

Rethinking Party Positioning on Decentralization

The Role of Political Dimensions and Strategic Competition in Territorial Politics

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Abstract

What does political parties think about decentralization and what variables are likely to account for their positions on such an issue? This question, which is far from being trivial, has been rather neglected by literature. According to a post-functional theory of decentralization, in fact, regionalist reforms are implemented not only because of "functional pressures", but also because of distributional and identity factors. Among the latter, it should be taken into account the role played by the parties in triggering jurisdictional decisions that shape the territorial structure of the state. Moreover, decentralization emerged in the recent years as one major issue of political debate, whereas the pros and cons of devolution are likely to be assumed as a matter of contestation from several ideological perspectives. Hence, in this paper I suggest some possible explanations of parties' attitudes towards decentralization. In particular, adopting a statistical research design and using the expert surveys to evaluate party positions on a set of dimensions and issues, I test some hypotheses concerning the determinants of party attitudes in this area of politics. These preliminary findings show that the post-materialist dimension accounts for decentralist trends more than the left-right polarization. Moreover, participation at central government appears to be likely to moderate the support to decentralization, while peripheral parties, lying at the periphery of the system, tend to adopt the more decentralist stances. This paper is conceived to be just a first, explorative attempt to provide some insights on the determinants of party positions on decentralization. Far from assuming to be exhaustive, it is rather aimed at paving the way for further research.

Keywords: Decentralization, post-functionalism, expert surveys, post-materialism, mainstream/peripheral parties

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“Federalismo come teoria della libertà e democrazia nuova sono termini indissolubilmente legati. Il problema, se mai, è quello di vigilare a che il federalismo d’oggi sia veramente l’attuazione di una democrazia articolata, che è segno di vitalità del nuovo stato, e non pretesto per uno smembramento dissolutore, che sarebbe indizio di debolezza e di vecchiaia ”.
(Norberto Bobbio)

Introduction. Parties’ Attitudes in the “Era of Decentralization”: Why Bother?

In a recent work, issued in 2008, Marks, Hooghe and Schakel argued that the post War World II period in Western Europe has been characterized by a “torrent of reform”, which has deeply shaped the structure of territorial government. According to the authors, the centralized European nation-states, which have been built throughout the XIX century, have progressively decentralized their structures of government in the second half of the XX century, whereas the change seems to be overwhelmingly in one direction only (Marks *et al.*, 2008). In particular, the cultural change described by Ronald Inglehart (1977), which started from the 1960s, has coincided with the period of major decentralist trends.

Nevertheless, regionalized systems emerge as the outcomes of reforms which are mediated by political parties. So far, however, literature has largely overlooked the analysis of the determinants of party positions on this issue. Hence, the main question raised by this paper is *whether the dimensions that traditionally structure party competition in Western Europe are likely to influence parties’ attitudes on decentralization*. Far from being trivial, this research question focuses its attention on the actors that are likely to mediate demands of reform to be translated into jurisdictional decisions. I will also test some alternative hypotheses concerning the role of parties in the party system and of the respective national contexts.

The paper is structured as follows: in the first two sections I will introduce the issue of decentralization and I will provide a short literature review on this subject. In particular, I will introduce the theoretical framework, by endorsing *a post-functionalist account of decentralization*. Then, in the third section, I will develop a theoretical model and I will test my hypotheses using a statistical research design.

1. The Where, What and Why of Decentralization in Western Europe

1.1. The Where: Decentralist Trends in Western Europe

Since the 1960s, *decentralization* became one of the most pronounced words by European politicians of several countries, which were ready to reform their constitutions in the name of the

respect of cultural specificities and regional autonomies¹. Caciagli (2006) provides an exhaustive account of the various decentralist reforms which have been implemented in the recent years throughout Western Europe.

In Italy, for instance, the *Regioni* were just formally acknowledged by the Republican Constitution of 1948, but they have been fully implemented only since the 1970s². Recently, reforms in the electoral system for the regional constituencies, a further decentralization of administrative competences³ and the reform of *Title V* of the Constitution⁴, have represented decided steps towards decentralization. In France, despite its tradition of strong centralisation, under the socialist government and Mitterrand's Presidency in the 1980s, there was a considerable transfer of power towards the regions, which were endowed, in the same years, with the first elected assemblies. The Spanish history of decentralisation cannot be separated from the process of democratization in the aftermath of Franco's regime, in 1977. While under the dictatorship regional identities were strongly repressed, the democratic constitution of 1978 instituted four *Comunidades Autónomas* (Catalunya, País Vasco, Galicia and Andalucía), later followed by other 13 regions⁵. Belgium's unitary state has progressively disintegrated since the constitutional reforms of 1970s, because of the long lasting ethnic and linguistic divide between Walloons and Flemish within this small country. With the reform of 1993, the federal Constitution was finally brought to completion⁶. Last but not less important, the British devolution has taken place since 1997, when autonomous institutions were set up both in Scotland and Wales by the Labour government⁷.

Those above mentioned are just few examples of this restructuring trend in contemporary European territorial politics. All but few countries, regardless of their size and population has

¹ It should be remembered that the 1970s were also characterised by new upsurge in ethnic and nationalist claims. While ethnic and regionalist groups, as well as their demands of self-government, were dismissed in the previous decades insofar as they "were thought to have lost in the historical game" (Urwin, 1983), since the 1960s and 1970s all these arguments were defied. The reawakening of peripheral protests, again, introduced ethnic and regional issues into the political discourses and, in most cases, peripheral claims were translated into institutional reforms.

² From 1947 to 1963, only the five regions with a special statute were instituted. Decentralisation was finally completed with the institution of the remaining 15 regions and with the transfer of administrative and legislative powers, according to the decrees issued in 1975 and 1977 (*Ibid.*).

³ With the so-called "Bassanini Laws" of 1997.

⁴ The reform, approved by a centre-left majority and definitively confirmed through a constitutional referendum in 2001, concerns the formal distribution of powers. Article 117 of Title V, in particular, lists the competences reserved to the central states, thus reserving those remaining to the regions.

⁵ The Spanish Constitution is characterised by a complex and flexible institutional design, whereby the Communities' competencies are not definitively enumerated by the constitutional Charter.

⁶ The Kingdom of Belgium is nowadays made up of three communities (along the linguistic divides) and three regions (Flanders, Walloonie and Brussels-Capital).

⁷ Once again, a centre-left coalition, such as in Italy and France, has implemented a process of decentralisation.

experienced in the recent years an increase in regional authority, while recent data and research do not account for cases of reverse processes of re-centralization⁸.

1.2. *The What: Terminological Choices at Stake*

As we have seen in the previous section, there can be several degrees of political decentralization, as well as different ways to organise the distribution of powers within a polity unit. Nevertheless, there is no broad consensus in literature over the terminological choices to deal with this phenomenon. There is a vast array of terms available, ranging from “regionalization”, “devolution”, “decentralization”, “federalization”. This is not simply a matter of formal labels. The use of a specific definition entails a clear perspective in approaching the issue, as well as a narrower delimitation of the dependent variable. That is why I deem important to pay some attention to *what* is the decentralization.

