

## **Ideology matters: Why decentralisation has a differentiated effect on regionalist parties' fortunes in Western democracies**

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**Abstract.** This article addresses the effects of decentralisation reforms on regionalist parties' electoral strength. It takes up the debate between 'accommodatists' (i.e., electoral loss due to policy accommodation) and 'institutionalists' (i.e., electoral gain due to institutional empowerment). These effects depend on the electoral venue considered – regional or national – and on the ideological radicalism of a given regionalist party – secessionist or autonomist. This study finds that increases in the level of decentralisation are positively associated with higher scores for autonomist parties in regional elections, while they are not statistically significantly correlated with secessionist parties' electoral performances. In contrast, in national elections, decentralisation reforms seem to penalise autonomist parties more than secessionist ones. These findings are based on the analysis of a novel dataset which includes regional and national vote shares for 77 regionalist parties in 11 Western democracies from 1950 until 2010.

**Keywords:** regionalist parties; decentralisation; federalism; ideology; multilevel politics

### **Introduction**

This article aims to contribute to the debate on the consequences of decentralisation reforms for the electoral strength of regionalist parties. The relevance of the political actors that are investigated here has been fully acknowledged in the literature, which has analysed and explained the growth of this party family in political systems (Elias & Tronconi 2011). However, the fact that these parties keep thriving in decentralised and still decentralising political systems brings back the question of whether decentralisation reforms undermine or strengthen their electoral performances.

Regionalist parties are widely considered to be able to act as the main 'motor' of decentralisation (Toubeau 2011). Although they are rarely involved in central government, the pressure they exercise directly or indirectly on governmental parties can (and does) lead to decentralisation reforms (Hopkin & Van Houten 2009; Maddens & Swenden 2009; Meguid 2008, 2010). This dynamic has been particularly evident in some formerly centralised (or weakly

decentralised) Western European countries, such as Belgium, Spain, the United Kingdom, Italy and, to a lesser extent, France.<sup>1</sup>

However, even when decentralisation is produced by the strength of regionalist parties in the first place, the intervened institutional change can, in turn, have an independent effect on subsequent regionalist parties' electoral scores.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have recently started to explore the causal relationship from this perspective by looking, for instance, at the effect of the establishment of a regional tier of elected government on the number and electoral strength of regional parties contesting national elections (Brancati 2008) or, more indirectly, on the level of party system's nationalisation (Chhibber & Kollman 2004; Harbers 2010). These studies find that decentralisation leads to more numerous and stronger regional parties. These findings stand in stark contrast with a strand of the literature that highlights the accommodating and electorally undermining effects of regional reform (Levi & Hechter 1985; Rudolph & Thompson 1985; De Winter 2006). This scholarship, indeed, supports the thesis that decentralisation leads to a weakening, or even to the demise, of regionalist parties.

We aim to contribute to this ongoing debate by providing an innovative argument and analysis within the remit of Western democracies. Our argument is that the extent to which regional reforms have an accommodating or invigorating effect on individual regionalist parties depends on the ideological radicalism of these parties – moderate/autonomist or radical/secessionist – and on the electoral venue – national or regional elections. We argue that this interaction between ideological radicalism and electoral arena is based on two aspects: the different level of 'accommodability' of regionalist parties (radical ones being less 'accommodable' than moderate ones), and the different predominant roles of regionalist parties in the two arenas (advocates of self-government at national level versus advocates of self-government and potential governing parties at regional level). In line with our argument, we find radical-secessionist parties being less vulnerable than moderate-autonomist ones to regional reforms in national elections; whereas, in regional elections, it is only the latter that benefit from regional reform.

Our analysis draws upon a comprehensive dataset on 77 regionalist parties participating in regional and national elections between 1945 and 2010 in 11 Western democracies. We define them as parties prioritising two main concerns: the achievement of some kind of territorial self-government (De Winter 1998: 204–205); and the administration of regional powers and resources in the exclusive interest of the region (Gomez-Reino et al. 2006: 258).<sup>3</sup>

Our dataset contains two innovative elements. First, we code regionalist parties' level of ideological radicalism in respect to their self-government claim, distinguishing between moderate (autonomist) and radical (secessionist) ones.<sup>4</sup>

We chose this classification precisely because it refers exclusively to the level of institutional self-government demanded by the party without tapping into identity questions. Second, we use a refined measurement of decentralisation, developed by Hooghe et al. (2010), which allows us to treat it as a continuous variable and, therefore, as a process, rather than simply as an event. These two features allow us to adopt a multilevel approach and to analyse individual regionalist parties' electoral scores over time in both regional and national elections and to investigate the putative different effects of decentralisation reforms on regionalist parties at the two levels.

The next section discusses the relevant literature, pointing out competing theses and contradictory empirical results. Then our main argument is introduced, exposing the theoretical framework, some empirical examples and the main hypotheses. The ensuing section presents the data and analysis. Conclusions are drawn in the final section.

### **Decentralisation and regionalist parties' electoral performances: The state of the art**

Traditionally, studies that tried to explain regionalist parties' electoral fate have emphasised the link between territory and social factors, especially the sociocultural, historical and socioeconomic specificities of the region (Rokkan & Urwin 1983; Gourevitch 1979; De Winter & Türsan 1998; Fearon & Van Houten 2002; Sorens 2005). They showed how strong regionalist parties tended to emerge in territories with distinctive identities, based on the presence of a different language, religion, history or socioeconomic fabric *vis à vis* the rest of the state. Within this scholarship, processes of decentralisation were predominantly analysed as consequences of regionalist parties' activities – that is, concrete manifestations of their 'policy success' (De Winter 1998), rather than possible determinants of their electoral success. However, as decentralisation reforms kept on being implemented across a wide range of states, scholars started to inquire about the independent effect that these institutional changes have on regionalist parties' electoral performances. The resulting academic literature has led to the development of two opposing theses, based on competing arguments and contrasting empirical results.

