivals, particularly in defence, and to further the teaching of the Basque language. Basque became the central element of Basque identity, and, as such, it is widely recognized today, though not the sole one, as can be appreciated in a study encompassing the entire Basque Country by Baxok and others (2006: 55-56). This study reveals a change of attitude among young people in particular in the present century, in the sense that they no longer attributed such a central role to the Basque language.

At the same time, as already mentioned, a second, more political agenda was developed. In line with socialist trends, it sought to channel the concept of the nation as a suitable framework for raising the question of class struggle. Thus, at a time when there was increased tension due to major migratory waves from Spain, and when the Basque language was clearly in decline in the Basque Country, ETA felt it could equally argue that “Basque is the quintessence of Euzkadi [Basque Country]: while the Basque language lives, Euzkadi will live” (Hordago, 1979: I, 194); and, on the other hand, that the Basque people are made up of “the Basque proletariat and diverse oppressed elements in other social classes” (Hordago, 1979: VII, 98). This standpoint gave rise to a series of cultural expressions linked to left-wing nationalism, which associate Basqueness with protest movements (Kasmir, 2002), particularly from the nineteen eighties onwards.

To these two agendas we would also have to add, effectively, an intermediate solution, calling as it did for political engagement in favour of Basque nationalist positions, while allowing the defence of an identity to be combined with the construction of a non-exclusive identity (Conversi, 1997: 240; Huszka, 2014; Jeram, 2016). People were invited to adhere to nationalism for linguistic and cultural reasons as well as for social, economic, political and ideological reasons. In any case, the idea of a Basque national identity, incompatible with Spanish national identity, was further developed.

Thus, this classical discourse is clearly evident in the tenets of the Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV, a Christian democrat party). As pointed out by Manu Montero, from the nineteen seventies onwards, the party embraced identity-related nationalism, and was willing to allow those who did not feel Basque to convert to their tenets (2015: 14). As for the other great branch of Basque nationalism, in his overview and analysis of the

history of the Nationalist Left, Raul Zelik (2017) highlighted its insistence on the identity component as well as its clear, political, left-wing component.

This formula seems to have worked for Basque nationalism, as it has managed to achieve a significant degree of popular support, as is constantly reflected in data from the different surveys carried out in the Basque Country for measuring the population's aspirations for independence from Spain. These surveys are more frequent in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country.ⁱ So, drawing on Moreno's categories (1988), in 2019, 22% felt only Basque, which rose to 44% if the *More Basque than Spanish* category were added. At the other end, 6% felt only Spanish, which rose to 10% were we to add the *More Spanish than Basque* category. In the middle, 32% affirmed they felt *As much Basque as Spanish*. As far as the wish, or lack of, for independence, the same study in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country indicated that 23% was in favour of the independence of the Basque Country; 32%, against, and 26% , in favour "depending on the circumstances" (as well as 19% who did not know, did not answer).ⁱⁱ

Added to this classical discourse, based on the promotion of Basque national identity, since the close of the twentieth century, another discourse, which incorporates greater concern with personal and collective wellbeing, has been taking hold (see Zabalo and Odriozola, 2017).

The emerging discourse: in search of new supporters of independence

Globalisation, migratory flows, minority rights, etc. have led, in recent decades, to an intense debate on diversity, a concept which could clash with that of identity. It is widely accepted that diversity needs to be managed from the defence of democracy and human rights, but a variety of proposals have been put forward. On the one hand are

those who, while recognizing diversity, believe that it could affect liberal democracies (from diverse standpoints, see Appiah, 2005, or Gutmann, 2004; and Walzer, 1997). The second proposal comes from a number of liberal philosophers and so-called community philosophers. For the latter, diversity is not a problem to be solved, but rather a, very often, enriching fact of social life (with different angles, see Kymlicka, 1995; or Taylor, 1992).

In this context, the nationalist movements of the Western stateless territories too start to rethink diversity and end up making new, more inclusive proposals for that part of society far removed from the national identity proclaimed by these nationalist movements. We would mention the cases of Quebec, Scotland and Catalonia (for a comprehensive presentation, see Keating, 1996).

What is truly interesting about Quebec is the intensification in the theory on the right to self-determination, with a view to applying it, not to an overseas colony, but rather to a considerable part of the national territory. This gave rise to an interesting academic, political and legal debate (see, Macedo and Buchanan, 2003; or Moore, 1998), in which it was widely considered that, in a democratic context, there is always some formula to provide for the will of the people, and a decision taken by the majority (without entering into the debate on the *origin* of the majority) must be taken into account by all parties. This was evident in the referendums held in Quebec (1980 and 1995), and it could be said that it was upheld in the referendum that took place in Scotland in 2014 (see Hassan, 2009; McCrone, 2001). Nevertheless, when one of the two parties involved, that is, the established state, removes this possibility, new theories necessarily spring up.