Caciagli, for instance, uses the term devolution as a generic definition encompassing various degrees of transfer of power and resources from the centre to the peripheries, such as the regionalization, the decentralization and the federalization (Caciagli, 2006: 21)⁹. Most scholars, however, adopt the term decentralization to describe a wide range of reforms characterized by a cession of power, resources and responsibility over policies away from the central government (De Vries, 2000¹⁰; Schneider, 2003; O’Neill, 2003). In all the definitions, however, it clearly emerges one dynamic component, that is to say the “*top-down*” initiatives, taken at central level, aimed at transferring authority downwards to sub-national levels, thus designing a multi-tiered structure of government. In this perspective, the notions of *decentralization* or *regionalization*, as well as of devolution, all refer to a criterion of organization of the polity that is triggered by the central government, whereas there is no a clear-cutting distinction among the different outcomes. On the contrary, concepts as those of *regionalism*, relate to the bottom-up pressures from regional and ethnic groups, demanding greater political autonomy and allocation of resources. According to such premises, in this paper, I will use interchangeably the notions of decentralization and

⁸ Marks et al. in particular, have developed an index of regional authority, according to which they estimate an overall increase in regional authority in 42 democracies for 1950-2006. See also <http://www.unc.edu/~gwm/ra.php>, accessed on 30th November 2009.

⁹ This author also notes that the term devolution has been borrowed by the Italian ethno-regionalist party *Lega Nord* from the processes of reform that have occurred in United Kingdom in the late 1990s. Then, in the political jargon of this party, the notion of devolution assumed the restricted meaning of a particular form of strong federalism (Caciagli, 2006).

¹⁰ However, just to make an example of the terminological confusion, De Vries defines the “decentralization as the devolution of power” (De Vries, 2000: 196).

regionalization, taking into account just this “top-down”, dynamic aspect of the phenomenon, as opposed to the “bottom-up” component of the so-called *fait régional*¹¹.

1.3. *The Why: A Post-Functionalist Account of Decentralization*

Assumed that the decentralist trends that are taking place in Europe are characterized by such a top-down shift of powers downwards, it remains to understand the rationale behind these choices of territorial restructuring.

Several scholars have highlighted the advantages as well as the drawbacks of this kind of reforms, vis-à-vis its antinomic counterpart, that is to say the centralization. Among the purported virtues of the regionalized systems there are: an increased efficiency in the policy field, an enhanced democracy due to the increased opportunity of participation, a greater closeness of the officials working in the field to the problems of the people (De Vries, 2000; Meguid, 2009); moreover, decentralist solutions are sometimes implemented within the framework of strategies of appeasement of nationalist threats in ethnically heterogeneous contexts (Sorens, 2009). Nevertheless, the alleged benefits of multi-tiered government are often disputed and centralization becomes a more desirable alternative in the political discourse. As De Vries (2000) argues, the existence of different opinions about the decentralization among the elites, the practitioners as well as the public opinion, clearly indicates that *it is likely to be an issue of political contestation and a terrain of party competition*.

Notwithstanding the competing views on decentralization, however, the choice of a central government to decentralize stems eminently from “functional pressures” (Marks *et al.*, 2008). In the aftermath of the World War II, in fact, Western European states were called to face different challenges from those of the past. While the conventional war-making required a greater centralization of authority, the national states were required to distribute resources and rebuild their economies. Moreover, with the welfare state, national governments were called upon to diversify their policy portfolio (*Ibid.*). Within this framework, it appeared a straightforward solution to many political leaders to redistribute competencies and resources to the regional and local tiers¹².

¹¹ This expression is used and explained by Mario Caciagli (2006). According to the author, the generic term *fait régional* has the advantage to encompass different dimensions of the same, multifaceted phenomenon. It indicates, as already specified, the process of progressive decentralisation within centralised states (*Regionalisation*), the cultural and ideological process of rediscovery and claim of regional identities (*Regionalism*), as well as the European Union’s positive and encouraging attitude towards regions.

¹² Moreover, the parallel process of integration at European level has further encouraged such jurisdictional reforms. In fact, while it could appear a contradiction in terms, the European integration and the decentralization processes are complementary dynamics, whereas the EU has provided a economic, financial, cultural, institutional and political incentives to the development of the sub-national levels (Keating 1996, 2001 and 2008; Bartolini, 2005; Caciagli, 2006).

Nevertheless, as Marks, Hooghe and Shakel argue, “the extent to which these pressures lead to reform depends on distributional and identity effects” (Marks *et al.*, 2008: 169). The latter refer to the intervening political factors that “mediate the effect of functional pressure for institutional outcomes”. In other terms, *while the functional pressures lead to the need of reform, their effective implementation heavily hinges upon the distributional and identity pressures*. For example, the rise of the ethno-regionalist movements, as well as the cultural change described by Inglehart (1977; see also *infra* sections 2 and 3), which has challenged the materialist culture based on centralized, large organizations, have been all influential variables in triggering the decentralist trends since the 1970s (Marks *et al.*, 2008). This interaction of functional, distributional and identity pressures in explaining the regionalist reforms is referred by the authors to as a “post-functionalist account of multi-level governance”, whereas they point out the importance of political factors, while they do not dismiss at all the functionalist dimension¹³.

This theoretical argument leads us to assume that, *in territorial policies, political actors matter*. Moreover, while it is undeniable the role played by the ethno-regionalist parties in demanding and inducing such reforms, it is also true that they seldom have, if any, the political power to effectively adopt any jurisdictional decision that could shape state’s constitution. As a matter of fact, national governments are usually dominated by state-wide parties¹⁴. Accordingly, the first, core question of this paper is: *why do political leaders at central level decide to adopt decentralist reforms?* Or, given that, as assumed before, the pros and cons of decentralization are often disputed, *what are the ideological or strategic variables that are likely to structure the political debate over the issue of decentralization?*

As far as political parties are considered, in democratic systems, as a fundamental unit of political competition and decision making, in the remaining part of the paper I will focus on the relationship between political parties and regionalization in Western European democracies.

2. Political Parties and Decentralization: State of the Art in Literature

A recent special issue of the journal “Party Politics” (2009), addressed the question of the relationship between political parties and territorial politics. As pointed out in the previous section, there is a one-directional change in the institutional settings of Western Europe democracies: contemporary politics is progressively “denationalized” (Hopkin, 2009) and one of the main

¹³ The Post-functionalist argument has been developed, first, by Marks and Hooghe, to account for the process of European integration (Hooghe & G., 2008). Later works, however, have showed its applicability also to the phenomenon of decentralization.

¹⁴ Furthermore, it should be noted that most reforms have been implemented by leftist coalitions and parties at government.

consequences is that this multi-level governance seems likely to affect (and to be affected by) parties' competition, behaviour and organization.

