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## A world of difference: the sources of regional government composition and alternation

Arjan H. Schakel<sup>a</sup> and Emanuele Massetti<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Political Science, Maastricht University, The Netherlands; <sup>b</sup>Politics Department, University of Surrey, UK


### ABSTRACT

This article aims to explain longitudinal and cross-sectional variation in regional government composition – oversized majorities and incongruence between regional and national governments (cross-cutting) – and regional government alternation. The analysis focuses on the explanatory value of a wide range of regional-level institutional variables, such as majoritarian vs. proportional voting systems and established practices of consociationalism. In addition, it provides a tentative exploration of the impact of regional (i.e. non-state-wide) parties on government composition and alternation. The findings show that most institutional variables have the expected impact, e.g., majoritarian voting systems increase government alternation and consensual practices decrease both cross-cutting and alternation. The analysis also suggests that regional parties impact on government composition and alternation in two ways. Strong regional parties increase cross-cutting and, once in office, they tend to reduce alternation. Smaller regional parties out of office tend to increase alternation and to decrease oversized government as their seat shares grow.

**KEYWORDS** Regional government; regional executive; regional parties; regional elections

In spite of a decades-long process of federalisation, devolution, and regionalisation of European states (Hooghe *et al.* 2016a), and discounting extremely rare early works (Downs 1998), the comparative literature on regional government and regional democracy is still in its infancy. Most studies, albeit extremely valuable, are based on research conducted in only one or two countries (Däubler and Debus 2009; Debus 2008; Deschouwer 2013; Falcó-Gimeno 2012; Falcó-Gimeno and Verge 2013; Klingelhofer 2016; Klingelhofer and Müller 2015; Orte and Wilson 2009; Ștefuriuc 2009; Tronconi 2014). So far, Bäck *et al.*'s (2013) work on seven Western European countries, covering about two decades

**CONTACT** Arjan H. Schakel  a.schakel@maastrichtuniversity.nl

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(1990s–2000s), represents the most extensive work on regional government formation. In addition, most of these studies have primarily drawn on theories of government formation developed at national level – office seeking and policy seeking – adding a special focus on government congruence between the regional and national level (Bäck *et al.* 2013; Däubler and Debus 2009; Debus 2008; Deschouwer 2009; Falcó-Gimenom and Verge 2013; Ştefuriuc 2009).

While this article departs from this body of literature in its analytical focus, it complements and supports the scholarship on regional government and regional democracy in two ways. First, we present a much-needed comparative analysis of regional institutional architectures, specific dynamics of regional politics, and constellations of regional government. In spite of relative homogeneity in democratic standards within Western Europe, the evidence shows great variance in basic institutional features of regional executives – such as elected or appointed heads of executives, monocratic or collegial executives, and presidential or parliamentary systems – both across countries and, in some cases, within them. Therefore, the dataset underlying the comparative analysis of regional institutions presented in this article represents, *per se*, an original contribution that will also be of use for those who want to replicate, comparing a wider set of countries, studies on multi-level government formation.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, rather than investigating which parties enter government coalitions at regional level and focusing on the effect of national government, we aim to explain not only multi-level government congruence but also other key features of regional government, namely government alternation and the presence of oversized majority coalitions. In doing so, we explore the impact of three clusters of regional-level factors. First, the ‘institutional set-up of the regional executive’, which includes the formal powers of regional government (self-rule and shared rule), properties of the executive head (chosen by the regional assembly, appointed by central government or presidential office), and the informal practice of forming consensus governments. Second, we investigate the impact of ‘electoral rules’, which includes the application of different voting systems (majoritarian or proportional rule) and the timing of the regional election vis-à-vis local, other regional, and national elections. The third set of variables taps into ‘political regionalism’ and includes a dummy to indicate regions with a particularly strong regional identity (labelled ‘Rokkan region’), as well as the seat share and government participation of regional parties.

Several of our findings have important implications for the study of regional government. First, we find that general ‘characteristics of regional executives’ have a large impact on multi-level government congruence, alternation, and the presence of oversized coalitions. These results indicate that an appreciation of the variation in regional institutional architectures is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of regional democracy. Second, we find that regional executives formed after regional elections which are held simultaneously with other regional elections experience more alternation and have a lower probability

to be oversized, but we find the opposite effects when regional elections are held simultaneously with local elections. These results strongly indicate that regional executive formation should be studied in its multi-level electoral context. Finally, we find that alternation increases with the size of the regional party seat share when a regional party is not in government but alternation decreases when a regional party is in government. Our explanation for this result is that electorally weaker regional parties may act as brokers between centre-left and centre-right state-wide parties which are competing for office and which rely on support from regional parties. But when regional parties increase their vote and seat shares they become viable options for regional office and once voted into executive government they can use the regional governmental machinery to their advantage and galvanise regional voters and induce them to vote the party into office time and again.

In the next section, we review the relevant literature on government formation in multi-level polities. In the third section, we present a descriptive overview of regional institutional architectures and of the composition and alternation of regional government for 2055 regional governments clustered in 260 regions nested in 13 countries. The fourth section presents a multivariate analysis to explain the variation in composition and alternation of regional executive government, and the final section summarises the main results and discusses our conclusions.

## **State of the art and theoretical framework**

The great merit of the regional government literature has been to highlight the interaction between the national and regional level (Bäck *et al.* 2013; Däubler and Debus 2009; Debus 2008; Falcó-Gimeno 2012; Klingelhofer and Müller 2015; Klingelhofer 2016; Orte and Wilson 2009; Ştefuriuc 2009). In particular, most works have looked at congruence/incongruence between the (often coalition) governments formed across levels. While different scholars have taken different perspectives – e.g. the strategic perspective of state-wide parties (Falcó-Gimeno and Verge 2013) vs. the strategic perspective of regional parties (Tronconi 2014) – or have stressed some peculiar factors such as the absence of state-wide parties and a national electoral arena in the case of Belgium (Deschouwer 2009), all these studies have confirmed a tendency to avoid cross-cutting coalitions across the national and regional levels (i.e. to pursue cross-level congruence).

While drawing on this authoritative body of literature, this article departs from it and complements it in several respects. First, we aim to go beyond studying which parties form governments at regional level, rather devoting our attention to some key characteristics of regional government composition (oversized majorities and cross-cutting) and alternation, which are recognised as substantive features of the working of democracy (Ieraci 2012). Secondly,

compared to the widest studies on regional government (Bäck *et al.* 2013), we almost double the cross-sectional scope, raising the number of included countries from 7 to 13, and considerably extend the longitudinal scope: we have collected regional government data for 2055 regional governments for 260 regions in 13 countries from 1945 until 2015 (Table 1).<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that it is the inclusion of more countries that has triggered the need to build up a dataset on regional political institutions, as the ideal type of parliamentary democracy does not apply (or does not apply any longer) to the regional institutional setting in several countries.