The first thesis, which could be labelled 'loss by accommodation', focuses on the strategic choices of statewide parties and sees regionalist parties as 'the principal victims of accommodation [i.e., decentralisation reforms] efforts' (Rudolph & Thompson 1985: 300). The central idea is that once regionalist parties have achieved all or most of their core objectives, they lose their *raison d'être* and are therefore destined to decline. This thesis has been advanced and

supported on the basis of other comparative studies (Levi & Hechter 1985), as well as used to account for regionalist party decline in specific case studies (De Winter 2006). Meguid (2008) has proposed a more refined model to explain under what conditions statewide parties' strategies can have an undermining effect on regionalist parties. She shows empirically how statewide parties adopt pro-decentralisation policies and are willing to implement regional reform in an effort to curb regionalist party strength and to appeal to regionalist party supporters.<sup>5</sup> In addition, recent studies employing extensive datasets, though not explicitly subscribing to the 'loss by accommodation' thesis, have come to the conclusion that decentralisation, in general, does not favour regionalist parties' electoral scores (Lublin 2012). Interestingly, this literature tends to focus on *national* elections.

The second thesis, which could be labelled 'gain by empowerment', subscribes to the presence of an opposite effect to that of the 'loss by accommodation' approach. Decentralisation provides a boost of confidence for regionalist voters and parties and a more favourable institutional environment for the latter to emerge and thrive. Studies focusing on France and the United Kingdom have provided empirical evidence to support this thesis (Schrijver 2006; Meguid 2011). These studies demonstrate that the creation (and the subsequent empowerment) of a regional tier of government results in an increase in the number and electoral strength of regionalist parties. Interestingly, this literature tends to focus on *regional* elections. However, Brancati (2008), who has provided one of the most extensive empirical works on the subject, goes a step further, suggesting that the creation of regional governments has a positive effect on regionalist parties' strength in *national* elections too. For the sake of clarity and comparability of results, it is worth specifying that her empirical analysis goes far beyond Western democracies and does not specifically concern regionalist parties but, rather, all regional political actors.<sup>6</sup> The argument put forward by Brancati is that regional reforms represent an opportunity for new regional parties to form, gain representation and, maybe, get in office at regional level, thus strengthening their organisation and lowering the costs of entry into the national electoral arena. She therefore envisages a self-reinforcing circuit in which good electoral performances at regional level help participation in national elections, and good electoral scores in national elections boost the image of the party in regional elections, entailing further electoral gains (Brancati 2006: 139). Her results confirm this hypothesis, leading her to also draw some implications about the limits of the benefits of decentralisation for prevention of ethno-territorial conflict (Brancati 2008, 2006). Further, albeit indirect, support for this second thesis comes from studies on party system nationalisation. In particular, Chhibber and Kollman (2004) and Harbers (2010), drawing on empirical evidence from different

(overwhelmingly non-European) countries, found a causal relationship between the level of centralisation (or decentralisation) and the level of nationalisation (or regionalisation) of party systems. As we know that the level of nationalisation of the party system is also influenced, among other things, by the presence and strength of regional parties, these genuinely 'institutionalist' works appear to support the second thesis.

### **Our argument: Bringing in ideology and combining it with electoral venue**

Here we formulate more refined hypotheses which ponder the merits and limits of the theses advanced in previous studies within the empirical scope of Western democracies. We start from the two defining 'missions' of regionalist parties, which represent the two (arguably) main reasons why voters vote for them. First, these parties aim to exert pressure on the state in order to extract transfers of powers from the centre to the periphery (De Winter 1998: 204). The second, more open-ended, mission of regionalist parties is the administration of powers and resources allocated to 'their' region for its wellbeing and in its exclusive interest (Gomez-Reino et al. 2006: 258).

Although there are overlaps between the two missions and the two electoral arenas, it is rather evident that the first mission pertains primarily to the national political/electoral arena.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the second mission pertains to the regional arena. Indeed, due to their (limited) size and their reluctance to enter office at national level (Elias & Tronconi 2011: 353), most regionalist parties only aspire to become parties of government at regional level. Therefore, they tend to be evaluated for their potential governing skills in regional elections; while, in the national arena, they tend to be predominantly evaluated as advocates for self-government. This argument is based on general accumulated evidence that voters are able to make different kinds of judgement in different types of election and, as far as regionalist parties are concerned, that they score systematically better at regional than at national level.<sup>8</sup>

With regard to national elections, we find the 'loss by accommodation' argument more convincing from a theoretical perspective. Decentralisation reforms should, indeed, have a negative independent impact on regionalist party strength since they represent *de facto* a loss (or diminishment) of their first mission. However, we expect this dynamic to be affected by the level of party ideological radicalism. Indeed, the role of ideology in determining regionalist parties' 'susceptibility to accommodation' had already been pointed out in the mid-1980s by Rudolph and Thompson (1985: 293–294). The logic is rather straightforward: if a party has a radical ideological position

*Table 1.* Expected impact of an increase in decentralisation on regionalist parties' electoral strength

	Regional elections	National elections
Autonomist parties	++	--
Secessionist parties	+	-

(secession from the state), decentralisation reforms are more likely to fall well short of its demand/objective and, consequently, the accommodation strategy adopted by statewide parties would result in being less effective. A radical party might lose the support of the more moderate part of its voters, especially if it is the only regionalist party in the region and some voters support it simply as an instrument to obtain more autonomy but without actually wanting secession. Yet, in general, radical regionalist parties are likely to retain most of their electorate. In contrast, if a party adopts a moderate ideological position (autonomy within the state), it is more prone to suffer from a 'loss of mission' or from a 'loss of credibility' *vis à vis* other regionalist parties as a tough advocate of regionalist claims, unless it quickly radicalises its position immediately after (or even before) a new increase in decentralisation has been achieved. This radicalisation strategy is, indeed, very common (especially when there are other regionalist competitors in the same region) and, in time, can lead autonomist parties to defend themselves from the risk of 'accommodation' by becoming secessionist.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, as shown in Table 1, we hypothesise that regional reforms entail bigger losses for autonomist than for secessionist parties in *national* elections.