As Roller and Van Houten (2002) observe, national parties in newly regionalized countries face both *organizational* and *political* dilemmas. As for the first dimension, parties are required to take decisions concerning the territorial structure of the party, such as the delegation of powers to regional branches and the adaptation of political programs to sub-national levels¹⁵.

The *political* dilemma, however, is that one that closely relates to the object of the present paper. The authors argue, in fact, that, in front of the territorial restructuring, political parties are called to take positions on the territorial organization of the state, that is to say to express whether they favour or not further decentralization or federalization (*Ibid.*). It emerges that, despite an apparent convergence of the major parties in support of regionalist reforms (Mazzoleni, 2009), a significant variation of their attitudes is likely to emerge, as data on parties' positions empirically show (Roller and Van Houten, 2002: 10).

Moreover, in many cases, the territorial politics also forces national, state-wide parties¹⁶ to compete and to face the challenges of the ethno-regionalist parties. As far as the latter demand greater autonomy (or at least, the definitive secession) for their respective regions, national parties are called upon to find strategies of appeasement (or competition) with regionalist groups, in order to keep their votes in the peripheral regions (Fabre, 2008).

Notwithstanding the pertinence of such issues for the contemporary politics, literature seems to have rather overlooked the importance of the relationship between political parties and decentralist reforms. As Hopkin and Van Houten (2009) argue, on one side, literature on political parties and parties systems has paid only a limited attention to the territorial organization of the parties and their behaviour in multi-level governance¹⁷. On the other side, the growing body of literature on territorial politics has mostly concentrated on the recent upsurge of the ethno-regionalist parties, thus neglecting the role of state-wide parties in the adoption of constitutional reforms concerning the territorial organization of the states¹⁸.

¹⁵ Example of organizational strategies are the split up of mainstream parties (like the Belgian mainstream parties), the creation of federal structures (e.g. the Spanish PSOE- Socialist Party granted significant autonomy to its Catalan branch in 1978); or, sometimes, parties can also choose to strengthen their central structures just in order to better face regionalist challenges (it was the case, for instance, of the British Labour Party; see Roller and Van Houten 2002: 10). For a broader account of the different organisational strategies, see also Fabre E., 2008, pp. 29-30.

¹⁶ State wide parties can be defined as those parties which participate in electoral contests at both regional and national levels. This term is sometimes preferred by scholars instead of that one of national parties (Fabre 2008: 25). For a critical discussion of the distinction between state-wide and non state-wide parties, see also: (Barrio, Baras, Barberà, & Teruel, 2009).

¹⁷ The authors cite, as prominent exceptions, the works issued by Duverger and Panebianco on party organizations (Hopkin and Van Houten 2009).

¹⁸ In 1983, Derek W. Urwin defined the renewed interest of political science for "regionalism", which has flourished since the 1970s, as a "political vogue in studies of Western industrial societies". Nevertheless, as the author acknowledges, "vogues reflect actual phenomena and perceived trends in behaviour". De Winter and Türsan's volume,

Recently, however, some studies on party organizations and strategies in regionalized systems are filling this gap in literature. Works on the territorial organization of political parties (e.g. (Hopkin, 2003 and 2009; Van Houten, 2009; Fabre, 2008; Thorlakson, 2009), on voting behaviour in national and sub-national elections (Jeffery & Hough, 2009), as well as on party positions on decentralization over the time and across countries (Mazzoleni, 2009) are laying the basis for new interesting avenues of research in both the fields of territorial and party politics.

In the following section I will focus just on the third dimension, by suggesting a model for the explanation of parties' attitudes towards the issue of decentralization. Although this aspect has been rather neglected by literature so far, I will adapt existing theories on party positioning to the territorial issue, thus introducing some tentative explanatory hypotheses aimed at paving the way for further research in this area.

3. The Role of Political Dimensions and Strategic Competition in Structuring Party Positions on Decentralization

3.1. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

So far, literature has offered very little explanations about the reasons why political parties should support decentralization (Escobar-Lemmon, 2003). Recent works have focused on the electoral strategies, such as the prospects of electoral gains in regional contests, which are deemed as plausible motivation for a positive attitude (O'Neill, 2003; Sorens, 2009). Other scholars have provided interesting insights on the causes of variation across time (Mazzoleni, 2009) and across countries (De Vries, 2009) in the saliency of the regionalization issue. Very little attention, however, except for some remarkable instances (e.g. Roller and Van Houten, 2002), has been paid to ideological or systemic explanations of party positions on decentralization.

The post-functionalist account described in section 1.3 has raised an important point: regionalization is triggered not only by functionalist pressures, but also by political factors. Among them, political parties can be considered as one of the main "vehicles" according to which the functional pressures can be translated into jurisdictional reforms. Nevertheless, empirical observations and data on party positioning show that there is a rather little consensus among national parties over this issue. For example, both qualitative and quantitative analysis of party

Regionalist Parties in Western Europe, first published in 1998, represents a cornerstone in comparative studies on ethnoregionalist parties. Among the recent works on ethno-regionalist movements one can cite Tronconi (2009) and Elias (2009).

manifesto reveal an underlying opposition in the UK between the Labour party and the Conservative party, with the latter as firm opponent of a devolution of power, while the former has led all the main decentralist reforms in the country. Moreover, the recent history of some newly regionalized countries (e.g. UK, Spain, France) has experienced reforms just when their main leftist parties came to power after long periods at the opposition.

According to such premises, the research question that arises is: can the ideology of a party, or its position in the party system, explain the divergences in party positions on decentralization? The problem is not trivial. To the extent that we can predict party attitudes towards regionalist reforms according to the dimensions that traditionally structure party competition in Western Europe, we might be able to understand at least some of the intrinsic motivations that lead a party, once at government, to translate (or not) functional pressures into a decentralizing constitution.

In order to develop a theoretical background to frame the present analysis, I draw on an influential work by Marks *et al.* (2002 and 2004), which tried to assess the *strength of parties' ideological commitments as predictors of party positions on new issues*. The authors developed such a model in order to study party contestation on the European Integration that they assume to be an emerging issue in political debate. Nevertheless, I believe that the same arguments can be adapted also to the analysis of party divergence on the issue of decentralization, which can be considered as a *new issue*, as well. As the considerations developed in the first section demonstrate, in fact, the former unitary states emerged in XIX were defied only in the second half of the XX, when the regionalist movements and the emergence of new distributional needs, as well as of the welfare policies (once again, the functional pressures), brought to the fore the opportunities of a decentralized system of decision-making¹⁹.

In particular, Marks, Wilson, Ray and Hooghe (*Ibid.*) observe that, in Western Europe, “contestation among parties is limited to one or two dimensions”, that is to say the left/right and the “new politics” ones. The first relates to the social class conflict of the industrial society, while the second one, developed since Inglehart’s work on cultural intergenerational change in the post-World War age (1977), taps communal, environmental and cultural issues. Hence, I ask whether the issue of decentralization can be subsumed into these already existing dimensions of political conflict. Furthermore, again in line with Marks *et al.*, I also wonder whether alternative explanations such as the national context and the definition of parties as mainstream or peripheral play a role in structuring parties’ attitudes toward regionalization.

