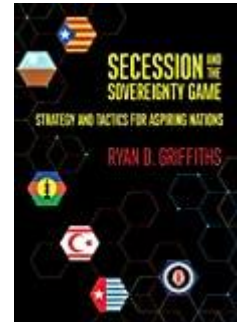


**Ryan D. Griffiths.** *Secession and the Sovereignty Game: Strategy and Tactics for Aspiring Nations*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021. Illustrations, tables. xii + 231 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-5474-6.



**Reviewed by** Nikola Mirilovic (University of Central Florida)

**Published on** H-Diplo (March, 2022)

**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Ryan D. Griffiths's *Secession and the Sovereignty Game* makes an important theoretical and empirical contribution to our understanding of secession and is an asset for those interested in the study of this issue. Griffiths studies secessionist groups and focuses on variation in the tactics they adopt in pursuit of their goal of creating a new sovereign state. He examines two kinds of tactics, which he calls “compellence” and “normative appeal.” Griffiths posits that the targets of compellence are the home state (the state the secessionist movement is attempting to separate from) and/or the international community. Secessionists seek to compel the home state to acquiesce to the creation of the new state, and they seek to compel the international community to recognize the new state. Griffiths categorizes different kinds of compellence tactics by secessionist movements as “electoral capture, nonviolent civil resistance, and violence.” He posits that the normative appeals that secessionist movements make are: “earned sovereignty, decolonialization, the right to choose, inherent sovereignty, and human rights” (p. 4).

Why do secessionist movements adopt different compellence tactics and normative appeals? Griffiths emphasizes the causal importance of institutional and structural factors. He argues that the capability of the home state shapes compellence tactics: secessionist movements located in strong states are less likely to use violent methods. Griffiths further claims that secessionist movements based in countries with “sound democratic institutions” are more likely to pursue independence via what Griffiths calls “institutional means,” such as elections and referenda (p. 145). He also points out that secessionist attempts that have led to a de facto state result in different conditions whereby the options of the secessionists to compel the home state are limited and they instead seek to preserve the gains they had already made. Overall, Griffiths identifies six kinds (“democratized, indigenous legal, weak combative, strong combative, decolonial, and de facto”) of secessionist movements “shaped by local factors such as regime type, strength of the state, and the degree to which the secessionist region is integrated with

the home state” (p. 4). He argues that the normative appeals different kinds of secessionist movements tend to emphasize are, respectively: earned sovereignty for *de facto* movements, decolonialization for decolonial movements, freedom to choose for democratized movements, inherent sovereignty for indigenous legal movements, and human rights for (both weak and strong) combative movements.

The book includes seven empirical chapters. There are six case studies of secessionist movements that Griffiths argues correspond to the six categories mentioned above: Catalonia (democratized), Murrawarri Republic (indigenous legal), West Papua (weak combative), Bougainville (strong combative), New Caledonia (decolonial), and Northern Cyprus (*de facto*). These six movements seek independence from, respectively, Spain, Australia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, France, and the Republic of Cyprus. Another chapter incorporates a large *n* analysis examining variation across “136 movements between 1946 and 2011” regarding their compellence tactics and normative appeal choices (p. 143). An appendix includes a list of secessionist movements and a coding of their tactical choices.

Griffiths argues that we should think of participants in secessionist movements as actors who strategically respond to their local conditions and to the overall recognition regime. This assumption is relaxed in chapter 11, which focuses on instances of secessionists adopting “bad strategy and poor tactics,” which according to Griffiths may occur due to incomplete information, wishful thinking, and the presence of mixed objectives (p. 155).

Griffiths posits that secession has both domestic and international determinants. In terms of the latter, he discusses the international recognition regime defined as “the evolving body of international legal norms, rules, and principles that determine when an applicant nation has the right to withdraw from an existent state and become a recognized independent sovereign state” (p. 4).

Chapter 2 focuses on the international recognition regime, while in chapter 12 Griffiths assesses the “comparative statics” of different recognition regimes from the pre-1815 era to today and proposes that “states be encouraged to democratize secessionism and accept a primary right to independence for minority nations, and that such policies be implemented at the prerogative of states themselves and not by outside actors” (p. 173).

The book includes much information that is relevant to understanding secession. Griffiths is interested in variation across space and examines secessionist movements in different parts of the world and in different national settings. He is also interested in variation across time, including assessing how recognition regimes have changed historically and how secessionist movements may have adopted different tactics over time. Studying systematically both the compellence and normative appeal tactics of secessionist movements provides a significant amount of relevant analysis and empirical evidence. Finally, Griffiths makes clear claims and takes clear positions.

Griffiths’s emphasis on structural and institutional factors that may only change slowly contributes significantly to our understanding of secession. However, these arguments may have difficulty in explaining why tactics of secessionist movements change over time. For example, a theory that emphasizes regime type and state strength as key factors may have difficulty in explaining why secessionists would change tactics over time while trying to secede from a country that remains democratic and relatively strong. In his focus on international factors, Griffiths tends to emphasize the international recognition regime. While the international recognition regime and changes in international recognition regimes are important, there is also cross-national and cross-regional variation in how different external actors approach a recognition dispute. Griffiths’s six case studies examine secessionist movements that at the time of the writing received very lim-

ited or no international recognition as an independent state from United Nations member countries. However, in cases of other aspiring states, such as Kosovo or Western Sahara, the situation may persist over a notable period of time whereby many countries have recognized an independence claim while many other countries have not: the “international community” does not act in unison. There can also be variation, including in cases where secessionist claims do eventually become universally recognized, in how quickly different countries choose to extend recognition. Finally, Griffiths points out that there is variation regarding the extent of importance of regional institutions, which is higher in some contexts (Europe and Africa) than in others (Oceania). There is relevant variation across international factors that shape secessionist and recognition disputes that a focus on the international recognition regime may not capture.

Secession is a consequential issue and Griffiths’s *Secession and the Sovereignty Game* makes an important contribution, both empirically and in terms of theory building, to our understanding of this phenomenon.

*Nikola Mirilovic is an associate professor at University of Central Florida’s School of Politics, Security, and International Affairs.*

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

**Citation:** Nikola Mirilovic. Review of Griffiths, Ryan D. *Secession and the Sovereignty Game: Strategy and Tactics for Aspiring Nations*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. March, 2022.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57039>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.