The case of regionalist parties in Flanders represents a very good example to illustrate the intervening influence of ideology. The dominant regionalist party, Volksunie (VU), was a moderate party which suffered electoral drawbacks after the first important reform of the 1970s and, even more, after the second big reform of the 1990s, which transformed Belgium into a federal state. In the election of 1971, the VU was able to draw 11 per cent of the national vote but its vote share declined to below 6 per cent for the elections held in the 1990s and after the election of 1999 it disappeared from the electoral scene. While De Winter (2006) is right in pointing to the effect of an accommodation strategy, it is worth noting that such a strategy only 'defeated' the Volksunie as this was the most moderate regionalist party in Flanders (or the slowest to radicalise its ideological position). Radical regionalist parties, such as the Vlaams Belang (VB) and, more recently, the Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie (NVA) were not negatively affected by decentralisation reforms and actually kept thriving. The VB saw its vote share rise from 1.1 per cent in 1978

to 7.7 per cent in 2010, and the NVA emerged after the second reform, becoming the biggest party in Belgium by 2010, with 17.3 per cent of votes.

We also argue that the debilitating effect of decentralisation reforms on moderate regionalist parties is limited to the national electoral venue. In contrast, subscribing to the ‘gain by empowerment’ thesis, in regional elections we expect decentralisation reforms to have a positive overall impact on regionalist parties’ electoral scores and, we add, a more beneficial impact on moderate regionalist parties than on radical ones (see Table 1). The reason for this has to be found in the second mission of regionalist parties: the competent management of regional powers and resources in the exclusive interest of the region. To be sure, both moderate and radical regionalist parties (and regional parties more in general) can be more credible than the regional branches of statewide parties in claiming to govern the region in its exclusive interest, and both types of regionalist parties are likely to galvanise their electorates in regional elections in the aftermath of successful decentralisation reforms (Meguid 2011).

However, competition in the regional arena not only revolves around self-government claims or the exclusivity of regional interests but, perhaps more importantly, around governing skills and plans on daily politics, beyond the territorial dimension. The image of a ‘party of (regional) government’, as opposed to that of a ‘challenger party’, is therefore crucial in a competition where ‘valence’ matters. This becomes more evident when the powers of the regional institutions have been strengthened further and there is more at stake for voters. Regionalist parties’ moderation and closeness to the regional median voter should be expected to represent an advantage in regional elections. This expectation is also based on the fact that, in many cases, radicalism on the territorial and on the left–right dimension tend to go together, resulting in secessionist regionalist parties being further away from the median regional voter (Newman 1997; Montabes-Pereira et al. 2004; Massetti 2009).<sup>10</sup> Empirically, prolonged predominance of moderate over radical regionalist parties in regional elections, even after increases in the level of decentralisation, can be observed in many well known cases of regionalism, such as Corsica, Catalonia, the Basque Country and South Tyrol (Roux 2011; Barberà & Barrio 2006; Perez-Nievas 2006; Pallaver 2006).

## **Regionalist party dataset**

Our contribution is based on the creation of an original dataset on regionalist parties. We only consider regionalist parties, excluding ‘ethnic non-territorial’ and ‘territorial but not regionalist’ parties and independent candidates.

Therefore we focus exclusively on those political actors that make demands for more devolution of powers from the centre to the periphery their ‘core business’. In addition, we only focus on established Western democracies, where the ethno-regionalist ‘struggle’ has been conducted almost exclusively in the ballot boxes (Newman 1996).

In order to test our hypotheses laid down in Table 1, we distinguish between *autonomist* regionalist parties as opposed to *secessionist* regionalist parties (*ideology effect*). The former may differ quite a lot in terms of self-government claims (from the mere recognition of their region with very limited powers to demands for strong legislative and fiscal powers), but they all respect the unity of the current state. In contrast, the latter want their region to break away from the current state in order to form a new independent state (or to join another one). We opted for a binary, as opposed to a more fine grained, coding of regionalist parties’ ideological radicalism for two main reasons. First, in coding the different parties and the same party across time, we wanted to keep subjective interpretation to a minimum. Second, we wanted to make sure that concepts underlying the coding classes could travel safely across political contexts and we believe that the basic distinction between parties that want some degree of self-government within the state and parties that want the region to break away is understood in the same way in different states and regions.

We have created a dataset that contains 77 regionalist parties which we could classify as autonomist or secessionist. The parties, their ideology and the region in which they compete in are listed in Table A1 in the data appendix (see Note 3). The data appendix also provides details on how we arrived at this dataset. We exclude vote shares for regionalist parties obtained beyond their core region and controversial cases (see data appendix), but we report on robustness of the results when these cases are included (see below). Table 2 provides a summary of regionalist party participation in national and regional elections.

## Variables and method

We analyse regional vote shares for regionalist parties obtained in regional and national elections. Our unit of analysis is the electoral strength of a particular party in an election year. We take the natural log of vote shares because there is a high number of small vote shares and relatively few large vote shares which results in a skewed distribution. If we analysed raw vote shares the beta coefficients would be inflated because the few high vote shares act as ‘outliers’ (see also Tronconi 2009). We track 77 regionalist parties’



Table 2. Number of regionalist parties participating in regional and national elections in 11 countries

	Regional elections		National elections		Regional elections only	National elections only	Regional and national elections	Total
	First	Last	First	Last				
Belgium	1974	2009	1954	2010	-	2	4	6
Canada	1944	2009	1945	2008	6	2	-	8
Denmark	1945	2009	1945	2007	-	-	4	4
France	1982	2010	1981	2007	-	2	4	6
Germany	1946	2010	1949	2009	-	-	2	2
Italy	1947	2010	1946	2008	8	1	9	18
Netherlands	1966	2007	-	-	1	-	-	1
Spain	1980	2010	1977	2008	3	-	23	26
Sweden	1998	2002	-	-	1	-	-	1
Switzerland	1970	2007	1991	2007	-	-	1	1
United Kingdom	1945	2007	1945	2010	-	-	4	4
Total					19	7	51	77

Notes: Details on party names, their ideology and the region in which they compete are provided in Table A1 in the online data appendix available at: [www.arjanschakel.nl](http://www.arjanschakel.nl)

electoral success in regional elections from their ‘birth’ to their ‘death’, which allows us to observe changes in their electoral strength before and after regional reforms.