¹⁹ Marks *et al.* (2008: 170) cite Schumacher’s work of 1973, which titled “Small is beautiful”, where the author questioned the large, centralized organizations.

3.1.1. *The Left/Right Dimension*

Traditionally, parties have polarized along the left-right continuum, which has been developed around the issue of the state intervention to reduce the social inequalities²⁰.

There seems, however, that support to decentralization is likely to come from both left and right. As Schneider (2003:34) argues, the right might favour decentralization in order to increase efficiency, while the same attitude in the left could be led by the desire to ensure a different distribution of power, more tailored to the interest of the citizens. According to such argument, we expect to find no significant variation among parties of left and right. I therefore formulate the first hypothesis:

H1: The Left Right dimension does not account for variation in party attitudes towards decentralization.

3.1.2. *The “New Politics” Dimension*

In the influential work “The Silent Revolution”, Ronald Inglehart (1977) argued that the publics of Western societies are shifting from giving priority to “materialist” values, such as the economic and physical security, to “post materialist” ones, thus emphasising the sense of belonging, the self-expression, the intellectual and aesthetic satisfaction. Moreover, he also hypothesises that the emergence of new value priorities has given rise to *new political movements* inspired by post-materialist issues (e.g. the environment, women’s rights, abortion). A “new” or “Post-Industrial” left is thereby emerging alongside the new materialist/post-materialist dimension, thus leading to a new polarization in the political conflict and posing both an opportunity and a challenge for the traditional left.

According to the theoretical framework, that describes the post-materialist type as more concerned with the individual self-expression, it is probable that the “new, post-materialist” left is likely to emphasise more the local autonomy rather than the authority of the political centre (Inglehart, 1977: 240). Further, the post-materialist left favours social change, as well as the “old”

²⁰ For reasons of space constraints, it is not possible, here, to review the literature on the emergence of party cleavages. For further details see Lipset and Rokkan 1967.

In this paper I will not consider in the analysis the role of the historical cleavages that gave rise to the ideological party families (but, for an account of these cleavages in influencing party positions on decentralization see Fabre 2008, drawing on Budge 1987). Beyond the theoretical framework, which is designed to focus just on the role of the two main dimensions in structuring party competition, I had also to deal with some “limits” of the dataset I used. In particular, the classification of some parties in the respective families, can be disputed (e.g. the Italian AN among the radical right). Also for this reason, at the present stage, I will not introduce party families in the model.

industrial left, but at the same time it “regards the state as an instrument of oppression and exploitation”. Accordingly, “one possible way out of this dilemma might be through decentralizing the state. Hence post-materialists tend to favour regional autonomy” (Inglehart, 1984:56). Moreover, left libertarians are usually perceived as parties willing to bring power closer to people (Meguid, 2009).

We can therefore conceive the issue of decentralization as part of the materialism-post-materialism dimension (Warwick, 2002), thus leading us to formulate a second hypothesis:

***H2:** Parties located on the post-materialist pole are more likely to support decentralization than the materialist ones.*

3.1.3. Mainstream or Peripheral Parties

Beyond the ideological dimension, a further variable that should be taken into account is the distinction between mainstream or “core” parties and the periphery or “niche” ones. The latter are generally ideologically driven, barred from office, with small electoral support and they are often perceived as policy seeking and single-issue movements (Meguid, 2005; Mazzoleni, 2009). On the other side, mainstream parties usually compete to enter government and they tend to adopt an office-seeking and vote-seeking behaviour (*Ibid.*).

This position within the party system is likely to affect the support to decentralist reforms. In particular, parties at the opposition might emphasise the argument of local autonomy in order to increase support at sub-national level, thus challenging the national government (Hopkin 2003). Furthermore, by increasing the number of offices also at regional level, these small parties might enhance their opportunities to enter to enter the “mainstream” of the political system (Roller and Van Houten, 2002: 13). Beyond such strategic considerations, however, peripheral parties often emerge just as a reaction to the crisis and the failure of mainstream parties. Accordingly, the inefficiency of the central government is likely to give these fringe parties further reasons to support a decentralized decision making (Escobar-Lemmon, 2003). Moreover, ethno-regionalist parties are generally included among the “niche” movements (Jensen and Spoon, 2008) and we expect, of course, to find a high support to local autonomy within this party family.

According to such premises, the third hypothesis can be formulated as follows:

***H3:** Support to decentralization is more likely among peripheral parties than among the mainstream ones.*

3.1.4. *The National Context*

Lastly, it can be argued that political parties tend to adopt convergent positions within the same country. Factors such as the size of the state, the relevance of regional and ethnic division within the national borders (Roller and Van Houten 2002), the presence of challenging ethno-regionalist or even secessionist movements could affect parties' attitudes towards the issue of local autonomy.

We can thus add a further hypothesis:

H4: *The characteristics of the country influence party position on decentralization.*

If this hypothesis holds, we should expect low variation on party positions within each country and, conversely, a certain variation across states.

3.2. *Data and Model*

The present analysis is based on the data from Marks et al. 2006 Chapel Hill's *Expert Surveys*²¹ (CHES). They account for party attitudes at a given point in time (2006). *Expert surveys* are a widespread method to measure party positions, based on indirect analysis through the judgements of country specialists.²² The estimate of party position on each issue is just the average of the country expert's judgements. Furthermore, problems of reliability and validity of the data have been dealt with through statistical tests (Marks *et al.* 2002 and 2004).

²¹ Hooghe, Bakker, Brigevich, de Vries, Edwards, Marks, Rovny , Steenbergen (2008), data and codebook available at: http://www.unc.edu/~gwmaks/data_pp.php. Chapel Hill's Expert Surveys replicate and extend the Ray dataset for 1984, 1988, 1992, and 1996 and the Chapel Hill survey of 1999. The 2006 survey, conducted in the summer of 2007, covers 227 national political parties in 29 countries. 632 party specialists, respectively, were asked to contribute their expertise. The questions delivered by these researchers replicated those from the Ray and 1999 Chapel Hill datasets on European integration, issue salience, and internal party dissent and those from the 1999 Chapel Hill dataset: general left/right position, economic left/right position, new politics/galtan position, and party position on some EU policies. Moreover, they add other questions on party positioning and salience for thirteen policy dimensions in line with those surveyed by Benoit and Laver in 2003. Among these, they measured also party positions on the issue of decentralization.

²² In synthesis, with this technique a number of experts of each country is identified and then asked to answer a set of questions, in order to assess party position on the issues considered by the survey. Practicality, according to Benoit and Laver (2007), is the main advantage of expert surveys. Unlike hand-coding procedures, it is quite easy and not expensive "to survey experts at any given time in point" (Benoit and Laver 2006). As Slapin and Proksch (2006) argue, "in an ideal world" this might be the best means for estimating party position. These authors, anyway, have also pointed out some weaknesses of the method, for example those related to the formulation of the questionnaires, in that the same question can be interpreted differently by each expert, also because of linguistic constraints. Moreover, in dimensions such as the left-right one, a major problem concerns the differences in the substantive meanings of these two concepts, which vary from country to country, as well as within the same country over time (Benoit and Laver 2007). Eventually, Benoit and Laver also admitted the impossibility to compare positions over time, since there does not exist a time series of expert survey estimates.

