

Decentralisation Reforms and Regionalist Parties' Strength: Accommodation, Empowerment or Both?

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Abstract

The article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of decentralisation on regionalist parties' strength in both national and regional elections. We consider decentralisation both as a putatively crucial event, that is, the creation of an elected regional government, and as a process. Our study is based on a dataset including aggregate vote shares for 227 regionalist parties competing in 329 regions across 18 Western democracies. Our findings show that decentralisation as an event has a strong impact on the number of regionalist parties, as it triggers processes of *proliferation* and *diffusion*. Decentralisation as a process has an overall empowerment effect in regional elections, while it does not have an effect in national elections. However, our analysis also reveals that the overall null effect in national elections is actually the result of an empowering effect on new regionalist parties and of an accommodating effect on old regionalist parties.

Keywords

territorial politics, centre-periphery cleavage, decentralisation reforms, regionalist parties

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The holding of a referendum on Scotland's independence from the United Kingdom in September 2014 and the on-going political/judicial struggle for carrying out similar referendums in Spain, most notably in Catalonia, represent only the latest and most extreme examples of the influence that regionalist parties exert on several established democracies. In the past decades, regionalist parties have contributed to triggering a general process of territorial reforms resulting in incremental transfers of powers from the state to the regions (Hooghe et al., 2010). Their policy success largely originates from their electoral

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success (De Winter, 1998: 238–239), which in turn allows them to put pressure on state-wide parties in multiple ways: posing an electoral threat to one (or more) of them, being voted into office at regional level and using the regional institutions to negotiate with the central institutions, or even becoming relevant parties in the national parliament (Alonso, 2012; Field, 2015; Meguid, 2008; Toubeau and Massetti, 2013). It should not come as a surprise, therefore, if the literature on regionalist parties has mainly focused on the sources of their electoral success (Goldin, 2001; Sorens, 2005, 2004; Tronconi, 2006). This scholarship has confirmed the importance of historical-sociological variables that had already been pointed out in earlier studies (Rokkan and Urwin, 1983). Yet stark disagreement remains on the effect of some institutional factors and, primarily, on the effect of the decentralisation reforms.

We want to contribute to this scholarship by addressing a still open controversy on the explanatory value of two alternative theses. On the one hand, some scholars have proposed what we label the ‘accommodation thesis’, which sees decentralisation as a strategy adopted by state-wide parties in order to appease regionalist parties and deprive them of their *raison d’être*, thus undermining their electoral strength (De Winter, 2006; Levi and Hechter, 1985; Rudolph and Thompson, 1985). On the other hand, other scholars have proposed what we label the ‘empowerment thesis’ which sees decentralisation as providing a more favourable institutional environment in which regionalist parties can flourish (Brancati, 2008). Adding to the controversy, some scholars have recently suggested that decentralisation does not strengthen (nor weaken) regionalist parties (Lublin, 2012), while others have proposed that the effect of decentralisation on individual regionalist parties depends on their centre-periphery ideological radicalism and on whether regional or national elections are considered (Masseti and Schakel, 2013). These contrasting findings, and the fact that these studies employ a variety of research designs – for example, a focus on individual parties or aggregate electoral scores, many or few countries, national or regional elections – suggest that decentralisation can have a complex and multifold effect. Hence, the main challenge of this article lies in identifying the scope conditions which lead empowerment or accommodation to prevail within the remit of Western democracies.

We argue that these contrasting findings can be reconciled by conceptualising decentralisation both as an event – that is, the establishment of an elected regional tier of government – and as a process – that is, all transfers of powers from the centre to regions that might precede and, most commonly, follow the establishment of elected regional governments. We hypothesise that the establishment of a regional electoral arena accommodates pre-existing (‘before’) regionalist parties but, at the same time, provides opportunities for political entrepreneurs to establish new (‘after’) regionalist parties. Whether this process leads to larger aggregate/total vote share for regionalist parties depends on (1) the effects of further decentralisation reforms on ‘before’ and ‘after’ parties and (2) whether ‘after’ parties are ‘original’ (genuinely new) or are break-ups from ‘before’ parties. We expect that further decentralisation reforms (i.e. decentralisation as a process) strengthen ‘after’ parties – starting from regional elections and using the regional electoral arena as a ‘springboard’ into the national electoral arena (Brancati, 2008). However, empowerment may be offset by electoral losses for ‘before’ parties to the extent that ‘after’ parties are ‘splinters’ – that is, their leaders, members and voters come from the (‘before’) party of origin. By classifying parties according to their relative birthday and origin, we are able to provide a more exhaustive evaluation of the causal mechanisms between decentralisation reforms and total electoral strength for regionalist parties.

Our study is based on a dataset of 227 regionalist parties across 329 regions and 18 countries. We find that the establishment of regional elections (i.e. decentralisation as an event) has a much bigger impact on the number rather than on the aggregate electoral strength of regionalist parties, with ‘before’ parties remaining the most successful in electoral terms, especially in national elections. As far as decentralisation reforms (as a process) are concerned, we find that they have no impact on regionalist parties’ aggregate electoral strength in national elections, but they have a positive impact on regional elections. When parties are sorted according to their relative birth time and origin, however, we are able to observe how the overall non-impact on national elections actually hides the presence of accommodating and empowering dynamics that prevail on different sub-sets of parties but cancel each other out in the aggregate. Indeed, we find a negative (accommodating) effect on ‘before’ parties and a positive (empowering) impact on ‘after’ (both ‘original’ and ‘splinter’) parties. Therefore, the unfolding of decentralisation reforms appears to favour a marginal redistribution of votes from old to new regionalist parties, which tend to be (especially ‘splinter’ ones) more radical in their self-government claims.

The article is organised in the following way. The next section discusses the theoretical and empirical literature on regionalist parties’ electoral strength and, in particular, the alternative logics behind the accommodation and empowerment theses. In this section, we outline our expectations concerning the prevailing of one or the other thesis under different conditions. Then, we present the data/methodology and discuss the main findings. The results are then summarised and discussed in the conclusion.