In the case of Catalonia, and with respect to Spain, we can see there was a fresh attempt to theorise on the possibility of seceding from the established state by invoking democratic rights, namely, the existence of a *demos*, a political community, rather than a

nation. However, this is interpreted in different ways by each party (see Cuadras-Morato, 2016; or Vilajosana, 2014). The Catalan experience points to an intensification of the defence of the democratic right to decide on a variety of subjects, with the result that, rather than speaking of the right to self-determination, it is the concept of the *right to decide* that is being invoked.

According to Jaume López, the right to decide does not focus, to the same extent, on the *specific right* of a given region or nation to decide its future. Here, the debate tends to concentrate on whether, in each case, the conditions laid down for this right are met or not. He, on the other hand, leads the debate to the right “to a democratic principle: to participate in a decision”, and therefore considers it “based on a principle of *democratic radicalism*”, which is not necessarily linked to a nation, but rather “it refers to citizens who have the right to decide because the decision affects them” (2011: 24).

The implications of this democratic discourse on theory and political practice are obvious. In theory, nation and state become independent elements, and the concept of the nation-state is avoided. The independent state becomes a multipurpose tool, and not only for safeguarding the nation. In practice, the aim is not so much to engage the population to identify themselves with a given nation, but to make them appreciate the advantages that the new political project proposed could imply in terms of the economy, society, culture and politics.

All these new proposals put forward in the processes in Quebec, Scotland or Catalonia have expanded quickly in a Basque Country faced with a new context following ETA’s decision to cease its armed activity in 2011 (and then dissolve in 2018) and have led to a debate on new political practice. Their influence is easily appreciated in the new theories emerging as well as in political activity.

As regards theory, the Scottish experience has helped highlight the importance that more material factors, such as social welfare, should have in nationalist formulation, to the detriment of proposals more closely linked to cultural and ethnic identity (see, among others, Olariaga et al., 2016). It cannot be said to be a new discourse in the Basque Country, but it has attained a level of acceptance which it had previously failed to achieve. Indeed, other academic studies have already pointed out that economic or material factors have taken on greater importance in recent times, as a result of the influence of Catalonia (Alkorta and Leonisio, 2019).

Moreover, the Catalan experience has helped, above all, to popularise the right to decide. This has led, for example, to the setting up of a large association in favour of the right to decide, *Gure Esku* (It's in our hands) (cf. Scensei and Columbia University, 2015), which reflects the new ways of doing things, and has its origin mainly in Catalonia.ⁱⁱⁱ As far as parliamentary political activity is concerned, since 2018, the Basque Parliament has been working on drawing up a new Statute of Autonomy. Though far removed from the practical experience in Catalonia, with this project, the Basque Nationalist Party, together with the nationalist left (EH Bildu), reveal that they are in favour of including the right to decide, in line with the Catalan conceptualisation.^{iv}

In the study outlined below, we shall see how both discourses persist and how a change in attitude is perceptible in sectors so far showing no sympathy for the cause for independence of the Basque Country.

Methodology

In order to be able to understand and show the reality of both discourses and of the new attitudes towards the pro-sovereignty process in the Basque Country, it was necessary to

move forward with the type of questions asked. In other words, apart from asking the usual questions on the wish, or lack thereof, for independence (associated with the classical discourse, and the answer thereto was very closely linked to the national identity of the informant), it was necessary to include questions related to the supposed (economic, social, cultural) benefit that a Basque state would bring. Moreover, given that the aim was to study Basque nationalism in its entirety, namely, in all the territories where it is present, it must be stressed that the study was carried out in the different territories making up the Basque Country, and not only in some of its administrative units.

To reach the objectives set, a qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate and, so, 13 *focus groups* were set up with an aim to gaining an insight into the socially relevant discourses on the matter at hand. In all, 92 people took part. The groups were formed between March and October 2015, and were made up of between 3 and 10 people, throughout the entire Basque territory: nine in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (representing 70% of the total population), two in the Foral Community of Navarre, and two in the Community of the Basque Country. The groups were formed in provincial capitals as well as in smaller towns. Thus, the groups were formed in areas where the Basque language is prominent as well as in others where its use is limited. Nine groups were formed in Spanish, two in Basque and another two in French (cf. Zabalo et al., 2016: 53 and following). As is usual in these cases, three main groups were identified with respect to their view on a hypothetical Basque state: in favour, against, and undecided.

