

# Containing Nationalism: Culture, Economics and Indirect Rule in Corsica

Comparative Political Studies

1–35

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0010414020957671

[journals.sagepub.com/home/cps](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/cps)

David S. Siroky<sup>1,2</sup> , Sean Mueller<sup>3</sup> ,  
André Fazi<sup>4</sup>, and Michael Hechter<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

Central governments in multinational states frequently deploy indirect rule to contain peripheral nationalism. Through the exchange of economic resources for political control, local notables are co-opted into cementing loyalty to the central state. Although nationalism often has cultural roots, these can fail to bear fruit because indirect rulers prevent them from developing. When the incentives sustaining support for indirect rulers change, this can open a window of opportunity for nationalism. This article examines how culture, institutions and economics influence center-periphery relations, specifically the demand for autonomy and nationalist parties. Utilizing new, disaggregated data and an original survey from the French island of Corsica, we show that indirect rulers have managed to contain nationalist parties in culturally distinct communes, specifically those that are more dependent on public funds. Only where a thriving private sector offers alternatives to state dependence, lessening the force of indirect rule, is cultural distinctiveness associated with nationalist voting.

## Keywords

nationalism, indirect rule, territorial politics, Corsica, principal-agent relations

<sup>1</sup>Arizona State University, Tempe, USA

<sup>2</sup>Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic

<sup>3</sup>University of Lausanne, VD, Switzerland

<sup>4</sup>University of Corsica, Corte, Corse, France

## Corresponding Author:

David S. Siroky, Arizona State University, P.O. Box 873902, Tempe, AZ 85287-3902, USA.

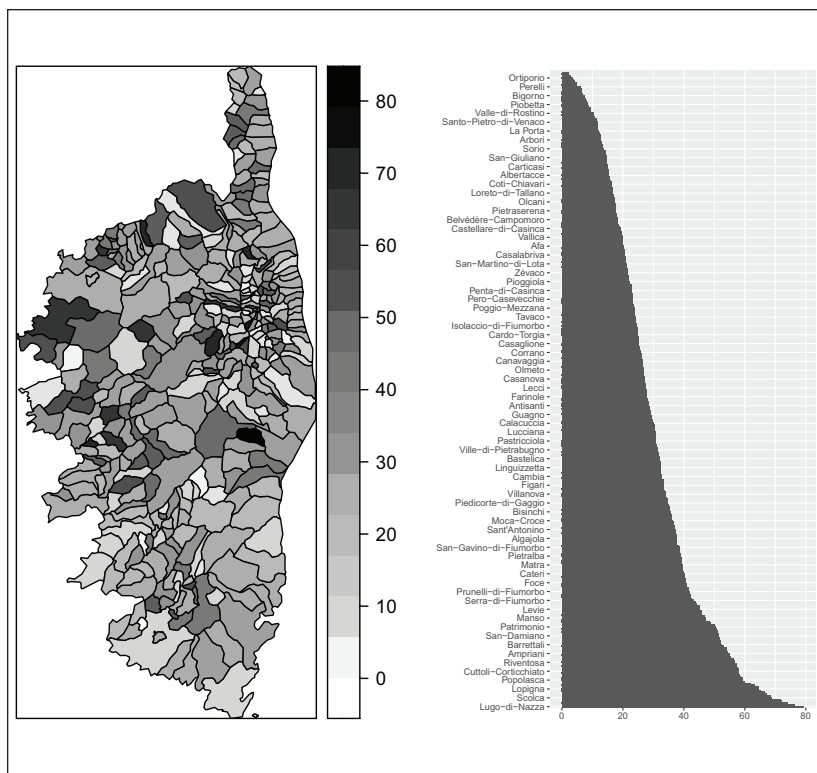
Email: [david.siroky@asu.edu](mailto:david.siroky@asu.edu)

Nationalist demands for greater regional autonomy and even outright secession are on the rise (Griffiths, 2017; Roeder, 2018; Sambanis & Milanovic, 2014). Many different explanations have been proposed for this rise, which has occurred in both the developed and developing world. Despite varieties of nationalism, there is a broad consensus that differences in culture—notably, a distinct language and a separate religion—along with legacies of prior statehood (Sorens, 2012) and lost autonomy (Cederman et al. 2015; Siroky & Cuffe, 2015; Germann & Sambanis, 2020) play an important role. Since nationalists aim to make the boundaries of their nation congruent with those of the state (Gellner, 1983; Hechter, 2000), this implies that nationalism ought to be strongest in the most culturally distinctive, “historic” peripheries that “missed their turn” in becoming independent states. Well-known European examples include Catalonia, the Basque Country, Flanders, and Scotland.

A lesser-known case is Corsica—probably because nationalism there has not been notable, at least until recently. In fact, nationalism sometimes fails to emerge just where conventional explanations suggest it should. Corsica has long seemed to constitute such an outlier: the Corsican language is distinct from French,<sup>1</sup> the island has a prior history (albeit brief) of statehood, is at a remove from the capital, and has maintained a strong cultural identity, despite repeated foreign occupations and assimilation efforts.<sup>2</sup> The mainland has also tended to ignore the economic development of the island, making cultural frustration, economic deprivation and the development of peripheral nationalism all the more likely (Fazi, 2014). Moreover, Paris has long resisted concessions to *any* historic minority language, including Alsatian, Breton, Occitan, and Corsican.<sup>3</sup>

Yet despite all these ingredients, modern Corsican nationalism only appeared in the 1970s, and initially received a marginal share of the vote—even in regional elections most favorable to nationalism (De la Calle & Fazi, 2010, p. 406).<sup>4</sup> Nationalism has experienced a strong electoral surge since 2008, following the breakdown of the party system and a sharp decline in armed violence, which prompted moderate and radical nationalist lists to merge and garner a significant share of the vote.<sup>5</sup> In the 2010 and 2015 regional elections, their vote share climbed to 35%, and then to a remarkable 56% in 2017 (Fazi, 2018; Supplemental Appendix 1). Between 2004 and 2017, the absolute number of votes cast for nationalist parties more than tripled (from ca. 21,000 to 67,000), and since 2015 the leaders of both the main regional institutions have come from nationalist parties.

While French remains the only official language, nationalists have been the main advocates for the Corsican language. Thus, speaking Corsican in official settings represents a political statement—precisely what was intended when the head of the regional assembly held his inaugural speech in Corsican.



**Figure 1.** Spatial variation (left) and ranked (right) nationalist voting in Corsica by commune, 2015 regional elections (1st round).

Several French politicians called this “unacceptable” and “a danger to the unity of France” (Quinault-Maupoil, 2015).

Not only was the rise of Corsican nationalism late, it was also territorially uneven (see Figure 1). More puzzling still, nationalist parties have often done particularly well in some of the *least* culturally Corsican areas along the coast, whereas some of the traditional communes in the island’s rural and mountainous interior have seemed impervious to nationalism (De la Calle & Fazi, 2010). If nationalism really is driven by cultural factors, why have nationalist parties been *least* successful in some of the *most* culturally traditional parts of Corsica? By comparison, nationalist parties in Catalonia, for instance, fare much better in the areas where Catalan is widely spoken (Bartomeus, 2018).