Theoretical Framework and Working Hypotheses

The early scholarship on the sources of regionalist parties’ strength adopted an historical-sociological approach, which focused on the importance of cultural markers of identity (e.g. language and religion) and on uneven economic development that made some regions particularly distinct from the rest of the state (Gourevitch, 1979; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Rokkan and Urwin, 1983). While this theoretical approach has found extensive substantiation in later, more systematic, empirical research (Fearon and Van Houten, 2002; Goldin, 2001; Sorens, 2005), scholars have also explored the influence of other factors, such as the conditions of the electoral market and state-wide party strategies (Meguid, 2008; Tronconi, 2006); regionalist parties’ ideological widening and adaptation (Newman, 1997); agency effects and exogenous incidental events (De Winter et al., 2006; De Winter and Tursan, 1998); international trends and European integration (Jolly, 2015; Meadwell and Martin, 2004); and institutional factors, such as electoral systems (Harmel and Robertson, 1985; Hauss and Rayside, 1978; Lublin, 2014; Montabes-Pereira et al., 2004). However, the literature has dedicated relatively little attention to the effect of decentralisation reforms on regionalist parties’ electoral strength. This lacuna can be explained by the fact that decentralisation has been mainly considered as a consequence, rather than a cause, of regionalist parties’ electoral success (De Winter, 1998: 237–240). Indeed, in those countries where they are present, regionalist parties are widely considered to be the ‘motors’ of decentralisation reforms (Alonso, 2012; Toubeau, 2011; Toubeau and Massetti, 2013). Yet, once a specific decentralisation reform has taken place, even if adopted under pressure from regionalist parties, it might still have an independent effect on the subsequent electoral performance of regionalist parties. The question is not trivial, as it bears evident implications on whether decentralisation reforms are an effective instrument to manage/contain the challenges posed by

regionalist parties to the territorial integrity of states. In addition, it represents an academic puzzle, as scholarly works addressing this question have come to contrasting conclusions.

It is possible to identify two main and opposing theses. On the one hand, some authors theorise a negative impact of decentralisation reforms on regionalist parties' electoral scores, based on the argument that concessions of regional autonomy would deprive regionalist parties of their mission and, therefore, undermine their electoral fate – 'accommodation thesis' (Levi and Hechter, 1985; Rudolph and Thompson, 1985, 1989). This thesis has been mainly proposed through qualitative works based on a few or one case study (De Winter, 2006). On the other hand, other studies have found empirical substantiation for a positive effect – 'empowerment thesis' (Brancati, 2006, 2008). In the latter case, the theoretical argument is twofold. First, the creation of a regional institution is expected to reinforce regional identity as distinct from national identity among the regional electorate, thus representing a strategic advantage for regionalist parties. The second and more emphasised argument is that the creation of a regional tier of elected government opens up new opportunities for regional political actors to emerge and establish themselves at the regional level first. After having strengthened their organisation and having built their electorate at the regional level, they have better chances of doing well in national elections too. Importantly, this 'springboard effect' can also work vice versa, with good results in national elections feeding back into the subsequent regional election, thus triggering a positive cycle (Brancati, 2006: 139).

Unfortunately, Dawn Brancati's (2006, 2008) work did not provide a full investigation of the proposed dynamics because it did not consider regional election results, leaving a certain distance between the main argument underpinning the central hypothesis and the empirical analysis. Brancati (2008) took the number and electoral scores of regional political actors in national elections as a proof of the empowering impact of the establishment of elected regional governments. In contrast, Massetti and Schakel (2013) have provided an analysis which, by looking at both regional and national election results, was able to investigate directly the 'springboard effect'. However, they analysed the effect of decentralisation on individual regionalist parties' electoral scores, rather than on aggregate electoral strength. Moreover, they focused on the analysis of decentralisation as an unfolding process, missing out the (potential) importance of the establishment of regional elections as a specific critical juncture. Finally, the works of Jason Sorens (2005) and David Lublin (2012) appear to point to the emergence of a third position, which sees decentralisation as having no impact on regionalist parties' electoral strength. In spite of a different approach and empirical scope,¹ these studies suggest that the electoral performance of regionalist parties is primarily affected by sociological, demographic and ideological factors (Sorens, 2005: 318), or by other institutional factors, such as electoral systems and the direct election of a powerful president (Lublin, 2012: 1089), but not by decentralisation.

Our analysis brings together, in an innovative way, the approaches and insights of previous studies, aiming to provide a comprehensive investigation on the impact of decentralisation reforms on regionalist parties' electoral strength. We start by acknowledging that, as proposed by Brancati (2008), the establishment of an elected regional tier of government is the most important decentralisation reform as it can represent a 'critical juncture' on subsequent electoral politics. The established literature, indeed, suggests that this particular reform provides regionalist parties with a series of key advantages, such as competing on an equal basis with state-wide parties in terms of territorial coverage, strengthening their organisation, aiming to catch and retain regional office, as well as

using public resources to stabilise their electorate (Alonso, 2008; Elias and Tronconi, 2011; Goldin, 2001; Hough and Jeffery, 2006; Thorlakson, 2009). Indeed, some studies appear to support the ‘empowerment thesis’ although limited to regional elections (Linares, 2008; Meguid, 2011; Schrijver, 2006).

In order to account for the importance of the establishment of an elected regional tier of government we distinguish, as also pointed out by Lublin (2012), between parties born before the creation of regional elections and parties that were born after. However, we also distinguish between ‘original’ regionalist parties and ‘splinters’ from pre-existing regionalist parties. This distinction allows us to assess whether empowerment for after parties results from accommodation for before parties, as the former break away from the latter. At the same time, we recognise that it is important to look at decentralisation as a dynamic component of party competition (Alonso, 2012; Meguid, 2013; Toubeau and Massetti, 2013) and to analyse decentralisation as an on-going process. Finally, we adopt a multi-level perspective, considering regionalist parties’ electoral scores in both regional and national elections (Masseti and Schakel, 2013). This choice allows us to provide a more exhaustive evaluation of the impact of decentralisation reforms and, crucially, for an evaluation of the causal mechanisms underlying the ‘springboard effect’ envisaged by Brancati (2008). Our contribution, therefore, aims to single out when one of the two dynamics (‘accommodation’ or ‘empowerment’) tends to prevail at the level of aggregate regionalist party vote share, depending on the *level of election* (national or regional) and on the *type of regionalist party* – whether born before or after the establishment of regional elections and whether they are new regionalist parties or they originated as splinters from pre-existing regionalist parties. Here, we present our working hypotheses based on the theories outlined above and on the most recent findings.

First, we expect that the ‘accommodation thesis’ applies especially to ‘before’ parties that have pressed for decentralisation reforms in the first place. In contrast, ‘after’ parties that were born in an already decentralised state are expected to be more strategically and ideologically equipped to exploit the new institutional setting and avoid being accommodated by the unfolding of further reforms (e.g. they might be more radical on self-government claims). Following previous studies (Masseti and Schakel, 2013), we also expect that the ‘accommodation’ effect should apply only to national elections because that is where regionalist parties are mainly perceived as single issue (self-government) parties, whereas in regional elections they tend to be evaluated by voters on the basis of their whole programmatic platforms and can even be perceived as parties of (regional) government. Therefore, our first set of hypotheses concerning national elections is the following:

H1. Increases in regional authority are followed by electoral losses for ‘before’ parties in national elections.