In addition, in order to guarantee intra-group heterogeneity, the following variables were used: age, gender, employment status and electoral behaviour (abstentionists, voters of Basque nationalist parties or those against independence, and those split into

the left and right wings). Moreover, in two of the groups, the parents' origin was likewise taken into account (born within or outside the Basque Country). Thus, in all, three groups were formed with participants opposed to an independent state, three groups in favour of a Basque state, three groups with an Intermediate profile (with informants who were neither in favour or against a Basque state or were in favour of abstaining) and four mixed groups (combining, depending on the case, those in favour, against and Intermediate).

Code	Attitude towards a Basque State	Place ^v	Gender	Age	Employment status	Ideology / Other criteria
G1	In favour	San Sebastian (CAV)	4M 3F	3 (18-29) 4 (30-65)	1 Unemployed 4 Stable job 2 Irregular employment	4 Nationalist left sympathiser 3 Basque Nationalist Party sympathiser
G2	In favour	Bilbao (CAV)	4M 4F	2 (18-29) 4 (30-65) 2 (+65)	1 Unemployed 2 Student 2 Retired 3 Stable job	5 Pro-independence PNV 3 Pro-Autonomous Community PNV
G3	In favour	Cambo-les-Bains (CPB)	2M 3F	1 (18-29) 4 (30-65)	1 Unemployed 3 Stable job 1 Retired	5 Nationalist left
G4	In favour	Zarautz (CAV)	6M 2F	1 (18-29) 4 (30-65) 3 (+65)	1 Unemployed 4 Stable job 3 Retired	8 Nationalist left
G5	Mixed (In favour + Opposed)	Pamplona (CFN)	2M 1F	1 (18-29) 2 (30-65)	2 Stable job 1 Student	1 Non-nationalist left 2 Non-Basque nationalist 3 Nationalist, pro-Navarre
G6	Mixed (In favour + Opposed)	Bayonne (CPB)	2H 6F	3 (18-29) 5 (30-65)	7 Stable job 1 Retired	4 Basque nationalist 4 Non Basque nationalist
G7	Mixed (Opposed + Intermediate)	Vitoria-Gasteiz (CAV)	4M 3F	3 (18-29) 3 (30-65) 1 (+65)	3 Unemployed 3 Stable job 1 Retired	1 PSOE 2 PNV 2 Podemos 2 Variable vote
G8	Intermediate	Bilbao (CAV)	4M 5F	2 (18-29) 5 (30-65) 2 (+65)	3 Unemployed 3 Stable job 3 Irregular employment	2 Abstention, always 2 Abstention not always 3 Variable vote non-Basque nationalist 2 Variable vote Basque nationalist
G9	Intermediate	Portugalete (CAV)	4M 6F	3 (18-29) 7 (30-65)	6 Unemployed 4 Stable job	-Independence: do not know/do not answer -Origin: Parents born in the Basque Country
G10	Intermediate	Arrasate (CAV)	5M 2F	2 (18-29) 5 (30-65)	3 Unemployed 4 Stable job	-Independence: do not know/do not answer -Origin: Parents born outside the Basque Country, different regions of Spain
G11	Opposed	Pamplona (CFN)	6M 4F	4 (18-29) 4 (30-65)	5 Unemployed 5 Stable job	2 PP 3 PSOE

				2 (+65)		1 Others 4 Variable vote
G12	Opposed	Bilbao (CAV)	5M 5F	2 (18-29) 6 (30-65) 2 (+65)	7 Unemployed 3 Stable job	1 PP 1 PSOE 2 PNV 2 Others: Izquierda Unida 3 Variable vote
G13	Opposed	Barakaldo (CAV)	2M 2F	4 (30-65)	4 Stable job	4 PSOE

Source: Own figures.

Table 1. Make-up of the focus groups

Focus groups were formed in order to spontaneously gain insight into how the Basque population felt about this issue. Rather than a theoretical discourse on the nation, the idea was to find out their opinion on a hypothetical Basque state and the repercussion it would have on them: if they would agree or disagree with it, if it would imply any benefit or harm and if they felt that, depending on the circumstances, they would change their mind. If, instead, personal interviews had been carried out, it would not have been possible to go deeply into these issues; however, in a group, each member is constantly evaluating their opinion, depending on the arguments and pressure from the other members of the group.

According to Cyr (2016), three units of analysis can be identified in focus groups: the individual unit, in which the opinions that the individuals expressed in the context of the group are examined; the group unit, in which the prevailing consensus in the group is analysed; and the interaction unit, in which the deliberation process developed in the group is studied. As we shall see, in this work we shall consider the three levels, to which end, apart from the recordings, we shall avail of the factsheets for each group, together with the degree of consensus recorded.