Thirdly, we want to identify the main factors that may impact on the key characteristics of regional government composition. We are the first to look at regional executive government in such a large spatial and temporal scope and we do not have much theory or literature to rely on. We draw on ‘new institutionalism’ (March and Olsen 1984) – as it emerged in its three main strands within political science (Hall and Taylor 1996): ‘rational choice institutionalism’, ‘historical institutionalism’, and ‘sociological institutionalism’ – to identify independent variables impacting on regional government. All three approaches prescribe bringing institutions to centre stage but they differ substantively on both the connotation and denotation of the concept of ‘institutions’ and on the explanatory use of these concepts. Rational choice and historical institutionalism lead us to include formal and informal (i.e. consensus democracy) institutions relating to the ‘regional executive’ itself and to the ‘electoral rules’. The ‘sociological institutionalist’ approach induces us to include variables related to

**Table 1.** Included countries, regions, and governments.

Country	Regions		Governments		
	Tier	<i>N</i>	First	Last	<i>N</i>
Austria	Länder	9	1945	2015	140
Belgium	Gewesten/Gemeenschappen	4	1990	2014	22
Denmark	Amter	15	1970	2001	135
	Regions	5	2001	2013	15
France	Régions	22	1986	2010	110
	Régions	13	2015	2015	13
Germany	Länder (West)	10	1946	2015	185
	Länder (East)	6	1990	2014	36
Greece	Nomoi	47	1994	2006	188
	Periphereia	13	2010	2010	26
Italy	Regioni a statuto ordinarie	15	1970	2015	151
	Regioni a statuto speciale	7	1947	2013	73
Netherlands	Provincies	12	1945	2015	206
Norway	Fylker	19	1975	2015	209
Spain	Comunidades autónomas (non-historic)	13	1983	2015	119
	Comunidades autónomas (historic)	4	1980	2015	39
	Ciudades autónomas	2	1995	2015	12
Sweden	Län	21	1994	2014	125
Switzerland	Cantons	26	1980	2015	231
United Kingdom	Devolved entities	4	1998	2016	20
		260			2055

‘political regionalism’, i.e. political parties that tend to politicise socio-cultural and socio-economic instances of specific regions.

### **Regional executives**

Rational choice institutionalism tends to have a relatively restricted understanding of ‘institutions’ and focuses on the set of incentives and constraints they place on political actors. Previous studies on regional government have made some use of rational choice institutionalism, albeit limited to the level of regional authority. Following Bäck *et al.* (2013), as a result of more power being at stake, we expect self-rule to lead to more autonomous government formation processes at regional level and, therefore, to more cross-cutting vis-à-vis the national government. As for shared rule, in general terms we also accept Bäck *et al.*’s (2013) argument that more regional representation in a powerful (often federal) upper chamber should be expected to place strong incentives on cross-level congruence (i.e. less cross-cutting), as the parties in office at the national level do not want to find themselves in a minority position in the second chamber of parliament. However, just to exemplify the importance of comparative regional constitutionalism, this logic will especially hold for the cases where members of the national high chamber are chosen by the regional executive (e.g. in Germany) and less so for cases where these members are elected by the regional assembly (e.g. in Austria or in the Netherlands) or directly by the regional electorate (e.g. in Switzerland). We therefore treat this expectation with scepticism.

Secondly, we want to investigate the potential effect of appointed (from above) heads of regional governments, speculating that this should have a positive effect on oversized majority governments. Thirdly, we want to account for the impact of presidential (monocratic) executive bodies, as opposed to collegial executives in which the head is a *primus inter pares* in regional cabinet. This institutional feature might work in favour of government alternation, as it makes the nature of regional executives more majoritarian, or against it, as regional politics might become dominated by strong personalities who manage to win the regional presidency for several terms.

We draw upon the ‘historical institutionalist’ approach to bring in un-codified practices and political habits that, though subject to change in the long term, introduce an element of inertia and even path-dependency in how the process of government formation is dealt with. In particular, we aim to account for practices of consensual democracy, which might have been established at national and/or regional level in some countries (Dandoy and Schakel 2013; Deschouwer 2006; Lehmbruch 1993, 2003; Lijphart 1969; Lijphart and Crepaz 1991; van Haute and Deschouwer 2017). This variable has proven to be explanatory when particular countries are taken as case studies – such as the Netherlands (Klingelhofer and Müller 2015) – or, as is the case for this article,

when they are included in a comparative study. We expect that consensual democracy has a strong positive impact on oversized majority governments, a negative impact on government alternation, and a negative impact on cross-cutting (as oversized regional governments increase the chances of multi-level congruence).

### **Electoral rules**

Within the rational-choice institutionalist approach, we bring in several other variables whose potential effects have not yet been tested at the regional level. First, we distinguish between predominantly majoritarian electoral systems, which we expect to discourage oversized majority governments and to favour alternation in government; and proportional electoral systems, which might open the way for oversized majority governments and less government alternation. We also include variables on the electoral cycle that relate to the 'second-order election' model: timing of the regional election vis-à-vis national elections, regional (horizontal) simultaneity, and (vertical) simultaneity with local elections (Dandoy and Schakel 2013; Pallarés and Keating 2003; Schakel and Jeffery 2013). The idea for including the electoral timing variables is that second-order election effects, which include protest voting by punishing parties in national government by voting for national opposition (or new) parties, increases around mid-term. Hence, cross-cutting and alternation may increase to the extent that electoral timing induces second-order election effects. Regional simultaneity is expected to reinforce second-order election effects because the vote can be seen as a national test; while local simultaneity is expected to regionalise/localise the electoral campaign, thus not favouring second-order effects (Dandoy and Schakel 2013; Schakel 2017).

### **Political regionalism**

Within political regionalism we put at the centre the role of regional parties, amongst which the biggest and most influential ones are also 'regionalist' parties (De Winter and Tursan 1998; Massetti 2009). These are the political actors that tend to benefit most from the establishment of regional elections and regional governments (Brancati 2008; Massetti and Schakel 2017). This choice draws on previous works, which have suggested that: (a) the presence of regional parties create a bi-dimensional regional space (traditional left-right plus a centre-periphery dimension) that changes the dynamics of competition and government formation (Ștefuriuc 2009); (b) the number of regional parties entering regional office has increased substantively in the last two decades (Elias and Tronconi 2011); (c) strong regional parties that get into office at regional level tend to hold on to it for long periods due to their strongly identitarian appeal (Alonso *et al.* 2015: 17); (d) they tend to be less judged (and penalised) by voters



on executive performance (Alonso 2008: 101); and (e) regional parties are far from immune from the general pressure for vertical congruence in government formation (Tronconi 2014).