H2. Increases in regional authority are followed by electoral gains for ‘after’ parties in national elections.

When it comes to regional elections, we expect that all regionalist parties gain from decentralisation reforms. Devolving ever more powers to the regions creates the conditions for the de-nationalisation of politics, with increased levels of differentiation in the relative salience of political issues and their framing across various regions (Thorlakson, 2009). Therefore, parties are pushed to tailor their discourses and policy proposals towards regional electorates. In this respect, regionalist parties have an obvious advantage over

regional branches of state-wide parties, as they are not constrained by national leaders and they can present themselves as the true champions of regional interests. In addition, the concession of more regional powers can galvanise the regionalist electorate, thus increasing support for regionalist parties in general (Meguid, 2007). Yet, even at the regional level, ‘accommodation’ and ‘empowerment’ dynamics may be at work at the same time as the regional electoral arena provides more ‘electoral space’ for regionalist parties to emerge, not only as new parties but also as splinters form pre-existing ones. Subsequent unfolding of regional reforms may intensify competition among regionalist parties, which we expect to result in electoral gains for the more radical regionalist parties that claim further decentralisation. To the extent that ‘after splinter’ parties are radicalisers vis-à-vis the parties from which they originated, we expect ‘after splinter’ parties to be the main winners from decentralisation reforms in regional elections:

H3. Increases in regional authority are followed by electoral gains for all types of regionalist parties in regional elections.

H4. Increases in regional authority are followed by bigger electoral gains for ‘after splinter’ parties than for the other categories of parties.

Finally, the way in which regional reforms impact on regionalist parties’ performances across the national and regional electoral arena might also depend on the presence and strength of what we label the ‘springboard effect’, that is, a positive cross-level impact of previous electoral scores on the subsequent ones, which is a central argument within the ‘empowerment thesis’. Here, we do not have specific expectations concerning the different types of parties, but in order to assess the ‘empowerment’ effect properly, we include vote shares obtained in previous regional or national elections in the models presented below.

Regionalist Party Dataset: Electoral Strength across Type of Election and Party

In order to identify regionalist parties, we proceeded in several steps. First, we collected regional vote shares for regional and national elections in 18 West European and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) from 1944 to 2010. Second, we looked at party labels and consulted the literature to identify regionalist parties, that is, those parties whose core mission includes the enhancement/defence of territorially based (regional) self-government vis-à-vis the state, no matter whether the extent of self-government claimed is minimal (administrative) or maximum (up to secession from the state) (De Winter, 1998). Third, we applied a relevance criterion: we include in our dataset each regionalist party which obtained at least 1% of the vote and/or one seat in one national or regional election. This has led to the identification of 227 regionalist parties participating in regional and/or national elections in 100 regions in 16 countries. Greece and Japan also have regionalist parties, but they do not reach the 1% or one seat criterion. Supplementary Information S1 lists these parties and the countries and regions where they participate in elections. Supplementary Information S2 details sources and coding. Table 1 provides an interesting ‘snapshot’ overview.

Table 1. Total Number of Regionalist Parties and Their Participation in Regional and National Elections.

Country	Regional tier	N	Presence in regions			Regional elections		National elections	
			Parties	Total	Yes	No	First	Last	First
Australia	States and territories	5	8	3	5	1950	2008	–	–
Austria	Länder	3	9	2	7	1987	1994	–	–
Belgium	Régions/Gewesten/Gemeenschappen	10	4	4	0	1974	2009	1949	2010
Canada	Provinces and territories	10	13	7	6	1944	2009	1984	2008
Denmark	Amter/regions, Faroe Islands, Greenland	6	22	2	20	1945	2009	1945	2007
Finland	Åland	2	1	1	0	1987	2007	1987	1987
France	Regions	18	22	12	10	1982	2010	1981	2007
Germany	Länder	4	16	16	0	1946	2010	1949	2009
Greece	Nomoi	0	58	0	58	–	–	–	–
Italy	Regioni a statuto ordinario and speciale	60	20	20	0	1947	2010	1946	2008
Japan	Todofuken	0	47	0	47	–	–	–	–
The Netherlands	Provincies	11	12	7	5	1966	2007	–	–
Norway	Fylker	2	19	2	17	1983	2007	1985	1989
Portugal	Acores and Madeira	1	2	2	0	1980	2004	1980	2005
Spain	Comunidades and Ciudades autónomas	70	19	15	4	1980	2010	1977	2008
Sweden	Landstinget	2	27	1	26	1998	2002	–	–
Switzerland	Cantons	5	26	3	23	1970	2009	1991	2007
United Kingdom	London, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales	18	4	3	1	1945	2007	1945	2010
Total		227	329	100	229	1944	2010	1945	2010

A detailed overview of which regionalist parties participate in which regions and elections can be found in Supplementary Information S1. The total number of regions analysed for regional elections is 320 because of regional (boundary) reform implemented before or at the time of the first regional elections.

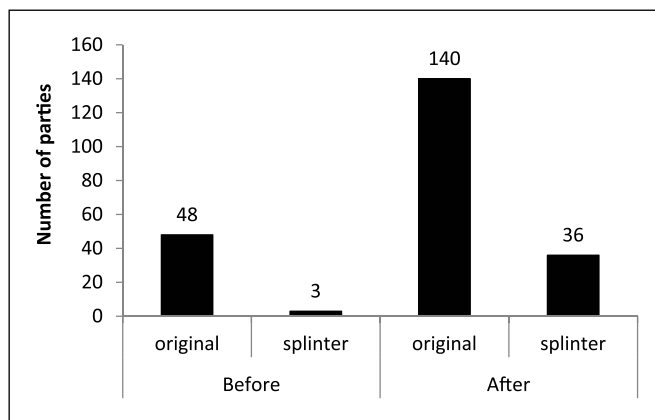


Figure 1. Number of Regionalist Parties.

Before = party is established before the introduction of regional elections; after = party is established after the introduction of regional elections; original = party is a newly established regionalist party; splinter = party is a splinter from a pre-existing regionalist party (see Supplementary Information S2).