As for the subject matter, three discussion topics were put forward: a) by way of an introduction, their opinion on the secessionist processes of Scotland and Catalonia; b)

their view of the 'right to decide' and their option on holding a referendum on independence in the Basque Country; and c) views on an independent Basque state, including the possibility of changing their view for or against, depending on the possible benefit or harm presented to the participants.

These topics were discussed with the aid of a script and guided by a moderator; whose intervention was kept to a minimum (their role was to ensure that participants did not stray from the matter under study). These groups were recorded, and the debates were later transcribed. Together with the transcripts, a factsheet was drawn up for each group, including all the prevailing opinions on each issue, thus enabling the analysis of the group opinion.

A Basque State: discourses and attitudes in favour

As already stated, in addition to the classical discourse for winning over people to the idea of an independent Basque Country based on national commitment, in recent years a second discourse has gained ground, one which aims at attracting sectors of the population unconnected to Basque nationalism, who, depending on the circumstances, could be drawn to the pro-sovereignty process. With the aid of the focus groups described in the previous paragraph, we aim to analyse whether there is reason to believe that the second discourse is being interiorised by Basque citizens, and, if so, if any change in attitude is perceptible in sectors far removed from those longing for independence? We refer to the opinions of ordinary Basque citizens (Basque nationalists or not), and not to discourses drawn up by political representatives. Similarly, being a qualitative study, emphasis is placed on the prevalent opinion lines studied and not their level of dissemination throughout Basque society.

We shall structure the analysis on three main trends (see Figure 1). First of all, the Basque nationalist discourse which we have called *classical*, in favour of an independent Basque state, especially for reasons of national identity. Secondly, another discourse emerging from Basque nationalism, in favour too of a Basque state, but including promises of social, economic or cultural improvements in the new state, with no need to be a Basque nationalist. Thirdly, a new attitude in favour of a Basque state, which does not derive from Basque nationalism, but rather from the group who is undecided about this issue, and because of the possible benefits that a pro-sovereignty process could entail, as outlined in the emerging discourse. This last trend is, in our opinion, a new expression of pro-independence in the Basque Country, and differs from the attitude that is clearly opposed to a Basque state.

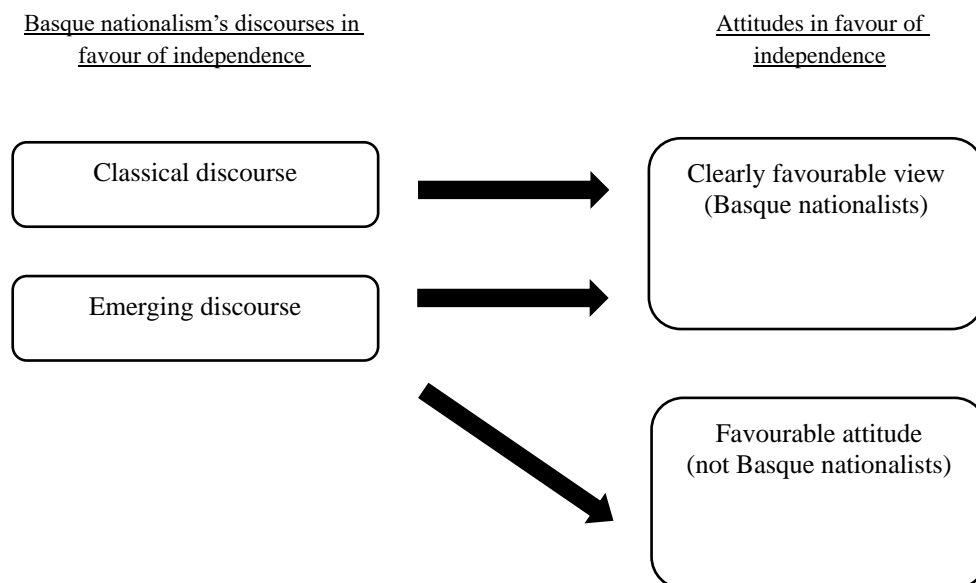


Figure 1. Discourses and attitudes in favour of the independence of the Basque Country

The permanence of the classical pro-independence discourse

It is clearly a discourse based on national identity, sufficient reason, according to its proponents, to be able to opt for a state of their own. It is widely shared in the G4 group, although the emerging discourse also shows up in this group, as we shall see later on:

“(...) right now, I am sure that the seven [Basque] provinces have the right [to form a state], because they have Basque identity” (G4-In favour).^{vi}

“What I’ve always believed is that I am not Spanish, and I want independence because I am Basque” (G4-In favour).

