

Sincerity and Strategy in Games of Secession: Two Puzzles
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This paper examines the logical structure of a theoretical claim sometimes found in the literature on secession.

The Claim

The central claim consists of three closely linked propositions: (A) Publicly-expressed support for secession is a negotiating position, (B) Secession is a threat, and (C) The public expression of support for secession is insincere. Linking these propositions yields this type of claim: Insincere secessionists threaten to secede in order to extract resources from a central authority. Their public support for secession does not reveal their preferences.

However, this claim might be prone to two types of mistakes. First, on the face of it, this line of reasoning could not account for the occurrence of secession. Second, as it stands and on its own terms, the claim might not fully specify the mechanisms and paths that are associated with the absence of secession.

A Question, a Problem and Two Puzzles

Is secession consistent with these propositions? On the face of it, if these propositions were accurate descriptors of the world, there would be no cases of secession.

In order to consider how to interpret these propositions in light of this question, it is useful to specify the key terms of the propositions as variables (with their putative qualitative values in parentheses): preferences over secession (insincere or sincere), concessions (existence or non-existence; feasible and recognized or feasible and not recognized) and threats (implemented or not).

Under some values of these variables, these situations are not secession-proof. First, if publicly-expressed support for secession is sincere, rather than insincere, these states of affairs are not secession-proof. Second, if there are no feasible concessions, these states of affairs are not secession-proof. Third, if feasible concessions exist, but are not recognized, then these states of affairs are not secession-proof. Fourth, insincere supporters of secession might or might not instantiate their threat to secede, in the absence of concessions.

However, not all values of these variables are consistent with the logic of the claim and so some of the situations described in the paragraph above must be ruled out. Most importantly, secession cannot be made consistent with these propositions by introducing sincere preferences for secession. After all, if there are real supporters of secession, then their public support for secession is not insincere. In emphasizing the existence of support expressed in bargaining and in linking such support to threat-making and to concession-extraction, this claim effectively limits the relevance of publicly-expressed sincere support and what this kind of support presupposes – what I have called ‘real’ support.

Still, concessions may or may not be feasible, and they may not be recognized even if they exist – this much is not a violation of the claim discussed here. Even at this stage, however, a problem can be raised.

Granted that within this approach we must begin from the position that secession is instrumentally used as a threat, why, in the absence of concessions, would an insincere secessionist make good his or her threat by proceeding to secede? Secession marks a fundamental break in the relationship between the central authority and the seceding unit. There is no obvious reason why establishing or maintaining a reputation for toughness, for example, which is one basic reason why a threat is instantiated, would be an incentive for insincere secessionists to proceed to secede.

Moreover, if this is a valid problem, another and perhaps larger issue is raised: Absent a reason to make good a threat, how can a threat of secession be made credible¹? Further, if this threat is not credible, then it is not clear why a central authority would make concessions to the actors making the threats.

This claim and these propositions seem to be about to unravel completely. However, in order to consider these issues in more detail here, two puzzles are introduced and discussed.

The first puzzle is now clearer: *First Puzzle*: If support for secession is insincere, how can secession occur? The second puzzle is posed in such a way as to raise separately the issue of the credibility of the threat to secede. This second puzzle sets the problem of credibility within different states of the international economy, which are conventionally taken to be conditions that influence the likelihood of secession. *Second Puzzle*: If support for secession is insincere, how can increasing economic openness make the threat of secession more credible?

The discussion of these two questions will broach a basic point. It is that the claim, as expressed in the linked propositions above, is incoherent. The claim continually presupposes the existence of sincere support for secession. As a consequence, the claim is self-contradictory. The claim is self-contradictory, and therefore incoherent, because, on the one hand, it rules out sincere support for secession as inconsistent with its theoretical logic while continuing to presuppose that sincere support exists.

The First Puzzle

Three ways to answer this first puzzle posed above are presented here. Each begins from the assumption, essential to this approach, that support for secession is insincere.

(1) First of all, then, a central authority (hereafter a ‘state agent’) takes insincere supporters of secession to be sincere supporters. The agent fully concedes to them and agrees to secession.

¹ Keep in mind that a threat has a different structure than a warning.

The premise of this argument -- that an agent might mistake insincere for sincere support -- has some plausibility. An insincere supporter has private knowledge which is not immediately available to the state agent, and it is this asymmetry in knowledge which the insincere supporter seeks to exploit and turn to his or her advantage. The insincere supporter knows that her public expression of support is insincere. She should want to be taken as a sincere supporter, rather than reveal her true preference, because then her demand for secession has more credibility. On the public surface, therefore, insincere and sincere supporters may look alike to the state agent.