We analyse regional and national election results in 329 regions, and in 100 of them (about 30%) we may find regionalist parties. It is also interesting to note that the presence of regionalist parties varies hugely across countries especially for regional elections because some countries introduced (direct) regional elections relatively late.² Our dataset includes region total vote shares for all regionalist parties, including regions where no regionalist party participates and which score zero. The inclusion of ‘zero cases’ is important because it allows us to assess to what extent a regional electoral arena is an institutional incentive for the establishment of new regionalist parties and how important these are in terms of electoral strength.

As explained in the previous section, in order to explore the causes and processes underlying the impact of regional reforms we propose to differentiate between type of election and party. We distinguish between parties born before (‘before’) and after (‘after’) the introduction of regional elections. In addition, within both categories, we further distinguish between parties born as new regionalist parties (‘before/after original’), defined as parties whose membership/leadership does not come primarily from a previously existing regionalist party, and splinter parties (‘before/after splinter’), defined as parties whose membership/leadership comes primarily from a pre-existing regionalist party (Barnea and Rahat, 2011; Beyens et al., 2015).³ Detail is provided in Supplementary Information S1 and S2.

Figure 1 reports data on the number of parties in each category. The data leave little doubt about the fact that the introduction of regional elections represents a strong institutional incentive for regionalist parties to form. Indeed, out of all regionalist parties included in our dataset, about one-fifth (22%; 51 out of 227) were born before the establishment of regional elections and about four-fifths (78%; 176 out of 227) were born after. ‘After original’ parties represent a solid majority of cases within the ‘after’ category (80%; 140 out of 176). ‘After splinter’ parties, beyond being numerically important (20%; 36 out of 176), are very interesting from a theoretical perspective, as they constitute a sort of hybrid category between ‘before’ parties – they are off-springs of ‘before’ parties in terms of members, leaders and (arguably) voters – and ‘after original’ parties

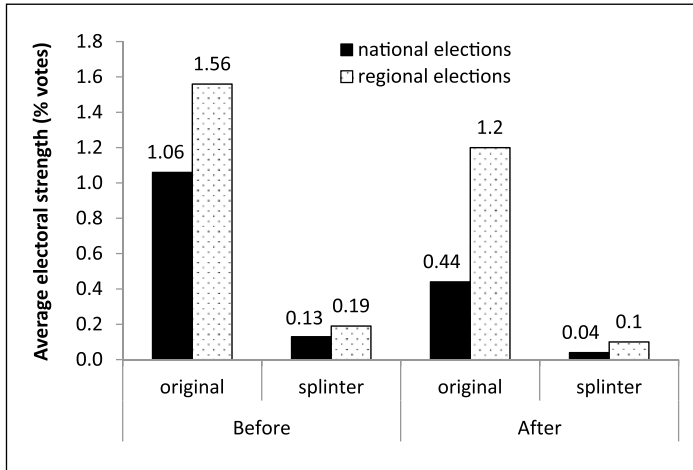


Figure 2. Average Electoral Strength of Regionalist Parties (Including Zero Cases).

Shown are average total vote shares for regionalist parties in national and regional elections. National election results are disaggregated to the regional level. Total number of observations (region \times election years) is 5718 for national elections and 3089 for regional elections. Before = party is established before the introduction of regional elections; after = party is established after the introduction of regional elections; original = party is newly established; splinter = party is a splinter from a pre-existing regionalist party (see Supplementary Information S2).

– they were able to stand as a new regionalist party exploiting the more favourable institutional conditions created with the establishment of a regional elected government. Given that ‘after splinter’ parties compete in regions where regionalist parties are already present, it is not surprising that two-thirds are radicalisers (67%; 24 out of 36), that is, they adopt a more extreme position on the centre-periphery dimension than the party they originate from (see Supplementary Information S2). The numerical insignificance of the category ‘before splinter’, as well as the peculiarity of the three cases falling in this class,⁴ represents a confirmation of the key role played by the presence of regional elections for the proliferation of regionalist parties. Clearly, the absence of a regional electoral arena works as a potent incentive/constraint for regionalist parties to remain united if they want to have better chances of influencing the political and policy process via participation in national elections.

However, the number of parties does not necessarily reflect the electoral strength of the different categories. Once we look at electoral strength (Figure 2), we observe that ‘before’ parties account for more than two-thirds (1.19% out of 1.67%) of the regionalist average vote in national elections and for a slight majority (1.75 out of 3.05%) of the regionalist vote in regional elections. The combined data of Figures 1 and 2, therefore, lead us to suggest that, in line with the ‘empowerment thesis’, the establishment of regional elections does produce a proliferation of regionalist parties. The emergence of these new parties appears to account for an increase by nearly 50% (0.48% for ‘after’ parties vs. 1.19% for ‘before’ parties) of the total regionalist party vote in national elections and about 80% (1.30% for ‘after’ parties vs 1.75% for ‘before’ parties) in regional elections vis-à-vis ‘before’ parties’ total strength. Yet, in line with Lublin’s (2012) findings, these data mean that new parties tend to be many but small, while the fewer ‘before’ parties remain the main regionalist protagonists, especially in national elections. In addition,

the average regionalist party vote share for ‘original’ parties tends to be about 10 times stronger than for ‘splinter’ parties.

While the descriptive statistics provide an interesting picture on the effect of decentralisation as a dichotomous variable (presence vs. absence of regional elections), it does not say anything about the effect of regional reform as a process, which might precede the establishment of regional elections and might continue after it. As discussed above, transfers of powers to the regions can be expected to have both beneficial (‘empowerment’) and detrimental (‘accommodation’) effects on subsequent regionalist parties’ electoral scores. In order to disentangle the (possible) mutually neutralising effects of these two opposite dynamics, we proceed with a more systematic analysis of our data along the lines of the hypotheses presented above.

Multivariate Analysis: Assessing the Impact of Regional Reform

The units of analysis are total regionalist party strength for each region election year. In total, we analyse 5389 *national* election vote shares for 329 regions in 18 countries and we analyse 2765 *regional* election vote shares for 320 regions and 18 countries.⁵ We take the natural logarithm of the total vote share for regionalist parties (plus 1 because logarithms cannot be taken on zeros) since there are many regions which score zero on total regionalist party strength (Tronconi, 2009). We analyse total regional vote share for four categories of parties, sorted on the basis of when and how they originated (Figure 1). First, we distinguish between parties which are established before and which are founded after the introduction of regional elections. Second, we separate original parties from splinter parties.

