

1 *Introduction*

Future Historians may call our era “the age of Secession.”

– Allen Buchanan, “Self-Determination,
 Secession, and the Rule of Law”

The world map changes all the time, and the dominant trend since the mid twentieth century has been one of state proliferation. One hundred thirty-one sovereign states have been born since 1945, a threefold increase in seventy years. Current events in Ukraine, Scotland, Catalonia, and Myanmar illustrate that nationalism and the demand for self-determination remain potent forces in international life. Although some nations aim merely to exit their existing state and join their kin and co-nationals who have been sundered by borders not of their making, most self-determination movements desire to secede and form an independent country. Moreover, there is a recursive nature to this process as new secessionist movements rise up to replace those that are seceding and forming new sovereign states.¹ If the rate of state birth were to continue at its current pace, there would be 260 countries in the world by 2050 and 354 by the end of the twenty-first century.² We are truly living in an age of secession.

This was not always the case, and if we widen the historical lens to encompass the past two centuries, the pattern in the international system shows a clear transition from an era of state aggregation to one of fragmentation (see Figure 1.1).³ One indicator of aggregation was that the number of sovereign states decreased over time as countries engaged in the processes of unification, conquest, and accession. This

¹ Fazal and Griffiths 2014; Coggins 2014.

² These calculations are based on a growth rate of a little less than two states a year, the rate between 1945 and 2015. However, given the tendency toward recursive secession (that is, fragmentation within new states), the future growth rate could be much higher and is potentially exponential.

³ Correlates of War Project 2011; Griffiths and Butcher 2013.

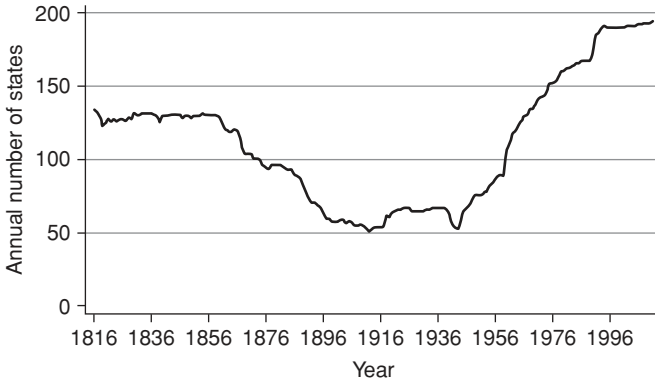


Figure 1.1 Number of states in the international system. Data are from Griffiths and Butcher (2013).

trend reached its absolute minimum in 1912, when the international system comprised fifty-one states. That low point was nearly reached again in 1943, when the conquests of World War II reduced the number to fifty-three. A second indicator of political aggregation is an increase in the size of states. David Lake and Angela O'Mahony found that the average state size increased steadily throughout the 1800s and reached its zenith at the turn of the century at a little less than 2 million square kilometers. However, it was after 1945 that the trend toward fragmentation truly began. States have proliferated, and by 2004, the average size had fallen to 854 000 square kilometers, an average roughly similar to what it had been in 1815.⁴

One can discern four general periods to the trend illustrated in Figure 1.1. The first existed from 1816 until roughly 1860. After an initial drop from 135 states, the number held at approximately 130 for the next forty years. This period witnessed both state birth, for example, the Spanish secessions in Latin America, and state death, for example, the independent princely states in India. The second period,

⁴ Lake and O'Mahony do not include colonial possessions in their calculations (for example, Britain's only net change in size between 1815 and 2004 was the loss of Ireland in 1922). This reduces the size of states and locates the peak of average state size too early, because most overseas possessions remained subordinate territories well into the twentieth century (Lake and O'Mahony 2004). Also see Lake and O'Mahony 2006.

which ran from about 1860 until 1914, witnessed a 63 percent reduction in the number of sovereign states. It was during these years that the number of sovereign states was reduced to unprecedented levels. This era was consonant with the so-called new imperialism and scramble for Africa. The third period, which belonged to the interwar years, is when the great historical pattern of political aggregation finally bottomed out. Indeed, there was an initial uptick in the number of states on account of the collapse of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires. This era began with the Wilsonian Moment, and it was characterized by a surge in nationalist and secessionist demands.⁵ However, in the end, the small increase in the number of states was nearly undone by the territorial acquisitions during World War II. The fourth and final period began in 1945 and is notable for the dramatic increase in the number of states. This current era of state proliferation stands in sharp contrast to the earlier periods.