Surely regional parties can be expected to have an effect on regional government composition, and particularly on multi-level congruence, given the fact that they usually increase party system incongruence across levels (Dandoy and Schakel 2013; Schakel 2017). However, an important contribution of this article concerns proposing two additional, different, and quite opposing effects on the composition and alternation of regional executive government. In a first scenario, electorally strong regional parties are viable contenders for regional office and once voted into office they tend to hold on to it, thereby decreasing alternation and increasing cross-cutting (incongruence) between the regional and national government. The Südtiroler Volkspartei (SVP) in South Tyrol and the Christlich-Soziale Union (CSU) in Bavaria represent the most striking examples, as they governed their respective region continuously (except for the short period 1954–1957 for the CSU) for about seven decades. Yet several other examples also fall into this first mechanism, such as the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV), which led regional office in the Spanish Basque Country from 1980 to 2005 and then again from 2012 to the present (2017); the Union Valdôtaine (UV), which has led the regional government in the Italian region of Val d'Aosta for more than two decades; Convergència i Unió federation (CiU), which led the regional government in Catalonia from 1980 to 1999; as well as others that appear to be set in that trajectory, such as the Scottish National Party (SNP), which has led Scotland's regional executive since 2007.

A second scenario emphasises the effects of electorally less strong regional parties which can act as pivot actors between centre-left and centre-right state-wide parties which compete for office. These parties will increase alternation and, to the extent they become electorally stronger, they will also decrease the occurrence of oversized government. One example of this second mechanism can be provided by the electoral growth of the Partido Regionalista de Cantabria (PRC), which helped to change the balance of power in the Spanish region of Cantabria. After supporting a centre-right regional government for two terms in the period 1995–2003, the PRC was crucial in determining that a centre-left regional government prevailed in the period 2003–2011 and then again in 2015, after another centre-right-led term in 2011–2015. Similarly, the modest electoral weight of the Partito Sardo d'Azione (PSdAz), which had previously gravitated around the dominant centre-right party, was still important in the shift to a centre-left regional government in 1985. The same party had a similar effect, but in the opposite direction, almost three decades later, brokering an alternation in regional office from the centre-left to the centre-right in 2009.

In summary, we aim to make three contributions to the literature on regional government. First, while previous works have largely overlooked regional institutional features – with the exception of regional authority in respect to



cross-cutting government (Bäck *et al.* 2013) and the presence of traditions of consociational democracy (Klingelhofer and Müller 2015) – we try to bring it in as much as possible, looking at the nature of regional executives (selected from below or appointed from above, monocratic or collegial) and their relationship with the regional legislative body (presidential vs. parliamentary systems), besides including the levels of regional authority. Second, drawing on the literature on multi-level elections (Dandoy and Schakel 2013; Pallarés and Keating 2003; Schakel and Jeffery 2013), as well as on single-country studies on regional multi-level government formation (Deschouwer 2009), we consider the possible effects of electoral systems and multi-level electoral cycles. Third, regarding regional parties we seek to tentatively test two mechanisms with opposing effects on alternation and the occurrence of oversized government. In the next section, we present a descriptive overview of regional institutional architectures and we compare the constellation and alternation of executive government between the regional and national levels.

### **Descriptive analysis of regional institutional architectures and regional executive government**

We start our analysis with a descriptive overview of the basic features of regional institutional architectures. Then we proceed with a comparison between regional and national governments regarding their composition and extent of alternation. In the subsequent section, we will present the results of multivariate analyses on the determinants for alternating, cross-cutting, and oversized regional government.

#### ***Regional institutional architectures***

An overview of the basic features of regional institutional architectures in 13 Western European countries (Table 2) reveals a dominant pattern of full parliamentary democracy – Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy (before 1999), Spain, Switzerland, and three UK regions (Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales). Yet the overview also reveals important variance, particularly but not exclusively across countries.<sup>3</sup> First, while most regional executives are legitimated exclusively by popular vote, either via the election of regional assemblies or directly, in some regions the head of the executive is fully appointed from above – the Netherlands – or is flanked in important executive functions by a prefect/governor appointed from above – France, Norway, Sweden, and Northern Ireland and Wales in the United Kingdom. Secondly, while most regional executive bodies are collegial (i.e. a regional cabinet headed by a first minister/president), some regions have monocratic executives – Denmark, France (except Corsica), Greece, and Greater London in the United Kingdom. Thirdly, some regions – post-1999 Italian regions (with the exception of South Tyrol) and Greater

**Table 2.** Regional institutions concerning the executive and electoral system.

Country	Regional tier	Dual executive		President /Mayor	Consensual democracy		Simultaneity		Electoral system	Electoral threshold	N rounds	Early elections
		executive			Local	Regional						
Austria	Länder	No		No	Yes	No	No	PR	4–5%	1	Yes	
Belgium	Gemeenschappen/Gewesten	No		No	Yes	No	Yes	PR	5%	1	Yes	
Denmark	Amter/Region	No		Yes	No	Yes	Yes	PR	None	1	No	
France	Régions	Yes		Yes	No	No	Yes	Mixed	5%/10%	2	No	
	Corsica	Yes		No	No	No	Yes	Mixed	5%/7%	2	No	
Germany	Länder	No		No	No	No	No	Mixed	5%	1	Yes	
Greece	Nomo/Peripheries	No		Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Mixed	None	2	No	
Italy	Regioni a statuto speciale	No		No	No <sup>a</sup>	No	No	PR	None–5%	1	Yes	
	Regioni a statuto ordinario	No		No	No	No	Yes <sup>c</sup>	PR	2–5%	1	No <sup>d</sup>	
Netherlands	Provincies	Yes		No	Yes	No	Yes	PR	None	1	No	
Norway	Fylker	Yes		No	Yes	Yes	Yes	PR	None	1	No	
Spain	Comunidades autonomas (historic)	No		No	No	No	No	PR	3–5%	1	Yes	
	Comunidades autonomas (non-historic)	No		No	No	Yes	Yes	PR	3–5%	1	Yes	
Sweden	Län	Yes		No	Yes	Yes	Yes	PR	3%	1	No	
Switzerland	Cantons	No		No	Yes	No	No	MAJ/PR	None–10%	1	Yes	
United Kingdom	Greater London Authority	No		Yes	No	No	No	Mixed	5%	1	Yes	
	Northern Ireland	Yes <sup>e</sup>		No	Yes	No	No	PR	None	1	Yes	
	Scotland	No		No	No	Yes	Yes	Mixed	None	1	Yes	
	Wales	Yes <sup>e</sup>		No	No	Yes	Yes	Mixed	None	1	Yes	

<sup>a</sup>Except Südtirol.<sup>b</sup>No since 2000.<sup>c</sup>The number of involved regions gradually decreasing to seven in 2015.<sup>d</sup>Yes since 2000.<sup>e</sup>No since 2007. Mixed = PR with majoritarian elements. Further detail is provided in the country profiles in the online appendix.