Our dataset constitutes a typical cross-section cross-time dataset. Elections and parties are nested within regions, but regions are subsequently clustered within countries. We use multilevel mixed-effect linear regression models to accommodate this feature of the data. We control for autocorrelation between vote shares over time by introducing lagged dependent variables (Beck & Katz 1995; Plümper & Troeger 2007). An additional benefit of introducing lagged dependent variables is that the analysis focuses on *change* in electoral strength rather than the level of vote shares which enhances the fit with our primary interest. A second benefit is that the introduction of a lagged dependent variable also incorporates the effects of other independent variables which may impact on regionalist party success such as ethno-cultural/historical, economic and institutional factors. To the extent that these mostly time-invariant variables matter for the strength of regionalist parties, their effects are captured by introducing a lagged dependent variable (Kittel 1999; Plümper et al. 2005).

We aim to investigate the impact of decentralisation as a process, not as a single event. A particular useful measurement of regional reform over time is the regional authority index (RAI) proposed by Hooghe et al. (2010). This measurement distinguishes between self-rule – authority exercised by a regional government over those who live in the region – and shared rule – authority exercised by a regional government or its representatives in the country as a whole.

We use yearly scores at the regional level, as we are interested in the effect of change in regional authority on regionalist party vote shares. In addition, to circumvent endogeneity to the largest extent possible, we are interested in changes in regionalist party vote shares *after* regional reform. Therefore, a *cumulative change* variable of the RAI is included in the models. The measurement starts with the introduction of national or regional elections. This means that in the case of regional elections only those regional reforms are considered which took place after the introduction of regional elections. To explore the conditional effect of regional reform according to the ideology of the regionalist party we interact the cumulative change in RAI scores with an ideology dummy (1 = secessionist).

Regionalist parties may face competition on decentralisation both from other regionalist parties and from statewide parties which try and tailor their message to regional politics (Hopkin 2003; Thorlakson 2009; Fabre 2011). Therefore, we expect that regionalist party strength weakens when competition by other regionalist parties intensifies, but also when statewide parties

adopt and stress pro-decentralisation positions. We include a regionalist party competition variable which is operationalised by subtracting the vote share for a particular regionalist party from the total regionalist party vote share in the election. When multiple regionalist parties compete for the regional electorate, the electoral scores of a given regionalist party shrinks according to the electoral strength of its regionalist competitors. Statewide party competition is measured with the use of party manifesto data (Volkens et al. 2010). We take the percentage of quasi-sentences devoted to decentralisation in all party manifestoes for national elections, weight them by party size and sum them to get an overall score reflecting salience with regard to decentralisation.

To accommodate spill-over effects of electoral success we include the vote shares obtained by the regionalist party in the previous national elections when we analyse vote shares for regional elections. Similarly, we include the vote shares obtained in the previous regional election when we analyse national vote shares (scores are set at zero when there is no previous regional election). The latter variable also captures the ‘springboard’ effect, which describes how electoral success in the regional electoral arena may lower the entry costs for participating in national elections. Table A2 in the data appendix provides descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables.

The findings presented in this article have been subject to several robustness checks which we report upon in notes at the end of the article. First, we estimated fixed effects models. These kinds of models include party dummies which account for unobserved country, region and party-specific effects and one focuses solely on change in vote shares over time. Second, we run models in which we exclude, respectively, regionalist parties from Belgium, Canada, Italy, Spain or the United Kingdom. As can be seen in Table 2, the dataset (heavily) relies on the regionalist parties vote shares obtained in these countries. Third, we run models whereby we include vote shares obtained beyond the core region and for controversial cases (see the data appendix).

## Results

Figure 1 displays average regionalist party strength for five decades, differentiated for national and regional elections and for autonomist and secessionist parties. The averages are obtained by dividing the total sum of vote shares by the total number of elections held in the regions. For every decade, regionalist parties obtain more votes in regional than in national elections except for the 1970s and 1990s. In addition, autonomist party vote shares are higher than those for secessionist parties. Although regionalist parties have been