The premise therefore has plausibility. Yet its plausibility depends on the difficulty of distinguishing the real motives of public actions. The state agent is being asked to take seriously what is ruled out from the start in the claim and its linked propositions -- namely that sincere support for secession exists. The premise is plausible but not consistent with the claim.

Furthermore, how can an insincere secessionist make her public support for secession credible without increasing the likelihood that she will be mistaken for a sincere supporter of secession? She wants to appear to be sincere. If her credibility depends on her ability to disguise herself as a sincere secessionist, and she is taken for a sincere supporter by the state agent, then there are responses from the state agent which she, as an insincere supporter, will find unpalatable.

One response from the state agent is to make no concession at all. The state agent might believe that concessions to a sincere secessionist at time t encourage further demands at time $t+n$ and decide as a consequence of this belief not to make a concession. This leaves the insincere secessionist in a situation inferior to the desired situation in which some concessions are made.

Another response, however, is for the state agent to concede full secession. This, too, leaves the insincere secessionist in an inferior situation because the insincere secessionist does not desire secession, she only desires concessions produced as a consequence of the threat of secession. Further, if the agent concedes secession it is for the same reasons (whatever they might be) that the agent would concede secession if support for secession were sincere since, by assumption, the agent, in not being able to distinguish sincere from insincere support, is acting as if support for secession is sincere.

Either way, the insincere secessionist has failed to fulfill her desire to extract concessions short of full independence. Thus this question should be put: Is there a way for the insincere secessionist to establish the credibility of her commitment to secession without mimicking sincerity? Further, absent a solution to this problem faced by insincere supporters, is an insincere supporter better off signaling that she is willing to settle for something less than secession? Yet if she signals this, a threat to secede is no threat at all, and the state agent has no reason to make any concessions to her.

(2) Secondly, then, the state agent does not believe that publicly observable support for secession is sincere. The agent responds to the insincere expression of support for secession by agreeing to secession.

Again the premise here – that the agent believes he can distinguish insincere and sincere support -- is plausible. But why would a state agent agree to secession if he believes that the public expression of support for secession is insincere? With this knowledge, the agent could simply refuse to make any concessions at all.

The agent of the state, however, has private information of his own regarding his or her preferences. He concedes secession when he calculates that it is the interest of the state to do so. The consequence is to hoist the insincere secessionist by her public position: “You said you desired secession – here it is”. It then becomes difficult for a publicly-committed supporter of secession to argue that the state agent has bargained in bad faith or demanded too much compromise, when the state agent’s concession fulfills the publicly-expressed desire of the insincere secessionist.

The insincere secessionist in this situation has wrongly assumed that the state does not prefer or will not accept secession. In effect, the agent calls the insincere secessionist’s bluff, not by refusing secession but by agreeing to it.

The occurrence of secession has been made consistent with the existence of insincere support for secession in this situation, but note that this result depends on the conjunction of these two factors: Feasible concessions from the state do not exist *and* the insincere supporter of secession does not know this. The state preference is actually stronger than this: Its agent prefers secession not only to any concession but also to the status quo ante, such that the ideal points of a sincere secessionist and the state would be effectively the same. If the insincere secessionist knew that the state preferred secession to any concession and to the status quo, then she would not have expressed support for secession. Secession does occur in this scenario but, effectively, it is not secession of the referent group but secession of the center.

(3) Insincere supporters threaten secession. They threaten secession in order to extract concessions. The agent of the state does not make concessions. Insincere supporters of secession secede.

The insincere secessionist makes good her threat. But why would she? In some situations in which threats are made, they are carried out in order to establish or maintain a reputation for toughness that will influence outcomes in the future. In general, reputation effects can be exploited outside of an original dyad. It is not obvious that this is the situation here, however, and to secede is to break off those relations within which reputation might most matter in the future. If secession occurs, a reputation for toughness might provide some bargaining advantages for the new state, if it is formed, but is the prospect of these advantages enough to explain why the insincere secessionist makes good her threat?

The Second Puzzle

In light of this analysis, consider the proposition that globalization makes the threat to secede from an existing state more credible, let us say by increasing the efficiency of independence. Other propositions use different language but make essentially the same point. A different version might take this form: International market integration (hereafter for convenience I refer to 'interdependence' rather than globalization or economic integration) increases the likelihood of economic viability after a period of transition and these consequences of interdependence make the threat of secession more credible.

However, if interdependence increases the efficiency of independence, and we as observers know this, why would state agents not also know it? If this proposition is common knowledge among state agent and secessionists, and commonly believed, how can interdependence make the threat of secession more credible?