To explore the effects of regional reform, we estimate models that include a lagged dependent variable which allows us to focus on change in total vote share. We also hypothesise a ‘springboard’ effect of a regional electoral arena into the national electoral arena. In a similar way, national election vote shares may ‘spill-over’ into the regional electoral arena. We assess spill-over effects between electoral arenas by introducing the total regionalist party vote share (vote share plus 1 natural logged) in the previous regional or national election. Being strong in one electoral arena should have positive effects on the electoral scores in the other electoral arena.

Our main independent variable of interest concerns regional authority. Regional authority is indicated by the regional authority index proposed by Marc 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. Self-rule includes institutional depth, policy scope, fiscal autonomy and representation, while shared rule encompasses law making, executive control, fiscal control and constitutional reform. Scores vary between 0 and 24 and the regional authority index provides region scores per year. Instead of a level effect, we are mainly interested in a change or reform effect. We introduce a cumulative change index of regional authority index scores which allows us to assess the effects of reform not only in the first election that follows but also in subsequent elections.

Our primary interest concerns the impact of regional reform and we need to control for other important factors affecting (especially cross-sectional) variation in regionalist parties’ electoral scores. We control for two main determinants of regionalist party strength:

territorial cleavages and electoral systems. We control for territorial cleavages with two variables: regions with a distinct language and/or history are measured by a regional language and history dummy (Fitjar, 2010). The language dummy variable scores positive when there is an indigenous regional language that is different from the dominant (plurality) language in the state. The history dummy captures the extent to which the region itself or other states than the current sovereign governed the territory in the past. The index scores positive when the region has not been part of the current state since its formation. Data come from the Encyclopædia Britannica (2010) and Lewis (2009). We expect to observe positive effects for both the regional language and history variables on regionalist party strength (Goldin, 2001; Sorens, 2005; Tronconi, 2006). The effect of the electoral system is indicated by dummy variables. We take proportional electoral systems as the reference category and introduce dummy variables for mixed and majoritarian/plurality electoral systems. We expect negative effects for mixed and majoritarian/plurality electoral systems on regionalist party strength, especially in national elections (Harmel and Robertson, 1985; Hauss and Rayside, 1978). Supplementary Information S3 provides descriptive statistics on the dependent and independent variables.

The unit of analysis is total regionalist party strength for a particular region election year and the dataset is a typical cross-time-cross-section dataset (Beck and Katz, 1995), whereby party vote shares for elections are clustered within regions and regions are subsequently clustered in countries. A particular concern in panel datasets is to control for dynamics over time. In other words, we need to control for serial correlation over time. Preferably, one uses a fixed-effects model but this has a major drawback in that it focuses on the within-region variance for estimation and disregards the between-region variance (Hsiao, 2003; Woolridge, 2002). As a consequence, it does not allow for the estimation of time-invariant and rarely changing variables. Our main variable of interest, regional reform, is a (relatively) rarely changing variable and our control variables for territorial cleavages and the electoral system are (largely) time invariant. Therefore, we propose to estimate multi-level mixed-effects models which allow us to include time-invariant variables and which allow us to control for the nesting of the data. To test for the robustness of the results, we have estimated various different specifications of the models (fixed-effects, non-logged vote shares and models with 'level' regional authority index scores including a rho coefficient to control for autocorrelation) and the results remain highly robust (detailed results are provided in Supplementary Information S4).

Tables 2 and 3 present the results of five models for total regionalist party strength in, respectively, national and regional elections. The first model in both tables analyses total regionalist party strength as a percentage of the regional vote and we can immediately observe that the effect of regional reform is not statistically significant for national elections, but it is positive and statistically significant for regional elections. We have split up the total vote share into total vote shares for parties which were established before and parties which were established after the introduction of regional elections. What we find is a striking difference: the beta coefficient for regional reform in the model which analyses national election vote share for 'before' parties is negative and statistically significant, whereas in the model for 'after' parties the sign of the beta coefficient of regional reform is positive and statistically significant. In addition, the beta coefficients are similar in magnitude. The effect of regional reform for total regionalist party vote share in national elections seems to be actually produced by two different causal processes which offset each other. Regional reform 'accommodates' parties which were established before the introduction of regional elections, but the decline in vote share is compensated for by the 'empowerment'

Table 2. Determinants of Total Regionalist Vote Share in National Elections.

	Total			Before regional elections			After regional elections		
	Total	Original	Splinter	Total	Original	Splinter	Total	Original	Splinter
Regional reform	-0.0010 (0.0012)	-0.0026** (0.0004)	0.0005 (0.0003)	-0.0077** (0.0008)	0.0032** (0.0005)	0.0005 (0.0003)	0.0032** (0.0005)	0.0032** (0.0009)	0.0027** (0.0004)
Vote share previous regional election	0.1818** (0.0093)	0.0803** (0.0047)	0.1998** (0.0110)	0.1543** (0.0093)	0.0977** (0.0043)	0.1998** (0.0110)	0.0977** (0.0043)	0.2474** (0.0090)	0.3608** (0.0100)
Lagged dependent variable	0.6854** (0.0104)	0.5821** (0.0109)	0.7500** (0.0112)	0.7880** (0.0093)	0.6611** (0.0112)	0.7500** (0.0112)	0.6611** (0.0112)	0.6324** (0.0113)	0.4411** (0.0136)
Majoritarian electoral system	-0.0273 (0.0340)	0.0212 (0.0128)	0.0028 (0.0075)	0.0106 (0.0209)	-0.0140 (0.0102)	0.0028 (0.0075)	-0.0140 (0.0102)	-0.0109 (0.0197)	0.0018 (0.0084)
Mixed electoral system	-0.0527 (0.0322)	0.0236* (0.0116)	0.0004 (0.00075)	0.0245 (0.0208)	-0.0326** (0.0104)	0.0004 (0.00075)	-0.0326** (0.0104)	-0.0458* (0.0201)	0.0001 (0.0086)
Regional language dummy	0.0667** (0.0188)	0.0593** (0.0116)	0.0044 (0.0038)	0.0381** (0.0098)	0.0005 (0.0065)	0.0044 (0.0038)	0.0005 (0.0065)	-0.0228 (0.0123)	-0.0042 (0.0045)
Regional history dummy	0.0319 (0.0167)	0.0239* (0.0104)	-0.0019 (0.0034)	0.0126 (0.0089)	-0.0014 (0.0058)	-0.0019 (0.0034)	-0.0014 (0.0058)	0.0129 (0.0110)	0.0003 (0.0041)
Constant	0.0669 (0.0350)	0.0252 (0.0215)	0.0024 (0.0059)	0.0348 (0.0217)	0.0145* (0.0074)	0.0024 (0.0059)	0.0145* (0.0074)	0.0161 (0.0143)	-0.0009 (0.0067)
Variance country	0.0173** (0.067)	0.0072** (0.0028)	0.0004* (0.0002)	0.0068** (0.0027)	0.0005* (0.0002)	0.0004* (0.0002)	0.0005* (0.0002)	0.0020** (0.0009)	0.0005* (0.0002)
Variance region	0.0046** (0.0012)	0.0033** (0.0006)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0001 (0.0005)	0.0003** (0.0001)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0003** (0.0001)	0.0009 (0.0005)	0.0000 (0.0000)
Variance elections	0.0762** (0.0016)	0.0074** (0.0002)	0.0064** (0.0001)	0.0403** (0.0009)	0.0146** (0.0003)	0.0064** (0.0001)	0.0146** (0.0003)	0.0531** (0.0011)	0.0092** (0.0002)
Log restricted likelihood	-850	5201	5931	971	3679	5931	3679	205	4970
Wald χ^2	13599**	6266**	39435**	30429**	9800**	39435**	9800**	11658**	7626**