Generally speaking, in other groups too, some participants invoke the right to independence due to their being a nation:

“I believe we have acquired the right to be independent after so many years as a nation. And, for better or worse, we’ll pull through, as we have done on other occasions while subject to a Spanish government” (G2-In favour).

This fact being patently obvious to a Basque nationalist, it leads them to dispute the democratic nature of the state from which they wish to separate:

“Spain should allow us the right to decide what we want to be, and yet they don’t. That is not democratic! That’s how I see it, they are totally undemocratic. In my view, there is no democracy in Spain today” (G2-In favour).

As can be expected, there are numerous references to the Basque language, insofar as it is considered the main constituent of the Basque nation. Its preservation has thus become one of the fundamental reasons for creating an independent state:

“(...) above all language and identity are what differentiates us. The only thing that can ensure that this does not disappear is the Basque state” (G4-In

favour).

However, preservation of the Basque language clashes with the trilingual reality of the Basque Country and with the fact that, in large areas and segments of society, the percentage of use of the language is limited. Classical discourse advocates promoting Basque throughout the territory. Said view is defended in the G1 group, which speaks of a preliminary stage of recovery of the language in all public and private domains. Another participant in the G5 group provides a graphic description when they refer to a town in the southernmost part of Navarre where there are scarcely any Basque speakers:

“I would see a Basque state as a guarantee that I could go to Buñuel, for example, to the doctor’s and be able to speak in Basque. It would be a way of safeguarding the rights of citizens who can see that they are not currently being safeguarded. I believe that, in such a state, the right to work, socialise and live in Basque, for example, must be guaranteed. Like what is said about Spanish” (G5-Mixed).

To conclude, and to better understand the importance of the Basque language in this classical discourse, the following opinion of a member of the G4 group (an opinion shared by a part of the same group and by other groups, such as the G1 group) is very clear. With it, they imply that a Basque state is understood as a mere instrument for the main objective, which is that it must guarantee being able to live in Basque throughout Basque territory:

“I want to live like an euskaldun [Basque speaker], but I can’t. In my case, when a Basque state is established, the identity card is worth nothing, it won’t make me more of a Basque speaker, but, yes, it will mean that I can live as one” (G4-In favour).

Emerging pro-independence discourse

This discourse, as we have already pointed out, owes much to the processes unfolding in Catalonia and Scotland over the past few years, albeit in our groups it is only the Catalan experience that is in fact mentioned, it being the one closest to home. Consequently, one of the issues proposed in the focus groups was, precisely, to evaluate the Catalan pro-sovereignty experience. The comparison highlights the importance taken on by aspects not related to identity, which in Basque nationalism's classical discourse were overlooked or closely related to the nation.

For example, the importance of “economic and social factors” is mentioned, which helped attract different interests in favour of Catalan independence, despite the fact that “the majority in Catalonia are not inherently Catalan nationalists” (G1-In favour). It is a much-debated topic in this group, which considers that new alliances must be sought with non-Basque nationalist sectors who may be interested in a Basque state, and we need to move beyond the bipartisan scheme (PNV and EH Bildu) that controls the Basque nationalist movement. In this respect, popular bodies not linked to these parties, such as the abovementioned *Gure Esku*, have recently been playing a greater role. All these arguments are likewise reflected in the G4 group, among whom the Catalan experience has also generated enthusiasm because a new path has been opened on the road towards independence:

“In Catalonia, they placed greater value on the idea that [with independence] they will have a better life. I don't know how dangerous this idea is, but the fact that somebody might think that they would have a better life if they were independent gives us hope” (G4-In favour).

The reflection arising as a result of these changes calls into question basic concepts of the classical discourse, such as a unitary Basque identity for the whole of the territory. In the G4 group in particular, an interesting debate took place on national sentiment, citizenship and the stance a Basque state should take. Thus, the proposal that a nation-state was the ideal solution for a plurinational territory like the Basque one was questioned, as it would necessarily lead to conflict.

In this discourse, preservation of a single Basque identity is no longer so important. The debate that took place in the next group points to this. They discussed the compatibility of the three main national identities (Basque, Spanish and French) with a hypothetical Basque citizenship:

“-But then, if the Basque state is based on one of these three identities, what happens to the other two? How will the people with a Spanish or French identity live in a Basque state?”

-Well, some will certainly go on being Spanish or French, but they will be Basque citizens” (G4-In favour).