For the purposes of the present paper I will drop from the dataset the Eastern European countries, thus including in the model only the parties from Western Europe.

3.2.1. *The Dependent Variable*

The dependent variable, here, is party position on the issue of political decentralization to regions/localities. In the CHES dataset, parties have been assigned a score along a ten-point scale ranging from 0 (“strongly favours political decentralization”) to 10 (“strongly opposes political decentralization”).

3.2.2. *Independent variables*

The first independent variable is the *party ideological stance along the left/right continuum*. The CHES dataset allows us to locate party positions according to a scale²³ ranging from 1 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right).

Then, I included in the analysis also the “*new politics*” dimension. It has been operationalized by Hooghe, Marks and Wilson (2004) in an intriguing interpretive model, which considers two poles of conflict. The first, dealing with lifestyle, ecology, cultural diversity, nationalism, immigration, and participatory democracy (decentralisation) is labelled as the green/alternative/libertarian (GAL) pole; on the opposite side, the support for traditional values, law and order and the reaction against immigration identifies the traditional/authoritarian/nationalism (TAN) pole. Accordingly, parties have been assigned a score that varies from 0 (libertarians/ post-materialist) to 10 (traditional/authoritarian)²⁴.

As previously stated in the theoretical background, I also want to assess the impact of the role within the party system as *mainstream or peripheral party*.²⁵

²³ The wording of question 10, concerning general left/right stance was the following: “Please tick the box that best describes each party’s overall ideology on a scale ranging from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). 0=extreme left, 5=centre, 10=extreme right”

²⁴ Question 12 from the Chapel Hill’s survey: “Parties can be classified in terms of their views on democratic freedoms and rights. “Libertarian” or “post-materialist” parties favour expanded personal freedoms, for example, access to abortion, active euthanasia, same-sex marriage, or greater democratic participation. “Traditional” or “authoritarian” parties often reject these ideas; they value order, tradition, and stability, and believe that the government should be a firm moral authority on social and cultural issues: 0=libertarian/post-materialist, 5= centre; 10= traditional/authoritarian”.

²⁵ Some authors (e.g. Conti, 2009) create such a variable by considering party families. In this way, liberal, conservative and socialist parties are included among the mainstream, while the other families form the group of peripheral parties. Nevertheless, such a classification can be disputed when using the CHES dataset. The inclusion of the Italian *Alleanza Nazionale* among the radical right parties, as well as of the British United Kingdom Independence Party among the conservatives, for instance, are likely to lead to bias, to a certain extent. In fact, given the distinction between mainstream and peripheral adopted in this paper, we would have AN, which participates at the Italian

To measure such a variable, it could be useful to create of an index to take into account both the size of the party and its participation in the government of the party. Nevertheless, at this stage of analysis another viable solution is that to create a mainstream category by including all political parties that have participated in the government in some time period between 1990-2006²⁶. In this case, “peripherals” have been coded as 0 and “mainstream” as 1.

The *national context* hypothesis is operationalized using dichotomous variables for each of the Western European countries included in the model.

Finally, I control for the *saliency of the issue of decentralization* in each party’s manifesto. I expect to find a high linear negative correlation, insofar as those parties that mostly emphasise an issue are generally those that adopt a positive stance on it. In the CHES, saliency is measured according a ten-points scale (whereas 0= not important at all and 10= extremely important).

3.3. Findings and Discussion

There seems to be a weak linear positive relationship between the left/right dimension and party position on decentralization (Figure 1, below). There is a certain “noise” in the scatter plot, however, that arises some doubts about the real influence of such a dimension on our dependent variable.

As for the relationship with the second, “new politics” dimension, we can appreciate a greater positive linearity (Figure 2, below). It seems, in fact, that the more TAN the parties are, the less they favour decentralization. We can also note, however, some outliers, that are likely to affect such a relationship. When looking more closely at the outliers located at the bottom of the scatter plot, we can observe that most of them are ethno-regionalist parties (BNG, ERC, Plaid, SNP, EA, CiU, PNV, CC, VB, CHA). It is a heterogeneous party family, whose members are spread throughout the whole “new politics” dimension (De Winter, 1998; Van Atta, 2002).

While parties such as the more leftist and libertarian Chunta Aragonesista (a Spanish regionalist parties) and the xenophobic Flemish Vlaam Belang seem to have little in common, they both share the same ideological platform consisting in the demand for a greater local autonomy. Hence, dropping this “outlying” category, we obtain a more linear relationship, whereas the scatter plot of Figure 3 (below) just maps the position of the state-wide parties²⁷.

government since the 1994, among the peripheral parties and the UKIP, traditionally excluded from the office, within the mainstream group.

²⁶ I am indebted to Prof. Gary Marks for having kindly suggested to me this possible way out.

Of course, also this choice is not free of risks of bias and misleading results. At the present preliminary level of research, however, also taking into account the limits of the data available, it appears a rather acceptable solution.

²⁷ With all the parties, the Pearson’s r is .31, while dropping the ethno-regionalist parties it increases up to .38.

Figure 1. Position on decentralization and location on the left/right axis

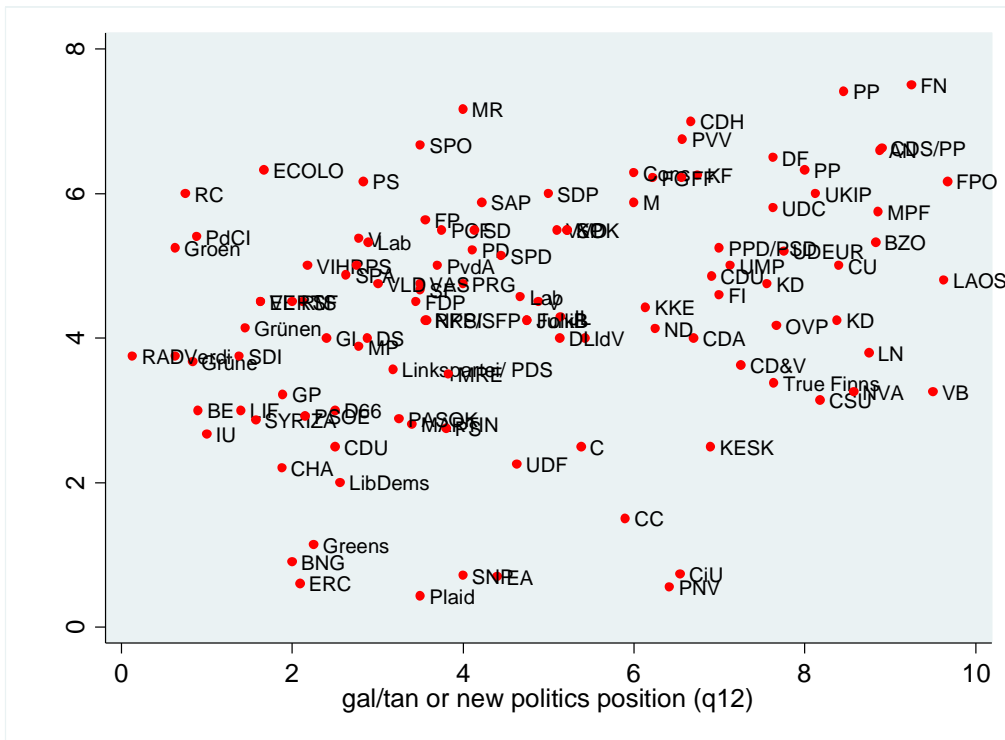


Figure 2. Position on decentralization and location on the “new politics” dimension, all parties included