The table shows the results of a multi-level mixed-effects linear regression model whereby national elections are clustered in regions and regions clustered in countries. The dependent variable is total regionalist party vote share in the region (logged). The models include 5389 election vote shares for 329 regions within 18 countries. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01 (two-tailed).

Table 3. Determinants of Total Regionalist Vote Share in Regional Elections.

	Total			Before regional elections			After regional elections		
	Total	Original	Splinter	Total	Original	Splinter	Total	Original	Splinter
Regional reform	0.0058** (0.0017)	0.0012 (0.0007)	-0.0000 (0.0003)	0.0067** (0.0018)	0.0027 (0.0018)	-0.0000 (0.0003)	0.0067** (0.0018)	0.0027 (0.0018)	0.0036** (0.0010)
Vote share previous national election	0.1291** (0.0135)	0.1390** (0.0134)	0.3551** (0.0139)	0.1380** (0.0150)	0.1830** (0.0152)	0.3247** (0.0115)	0.1380** (0.0150)	0.1830** (0.0152)	0.6108** (0.0236)
Lagged dependent variable	0.8450** (0.0125)	0.8423** (0.0129)	0.5862** (0.0140)	0.8332** (0.0128)	0.8277** (0.0126)	0.6582** (0.0112)	0.8332** (0.0128)	0.8277** (0.0126)	0.2545** (0.0196)
Majoritarian electoral system	-0.0385 (0.0285)	-0.0027 (0.0091)	-0.0099 (0.0428)	-0.0520 (0.0310)	-0.0496 (0.0302)	0.0021 (0.0041)	-0.0520 (0.0310)	-0.0496 (0.0302)	-0.0178 (0.0177)
Mixed electoral system	-0.0429 (0.0221)	-0.0104 (0.0089)	-0.0069 (0.0284)	-0.0591* (0.0242)	-0.0380 (0.0231)	-0.0018 (0.0040)	-0.0591* (0.0242)	-0.0380 (0.0231)	-0.0254** (0.0129)
Regional language dummy	0.0833** (0.0193)	0.0018 (0.0099)	0.0214 (0.0195)	0.1219** (0.0207)	0.1028** (0.0189)	0.0059 (0.0045)	0.1219** (0.0207)	0.1028** (0.0189)	0.0506** (0.0155)
Regional history dummy	0.0031 (0.0182)	-0.0001 (0.0092)	0.0099 (0.0181)	0.0181 (0.0197)	0.0057 (0.0184)	0.0012 (0.0041)	0.0181 (0.0197)	0.0057 (0.0184)	0.0443** (0.0137)
Constant	0.0283* (0.0144)	0.0010 (0.0041)	0.0049 (0.0202)	0.0348* (0.0153)	0.0371* (0.0154)	0.0005 (0.0018)	0.0348* (0.0153)	0.0371* (0.0154)	-0.0034 (0.0067)
Variance country	0.0014** (0.0008)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0039 (0.0020)	0.0015 (0.0009)	0.0017 (0.010)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0015 (0.0009)	0.0017 (0.010)	0.0000 (0.0000)
Variance region	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0073** (0.0015)	0.0011** (0.0022)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0011** (0.0022)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0050** (0.0008)
Variance elections	0.0821** (0.0022)	0.0255** (0.0007)	0.0234** (0.0007)	0.0892** (0.0031)	0.0846** (0.0023)	0.0052** (0.0001)	0.0892** (0.0031)	0.0846** (0.0023)	0.0184** (0.0005)
Log restricted likelihood	-477	1149	1058	-607	-520	3344	-607	-520	1422
Wald χ^2	23727**	64021**	11780**	10946**	12068**	42233**	10946**	12068**	2586**

The table shows the results of a multi-level mixed effect linear regression model whereby regional elections are clustered in regions and regions clustered in countries. The dependent variable is total regionalist party vote share in the region (logged). The models include 2765 election vote shares for 320 regions within 18 countries. *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01 (two-tailed).

of parties which are established after regional elections. In regional elections, regional reform empowers 'after' parties, whereas 'before' parties are not affected by decentralisation.

To gain further insight into the effects of regional reform, we distinguish between 'original' and 'splinter' parties. From the results presented in Table 2, we may observe that there is a relatively strong 'accommodation' effect for 'before original' parties, whereas regional reform seems to have no effect for 'before splinter' parties. The latter finding is not surprising given that two out of three 'before splinter parties' (*Fólkaflokkurin* and *Vlaams Belang*) are radicalisers compared to their respective parties of origin and should, therefore, not suffer the accommodation effect of regional reforms. In any case, due to the extremely small number of parties falling in this category (Figure 1), we prefer to remain prudent about commenting on this particular finding. For the 'after' parties, we observe hardly any differences in the magnitude of the beta coefficients for regional reform between the models analysing vote shares of 'original' and 'splinter' parties. For both types of party, regional reform has a similar 'empowerment' effect.

Turning to the results for regionalist party vote share in regional elections, we find two interesting results (Table 3). There is an overall positive effect of regional reform on total regionalist party vote share in regional elections but, interestingly, regional reform seems to have no impact on 'before' parties, whereas there is a clear 'empowerment' effect for 'after' parties. Within the 'after' parties, the beta coefficient for regional reform is positive but loses statistical significance for 'after original' parties, whereas it retains statistical significance in the model which analyses total vote share for 'after splinter' parties.