In general, said compatibility is stressed in the following group, although in reference to the Basque and French identities:

“In a Basque state two nationalities could be permitted” (G3-In favour).

The mere fact alone of posing this question implies an evident change with respect to the classical discourse. Moreover, as is summed up in the following group, many participants are aware that it is the discourse that remains to be *built*:

“(…) the Spanish will carry on being Spanish in Euskal Herria, and the French, French, etc. So, in my view, that’s the discourse to build, because the Spanish too will be happier in an independent Euskal Herria” (G4-In favour).

Consequently, we see topics rarely used in the classical discourse cropping up, and nation is no longer the core of the discourse. The importance of wellbeing, improvements in social questions, is a constant, and its necessity is proposed if the ultimate goal is independence. This is how the G1 and G4 groups understand it. More specifically, the following participant in the G3 group asserts:

“A programme dealing with the local economy and development [is necessary]. It could be explained to citizens that if we had a state there would be an end to the relocation of jobs (...) and the economic development of our people would be fomented (...) health and education would be strengthened” (G3-In favour).

What would be the role of the main element of the nation, that is, the Basque language? Here too we can appreciate, as is logical, new developments, particularly as this second discourse is fully aware of the linguistic reality of the Basque Country:

“The three languages existing in Euskal Herria (...) must be official... One thing is what we would like and quite another is reality” (G4-In favour).

Moreover, a difference is drawn between the starting point and the reality that would be achieved with an independent state:

“At the start, by necessity, all three [languages would be official]. Spanish is ours too. (...) At the beginning, all three, but states tend to integrate, to standardise... and so it would promote its own. I believe that Spanish and French are heritage, but, in the end, you need to promote your own” (G1-In favour).

It is, as we can see, an incipient discourse, which clashes with the classical perception. As well as the misgivings of those advocating the classical discourse, it also generates contradictions among those who defend this second discourse. This reveals how

personal interest is more voluble than the wish for independence from an identity-related standpoint or one linked to a nation.

Last of all, as is natural, the main doubts about, and criticism of, this discourse arise with regard to the Basque language. In the G4 group, there was a debate between people of either stance. Some argued –in line with the classical discourse– that the official language of a Basque state would necessarily be Basque, and others wondered if the proposal for three official languages would stifle any future the language may have:

“It looks like we have to be the coolest people in the world... If one day we do have a state of our own, Basque must be our language. I have no wish to oppress anyone, I just want us to have a state like everybody else’s” (G4-In favour).

“If all three languages are official, would that independent state be capable of guaranteeing the survival of Basque? I don’t know, I have my doubts...” (G4-In favour).

Pro-independence attitudes without nationalism. Why change attitude?

We shall now speak not of a new discourse, but rather of a sector of the population that is not, in principle, interested in the independence of the Basque Country, because they do not see it as something that belongs to them, or as essential to their identity. Therefore, it is a sector which, up to now, has not been considered as potentially in favour of a pro-independence process. However, not only has the emerging discourse evolving over the last few years opened the door for them to join the process, with the appeal of the possible benefits it could entail, but the nationalist movement itself is the one seeking their support.

In many cases, the stance of these undecided sectors is clear and can be appreciated in more than one group: identity-related issues would not encourage them to change but if there were a chance of social or personal benefit, they might be interested. Below are some of these clear opinions voiced by the groups:

“For me, economics is fundamental. Because, if you were to tell me that, instead of having the Spanish flag on my identity card, I was going to have the Basque one, it would be all the same to me. However, if you tell me I am going to have more work, would say where do I sign [for independence]” (G9- Intermediate).

“-I say no to independence because of the current situation in the Basque Country. Yet, if they manage to convince me, I will be the first to vote for independence.

- I think any of us would do so. If they give us reasons such as an improved standard of living, I think people would vote yes” (G7-Mixed).

Another matter is the plausibility we should afford these promises of greater welfare, but, in the hypothetical case that it were so, this member of the G7 group is also adamant:

“If I can be assured, which I doubt very much, that, by voting for independence, we are going to have a better socio-economic future and everything else, I would be the first to vote yes right now (G7- Mixed).

The doubts of this member of the G7 group (made up of intermediate and undecided views) are multiplied in others, which are composed of participants who are openly opposed to the independence of the Basque Country. Yet, worthy of mention is that, even in this case, the participant who questions the veracity of a promise of this kind likewise admits that they would, in theory, be willing to accept independence. What’s

more, in this type of group (intermediate or opposed), though it might seem paradoxical, said opinion predominated, over, for example, national identity or family origin. So,

“If somebody sugars the pill and says that [in a Basque independent state] a different, new and original, economic system is going to be set up, we might all be happy with the flag [in reference to the Basque flag, metonymy for independence], and I would be the first. If I it were proven to me that I would have a better life than now...” (G12-Opposed).