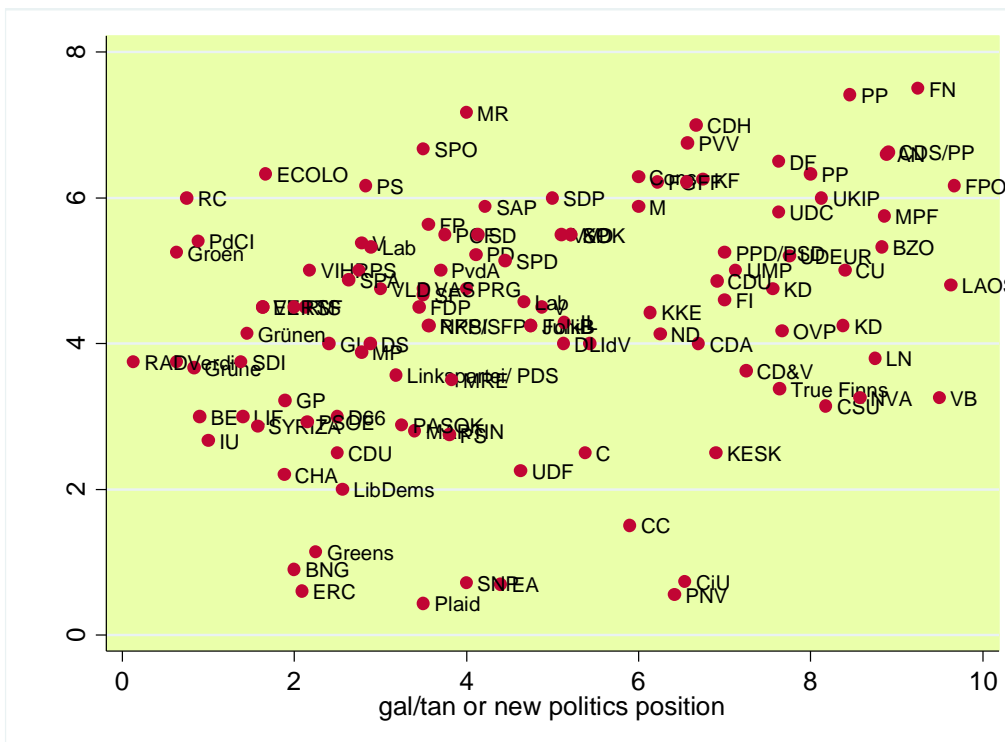


Figure 3. Position on decentralization and location on the “new politics” dimension, state-wide parties only

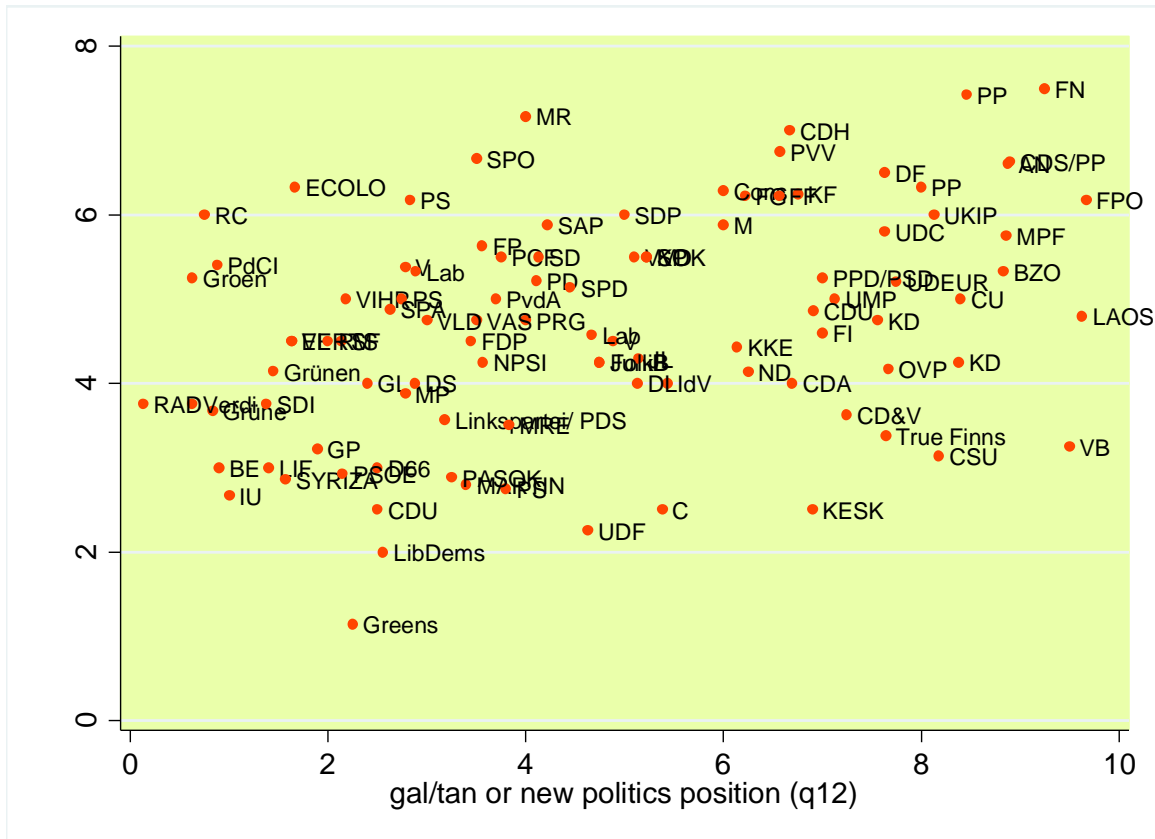


Figure 4 (below) shows, instead, the mean score obtained by parties on the issue of decentralization, sorted by country. It seems that, on average, Western European parties reveal an overall favourable attitude towards regionalization, with more positive stances in states like Spain and UK. It is to say, however, that Spain and UK have the highest number of ethno-regionalist parties included in the dataset, which are likely to deeply affect these means in a direction more favourable toward decentralization. In fact, as we can see from Table 1 (below) Spain and UK are also the countries where the standard deviations are higher.