London – have direct elections for the head of the executive. Fourthly, some regions apply codified or (more often) uncoded consociational rules when they form the regional executive (in Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and South Tyrol in Italy), with important consequences for the likelihood of oversized government.

### **Regional executive government**

We address regional executive government according to two characteristics which we think are important for describing how democracy functions at the regional level. First, we look at the composition of regional executive government by measuring the combined vote and seat share of parties, whether the government is oversized or not, and the extent to which a regional government cross-cuts the constellation of national executive government. We classify a regional government as oversized when the combined seat share of the parties involved in executive government remains above 50% if the smallest coalition partner is excluded. Cross-cutting is operationalised by computing the share of parliamentarians that need to switch their party affiliation to make full congruence between regional and national government (Bäck *et al.* 2013). Another element of regional executive government formation is the extent to which it alternates. We look at the change in seat share because of incoming and outgoing parties but also due to the outcome of the election for the parties that remain in government, and whether the major (largest or senior) party changes.

In Table 3 we display average regional scores (R) on the six characteristics and we compare them to the average for national executive governments (N). National executive government is similarly operationalised as regional government and we only include the latest national election held before the included regional elections. In Denmark, France, Greece, Italy (ordinary statute regions until the early 2000s), the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, regional election cycles are fixed and early elections are not possible (Table 2). In Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy (special statute regions), and Spain, early elections are possible but relatively rare, especially compared to the national level.

What emerges from Table 3 is that regional government tends to be more inclusive than national government. If we look at the vote and seat share support base for the government and the extent to which we find oversized governments, we observe that they are generally higher at the regional level than at the national level. The difference is especially stark for Austria, the Netherlands, and Norway, which highlights a strong effect of the informal rule to form regional government on a consociational basis. Not surprisingly, when regional executive power is vested in one monocratic office, as is the case in Denmark, France, and Greece, oversized government does not occur and the vote and seat share support bases are lower than can be found at the national level.

**Table 3.** Description of executive government at the regional and national levels in 13 countries.

Country	Tier	Votes (%)	Seats (%)	Oversized	Cross-cutting	Alterna-tion major party	Alterna-tion seats (%)
Austria	R	86.75	89.97	0.81	0.31	0.07	0.09
	N	66.85	69.58	0.05	n.a.	0.15	0.18
Belgium	R	56.75	60.91	0.43	0.66	0.42	0.35
	N	54.99	61.69	0.43	n.a.	0.50	0.30
Denmark	R	32.83	34.45	0.00	0.69	0.18	0.25
	N	36.98	37.85	0.08	n.a.	0.45	0.55
France	R	40.25	50.19	0.00	0.86	0.25	0.33
	N	47.84	55.88	0.00	n.a.	0.40	0.46
Germany	R	55.44	59.41	0.44	0.63	0.20	0.28
	N	56.54	58.57	0.33	n.a.	0.24	0.15
Greece	R	53.46	61.32	0.00	0.52	0.46	0.47
	N	43.92	54.83	0.00	n.a.	0.60	0.57
Italy	R	51.90	57.61	0.57	0.51	0.44	0.47
	N	48.65	53.87	0.71	n.a.	0.31	0.38
Netherlands	R	72.29	75.03	0.74	0.37	0.21	0.15
	N	61.29	63.06	0.50	n.a.	0.29	0.36
Norway	R	86.46	88.30	0.90	0.53	0.21	0.15
	N	40.35	43.29	0.00	n.a.	0.60	0.58
Spain	R	45.74	49.90	0.45	0.63	0.32	0.35
	N	38.19	46.17	0.00	n.a.	0.44	0.47
Sweden	R	52.40	53.75	0.31	0.58	0.26	0.33
	N	44.35	45.70	0.00	n.a.	0.40	0.44
Switzerland	R	79.19	82.86	0.93	0.33	0.09	0.10
	N	75.42	82.80	1.00	n.a.	0.00	0.06
United Kingdom	R	47.61	56.83	0.25	0.69	0.25	0.29
	N	43.02	57.53	0.00	n.a.	0.25	0.30

Notes: Entries for 'Regional' are average values for executive governments formed after regional elections (see Table 1). Entries for 'National' are averages for national elections which have been held during the same time period as when regional elections have been held (see Table 1).

Another important observation from Table 3 is that alternation in office is much more uncommon at the regional than at the national level. This is the case for regions which apply consociational rules (in Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden) as well as for most regions which do not (in Denmark, France, Greece, Spain, and the UK). In addition, this feature does not seem to depend on whether regional elections are held under proportional rule or have majoritarian elements (France since 2004, Greece, and three cantons in Switzerland) or higher frequency of minority governments at the national level (Denmark, Norway, and Spain).

The previous two observations lead to a third observation which is probably most accurately described as a caveat associated with the variable cross-cutting (or congruence) between regional and national governments, which features prominently in the (sparse) literature on regional executives. The extent of cross-cutting needs to be interpreted with great care because similar degrees of congruence between regional and national governments can be the result of minority government at the national level or represent a different outcome

of government formation at the regional level (Denmark and Norway vis-à-vis Germany and Spain). Similarly, high congruence between regional and national government in Austria and the Netherlands is most likely a result of consociational practices which lead to oversized governments that overlap across the levels, rather than just reflecting the will of national political actors trying to establish congruent government.

### **Multivariate analysis on the determinants of the constellation and alternation of regional executive government**

We are interested in the determinants of the constellation and alternation of regional executives. For constellation we observe the extent to which regional government cross-cuts national government (which varies between fully congruent (= 0) to fully incongruent (= 1))<sup>4</sup> and whether the government is oversized (= 1) or not (= 0).<sup>5</sup> For alternation, we look at the proportion of seat share change in between consecutive governments (varying from 0, no change in governmental parties and their seat shares, to 1, all parties are new in government)<sup>6</sup> and whether the major party alternates between consecutive governments (0 = no; 1 = yes).<sup>7</sup> Our unit of analysis is a regional government formed after a regional election or, if multiple governments have been formed in between regional elections, the regional government which lasted longest in between two consecutive regional elections.<sup>8</sup>