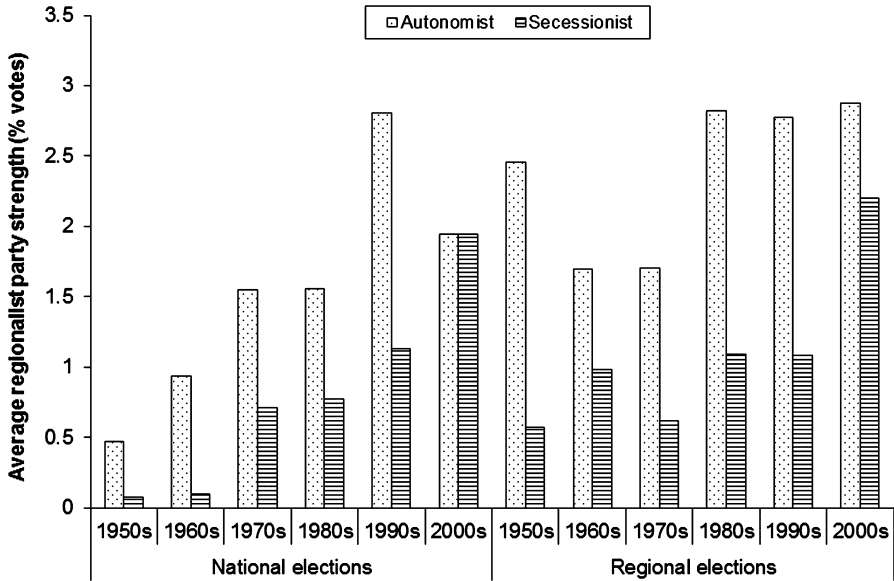


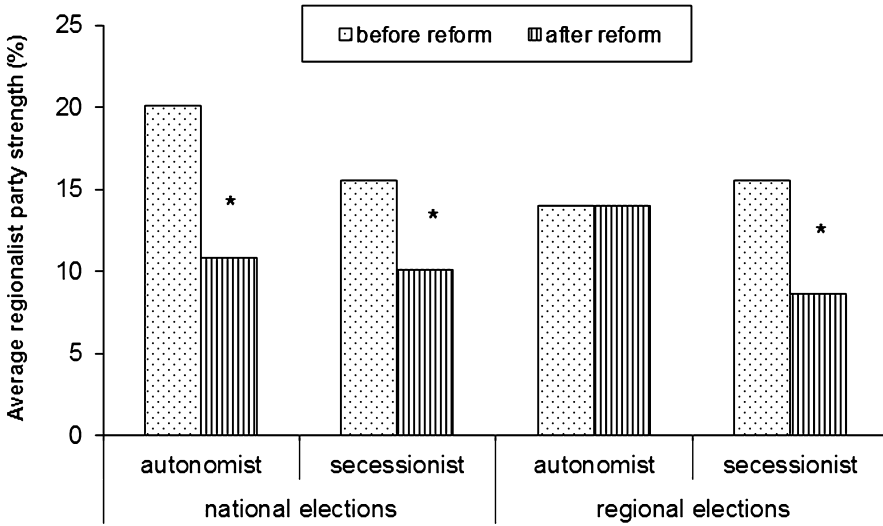
Figure 1. Average electoral strength for regionalist parties.

Note: Shown are the average vote shares for autonomist and secessionist regionalist parties in regional and national elections per decade. The averages are obtained by dividing the sum of vote shares by the total number of elections held in the regions. In Spain, democratic national elections were re-introduced in the 1970s. Regional elections were introduced at later dates in Italy (*regioni a statuto ordinario*) and Sweden (in the 1970s), Spain and France (in the 1980s), and Belgium, Germany (Eastern Länder) and the United Kingdom (in the 1990s).

competing in national elections since the 1950s, they have increased their vote shares considerably since the 1970s. For regional elections, we observe a U-shaped curve: declining vote shares until the 1970s but increasing thereafter.

Given that regional reform has been mostly uniformly positive since the 1970s (Marks et al. 2010), the pattern in Figure 1 suggests that regionalist parties benefit from decentralisation. Indeed, the sum of vote shares has been increasing since the 1950s in national elections and since the 1970s for regional elections. However, we may also detect an ideology effect. For autonomist parties we see a (small) decline in the 1990s for regional elections and a (large) decline in the 2000s for national elections, whereas secessionist parties continue to grow sharply in both types of elections. The decline in vote share for autonomist parties is especially sharp in national elections, which is in line with our hypotheses.

The relationship between regional reform and regionalist party strength is further explored in Figure 2, in which we plot average regionalist party vote



*Figure 2. Average regionalist party strength before and after regional reform.*  
 Note: The figure displays average regionalist party strength before and after regional reform –defined as a change in regional authority index (RAI) score – for autonomist and secessionist parties. An asterisk indicates that the difference in party strength before and after reform is statistically significant (t-test with unequal variances;  $p < 0.05$ ).

shares before and after regional reform. The difference from Figure 1 is that we divide the total sum of vote shares by the number of regional elections in which regionalist parties participate instead of the total number of regional elections being held.

Figure 2 clearly suggests an appeasing effect of decentralisation. The average vote share in national elections is lower for both autonomist and secessionist parties after regional reform. In addition, the decline in vote share for autonomist parties is almost twice as large (9.3 per cent) than the reduction in vote share for secessionist parties (5.4 per cent). This supports the ‘loss by accommodation’ hypothesis but moderate parties are more subject to the accommodating effects of decentralisation than radical parties.

Average party strength in regional elections does not change after regional reform for autonomist parties but secessionist parties are clearly confronted with a decline of 6.9 per cent in vote share. This finding partly supports the ‘gain by empowerment’ hypothesis. We hypothesised that, in regional elections, decentralisation should mainly benefit autonomist parties. It does, but the findings suggest that the benefit does not translate into increasing vote shares but rather entails prevention of a loss in vote share.

To explore the relationship between regional reform and regionalist party electoral strength more systematically, we present the results of multilevel mixed-effect linear regression models in Table 3. Models 1 through 3 report the results for national elections. First we estimate a model which includes our variables of main interest. The second model includes controls, and in the third model we analyse parties which participate in regional and national elections (thus excluding parties participating in national elections only).<sup>11</sup> The regional reform variable is statistically significant and negatively correlated with changes in regionalist party votes shares. This supports the notion that decentralisation reforms do accommodate regionalist parties. The interaction between the ideology dummy (1 = secessionist) and the regional reform variable is statistically significant and, as expected, positively correlated with changes in regionalist party strength. The magnitude of the beta coefficient for the interaction variable is not sufficiently high to compensate for the accommodating effect of the regional reform variable. The results support our hypothesis that radical parties are also appeased by regional reforms, but less than moderate parties.<sup>12</sup>

The results for regional elections are reported in models 4 through 6. Again, we first estimate a model which includes our variables of main interest (model 4). The fifth model includes controls and in the sixth model we analyse parties which participate in regional and national elections (thus excluding parties participating in regional elections only). In line with our hypotheses, the sign of the beta coefficients for the regional reform and the interaction variable changes.<sup>13</sup> This means that decentralisation is associated with an increase in average regionalist party strength in regional elections but the interaction variable reveals that secessionist parties may actually be confronted with a decline in average vote share after regional reform. However, further analysis on the interaction effect, according to the advice by Brambor et al. (2006), shows that the result for secessionist parties does not reach statistical significance at the 5 per cent level.

In order to explore the magnitude of the effect of regional reform, we plot changes in regionalist party vote share after regional reform in Figures 3 (national elections) and 4 (regional elections). We display the effect of regional reform by calculating change in vote share going from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean of the cumulative change in RAI score variable. The estimates are based on the results of, respectively, model 2 and model 4 (the constant is included).