The last scatter plot (Figure 5, below) illustrates the relationship between parties' attitudes on decentralization and the salience given to such an issue, that I have assumed as control variable. As expected (*supra*, 3.2.2), there is a strong negative linear relationship (Pearson's $r = -.55$), which indicates that the parties that place a high relevance on this issue are also those who tend to adopt positive stances on it²⁸.

²⁸ Nevertheless, the presence of some significant outliers at the top-right of the scatter would deserve some qualitative explanations.

Figure 4. Average scores of party positions on decentralization, sorted by country.

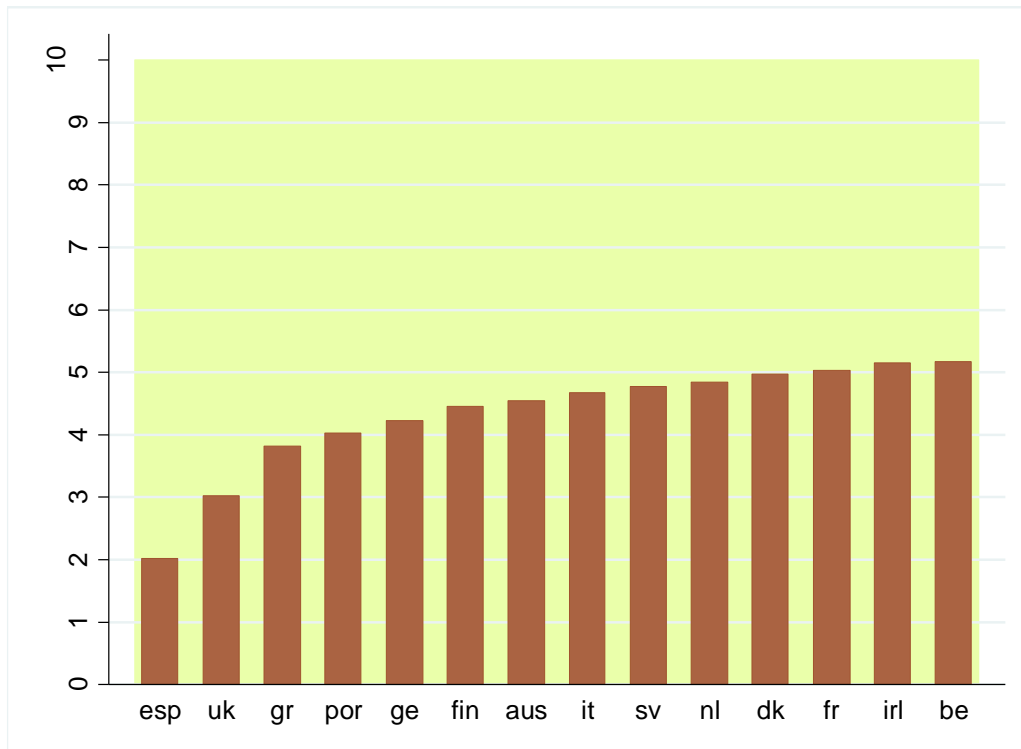
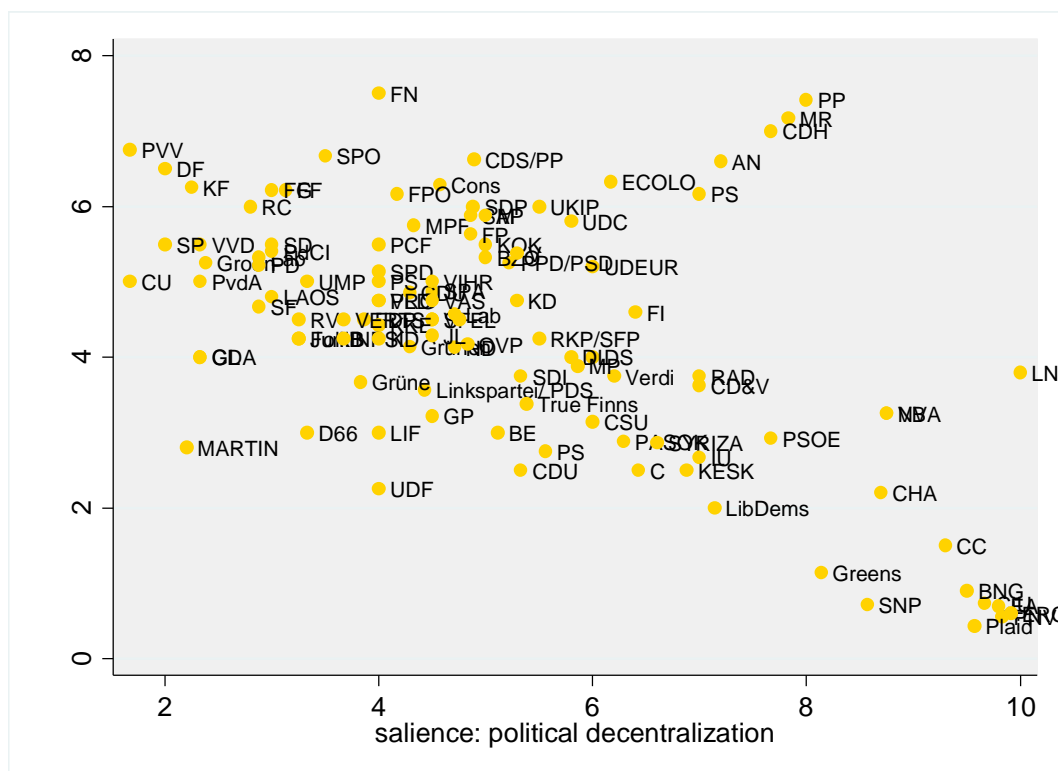


Table 1. Means and Standard deviations of party positions on Decentralization, sorted by country

Country	Mean	Standard Deviation
Belgium	5.168	1.479706
Denmark	4.972222	.8789593
Germany	4.225	.7654476
Greece	3.82	.8991385
Spain	2.019	2.095855
France	5.03125	1.460415
Ireland	5.146667	1.120922
Italy	4.670625	1.04986
Netherlands	4.84375	1.156793
UK	3.02	2.536231
Portugal	4.026	1.822671
Austria	4.544286	1.533556
Finland	4.45375	1.129146
Sweden	4.77375	1.18029
Total	4.359115	1.623423

Figure 5. Position on decentralization and salience of the issue in parties' manifestos



3.3.1. Four Models of Party Positioning on Decentralization

I regressed the dependent variable on the variables listed at section 3.2.2 (Table 2). In Model 1 and 3 I just considered the two ideological dimensions (left/right and “new politics”), the control variable salience and the dummy variable mainstream/peripheral party, while in Model 2 and 4 I also controlled for the dummies for country, with Austria as excluded reference category. Furthermore, in Models 1 and 2, I included all the parties, while in the last two *models I dropped the ethno-regionalist parties*, thus accounting just for the position of state-wide parties. I believe, in fact, that it is analytically interesting to observe the attitude of these latter alone, insofar as the ethno-regionalist family, which is ideologically heterogeneous but convergent on strong favourable attitudes on decentralization, is likely to bias the results toward a more “decentralist” direction.