To gain insight into the magnitude of the effects of regional reform on regionalist party vote share, we display estimates based on the results presented in Tables 2 and 3 in Figure 3. The vote shares included in the models are logged (natural) which complicates interpretation with regard to the magnitude of the effects of regional reform. The effects will depend on the size of the vote share, and therefore we produce estimates for four different vote shares: 1%, 5%, 10% and 20%. In Figure 3(a)–(c), we report on the magnitude of the effects of regional reform when cumulative change in regional authority index scores go from zero to their maximum (16 for regional and 21 for national elections), and we report the effects separately for national and regional elections and for three types of party. We do not show the results for 'before' party regional election scores, because there is no effect of regional reform (Table 3).

An empowerment effect of regional reform is underestimated when we do not consider the 'springboard effect' which we measure by the vote shares won in previous regional and national elections. The results presented in Tables 2 and 3 suggest that there is a 'springboard effect' for each type of party, but the magnitude of the beta coefficients varies across party type. In Figure 3(d)–(f), we estimate again the effect of regional reform on regionalist party vote shares but now we include the impact of the 'springboard effect' as well.

Figure 3(a) shows the estimates for 'before' party vote shares in national elections. Among the types of parties, it appears that 'before original' party vote share declines most sharply when change in regional authority goes from 0 to 21 points. The magnitude of loss depends on the initial size of the total vote share. The loss is 3.14% when we start from 20% and the decline is 0.30% when regionalist parties manage to win 1% of the vote share. These losses reflect relative declines of, respectively, 16% and 30%. A 'springboard effect' mitigates the 'accommodative' effect of regional reform but it is not strong enough to offset it. Regional reform has practically zero effects on the regional electoral

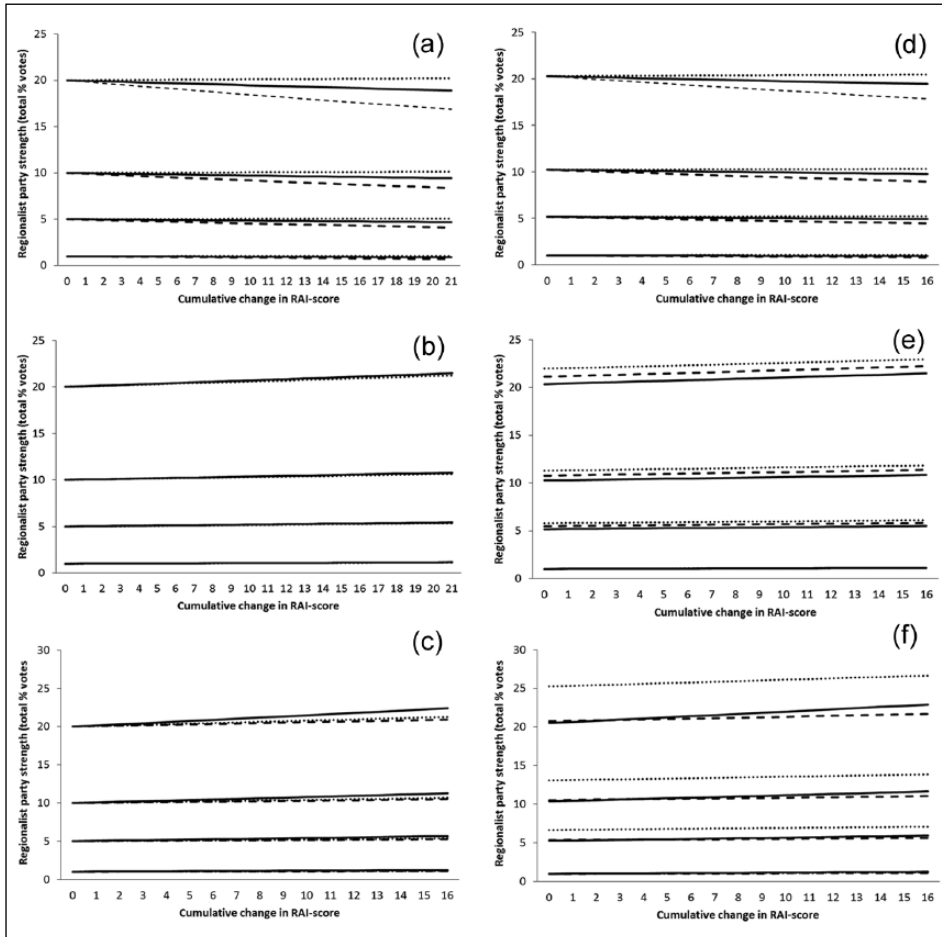


Figure 3. The Effects of Regional Reform without the Springboard Effect (a)–(c) and with the Springboard Effect (d)–(f). (a) and (d) National Election: Before Parties, (b) and (e) National Election: After Parties and (c) and (f) Regional Election: After Parties. Shown are the effects of cumulative change in regional authority index scores on total regionalist party strength in national and regional elections for type of party according to origin: established before/after regional elections; splinter from an existing party or original. (a)–(c) includes the effects of a springboard effect in addition to the effects of regional reform. Estimates are based on the results of the models presented in Tables 2 and 3. The results for before parties in regional elections are not shown, because the effects of regional reform are not statistically significant for any type of party.

— All parties; - - - original parties; splinter parties.

Before = party is established before the introduction of regional elections; after = party is established after the introduction of regional elections; original = party is newly established; splinter = party is a splinter from a pre-existing regionalist party.

scores for ‘before’ parties (Table 3) and this translates into a minor decline in the magnitude of the loss up to 0.59% depending on the initial vote share (Figure 3(d)).

Regional reform has an ‘empowerment’ effect for ‘after’ parties, both for ‘original’ and ‘splinter’ parties as well as in both regional and national elections (Tables 2 and 3). However, when we incorporate a ‘springboard effect’, we observe that regional reform seems to have an impact especially on ‘after splinter’ parties. When change in regional

authority goes from 0 to 21 points, vote shares may increase up to 1.46% in national elections and up to 1.65% in regional elections which is equal to relative increases of, respectively, 7.3% and 8.3% (Figure 3(b) and (c)). A ‘springboard effect’ reinvigorates the ‘empowerment effect’ of regional reform and regionalist party vote share may increase with an additional 2.03% and 5.46% in, respectively, national and regional elections (Figure 3(e) and (f)).