In national elections when no regional reform has occurred, average change in vote share is about 3.5 percentage points. With every one-point increase in regional authority, the average change in vote share declines by 0.2 percentage points for autonomist parties but only by 0.1 percentage points for

Table 3. Regionalist party strength in national and regional elections

	National elections			Regional elections		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Lagged dependent variable	0.443** (0.034)	0.346** (0.039)	0.264** (0.047)	0.194** (0.030)	0.069* (0.028)	0.078* (0.032)
Cumulative change RAI (Regional Authority Index)	-0.050** (0.010)	-0.058** (0.009)	-0.049** (0.010)	0.043* (0.021)	0.095** (0.019)	0.072** (0.018)
Ideology dummy (secessionist = 1)	-0.355* (0.159)	-0.002 (0.128)	-0.049 (0.160)	-0.022 (0.147)	0.156 (0.134)	0.259* (0.121)
Interaction ideology dummy and cumulative change RAI	0.050** (0.015)	0.036** (0.014)	0.035* (0.014)	-0.124** (0.052)	-0.140** (0.045)	-0.141** (0.046)
Vote share previous regional/national election		0.032** (0.005)	0.047** (0.006)		0.025** (0.004)	0.040** (0.004)
Regionalist party competition		-0.020** (0.004)	-0.015** (0.004)		-0.037** (0.003)	-0.017** (0.004)
Statewide party competition		0.080** (0.032)	0.038 (0.038)		-0.026 (0.026)	-0.097** (0.028)
Constant	1.491**	1.292**	1.198**	1.659**	1.943**	1.974**
Log restricted likelihood	-642	-624	-431	-571	-509	-232
Chi <sup>2</sup>	203**	463**	425**	57**	294**	278**
Number of observations	508	508	375	499	499	299
Number of parties	65	65	62	85	85	58
Number of regions	43	43	41	47	47	38
Number of countries	9	9	8	11	11	8

Notes: \*\* p < 0.05; \*\*\* p < 0.01. Shown are the results of a multilevel mixed-effect linear regression for the electoral strength (natural log of regional vote share) of regionalist parties in national and regional elections. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. The number of parties is higher than displayed in Table 2 because those participating in more than one region are treated as separate parties in the analysis. Models 3 and 6 include parties which participate in regional and national elections.

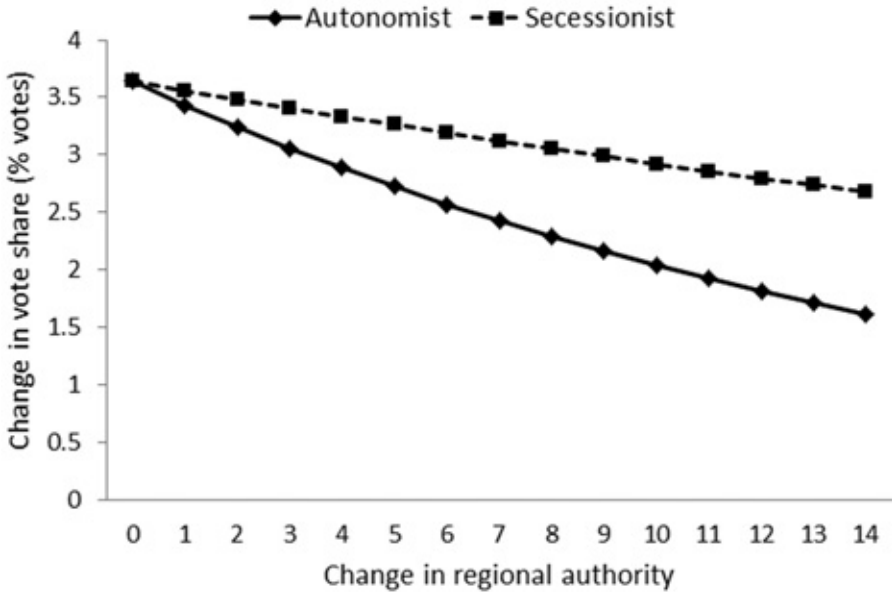


Figure 3. Regionalist party vote share changes in national elections for autonomist and secessionist parties in response to changes in regional authority.

Note: The figure displays changes in vote shares for autonomist and secessionist parties in national elections per one-point increase on the Regional Authority Index. The change from 0 to 14 points reflects going from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean. Estimates are based upon the estimates for model 2 in Table 3. The constant is included in the estimates.

secessionist parties. Moving on the variable change in regional authority from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean leads to a total reduction in average change in vote share of 2 percentage points and 1 percentage point for, respectively, autonomist and secessionist parties. In regional elections, average change in vote share is about 5.5 percentage points when no regional reform has occurred. Change in RAI scores are much lower than those observed for national elections because now we only incorporate regional reform which has taken place after the introduction of regional elections.

Another difference is that centralisation (negative regional reform) is incorporated since average change in regional authority equals to 1.2 RAI score with a standard deviation of 2.2 points. Autonomist parties seem to benefit from regional reform and they increase their average change in vote share from 4.8 to 7.8 per cent. In contrast, secessionist parties' average change in vote share declines by 1.1 percentage points (from 5.6 to 4.5 per cent). Figure 3 also suggests that centralisation benefits secessionist parties more