The statistical analysis partly confirms the hypotheses developed in this paper (Table 2). First and foremost, in none of the models the left/right dimension is statistically significant. As hypothesized, *left-right ideology does not account for significant variation in party positions on decentralization.*“

Table 2. OLS Regression of Party Positioning on Decentralization

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Left-Right	0.0140 (0.17)	-0.0171 (-0.20)	0.0270 (0.32)	-0.0330 (-0.37)
New Politics	0.193* (2.46)	0.235** (2.94)	0.185* (2.34)	0.261** (3.17)
Salience of decentralization	-0.399*** (-7.27)	-0.554*** (-5.73)	-0.217** (-2.88)	-0.402*** (-3.48)
Participation in government	1.108*** (4.51)	0.803** (2.93)	0.825** (3.14)	0.679* (2.41)
Belgium		1.696** (2.68)		1.603* (2.48)
Denmark		0.284 (0.49)		0.365 (0.63)
Spain		0.636 (0.85)		1.356 (1.51)
Finland		0.118 (0.19)		-0.0676 (-0.11)
France		0.164 (0.27)		0.194 (0.32)
Germany		-0.121 (-0.19)		-0.177 (-0.28)
Greece		-0.414 (-0.60)		-0.572 (-0.83)
Ireland		0.198 (0.31)		0.364 (0.54)
Italy		0.963 (1.50)		0.736 (1.14)
Netherlands		-0.709 (-1.16)		-0.455 (-0.73)
Portugal		0.136 (0.20)		-0.0481 (-0.07)
Sweden		0.886 (1.46)		0.711 (1.16)
UK		0.354 (0.53)		0.387 (0.55)
_cons	4.733*** (11.49)	5.293*** (8.47)	4.139*** (9.01)	4.706*** (6.92)
<i>N</i>	106	106	93	93

t statistics in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

New politics” dimension, on the contrary, appears to be statistically significant in all the four cases. This is consistent with the hypothesis according to which, as far as decentralization can be considered as one issue forming *the new politics dimension*, the latter *is likely to affect party attitudes on regionalization*. The positive sign of the coefficients suggests that the more favourable positions can be observed among the GAL parties.

Then, government participation is statistically significant in all the four models. The positive coefficient supports the hypothesis according to which parties tend to support more decentralist reforms when they are at the opposition. It seems that exclusion from government enhances the support to further decentralization but, once at the central government, parties tend to moderate their supportive attitudes.

The control variable, that is to say the salience of decentralist issue, in line with the expectations (and also with the scatter of Figure 5), presents a negative coefficients and accounts for major variation in the dependent variable.

Contrary to our hypothesis, however, the alleged influential role of the national contexts should be downplayed. In fact, just the Belgium is statistically significant. This result, however, strengthens the finding that new politics dimension and the participation at the central government are powerful predictors of party positions on decentralization, even controlling for the peculiarities of each national setting.

Concluding Remarks

The aim of this paper has been “to sow doubts, rather than harvest certainties”, in line with Bobbio’s recommendation. Far from proposing an exhaustive model to explain party positioning on decentralization, it has suggested the need to raise the awareness on the importance of party politics when dealing with the issue of decentralization. The latter, in fact, increasingly appears as a highly contested issue, involving competing ideologies and dynamics of political strategy. As Keating (2010) points out:

“Territorial reform has become a highly partisan issue, with differences between the views of the competing coalitions deliberately magnified, although some of the biggest differences lie within the respective coalitions. Parties in government tend to oppose policies they supported in opposition and vice versa”(emphasis ours).

The statistical analysis here performed has provided the first, exploratory results that could serve as a basis for a cross-national comparison. It has revealed, for instance, that parties generally lying at the periphery of the party system are more likely to support decentralization, as also argued

by Keating. It is a policy of opposition, challenging the authority of the central state; but, when a party enters in office and becomes part of the central authority, with all the related responsibilities, it seems that it will be more cautious in surrendering powers downwards.

Moreover, it has been also observed that political parties located towards the post-materialist pole support a conception of a multi-level state, whose sources of authority can be located closer to the citizens. This finding is, maybe not surprisingly, in line with Inglehart's influential work, which firstly hypothesized that the value change occurred in the second half of the XX century has led to an enhanced sense of affiliation to the community. It has also encouraged the need to emphasize the individual self-expression, which is more likely to be ensured by a system of decision-making that comes closer to people.

Nevertheless, this paper wants just to provide a first, tentative analysis over the determinants of party positions on decentralization. It can be improved, for instance, with the use of time-series data, accounting for variation of such positions over the time. Moreover, a more reasoned account of party politics on territorial issues would benefit from an in depth analysis of single case studies, based on countries or party families. It would be crucial in order to assess the importance of strategic motivations that are likely to induce parties to change their stances on the decentralist issue. Among these, one can consider, for instance, the presence of strong ethno-territorial movements and/or identities in a specific region. The need to deal with such peripheral mobilization may induce a state-wide party to ally with an ethno-regionalist movement and to agree with it to accommodate its self-government demands; or, in another possible scenario, even a national and mainstream party can introduce the "devolution" theme in its political discourse in order to gain the consensus in areas where strong regionalist identities are at stake.

Furthermore, parties' position also evolves over the time because of ideological reasons, that sometimes also come to terms with strategic considerations. Huysseune (2001), for example, considers the case of Alleanza Nazionale (AN), a right wing Italian party. It inherited the centralist tradition of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), a fascist movement which was based on the rhetoric of the Nation. Nevertheless, when in 1995 it turned to more moderate stances, endorsing the democratic values, AN also introduced in its public discourse an explicit reference to greater empowerment of regional authorities²⁹. Moreover, the alliance of this party with the ethno-

²⁹ *"Pur nella difesa di una concezione unitaria dello Stato, la questione del Federalismo può essere un tema di intervento per un grande movimento politico, ricercando nella tradizione storica, politica e culturale italiana i fili che ci riconducono alle fonti risorgimentali, dove scopriremo che il valore "Nazione" può coesistere perfettamente con le esigenze autonomistiche"* [excerpt from the "Tesi di Fiuggi, Riforma delle Istituzioni e rifondazione dello stato", congress of the foundation of AN, held in Fiuggi in 1995].

regionalist *Lega Nord* has undoubtedly affected its attitudes towards the issue of the so-called devolution.

All these information, of course, cannot be provided by the statistical data and wide cross-national comparisons, but they rather would require deeper insights into the specific dynamics of each party and the respective domestic party system.

That premised, however, the hypotheses suggested in this paper, embedded within the theoretical framework here suggested, should be considered as an introductory interpreting model, thus paving the way for further research connecting territorial and party politics in increasingly multi-layered polities.

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