Other scholars have noted this transition from a period of state expansion to one of contraction, and it appears to be part of a larger historical pattern that began well before 1816. Victor Lieberman observes that between 1340 and 1820, twenty-three independent Southeast Asian kingdoms collapsed into three.⁶ Similarly, Charles Tilly records that between the early sixteenth and early twentieth centuries, 500 Western European political units condensed into twenty-five.⁷ This long wave of aggregation ended in the early to mid 1900s and gave way to a new period of fragmentation. This transition constitutes a major historical event, one that challenges theories that emphasize continuity in international relations, and one that has not been adequately explained.⁸

Understanding state proliferation and the dynamics of secession is important because, apart from the many legal and cartographical issues that attend secessionist activity, the potential for conflict is a genuine

⁵ Manela 2007. ⁶ Lieberman 2003.

⁷ Tilly 1975. See Greengrass 1991 for a similar estimate.

⁸ A number of scholars have developed models for why states expand, overextend, and then contract (see Gilpin 1981; Kennedy 1987; Snyder 1991; Collins 1995). However, these theories typically draw on a number of domestic and international factors to explain the path of a given state, not the entire set of states or all the great powers. They lack a systemic theory for why states would be undergoing the expansion/contraction cycle at roughly the same time. Indeed, for Gilpin and Kennedy, the expansion of one state typically coincides with the contraction of another.

concern. Secessionism in the post-1945 period has quite often generated violence, and the observation of this pattern led Allen Buchanan to modify his prognostication from “the age of secession” to “the age of *wars* of secession.”⁹ Indeed, it is easy to see why states would deny independence to secessionists and even fight over the issue. Secession requires that the state surrender authority over a portion of its territory and forfeit the associated benefits. In a larger sense, however, permitting secession risks dissolution. Abraham Lincoln put it well when he said that secession forces the sovereign to choose between dissolution and blood. He said that permitting secession would establish “a marked precedent” that no state could survive and that accepting the Confederacy’s argument that secession is legal would be a recipe for further secession, because those who argued for the right could not then deny their own secessionists that same right. It was with an eye on the recursive nature of secession that Lincoln claimed, “The principle itself is one of disintegration, and upon which no government can possibly endure.”¹⁰ In such circumstances, a state must choose between dissolution and blood.

Scholarly estimates put the share of civil wars driven by secessionism at about 50 percent.¹¹ James Fearon and David Laitin calculated that roughly 52 percent of the civil wars between 1945 and 1999 involved secessionism.¹² Jason Sorens claims, “Since the 1980s, at least half of all ongoing civil wars in any given year have been secessionist.”¹³ Barbara Walter argues that secessionism is the chief source of violence in the world today.¹⁴ My own calculations show that since 1945, there has been an average of fifteen secessionist conflicts per year.¹⁵ This is clearly an important topic, and it would be useful to identify the factors that lead states to accept or deny independence demands, and how those responses shape the likelihood of conflict.

Despite the fact that secession has been researched in the various subfields of political science as well as in other social sciences, there has not yet been a systematic study that ties together the varied explanations that purport to explain the phenomena discussed here. What

⁹ Buchanan 1997, 301. ¹⁰ Lincoln 1953, 426, 435–436.

¹¹ Secessionism-driven civil wars are usually differentiated from civil wars aimed at taking over the center of power.

¹² Fearon and Laitin 2003. ¹³ Sorens 2012, 3. ¹⁴ Walter 2009, 3.

¹⁵ This calculation uses the threshold of twenty-five battle deaths as identified by the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (Themnér and Wallensteen 2012).

is missing is an explanation that connects the macrohistorical trend to a theory of metropolitan response. Surprisingly, no one has done this in a comprehensive manner. As David Armitage writes, “the story of how the world came to be so thickly populated with states has hardly begun to be told.”¹⁶

The Puzzle

My investigation into these phenomena is organized around a central question: what are the factors that determine how central governments (that is, metropolises) respond to demands for independence? Secessionist movements come in all shapes and sizes, and their motivations are quite varied. But the chief obstacle to their ambitions is the state itself, which can deny independence demands, deploy force if need be, and request that the international community respect its territorial integrity by not recognizing the breakaway region. My analysis centers on this crucial but neglected moment in the life of a secessionist movement and thus begins after secessionist movements have formed. I do not offer an exhaustive study of how these groups come to be, although I do investigate the relationship between secessionism and the anticipation of metropolitan response. This shift in focus from the secessionist movement to the central government is essential to understanding how patterns in metropolitan response have varied over time and space, why states have proliferated since 1945, and when independence demands are likely to produce conflict. States are the gatekeepers where secession is concerned and need to be brought into the center of the analysis.

To conduct this study, I utilize broad definitions of *secessionism* and *secession*. I conceive of secessionism as the formal demand for independence by a nation from its existing sovereign state, and I identify 403 secessionist movements between 1816 and 2011.¹⁷ Many of these movements have failed to achieve independence (for example, the Confederate States of America), and the success cases are quite varied in terms of whether the central government condoned the secession; whether violence was deployed; and whether the resulting state was classified as an instance of decolonization, dissolution, and so on.

