Spanish politician and former president of FC Barcelona, Joan Laporta, once said, “Creo que hay que hacer política con el deporte, por supuesto… desde un club de fútbol hay que hacer país” (Mota). In Spanish society today, this is very much true, especially when it comes to rivalries. From Betis versus Sevilla to Real Sociedad de San Sebastián versus Athletic Bilbao, it seems that every soccer fan has a team he loves, and one he absolutely despises. The most prominent rivalry in La Liga, possibly even the entire sporting world, however, has to be that between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona. This rivalry not only reflects the people’s sports team affinities, but also amplifies the political sentiments of the country, especially those regarding the conflict between the central Spanish government and Catalonia’s fight for independence.

Soccer is a powerful platform for political ideas due to its popularity among Spaniards. According to Llaneras in his article, “La Relacion entre el futbol y la politica (o dime a quien animas y te diere a quien votas)”, soccer is the shared interest of over 48% of Spaniards from various economic and social backgrounds with varying ideology. Llaneras also says that of those fans, about 2/3 prefer either Real Madrid or Barcelona, 37.9% and 25.4%, respectively, but these preferences can also predict political affiliations and socioeconomic status. Nearly half of all PP voters, as well as a large number of PSOE voters, are Real Madrid fans, though a quarter of PSOE voters are FC Barcelona fans, the IU party is mostly comprised of Atletico de Madrid and FC Barcelona fans, and the CIU party is almost entirely FC Barcelona fans. Nearly 60% of those who consider themselves to lean to the right politically are Real Madrid fans while almost 45% of those holding left-leaning political values support FC Barcelona. Nearly half of all unskilled workers are fanatics of “los blancos” while FC Barcelona and Atletico de Madrid are supported by the upper and upper middle classes. While these numbers may seem meaningless and coincidental, Llaneras continues by saying that soccer creates false conflicts and keeps these in perpetuity. It is evident that this is true in the case of La Liga, as these differences in ideologies seen today between the two major Spanish teams’ fan bases began during the Franco Regime.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a Colombian novelist and Nobel Laureate, once said that “Football is a tool to gain power” (Varona), and during his regime, Franco did just that, in using El Clasico to show the power of his central government (Lowe). He made Real Madrid a symbol of his regime while breaking down Catalonia, as he banned the Catalonian flag from being flown in the Barcelona stadium as well as the use of Catalan in the stadium and club documents (Schlewitz). Fans have also claimed that the refereeing of games was biased, and that intimidation was used to boast the regime’s power via Real Madrid, referencing the 1943 Copa del Generalisimo final, in which the Director of State Security visited Barcelona’s team before the kickoff of the second leg in which Barcelona was winning over Real Madrid 3-0. The team was told that they were playing because the regime has forgiven their lack of patriotism and Barcelona ended up losing 11-4 on aggregate (Schlewitz). Additionally, until the early 1980s, the government exclusively showed Real Madrid games on the television.

This frustration and conflict throughout the Franco dictatorship on the pitch between these two major teams became the “morbo,” or fuel to the rivalry, according to Phil Ball in his book entitled “Morbo: The Story of Spanish Football” has continued to this day (Lowe). Throughout the country, Real Madrid is still seen as a symbol of Franco and fascism while Barcelona is the symbol of freedom and democracy (Lowe). The teams’ frustrations toward each other have made an El Clasico win about more than pride in one’s team , but also pride in one’s identity, and Catalonia’s push for independence and nationalism has strengthened the pride in Barcelona fans, which is seen in the team’s motto, “Mes que un Club” (Schlewitz). Fans and players, such as FC Barcelona’s Gerard Pique, have made their political sentiments shown in whistles and jeers during the Spanish national anthem before games as well as toward the king when he attends matches, an example of which was seen during the playing of the Spanish national anthem in the Copa del Rey final of 2015, played between Athletic Bilbao and FC Barcelona. Since this incident, in which the whistles and boos were so loud, the anthem could barely be heard, sanctions and warnings have been proposed by government officials to prevent future offenses to state symbols, while other officials have suggested that the national anthems of Spain, and the Autonomous Communities all be played in the future (Quixano).

The nationalist sentiments and frustrations created during the Franco regime have consequently created what Tremlett calls “anorexic patriotism” in his article “World Cup 2010: Spain’s success puts nationalists in the shade” among Spanish players and fans when it comes to Spain’s participation in international competitions. Franco’s vindictive regime caused players and fans alike to feel no allegiance to Spain, thus underperforming in tournaments. This has changed in recent years, with World Cup and UEFA Euro wins in 2010 and 2012. Celebrations of Spanish successes temporarily silences Catalonian protestors who would like to have an official national team for themselves similar to that of Scotland and Wales within the United Kingdom (Tremlett).