“I believe that the decisive element [for being in favour of independence] is financial wellbeing. I’m referring to future generations. Financial wellbeing, and, for them, [the Basque Country] would be their country. I have no idea where their parents come from, let alone their grandparents or great grandparents...” (G13-Opposed).

However, there are some who believe that a Basque sovereignty project is viable and that they would benefit from it, especially if it were to be compared with Spain (in the case of the groups formed in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country and the Foral Community of Navarre), which is considered less economically viable than the Basque Country. This is backed up both these statements:

“I think so [we would have a better life in a Basque state] because more money would stay here. We could do more, there would be more jobs” (G8-Intermediate).

“If you were told that the country you are separating from is the USA, the wealthiest country in the world, would you separate or not? Of course, Spain is a hindrance (...) The economic question is very important, because there is tendency for us to move to where it is warmer” (G12- Opposed).

At any rate, as we can appreciate, all the debates in these groups made up of undecided

people revolve around the questions related to personal or social welfare. What about other aspects, those related to identity, for example? The G11 group made up of people opposed to independence is politically diverse, and offers interesting opinions, going beyond personal welfare. Below is a summary of the concerns about identity or democracy. In both cases, it is thought that, if these issues were satisfactorily resolved, they would have no objection to joining a sovereignty process:

“[In a Basque state] I assume that [Spanish] culture and traditions will be safeguarded. But I think that most important of all is our wallet. For me it would be very interesting to be able to manage our money, establish our priorities and show solidarity” (G11-Opposed).

The keys to the three groups analysed on this occasion are summed up in Figure 2.

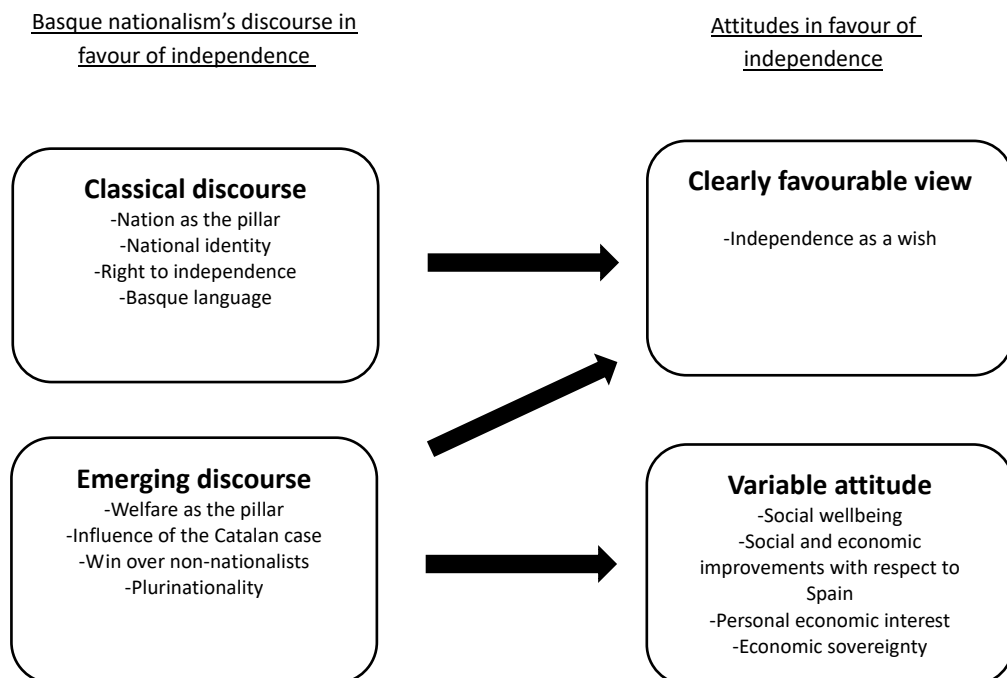


Figure 2. Keys in the discourses and attitudes in favour of the independence of the Basque Country

Conclusions

What we have called the *classical discourse* of Basque nationalism has traditionally consisted in winning people over to nationalist ideology, with the aim of building up enough force to gain access to increasingly greater levels of political power. This was the case with its two major political currents, on the one hand, (the nationalists with the PNV as a reference) with the aim of increasing its power in the institutions of the autonomous communities; and, on the other (the nationalist left) to force negotiations with the central government.