¹⁶ Armitage 2007, 20. See Wimmer 2013 for a discussion on this topic.

¹⁷ See Chapter 3 and Appendix A for more detail.

Accommodating this broad conception of secessionism requires an equally broad understanding of secession. I therefore adopt Peter Radan's definition: "the creation of a new state upon existing territory previously forming part of, or being a colonial entity of, an existing state."¹⁸ This definition includes the violent and the illegal instances of state birth, the states born from decolonization, and the many countries that emerged from state dissolution. It excludes the rare instances of forced fragmentation, for example, East Germany and West Germany after World War II. As I discuss in Chapter 2, secession is a contested term, and some readers will take issue with this broad conception. However, I defend it on theoretical and methodological grounds. Labels such as "decolonization" and "dissolution" are primarily legal ones used to sort out which secessionist movements have the right to independence, and identifying these different groups requires an examination of outcomes. I submit that it is better to begin with a set of secessionist movements that all meet the same criteria and then to scrutinize the factors that yielded these different outcomes. In sum, this study focuses on the governments of all sovereign states between 1816 and 2011, and it looks at how they have responded to any nation declaring independence from their sovereign authority.

The Argument

Donald Horowitz argues that "secession lies squarely at the juncture of internal and international politics."¹⁹ Mindful of this claim, I contend that state size and political boundaries are endogenous to international conditions. However, if states are guided by system-level constraints when they respond to secessionist demands, it is their internal structures that determine how they contract. States aim to downsize in a controlled manner, in a way that is mindful of administrative lines and categories.²⁰

With respect to the systemic portion of the theory, I argue that the historical trend from state expansion to contraction is primarily the result of changes at the international level.²¹ In earlier periods, competitive pressures among states incited them to expand because larger

¹⁸ Radan 2008, 18. Also see Pavkovic 2015. ¹⁹ Horowitz 1985, 230.

²⁰ As with O'Leary et al. (2001), I use the term *downsizing* when referring to a government's attempt to reduce territory.

²¹ Griffiths 2014.

territories usually brought military advantages and added economic benefits pertaining to resources and larger, more diversified economies. Although these pressures appear to extend back into history for some time, they were particularly sharp in the late nineteenth century, when the lead states scrambled to gather as much territory as possible. There were clear zero-sum characteristics to this scramble, and indeed, it accelerated with the feeling that unclaimed land – *terra nullius* – was running out as the core countries effectively brought the entire land surface of the Earth outside of Antarctica into one sovereign state system. Thus states were increasing in size because they were conquering and merging with other states and because they were expanding into supposedly unclaimed territory.²²

The inflection point in this historical pattern came in 1945, when a combination of security, ideological, and economic factors began to change the milieu in which states evaluated the costs and benefits of holding territory. First, the bipolar system (and later the unipolar system) permitted stable collaborations between strong and weak states on an intersovereign basis. Both superpowers preferred informal control over their respective spheres of influence, and this preference removed the zero-sum competition for territory that characterized the earlier multipolar era. It also generated an environment in which the superpowers encouraged decolonization and then competed for informal control over the emerging states. Second, the consolidation of the territorial integrity norm dramatically reduced the rate of conquest; reinforced the structural preference for informal control; and, by making states safer from predation, decreased the need to hold large territories. Third, the advent of the nuclear age changed the security emphasis for lead states from territorial defense to deterrence. Finally, the development of the liberal global economy reduced the need to possess large economic units. In an era of increasing globalization, small states could survive by plugging in to the global economy to secure capital and resources and leverage their comparative advantage. Together these security and economic factors reduced the value of territory, and

²² It was not until the early years of the twentieth century that the international system achieved its maximum size and came to encompass all landmass outside of Antarctica. Most of the last holdouts – various princely states in India, sultanates in the East Indies, and remote island kingdoms in the Pacific – were brought into the system by 1910.

as a result, states have been more amenable to secessionist demands when the costs of these possessions outweigh the benefits.

But while the international system has rendered peaceful secession more likely, it is the internal structure of states that governs how they downsize. Metropolises use administrative lines and categories when determining which groups can secede without fear of setting a precedent and who they must deny (and potentially fight) to maintain a credible reputation.²³ Internal lines and status categories reduce bargaining problems between center and periphery; they create conceptual distinctions that can become salient in the eyes of all relevant parties; and international law emphasizes administrative territories as a guide for recognizing new states via the principle of *uti possidetis* (as you possess). These factors shape the manner in which metropolises respond to secessionist demands. As a result, secessionist movements that do not cohere with any administrative region are the least likely to be granted independence and the most likely to experience conflict. In contrast, those regions that represent a unique administrative type are more likely to be recognized by their metropolises and less likely to resort to arms. Finally, large compound states sometimes downsize by category, and this helps explain why governments will release one set of units without contest while denying (and potentially fighting) another set from doing the same. In sum, the administrative architecture of states provides them with a means to disassemble in a controlled manner, and in fact, the administrative status of breakaway regions (or lack thereof) is a strong predictor of secessionist outcomes.