What is strange about the rivalry between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid today is how FC Barcelona’s position within La Liga reflects that of Catalonia within the country of Spain. For example, FC Barcelona is one of the richest soccer clubs in the world, second only to Real Madrid. In 2013, the club made a profit of 41 million euros, while the rest of the clubs in La Liga combined are running at a net 500-million-euro deficit. Barcelona’s money has obviously brought it much success in recent years, even more than that of Real Madrid, however, La Liga wants to restrict the amount of money that Barcelona can make and use to prevent the money-driven success cycle that has arisen in the past few years, making the rich teams more successful, and thus richer, and left the poor teams in the dust, preventing any team that is not FC Barcelona, Real Madrid, or Atletico de Madrid from achieving real success in La Liga (Redford). Parallels can be drawn to the fact that Catalonia is one of the richest Autonomous Communities in Spain during a time of economic crisis for the country. Thus, the central government has been taxing Catalonia, but has not invested the money back into the community, leaving Catalonians feeling jipped by their government and fueling the fight for independence.

Additionally, parallels between the recent ban on the Catalan flag at the Copa del Rey final of 2016 and the ban on the referendum that Catalonia would like to hold to determine whether or not they should separate from Spain and become an independent nation. The flag represents the Catalonian fight for independence driven by the upcoming national elections on June 26 and the right to self-expression. The reasoning behind the ban was to protect the safety of fans, as public disturbances due to protests by Catalonians were feared. Catalan politicians claimed they would not attend the game and sectionalists even suggested that the team not travel to Madrid in protest of the ban, and so the ban was overturned by a Spanish judge (Minder). Like the flag, the fight for the right to hold a Catalonian referendum represents the Catalonians’ right to decide their fates for themselves, whichever result comes of it, although it seems as though this ban will not be overturned as that of the flag was.

Finally, La Liga has announced that if Catalonia separates from Spain, the Catalonian teams, including FC Barcelona, would be unable to participate in La Liga competitions, though many dispute that this would actually be the case, due to the popularity and success of the club. Similarly, if Catalonia separate from Spain, they would not remain within the European Union, would lose the Euro, and would have to apply to rejoin, which would hurt the stability of Catalonia, Spain, and the European Union (Redford).

Although there are plenty of sports rivalries in various sports and regions throughout the entirety of the United States, there is none so fierce and politically-driven as that between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid. In my opinion, the situation is actually the reverse of that of Spain. While Spanish politics fuels the sporting rivalries, American sports play a large part in political decisions, due to the amount of money and power the sports organizations hold. Take, for example, the National Football League. Until recently, the NFL has disputed evidence that connects football to degenerative brain diseases. It has been claimed that the NFL had downplayed the risks of football in order to maintain popularity in the sport in the United States. The organization subsequently invested money into research in the diseases, causing skewed results to discredit other researchers, and hired lobbyists to pass laws to influence how the game is played in leagues from youth to professional levels. The latest admission of the link, however, has allowed unbiased research to surface and, hopefully, will lead to the redirecting of funds from covering up evidence to promoting safer game play and better conditions for players (Belson & Schwarz).

Especially when it comes to the conflict between the central government of Spain and Catalonia, Spanish football reflects and amplifies the political sentiments of the country. The fact that Spanish soccer plays such a prominent role in the political battles should not come as a surprise. The sport is followed like a religion within the country, and the players are powerful role models to the people of Spain, as they live very public lives (Mota). From the lasting, bitter sentiments from the Franco regime, to the current state of Catalonian relations with the central government, this rivalry is used as a platform for the people of Spain to display and discuss their political beliefs and ideas. Additionally, it is interesting how closely the situation of the rivalry emulates that of the politics within Spain. Although city councilwoman Concepcion Dancausa has claimed that “soccer… should not be converted into a setting of political confrontation,” I admire how Spain has incorporated politics into sports. I believe that it is an exciting way for people to discuss and understand serious issues going on within the country. Rather than be apathetic about present-day issues, Spaniards are passionate and spirited about their ideas, both political and athletic. If as many Americans became as passionate about political issues outside of election years as they are about their favorite sports team, as Spaniards appear to be, perhaps the American people will be better informed about the issues affecting American life and global issues.