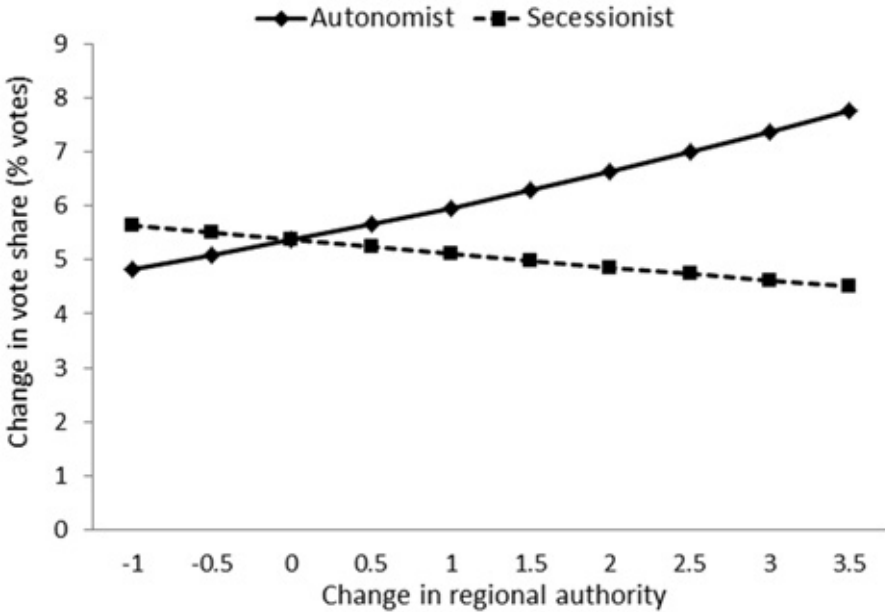


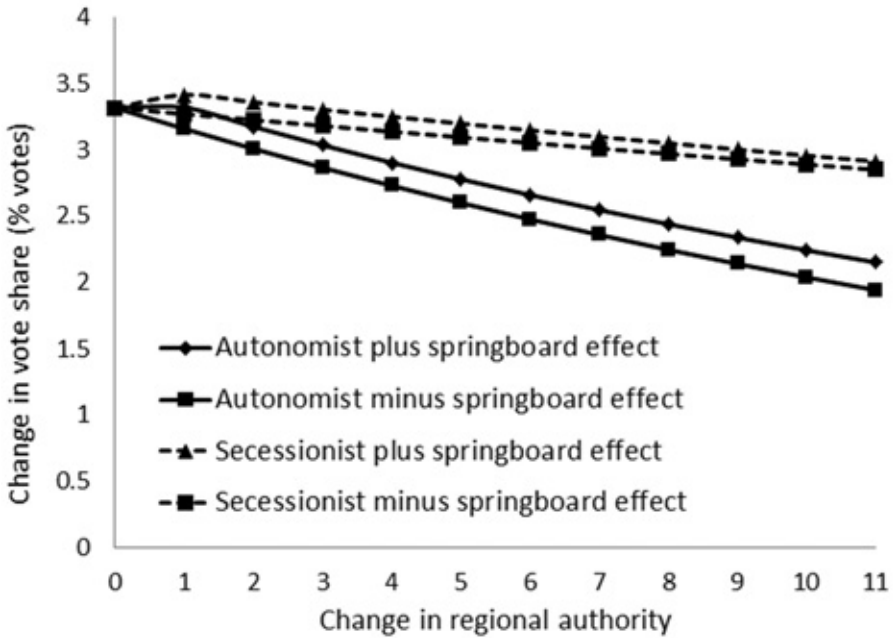
Figure 4. Regionalist party vote share changes in regional elections for autonomist and secessionist parties in response to changes in regional authority.

Note: The figure displays changes in vote shares for autonomist and secessionist parties in regional elections when the scores on the Regional Authority Index increase or decrease. The change from -1 to +2.5 points reflects going from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean. Estimates are based upon the estimates for model 5 in Table 3. The constant is included in the estimates.

than autonomist parties. We have only two regions in our dataset which underwent centralisation (Corsica and Trentino-Alto Adige), and one may question whether the findings for decentralisation also hold in reverse for centralisation; therefore we are cautious to make too much of this finding.

Turning to the control variables we can observe that, as anticipated, competition from other regionalist parties leads to weaker electoral performances. In contrast to our expectations, the statewide party competition variable is positively associated with changes in regionalist party strength in national elections. Clearly, statewide parties respond to strong regionalist parties by devoting more attention to the decentralisation issue in their manifestoes but, as suggested by Meguid (2008), the fact that statewide parties contribute to increasing the saliency of decentralisation reforms in the political debate could benefit – not undermine – regionalist parties.

The vote share received in a previous regional (or national, when regional elections are concerned) election is positive and statistically significant. This



*Figure 5.* Regionalist party vote share changes in national elections for autonomist and secessionist parties in response to changes in regional authority accounting for a ‘springboard effect’.

Note: The figure displays changes in vote shares for autonomist and secessionist parties in national elections per one point increase on the Regional Authority Index. The maximum change in regional authority is set at 11 because this is the maximum for that variable in the regional electoral arena (see Table A2 in the online data appendix). Two lines are shown: one line with and one line without accounting for a ‘springboard effect’. Estimates are based upon the estimates for models 3 and 6 in Table 3, which include parties that participate in regional and national elections. The constant is included in the estimates.

result suggests that good electoral performances at the regional level have a positive effect on subsequent national elections and might help to overcome entry barriers for the national arena. To the extent that regional reform may indirectly foster regionalist party strength in national elections, as proposed by Brancati (2008), it is captured by this variable. In Figure 5 we explore this ‘springboard effect’ further.

Figure 5 displays four lines, two each for autonomist and secessionist parties. One line, for each type of party, represents the effect of change in regional authority on change in average national vote share for parties which participate in national and regional elections (model 3 in Table 3). The other line represents the ‘springboard effect’. Since we have found that decentralisation reforms have a positive impact on regionalist parties’ electoral scores in

regional elections and that the latter has a positive effect on vote shares in subsequent national elections, we want to show how this beneficial ‘springboard effect’ fits in the overall impact of decentralisation on national elections’ scores. This is obtained by calculating the effect of change in regional authority in the regional arena (model 6 in Table 3) and feeding this back into the national arena via the beta coefficient for the previous regional vote share variable. From Figure 5 it becomes clear that the positive ‘springboard effect’ does not compensate for the negative effect of regional reform.<sup>14</sup>

## Discussion

We found considerable empirical support for our general argument that regional reforms are associated with regionalist parties’ electoral strength in different ways, depending on the ideology of these parties and on the electoral venue considered. First, as far as national elections are concerned, our results show that, in line with our expectations, decentralisation reforms have a substantive and negative association with the change in electoral strength of regionalist parties advancing autonomist claims, while secessionist parties seem to be only slightly (but still negatively) affected. This finding substantiates the ‘loss by accommodation’ argument that sees decentralisation reforms as a strategy adopted by statewide parties in order to undermine (and therefore regain votes from) regionalist parties in national elections.

