

Seeds of secession in California

Catalonia may be struggling to break free from Spain, but it has breathed fresh inspiration into a campaign for California's secession from the U.S. Spearheading the campaign for an independent 'country' of California is a bunch of activists who cut their teeth in pro-immigration, anti-war, feminist and green causes, and have now come together under the banner of California Freedom Coalition (CFC) that was started early this year. The first hurdle in the long march to freedom has been passed when the campaign was allowed in July to start signature gathering — if it collects 5,85,407 signatures of registered voters, the proposal titled 'California's Future: A Path to Independence' will be on the ballot in the November 2018 elections.

The campaign is to "demand the liberation of the people of California from its captors," but it "explicitly rejects conduct or speech inciting open rebellion against the United States government", according to its charter.

One could argue that California, the epicentre of the global digital economy, has already seceded from the rest of the U.S., and the election of Donald Trump as President was an illustration of that fact. Hillary Clinton's national lead in popular votes came almost entirely from California where she won nearly two votes for each vote for Mr. Trump, leading him by 4.37 million votes in the U.S.'s most populous State. After Mr. Trump became President, California's Democratic Governor Jerry Brown clashed with him on several issues. Among other things, Mr. Brown met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in June, committing California to stay the course on implementing the Paris climate agreement, disregarding Mr. Trump's decision to quit it. He has also announced a Global Climate Summit next year to bring together sub-national representatives — from cities and States.

Greater autonomy

What could be on the ballot is not an immediate secession but the repealing of a provision in California's Constitution that states it is an inseparable part of the U.S. It could direct the Governor, in consultation with those members of Congress who represent California, "to negotiate continually for greater autonomy from federal government, up to and including agreement establishing California as a fully independent country".

California Attorney General Xavier Becerra has given a series of interviews in recent weeks, making the case that the U.S. and California need each other. The secessionists have forceful arguments too. California contributes \$370 billion in federal taxes and gets only \$334 billion in federal spending. As an independent country, its economy will be the sixth largest in the world; and being on the Pacific coast, its links to other future centres of world economy will be immense. About 27% of California's population is foreign-born, about twice that of the U.S. percentage. It is not unimaginable for the immigrant population to visualise California as an independent country. More than half a million of the State's population is of Indian origin and Shankar Singam, one of the four members of the CFC leadership, is of South Asian origin.

The U.S. Constitution allows for secession, if two thirds of the Congress — 67 Senators and 290 Representatives — vote in favour, followed by three fourth of the 50 States. The idea of secession has been around for a while in California. In 2014, 20% of the people favoured it; after Mr. Trump's election, it grew to 32%, according to a Reuters poll. "But if that number gets into the high 40s or 50s, it makes sense to consider. And then we have a few more tools to pursue it than Catalonia," said Dave Marin, director of research and policy at CFC.

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