The state of the international economy, as modeled in this proposition, is not private knowledge. Further, an important feature of this situation and implicit model is that the state of the international economy is typically exogenous in the following sense – its state is not very sensitive at any one time to the activities of any one economy. According to this position, the varying costs of new state formation associated with various states of the international economy are not endogenous to the actions of the parties involved in this situation – a state agent and a set of would-be seceders. The state of the international economy is a parameter. If the state of the international economy is publicly observable and common knowledge, if it is exogenous in the sense above, interdependence should not have the direct consequence of making a threat to secede more credible but, all other things equal, it still might increase the likelihood that secession will occur.

This point should hold over two different types of inferences. The first is a static, cross-sectional comparison among cases, holding all else equal. The second is a dynamic comparison across time within a case or cases.

More specifically for the latter type of inference, at time t , there is either some positive level of public support for secession (sincere or insincere) or there is no support. If at time t , a state agent judges support for secession to be insincere and public commitment to secession not to be credible why, if interdependence increases, would the state agent modify his position and judge the threat to secede to be credible when it was judged not credible at time t ? Alternatively, if at time t , there was no public support for secession to observe and, at time $t+n$, there is some positive level of public support, and if there is more interdependence at time $t+n$ than at time t , then why would increasing interdependence increase the credibility of a threat to secede?

How can interdependence have this effect? What interdependence does is to increase the probability that public support for secession is sincere, for the following reasons. Sincere supporters of secession are motivated to achieve secession rather than to threaten it. Individuals who are motivated to achieve independence will express and act on their

motivations according to their sensitivity to the costs of secession. Increasing interdependence lowers the costs of secession, all else equal. As interdependence increases and costs go down, more individuals are likely to express their (sincere) support for secession. Interdependence increases the level of sincere support for secession.

If interdependence has consequences which make concessions more likely to be made by the state agent or which enlarge the range of feasible concessions recognized by the state agent, it is because interdependence makes it more difficult for the state agent to distinguish insincere from sincere support for secession.

Interdependence makes the sincere public expression of support for secession more likely and this, in turn, makes it more likely that the state agent observes sincere rather than insincere support for secession. It also increases the likelihood that the state agent will mistake insincere for sincere support for secession, since insincere supporters are mimicking the public commitments of sincere supporters. Interdependence therefore does have consequences but they are indirect.

Interdependence can have the direct consequence of making a threat to secede more credible only if this consequence does not depend on the effects of interdependence on sincere support for, according to the logic being probed here, only the insincere threat of secession exists. Once it is argued, as above in the preceding two paragraphs, that interdependence has consequences for the credibility of threats to secede only through its effects on sincere support for secession, we have violated the underlying logic of the claim under review.

In considering these two puzzles, it has been argued that the claim and the linked propositions which are the focus of this discussion continually presuppose the existence of sincere support for secession, while the theoretical logic which underpins the claim rules this kind of support out. This contradiction yields a claim which, as it stands, is inconsistent.

As a further consequence, the following kind of situation cannot be fully understood within the logic of the claim:

A state agent makes concessions, not directly in response to a threat to secede and therefore not according to the credibility or efficacy of a threat, but in order to strengthen the relative social and political power of those who oppose secession within some referent group but who prefer some concessions to the status quo. These latter individuals win concessions, then, not because they have threatened secession but because they can point to the existence of sincere support for secession among those who are motivated by the desire to secede rather than motivated by the desire to win concessions caused by the threat to secede. In this situation, moreover, the state agent is not making concessions directly to sincere supporters of secessions.

Concessions are made neither in response to a threat from insincere supporters nor are they made to mollify sincere supporters by moving partially toward their ideal point.

Rather concessions are made to thwart sincere supporters by strengthening a different subset of the collectivity in question.

Thus, if the state agent judges that there is relatively little sincere support for secession, he may make no concessions because he can conclude that concessions are not needed. The probability of secession is low. If there is very substantial sincere support for secession, on the other hand, he may also not make concessions -- on the expectation that they would be counter-productive, encouraging at the margin (where the margin counts because of the absolute level of support) future mobilization for secession rather than restraining it. But the concessions, if they are to benefit the opponents and not its supporters, must be streamed in a particular way. They should be strictly private. A concession which benefits opponents and supporters alike does not do the work of strengthening the opponents at the expense of the supporters. Sincere secessionists can still attempt to exploit concessions whenever they are made, if concessions come in the form of public goods. Then the problem is that private concessions are not really concessions at all; they are more like side payments.

Moreover, those individuals who oppose secession but who prefer concessions to the status quo have an interest in exaggerating the level of sincere support for secession in the referent group in order to increase the size of the side-payment. We might have thought that the opponents of secession would have a direct interest in policing secessionists within the group, isolating them or exposing them. But, in fact, some sincere support for secession within the group can work to their advantage. Thus this situation is not intrinsically strategy-proof but it cannot be understood without introducing sincere support for secession.