The second finding is that ideology matters in regional elections, too, and even more than we expected. In line with the institutionalist ‘gain by empowerment’ thesis, we hypothesised a positive effect of decentralisation reforms for both types of regionalist parties in regional elections, and a more positive effect for autonomist than for secessionist parties. We did find a positive association for regionalist parties in general, but we also found that only autonomist parties seem to benefit, while secessionist parties are not affected. Overall, this result still substantiates the ‘gain by empowerment’ thesis but only limited to regional elections. Indeed, contrary to Brancati’s conclusions, the positive ‘springboard effect’ from regional to national elections does not appear to be sufficient to trump, or even to compensate for, the accommodation effect discussed above. It is, however, worth reminding ourselves that the different empirical results might be due to the fact that we only selected regionalist parties (and in Western democracies), whereas Brancati selected all regional political actors more in general (and her analysis has a wider geographical scope).

Our contribution is important because it shows the complex implications of decentralisation reforms for regionalist parties. On the one hand,

decentralisation appears to confine regionalism to the regional level, triggering a trend of regionalist party decline in national elections and regionalist party thriving in regional ones. On the other hand, our results also highlight the consequences of decentralisation on the level of radicalism within the regionalist camp. While the strengthening of regional institutions reinforces moderate parties in the regional arena, it appears to reward, in relative terms, radical positions in the national arena.

It is worth spending a few words on the implications of the latter finding, starting from its limits. In particular, we abstain from drawing policy-making implications concerning the debate on whether decentralisation has only a beneficial effect – it would avoid violence by releasing tensions and creating opportunities for peaceful expression of ethno-territorial claims (Wolff 2009) – or it also has an indirect negative effect – it would provide fertile ground for regionalist parties that, in turn, would recreate tensions and the conditions for violence (Brancati 2006, 2008). Having selected cases that operate in contexts where the ethno-territorial struggle is overwhelmingly conducted within the limits of peaceful/electoral politics (Newman 1996), we think that it would be inappropriate to stretch the implications of our results by linking them to this debate.

The lesson we do draw from our results is that decentralisation may eliminate, contain or strengthen the politics of secession under certain conditions. From our results we can infer that, perhaps unsurprisingly, this depends predominantly on the overall strength of regionalism and on the pre-reform balance between moderate and radical regionalist positions.

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## Notes

1. For a comparison of Belgium, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, see Alonso (2012). For France, see Schrijver (2006) and Loughlin (2007)
2. In any case, the issue of endogeneity is clearly present, leading us to be cautious and to present the results as providing support, but not indisputable evidence, for the theoretical stances discussed in the article.
3. We provide a discussion on labels, definitions and internal classifications in the data appendix that is available online at: [www.arjanschakel.nl](http://www.arjanschakel.nl).
4. Our classification is in line with Dandoy as he identifies a claim for partition from the extant state as the main difference between the ‘secessionist’ and two other types of regionalist parties, which he labels ‘protectionist’ and ‘decentralist’ (Dandoy 2010: 206).
5. Building on Meguid, Toubeau (2011) discusses the conditions under which statewide parties, in their attempt to tackle the challenge of regionalist parties, are more likely to carry out decentralisation reforms.
6. Brancati’s study includes not only all regional parties, but also independent candidates and personal lists that compete in only one region, while it excludes regionalist parties that compete in more than one region (Brancati 2008).
7. That is, for instance, the justification given by De Winter (1998) for analysing only regionalist parties’ scores in national elections as a possible source of policy success (i.e., concessions of self-government). In many cases, regionalist parties try and use the regional arena, especially when they are in office, to advocate self-government. However, if they want to be successful at regional level, they also need to project the image of a reliable party of (regional) government.
8. For the ability of voters to make sophisticated voting choices across levels of government, see, on the United States, Ebeid and Rodden (2006); on Canada, Cutler (2008); on Germany, Völkl et al. (2008); on the United Kingdom, Johns et al. (2010). For studies concerning ‘dual voting’ that favours regionalist parties in regional elections compared to national elections, see Hough and Jeffery (2006: 255) and Linera (2008).
9. Due to our binary codification of ideological radicalism, we are not able to account for changes in party position that remain within the autonomist (or indeed the secessionist) category. However, passages from the former to the latter category, which we do detect, are not uncommon. For instance, the Basque National Party (PNV), after having adopted different positions within the autonomist category in the 1980s and 1990s, moved to a secessionist one in the early 2000s (Perez-Nievas 2006: 45–46).
10. This correlation between radicalism on the centre–periphery and on the left–right dimensions does not usually apply to regionalist parties that emerge in two-party systems (and under plurality rule), such as in pre-devolution United Kingdom and in

- Canada. These parties tend to adopt a moderate stance on the left–right dimension and a radical stance on the territorial dimension (Newman 1997). However, this set of parties represents a small minority of cases.
11. The results for national elections reported under models 1 and 2 survive all robustness checks listed in the methods section. The results reported for the interaction effect under model 3 do not reach statistical significance when Spain is excluded and in a fixed effect model specification.
  12. Following the recommendations on analysing interaction effects suggested by Brambor et al. (2006), we have calculated the marginal effect of regional reform for autonomous and secessionist parties separately along with two corresponding standard errors. The beta coefficients are  $-0.058$  (autonomist) and  $-0.022$  (secessionist), and both beta coefficients are statistically significant at the 5 per cent level.
  13. The results for change in regional authority and the interaction effect are not robust when Italy is excluded.
  14. We have done a similar exercise for a spill-over effect from the national to regional electoral arena and the compensation effect is, not surprisingly, much weaker.

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