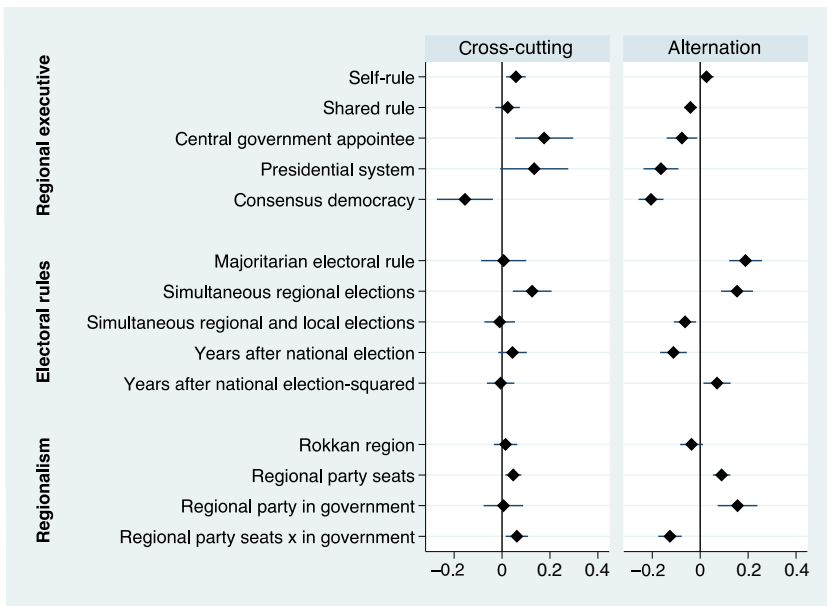
Our nine independent variables are operationalised as follows. Self-rule and shared rule regional scores are taken from Hooghe *et al.* (2016a). Centrally appointed executive heads,<sup>9</sup> presidential executives,<sup>10</sup> consensual systems,<sup>11</sup> and electoral systems with majoritarian elements<sup>12</sup> are indicated by dummy variables which score positive when the characteristic is present in a region (Table 2). The impact of the placement of the regional election in the national election cycle is assessed with a year and year squared variable whereby time reflects the number of years (number of months divided by 12) between a regional and a previously held national election. The impacts of regional<sup>13</sup> and local<sup>14</sup> simultaneity are assessed by dummy variables whereby a positive score indicates simultaneity (Table 2).

‘Political regionalism’ is measured by three variables: whether a region has a particularly distinct identity (‘Rokkan region’); share of seats for regional parties (Massetti and Schakel 2017); and regional party in office (Massetti and Schakel 2015). The first variable (‘Rokkan region’) is itself a synthesis of three indicators – geographical isolation, presence of regional languages, history of autonomy or independence (Hooghe *et al.* 2016b) – which are widely seen as sources of regional distinctiveness and regionalism (Fitjar 2010). This variable is expected to have a positive effect on cross-cutting. A regional party wins seats in one region only (Brancati 2008) and we include parties that win seats in more than one region (but not state-wide) when we know that the party is

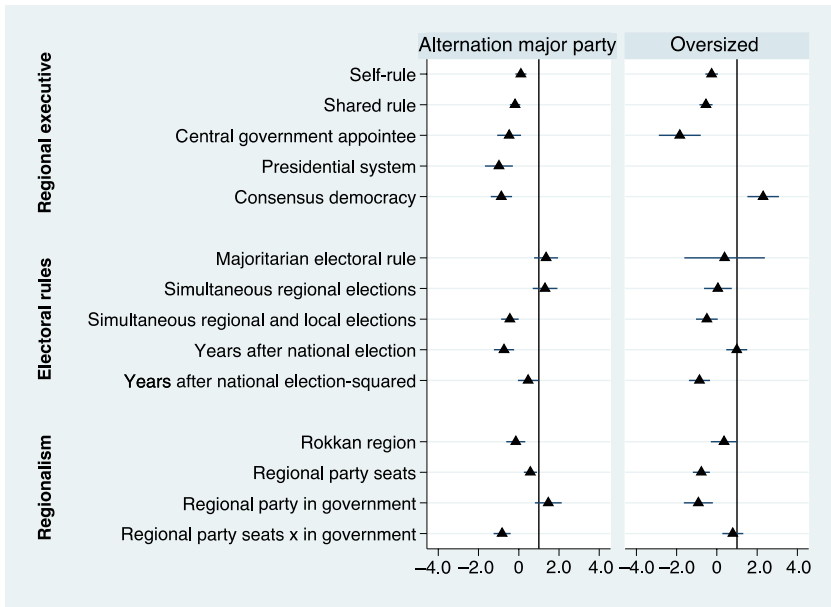
regionalist, i.e. prioritises its position on the centre–periphery dimension over its position on the left–right dimensions (Masseti and Schakel 2015, 2016).<sup>15</sup> We interact the share of seats for regional parties with a dummy variable indicating whether a regional party is in office.

Our dependent variables cross-cutting and alternation in proportion of seats vary between 0 and 1 whereas oversized and alternation of the major party can take the value of either 0 or 1. This difference has important implications for our modelling strategy. We employ multi-level linear regression models for cross-cutting and alternation in proportion of seats whereby regional governments are clustered in regions which are nested in countries. For oversized governments and alternation of the major party we run a logit model suitable for panel data whereby governments are clustered in regions. The models include an autocorrelation coefficient ( $\rho$ ) to control for possible time dependencies.<sup>16</sup>

Descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables are provided in Tables A1 and A2 in the appendix. The full model results are presented in Tables A3 and A4 in the appendix and in Figures 1 and 2 we display marginal effects for each of the independent variables on the four dependent variables. The marginal effects represent the impact of the presence of a factor (dummy variables) or the impact of one standard deviation increase (self-rule, shared rule, and vote share for regional parties).



**Figure 1.** Marginal effects of the institutional set-up of regional executives, electoral rules, and political regionalism on cross-cutting and alternation of regional executive government. Notes: The marginal effects represent the impact of the presence of a factor (dummy variables) or the impact of one standard deviation increase (self-rule, shared rule, and vote share for regional parties). The results are based on the models presented in Table A3.



**Figure 2.** Marginal effects of the institutional set-up of regional executives, electoral rules, and political regionalism on alternation of the major party and oversized regional executive government.

Notes: The marginal effects represent the change in odds ratios in the presence of a factor (dummy variables) or in response to one standard deviation increase (self-rule, shared rule, and vote share for regional parties). The results are based on the models presented in Table A4.

shared rule, and vote share for regional parties). The results of the multi-level linear regression models (cross-cutting and alternation in proportion of seats) are shown in Figure 1 and the odds ratios derived from the logit models are displayed in Figure 2. To ease the interpretation of odds ratios we also report on predicted probabilities, which are estimated by changing the independent variable of interest while keeping the dummy variables at their mode and non-dummy variables at their mean.