Discussion

The aim of this article was to investigate the impact of decentralisation reforms on regionalist parties’ number and, more importantly, total electoral strength. In particular, we wanted to test the explanatory value of two competing theses: the accommodation versus the empowerment one. We first investigated the impact of decentralisation as a single and, putatively, crucial event, that is, the creation of an elected regional government. Our findings appear to support Brancati’s (2006, 2008) ‘empowerment thesis’ since the number of regionalist parties increases dramatically (more than three times) and the average total regionalist party strength in national elections also increases. In addition, the new (‘after’) parties account for nearly half of total regionalist party strength in the regional elections that follow the crucial reform. Therefore, we can definitely conclude that the introduction of regional elections represents a sort of ‘institutional critical juncture’ which enables (‘empowers’) regionalist political entrepreneurs to succeed in creating new parties or to diversify the political offer by splitting pre-existing regionalist parties.

However, at an aggregate level, our data show that, rather than ‘empowerment’ of the regionalist phenomenon/threat, it would be more appropriate to talk about ‘proliferation’ and ‘diffusion’. Proliferation, especially due to regionalist party splits, tends to occur in regions with a long tradition of political regionalism, such as the Basque country, South Tyrol, Faroe Islands, Corsica and Sardinia (see Supplementary Information S1). In contrast, the process of diffusion consists of the birth of new regionalist parties in regions with a relatively weak (or absent) tradition of political regionalism, such as Cantabria, Rioja, Lombardy, Aquitaine, Groningen and Skåne (see Supplementary Information S1). In time, some of these regions might also go through a process of proliferation, like in the case of Extremadura (see Supplementary Information S1). The diffusion process might also be due to regionalist parties that are in fact multi-regional and/or aim to extend their presence beyond their core region (e.g. the *Partit Occitan* in France, the Western Canada Concept, the *Partij voor het Noorden* in the Netherlands and the *Lega Nord* in Italy). The most important point, however, is that after the establishment of regional elections, political regionalism tends to grow much more in terms of number of parties and number of regions affected than in terms of electoral strength. This means that, on average, the ‘after’ parties are rather small, while the old (‘before’) parties remain largely the most successful, especially in national elections. This conclusion is largely in line with Lublin’s (2012, 2014) findings, which critically revisit Brancati’s (2006, 2008) thesis.

Decentralisation reforms are not, however, a single event but, rather, an on-going process. Our analysis shows that the impact of incremental reforms is rather complex. As far as national elections are concerned, our findings support our general expectation that both accommodative and empowering dynamics are at work, neutralising each other at the total aggregate level. Furthermore, our distinction between ‘before’ and ‘after’ parties allows us to delve into how these two dynamics neutralise each other. Our analysis shows that the overall non-impact of regional reform on national election vote shares is the result

of a negative effect on ‘before’ parties and a positive effect on ‘after’ parties (both original and splinters). This finding means that while decentralisation reforms do have an accommodation effect on the old parties that originally pressed to start the process, they also strengthen the new parties born after the establishment of regional elections. Since new parties, especially splinter parties, tend to be more radical than the old parties, the overall effect in terms of regionalist threat is actually marginally augmented, as the regionalist front remains overall stable in terms of electoral strength but, within it, the new radical parties tend to incrementally grow at the expense of the old more moderate ones. The analysis of regional elections highlights this dynamic even more clearly. Here, we find strong support for the empowerment thesis, because the impact of regional reform leads to a positive vote share change in total regionalist party strength. However, despite being strengthened at the regional level, these regionalist parties do not seem to be able to ‘break through’ to the national electoral arena. In this respect, one may conclude that by establishing a regional electoral arena, new regionalist parties will arise, but they tend to remain electorally weak and largely contained at the regional level.

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Notes

- 1 Sorens’ analysis investigates, as a control variable, the impact of the level of decentralisation (Sorens, 2005), whereas Lublin’s multi-fold analysis is explicitly directed at scrutinising Brancati’s (2008, 2009) thesis, thus focusing on the impact of decentralisation as an event (Lublin, 2012, 2014).
- 2 All countries have held national elections since 1945. Australia (states), Austria, Canada (provinces), Faroe Islands in Denmark, Åland in Finland, Germany (Western *Länder*), four special statute regions in Italy, Japan (our data start from 1967), the Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden (our data start from 1970) and Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom have had directly elected regional assemblies or parliaments since the 1940s. Other countries introduced direct regional elections for a particular region or regional tier later: Australia (Australian Capital Territory since 1989 and Northern Territory since 1965 but our data start from 1974), Canada (Yukon since 1978; Northwest Territories since 1966 but our data start from 1999, and Nunavut since 1999), Belgium (German community since 1974, Brussels since 1989, Flemish and Walloon *régions/gewesten* since 1995), Denmark (*Amt* and Greenland since 1970, regions since 2005), France (Corsica since 1982, the other regions since 1986), Germany (Eastern *Länder* since 1990), Greece (since 1994), Italy (special statute region *Friuli-Venezia Giulia* since 1964, ordinary statute regions since 1970), Norway (since 1975), Portugal (since 1976), Spain (since 1980–1983 depending on the *comunidad autónoma*) and the United Kingdom (Scotland and Wales since 1999 and London since 2000). Source: Dandoy and Schakel (2013) and Massetti and Schakel (2013).
- 3 We were able to determine the origin of 171 out of 227 parties using secondary sources, party documents and party websites (see Supplementary Information S2). The 56 parties for which we could not determine

their origin and ideology with certainty were all established after the introduction of regional elections and we classify them in the ‘after original’ category. These parties tend to be very small parties and information on secondary sources is extremely thin or absent. In some cases, internet webpages are not accessible (anymore) and/or party manifestoes could not be obtained.

- 4 The three cases are *Fólkaflokkurin* (FF) in the Faroe Islands (Denmark), the *Vlaams Blok/Belang* (VB) in Flanders and Brussels (Belgium) and the *Unió València* (UV) in the Valencian Community (Spain). The FF was created in 1939 by a split from the Self-government Party (i.e. 6 years before the first regional election in the Faroe Islands included in our dataset) in an already regionalised party system. The VB was formed as a splinter from the Volksunie (VU) in 1978, long before the first direct election of the Parliament of the Flemish region (1995) but after the first important decentralisation reform that established the Flemish community (1970) and after the division of the Belgian party system along ethno/linguistic lines. The UV was formed as a splinter from *Unió Regional Valenciana* (URV) in 1982, prior to the first regional election (1983) but after the establishment of Spanish regions in the 1978 constitution. It was coded as a ‘before’ party because it first participated in the 1982 national election (see coding criteria in Supplementary Information S2).
- 5 The total number of regions analysed for regional elections is a bit lower because of regional boundary reforms implemented before or at the time of the first regional elections.

Supplementary Information

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

1. Regionalist Parties
2. Coding criteria and sources used to classify regionalist parties
3. Descriptive statistics
4. Robustness analyses

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