Historically, the discourse has been underpinned by two great elements, in the first place, the concept of race or ethnicity, and in more recent times, the language. Nevertheless, whatever the case may be, its aim was to build a Basque national identity, incompatible with the Spanish or French national identity, and, to this end, it needed to lay claim to its own state. This focus, as we have pointed out, bound people to *feel* the need to create an independent Basque state, which is why, in the frequent polls carried out to measure support for nationalist demands, it was sufficient to ask about the wish to be able to opt for an independent Basque state, in the belief that only those who felt Basque nationalist could want that political objective.

In the present century, another discourse with fewer demands with respect to identity and with a greater emphasis on a fairer and more democratic social project has been added to the classical discourse that dominated the entire twentieth century and persists to this day. Rather than seeking to win people over to the nationalist cause in general, this second discourse looks for possible support for a consultation on a Basque state;

and the basis of the discourse is underpinned to a greater extent on concepts of wellbeing than those of identity, thus enabling an opening up to non-politicised sectors, which had been out of reach with the former scheme of things. Consequently, the idea would appear to be, to some extent, to separate the categories of nationalism and independence.

The emergence of this second discourse has clear consequences in terms of how the independence of the Basque Country is understood, as it is no longer the sole objective of Basque nationalism, as was the case with the classical discourse, and might be supported by a part of the non- Basque nationalist population which might, at some time, be interested in the advantages that a Basque state could afford.

Though conflicting, both discourses logically converge in a stance which is favourable to a Basque state. Likewise, worthy of mention is a second stance which could favour independence, among sectors far removed from Basque nationalism. This study reflects the trends in these discourses and attitudes. In other words, on being asked who is in favour of the independence of the Basque Country we can appreciate two standpoints, apart from these two discourses:

- A stance which is unequivocally in favour of an independent Basque state. It is supported by a highly active group, among whom the question of national identity is still relevant. One of its versions upholds the classical discourse, whereas another more recent one places the emphasis on factors that are not associated to the same extent with ideology, making it more appealing to those who are undecided. There is a general awareness of the importance of this latter group because of the prospect of a hypothetical referendum on independence.

- The stance held by those who are undecided, holding no clear posture, either in favour or against Basque independence, because they attach little importance to these

matters. Yet the prospect of possible personal improvement proposed by the emerging discourse makes the path towards independence more appealing.

The stance of these undecided people in the future could be the key for the future of a present-day claim to a state on the part of Basque nationalism. Even if the movement manages to win their support, it does not appear, in any case, to be a permanent, ideological stance but rather circumstantial and liable to further change.

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Notes

ⁱ The Basque Country is divided into three administrative districts. The Autonomous Community of the Basque Country is located in Spain and is the westernmost as well as the most populated (the provinces of Alava, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa), and its political majority is Basque nationalist, from the centre-right to the left. The central territory (the Foral Community of Navarre) has traditionally had a regionalist right-wing majority (Spanish nationalist), although, since 2015, an alternative coalition, comprising, among other parties, Basque nationalist parties, took over the government. Last of all, the Community of the Basque Country is located in France, and Basque nationalism's voting strength is weaker, although it is on the rise, at around 15%.

ⁱⁱ All data in the Sociómetro Vasco 71, points 4.8. and 4.9 Office of Sociological Research, President's Office of the Basque Government.
https://www.euskadi.eus/contenidos/documentacion/sociometro_vasco_71/es_def/adjuntos/19sv71.pdf, access on 03 February 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ This group has formed human chains covering hundreds of kilometres and it has held referendums on a sovereign Basque Country in numerous towns. Three major demonstrations were held in Bilbao in September and October 2017, in support of the Catalan process, at a critical moment, and there have been constant visits and talks by Catalan speakers.

^{iv} For example, El País of 7 February 2018,
https://elpais.com/politica/2018/02/06/actualidad/1517932940_504697.html access on 10 February 2020. Last of all, aspects related to the nation and the right to decide have led to clear discrepancies among political parties, and, following the dissolution of Parliament in February 2020, it is not known whether it

will finally be drawn up. The differences in the draft of the Statute can be seen at <http://www.legebiltzarra.eus/portal/web/eusko-legebiltzarra/ponencias-autogobierno/xi-legislatura>

^v The following acronyms were used: for the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, CAV; for the Foral Community of Navarre, CFN; and for the Community of the Basque Country, CPB.

^{vi} The focus groups are codified as follows: group number in the research, and participants' profile (in favour, informants in favour of an independent Basque state; opposed, against independence; Intermediate, with people who are neither in favour or against independence; and mixed, with participants from the different profiles mentioned).

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