### Results of the multivariate analysis

All independent variables, except for the Rokkan region dummy, attain statistical significance for one or more dependent variables. One standard deviation increase in self-rule increases cross-cutting by 0.06 points and alternation in proportion of seats by 0.03 points. The positive effect of self-rule on alternation in proportion of seats is mitigated once a region obtains shared rule which reduces alternation in proportion of seats with 0.04 points per standard deviation increase. The results for self-rule confirm Bäck *et al.*'s (2013) findings but we find no decreasing impact of shared rule on cross-cutting.



Cross-cutting multi-level government is higher for regions where the executive head is appointed by the central government (0.18 points) as well as in regions where there is a presidential system (0.13 points); whereas it is lower for regions which have a practice of forming consensus coalition government (-0.15 points).

The predicted probability of finding oversized government is 61% (while keeping dummy variables at their mode and non-dummy variables at their mean)<sup>17</sup> and, not surprisingly, this probability goes up to 91% for consensus regions and goes down to 24% in regions whose executive head is centrally appointed. The probability that the major party is ousted from office is 44% and it decreases to 33% with centrally appointed heads, to 26% for presidential executives, and to 12% in regions with a tradition of consensual politics. Taken together, the results clearly indicate that the institutional architecture heavily impacts on regional executive constellation and alternation.

Regional electoral rules also impact heavily on regional government except for cross-cutting. Simultaneous regional elections increase cross-cutting by 0.13 points. This finding is in line with our expectation that parties in national office tend to be punished in regional elections when the latter take the character of a national test (as in simultaneous regional elections). Majoritarian rule significantly increases alternation of seats by 0.19 points and the probability of an alternating major party increases from 44% to 74%. Confirming our expectations, simultaneous regional elections increase alternation (0.15 points or 15% for seat share and 25% for the major party), whereas simultaneous regional and local elections decrease alternation (-6% for seat share and -10% for the major party).

In contrast to our expectations, alternation does not increase when regional elections are held mid-way through the national electoral cycle. We have calculated predicted probabilities for when a regional election is held one, two, three, or four years after a national election (while keeping dummy variables at their mode and non-dummy variables at their mean) and alternation in proportion of seats decreases respectively by 8%, 14%, 16%, and 15% whereas the probability that the major party will alternate decreases from 65% to respectively 52%, 44%, 40%, and 42%. A closer look at the electoral timing of regional elections within countries reveals that countries where we may find the largest second-order election effects also tend to be the countries which hold their regional elections at the same time and almost exactly (e.g. Norway) or often close to (e.g. the Netherlands) mid-term in the national electoral cycle (Dandoy and Schakel 2013). These are also the countries which apply a practice of consensus coalition government at the regional level (Table 2). Overall, the results strongly indicate that scholars studying regional government composition are well advised to take account of the multi-level electoral setting.

Finally, political regionalism matters too for regional executive government.<sup>18</sup> The extent of cross-cutting increases when regional parties increase their seat

share and especially when regional parties are in government. Although this result is not surprising, we do find the impact quite considerable. The extent of cross-cutting increases from 0.56 to 0.67 and to 0.77 when the seat share of regional parties that are in regional executive government increases respectively from 5% to 20% and to 35% (roughly the average and plus one and two standard deviations, see Table A1). The probability to find oversized government sharply declines with increasing seat share for regional parties (from 62% to 45% to 30%), but when a regional party is included in the executive the probability for oversized government does not change. This result may be due to the fact that regional parties which become electorally stronger can reduce the political space for competing state-wide parties (or coalitions), which may find it harder to form governments with oversized majorities.

Alternation increases when regional parties increase their seat share, unless regional parties are in office because then their increasing seat share decreases alternation. Regional parties may act as brokers between centre-left and centre-right state-wide parties which alternate in executive government but which still rely on regional party support to find a majority basis in the regional assembly. Alternation increases when regional parties become electorally strong and compete for office with one (or two) main state-wide parties. When electorally strong regional parties enter into regional executive government they tend to decrease alternation because they might turn into hegemonic parties, as can be observed in Bayern (CSU Bayerns), South Tyrol (SVP), and in some Spanish regions. That might be due to the fact that they are primarily perceived as actors representing an identity, rather than running an administration with functional aims, and are therefore less subject to be punished by voters for their incumbency position (Alonso 2008). However, the number of 'hegemonic' regional parties is limited and they constitute between 94 (sum of seat share above 35%) and 158 (sum of seat share above 20%) observations out of a total of 1746, which respectively constitutes 5.4% and 9.0%.<sup>19</sup>

More research is required to further investigate these two 'mechanisms'.<sup>20</sup> First, regional parties may, apart from being regionalist (i.e. having a self-rule demand), take up centrist or median positions in the party system. Unfortunately, we cannot control for the left-right position of regional parties because this data is missing. Second, a conditional logit model is to be preferred as a modelling strategy because it would allow for an analysis on the probability of government participation of regional parties while comparing the actual outcome to all possible alternative governments after a regional election has been held. Building this dataset requires a significant effort, as it not only entails including all potential governments but it also entails identifying all the potential coalitions for 2055 regional elections with up to 18 parties that win seats (e.g. in the elections in Sardinia in 2014 and Sicily in 2001).

## Discussion

The first objective of this article was to present an overview of the institutional variance that we find at regional level, even in a relatively homogeneous area such as Western Europe. This overview (with full details presented in the country profiles in the online appendix) and the dataset will be of use for future studies wanting to compare many countries. The comparative data on regional institutions show interesting variance across countries and regions, sometimes created by recent reforms. This variance can also allow comparative studies to engage more explicitly with normative debates. Indeed, many decentralisation reforms are implemented with the argument that they will enhance democracy by bringing government ‘closer to the people’ (Däubler *et al.* 2017; Sharpe 1993). However, the appointment from above of non-elected officials as heads (or co-heads) of regional office, as well as the creation of monocratic or hyper-presidential institutions, might call into question the way in which regional democracy is pursued. In addition, the lack of alternation in regional office for extremely long periods of time, due to state-wide parties’ regional electoral strongholds or the presence of hegemonic regional parties, raises questions about the types of democracy we often find at regional level, even when all criteria of ‘free and fair elections’ are guaranteed.