This theory combines international and domestic factors to explain the proliferation of states in the post-1945 period.²⁴ I argue that although the invisible hand of the international system has played a key role in driving state expansion and contraction, it is the internal structure of states that governs how they have downsized. These external and internal factors are intimately connected. When states expanded, they organized their political space by creating administrative units. They classified and ranked these units, giving national distinction to some and local autonomy to others. Although these early administrative decisions were often based on the strength of local cultural and institutional conditions, they were just as often the consequence of

²³ Griffiths 2015. ²⁴ See Roeder 2007, 342–344, for a discussion on this topic.

interstate security concerns and simple fortune. In making these decisions, metropolises created the embryos of future sovereign states both because they built local institutions around which national consciousness would develop and because these administrative boundaries and conceptual distinctions became increasingly salient in the eyes of the relevant parties. It was upon these lines that future governments – and, indeed, international law itself – would discriminate between secessionist groups when recognizing sovereign status.

In making this argument, I draw on and contribute to several different literatures. First, my attention to the effects that changing international conditions have on the supply of and demand for sovereignty borrows ideas from the literature on the size of states.²⁵ These arguments hold that state size is endogenous to system-level factors such as the global economy and the threat of conquest. Here a trade-off is posed between the benefits of size (for example, economies of scale, national defense) and local autonomy (that is, moving the locus of decision making closer to local preferences). The optimal size of states is thus determined by the frequency of conquest and corresponding emphasis on defensive capabilities, and on the level of global economic interaction. To use a metaphor, flipping these levers in one direction will make small states more viable; flipping them in the other will select for bigger states. Although this approach calls attention to the importance of the international system, the related research has been mostly theoretical, and insufficient attention has been given to the internal composition of states and how these structures interact with pressures from above.

My solution to the preceding problem is to decompose sovereign states and identify the patterns by which they fragment. In this regard, I draw on another approach that focuses on the administrative organization of states.²⁶ More comparative in orientation, scholars of this stripe argue that it is the imposition of ethnofederal structures that creates the conditions for secessionism. Such units generate new identities and new nations; they are states in the making. This is primarily an explanation for how nationalist ambitions arise. I argue that this approach is correct, but I extend it in two important ways. First, I show how changing international conditions interact with domestic

²⁵ For an overview, see Alesina and Spolaore 2005.

²⁶ Treisman 1997; Bunce 1999; Roeder 2007.

structures to explain trends in state birth. Second, I shift the focus from the region to the central government to argue that administrative lines and categories are used by metropolises when selecting which regions can secede. Whereas the first account helps explain where many secessionist movements come from, my theory explains why secessionist movements, even ones with a well-developed sense of nation, almost never secede unless they have the appropriate administrative status.

This consideration over metropolitan preferences connects me to a third literature that focuses on the need for central governments to demonstrate resolve to internal secessionists.²⁷ Walter, who has done some of the best work on this topic, argues that governments will be more likely to fight secessionists when they need to build a reputation. In fact, metropolises may do so even when the region in question is not particularly valuable. The more movements they face, the more likely it is that they will resist. I maintain that although this approach is insightful, it cannot explain why metropolises will often fight one movement (or set of movements) while simultaneously permitting the secession of others. This was the case when France fought to retain Algeria even while it was permitting the secession of French West Africa. The explanation is that not all movements are the same in the eyes of the relevant parties. I expand on the states-in-the-making literature to argue that large compound states often possess different types of administrative regions. Some are considered more peripheral or more autonomous, and these distinctions can be quite salient and provide the metropole with a means to discriminate between groups.

My theory brings the state into the center of the analysis. The states-in-the-making literature rightly notes the nation-generating effects of administrative design.²⁸ But central governments are not passive players in this process, merely permitting the fittest nations to secede; rather, they often deny independence to well-developed secessionist movements that lacked the right administrative status, and they have often permitted the independence of administrative units that possessed weak national identities. These administrative determinations are usually made for reasons other than concerns over future secessionism, such as cost, geography, foreign competition, institutional habit, and simple chance. But whatever the origins, an aspiring nation's

²⁷ Toft 2002; Walter 2006b; 2009. ²⁸ Bunce 1999; Roeder 2007.