Our second objective was to explain not only multi-level government congruence but also other key features of regional government, namely government alternation and the presence of oversized majority coalitions. We found that most institutional variables have an impact on government constellation or alternation, or both. In most cases, their effects are in line with our expectations. In particular, we find confirmation of previous studies on the effect of self-rule on government cross-cutting, while shared rule does not seem to have an effect. Of particular interest is the effect of presidential systems, which appear to push regional political dynamics in a majoritarian direction. Indeed, their impact is exactly the opposite of that of consensual practices: the former has a reinforcing effect on cross-cutting and alternation, while the latter has a weakening effect on both. Like presidential systems, majoritarian voting systems tend to increase government alternation. Government cross-cutting appears to be influenced also by the horizontal simultaneity of regional elections. Clearly, holding many regional elections at the same time increases the possibility of second-order election effects, by which parties that are in national office tend to be punished and might lose office at the regional level. These are important findings because the composition of regional government may have a large impact on public policy – see e.g. Kleider *et al.* (2017) on subnational expenditures on education, Huwyler *et al.* (2017) and Tosun and Ulrich-Hartung (2017) on European policy-making – and the extent to which voters will hold regional government accountable – see e.g. León *et al.* (2017).

Regarding regional parties, we found that they may increase the dynamism of regional democracy by increasing alternation in office but they may also turn regions into one-party hegemonies. Regional parties win seats in 35% of the regional elections in our sample and they have been part of the regional executive in just under 10% of the total 1746 observations in our dataset. Hence, regional parties are quite common and they therefore may have an important impact on the constellation and alternation of regional executive authority. Regional party hegemonies – loosely defined as receiving more than 35% of the votes and in regional office – are relatively rare but still constitute 4.1% of our observations (78 out of a total 1746 of regional governments). Nevertheless, further empirical analysis is necessary to observe how far our results are valid. In particular, an important next step would be to analyse how far the results still hold when the left–right position of regional parties is taken into account.

The data and analysis presented in this article represent a step forward in the comparative literature on regional government. In the light of growing policy-making, taxing, and budgeting powers of regions (Hooghe *et al.* 2016a), further research on regional democracy and regional government is needed (see also Däubler *et al.* 2017). In particular, our data and findings call for further studies of both an empirical and a normative nature. On the one hand, we need more in-depth studies on how citizens make sense of regional democracy in general, and of regional democracy without (or with rare) alternation in office in particular. On the other hand, we need more studies which reflect, from a normative perspective, on the different purpose of regional democracy, depending on the presence/absence of important ethno-territorial cleavages, and on the match (or mismatch) between the powers attributed to regional institutions and democratic standards (e.g. central government appointment of the head executives, monocratic or hyper-presidential executives, etc.) of regional institutional systems. Both types of studies would provide interesting material for the development of a ‘regional political science’.

## Notes

1. For example, our Regional Executive Government Dataset complements the Regional Election Dataset developed by Arjan H. Schakel (available at <http://www.arjanschakel.nl>), the Regional Authority Index dataset (available at [http://www.unc.edu/~gwmrks/data\\_ra.php](http://www.unc.edu/~gwmrks/data_ra.php)), and the Varieties of Democracy dataset (available at <https://www.v-dem.net/en/>).
2. Our data includes all but two of the 15 West European countries which hold regional elections and where the regional executive is (partly) appointed by regional councillors and/or directly elected by citizens (Dandoy and Schakel 2013). We do not include Finland (Åland islands) and Portugal (Azores and Madeira). Regional government data for Sweden before 1994 and Switzerland before 1980 are not available.
3. More detailed information is provided in the online appendix.

4. Cross-cutting is operationalised by computing the share of parliamentarians that need to switch their party affiliation to make full congruence between regional and national government (Bäck *et al.* 2013).
5. A government is oversized when the its seat share is higher than 50% when the seat share for the smallest party is subtracted from the total seat share of the government.
6. This variable is operationalised by taking the absolute difference between the seat shares for parties forming a government and for the preceding government (when a party is not in (preceding) government its vote share is zero), summing these differences across parties and dividing by sum of total seats share for the government and preceding government.
7. The major party is identified as the party with the largest seat share. When seat shares are equal we look at the vote shares to identify the major party. We did not opt to code the party of the head of the executive because, due to institutional variance, the nature and the logic of appointment of the post changes considerably from country to country: the prime minister might change according to strict rules (Switzerland); the head of the executive might not be elected but appointed by central government (the Netherlands); the executive might be, strictly speaking, collegial (Sweden); or there might be two heads of executive power (France and Norway), which puts into doubt which party affiliation should be coded.
8. An important benefit of this operationalisation is that the regional executive is compared for each election and we specifically analyse changes in regional government after a subsequent regional election has been held. If we were to include governments which have changed without calling for early elections it would require us to define what constitutes a new government. In addition, apart from regions in Germany and Spain, we lack data on changes in regional executive government in between elections. Furthermore, regions in Denmark, France, Italy (ordinary statute regions until the 2000s), the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden hold horizontal simultaneous regional elections with fixed electoral cycles without the possibility of holding early elections. This significantly reduces the incentives for parties to enter or leave government in between elections.
9. France, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Northern Ireland and Wales in the United Kingdom.
10. Denmark, France, Greece, and London in the United Kingdom.
11. Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, South Tyrol in Italy, and Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom. The coding is based on the literature (Dandoy and Schakel 2013; Deschouwer 2006; Klingelhofer and Müller 2015; Lehmbuch 1993, 2003; Lijphart 1969; Lijphart and Crepaz 1991; van Haute and Deschouwer 2017). It is important to note that one of the criteria used by scholars to identify consensus democracy often includes the presence of broad coalition governments.
12. France since 2004, Greece, and some Swiss cantons.
13. Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy (ordinary statute regions until the 2000s), the Netherlands, Norway, Spain (non-historic regions), and Sweden.
14. Austria (Vienna), Denmark, Germany (Berlin, Bremen, Hamburg), Greece, Italy (ordinary statute regions until the 2000s), Norway, Spain (non-historic regions), and Sweden.
15. We also ran models which include the vote shares for regional parties and the main findings remain robust, which is not surprising considering that the Pearson correlation between vote and seat shares for regional parties is 0.97

( $p < 0.001$ ). Table A2 provides more detail on the number of regional parties and their average seat and vote shares.

16. The models have been run in Stata with the mixed and xtlogit commands.
17. These estimates have been produced through the margins Stata-command.
18. The reported results appear to be robust in a fixed (country) effects model specification.
19. Obviously, the probability that a regional party will be included in government increases with the seat share won by regional parties. Out of a total of 94 observations whereby the sum of regional party seat share is above 35%, 81 observations (i.e. 86%) concern instances where a regional party was included in the regional government.
20. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising the subsequent two issues.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

*Arjan H. Schakel* is Assistant Professor in Research Methods at Maastricht University, the Netherlands. He is editor of the annual special issue on regional elections of the journal *Regional & Federal Studies*, editor of the book series *Comparative Territorial Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan), co-chair of the Standing Group on Federalism and Regionalism (European Consortium of Political Research), and co-director of the BA programme in European Studies at Maastricht University. Arjan co-developed the *Regional Authority Index*, which traces regional authority in 81 countries since 1950 (published by Oxford University Press, 2016). He has published in journals such as *Comparative European Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *Governance*, *Government and Opposition*, *Party Politics*, and *West European Politics*. Arjan has also edited two books on regional elections (Palgrave Macmillan 2013, 2017). [[a.schakel@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:a.schakel@maastrichtuniversity.nl)]

*Emanuele Massetti* is a Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the University of Surrey. He is the co-editor of the *Annual Review* of the *Journal of Common Market Studies*. Emanuele has published in journals such as the *European Journal of Political Research*, *West European Politics*, *Party Politics*, *Political Studies*, and *Acta Politica*. He also co-edited two books: on the party politics of territorial reforms in Europe (Routledge, 2014) and on the relationship between populism and nationalism (Routledge, forthcoming 2018). [[e.massetti@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:e.massetti@surrey.ac.uk)]



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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	St.dev.	Min	Max
Alternation seats (%)	0.26	0.34	0.00	1.00
Cross-cutting	0.53	0.35	0.01	1.00
Oversized	0.52	0.50	0	1
Alternation major party	0.25	0.43	0	1
Rokkan region	0.34	0.47	0	1
Regional party seat share	5.77	14.30	0	100
Regional party in government	0.10	0.30	0	1
Self-rule	12.64	2.95	1	18
Shared rule	4.38	4.10	0	12
Central government appointee	0.34	0.47	0	1
President	0.21	0.40	0	1
Consensual democracy	0.40	0.49	0	1
Majoritarian	0.12	0.32	0	1
Simultaneity regional	0.64	0.48	0	1
Simultaneity local	0.48	0.50	0	1
Year	1.87	1.10	0	4.9
Year <sup>2</sup>	4.71	4.34	0	24.2

Notes: the number of observations is 1746 for 250 regions nested in 13 countries.

**Table A2.** Average sum of vote and seat shares for regional parties.

Country	All		Seats		Votes		
	parties	N	N (%)	share	N	N (%)	share
Austria	107	8	7.5	1.0	77	72.0	1.5
Belgium	166	9	5.4	16.3	122	73.5	17.3
Denmark	124	11	8.9	0.9	80	64.5	1.5
France	84	26	31.0	1.8	32	38.1	1.6
Germany	333	23	6.9	8.3	221	66.4	8.2
Greece	15	1	6.7	4.9	1	6.7	6.4
Italy	490	143	29.2	11.6	355	72.4	12.7
Netherlands	184	28	15.2	1.2	124	67.4	1.6
Norway	58	14	24.1	0.9	25	43.1	0.9
Spain	671	92	13.7	20.4	580	86.4	22.2
Sweden	45	10	22.2	2.7	27	60.0	3.2
Switzerland	415	81	19.5	2.4	376	90.6	2.7
United Kingdom	148	34	23.0	57.4	127	85.8	55.5
Total	2840	480	16.9	6.3	2147	75.6	6.9

Notes: see Table 1 for the number of included regions and elections per country.

**Table A3.** Multivariate analysis on characteristics of regional government.

	Cross-cutting			Alternation seats (%)		
	beta	s.e.	<i>p</i>	beta	s.e.	<i>p</i>
Self-rule	0.06	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.02	0.08
Shared rule	0.02	0.03	0.37	-0.04	0.01	0.00
Central government appointee	0.18	0.06	0.01	-0.08	0.03	0.02
President	0.13	0.07	0.06	-0.16	0.04	0.00
Consensus	-0.15	0.06	0.01	-0.21	0.03	0.00
Majoritarian	0.01	0.05	0.89	0.19	0.03	0.00
Simultaneity regional	0.13	0.04	0.00	0.15	0.03	0.00
Simultaneity local	-0.01	0.03	0.76	-0.06	0.02	0.01
Year	0.04	0.03	0.15	-0.11	0.03	0.00
Year <sup>2</sup>	-0.01	0.03	0.84	0.07	0.03	0.01
Rokkan region	0.01	0.02	0.56	-0.04	0.02	0.14
Regional party seats (%)	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.09	0.04	0.00
Regional party in government	0.01	0.04	0.89	0.16	0.04	0.00
Interaction	0.06	0.02	0.00	-0.13	0.03	0.00
Constant	0.43	0.05	0.00	0.36	0.03	0.00
Rho	0.170			0.141		
Log likelihood	-503			-395		
Variance governments	0.098			0.092		
Variance regions	0.000			0.002		
Variance countries	0.005			0.000		
<i>N</i> governments	1981			1746		
<i>N</i> regions	257			250		
<i>N</i> countries	13			13		

Notes: Shown are the results of a multi-level linear regression model whereby governments are clustered in regions which are subsequently nested in countries. The models include a rho coefficient to control for autocorrelation and non-dummy variables are standardised (see Table A1).

**Table A4.** Multivariate analysis on characteristics of regional government.

	Oversized			Alternation major party		
	beta	s.e.	<i>p</i>	beta	s.e.	<i>p</i>
Self-rule	-0.26	0.16	0.11	0.11	0.14	0.45
Shared rule	-0.54	0.17	0.00	-0.19	0.13	0.16
Central government appointee	-1.84	0.53	0.00	-0.48	0.30	0.12
President		(omitted)		-0.99	0.35	0.01
Consensus	2.30	0.40	0.00	-0.86	0.27	0.00
Majoritarian	0.39	1.02	0.71	1.36	0.30	0.00
Simultaneity regional	0.05	0.35	0.89	1.31	0.31	0.00
Simultaneity local	-0.50	0.27	0.07	-0.44	0.22	0.05
Year	0.99	0.27	0.00	-0.73	0.26	0.00
Year <sup>2</sup>	-0.87	0.27	0.00	0.46	0.26	0.07
Rokkan region	0.36	0.34	0.29	-0.15	0.24	0.54
Regional party seats (%)	-0.77	0.22	0.00	0.58	0.16	0.00
Regional party in government	-0.92	0.37	0.01	1.47	0.34	0.00
Interaction	0.79	0.27	0.00	-0.82	0.22	0.00
Constant	0.39	0.40	0.34	-1.34	0.32	0.00
Rho	0.327			0.178		
Log likelihood	-775			-860		
<i>N</i> governments	1518			1742		
<i>N</i> regions	148			250		
<i>N</i> countries	10			13		

Notes: Shown are the results of a logit model (1 = oversized; 1 = major party alters) whereby governments are clustered in regions and which includes a rho coefficient to control for autocorrelation over time. Non-dummy variables are standardised (see Table A1). President is omitted because this variable explains oversized perfectly and 464 observations (Denmark, France, and Greece) are dropped from the analysis.