

## Adaptation or inflexibility? Niche party responsiveness to policy competition, with evidence from regionalist parties

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**Abstract.** Despite a growing literature on niche parties, little is known about whether and how these parties are responsive to policy competition. Drawing upon data on regionalist parties' programmatic strategies across Western Europe from 1971 to 2009, I find that these niche parties are more ideologically flexible than previously posited when facing governmental policy appeasement. While they do not shift to a more extreme issue position following increases in a region's decentralization level, regionalist parties do broaden their issue agenda. Issue diversification, however, is limited to those parties whose goals are being met; dissatisfied secessionist parties do not expand their issue emphases after decentralization reforms short of independence. Supported by emerging evidence of similar agenda diversification among appeased green and radical right parties, these analyses further our understanding of niche parties as strategic actors and offer new explanations for variation in the effectiveness of mainstream party tactics towards them.

**Keywords:** niche party; competition; appeasement; regionalist party; Western Europe

Over the past 50 years, niche parties have emerged across advanced industrial democracies from Europe and North America to Asia and Latin America. Extensive research has been conducted on the impact of these parties in introducing new issue dimensions (Bischof, 2017; Meyer & Wagner, 2013; Wagner, 2012), shaping mainstream party competition (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Adams et al., 2006; Lublin, 2012; Meguid, 2005; Spoon et al., 2014) and affecting government (Jensen & Spoon, 2010).

However, less attention has been given to niche parties as strategic actors. We know little about whether and how niche parties respond programmatically to competition with other parties, especially on their core issue.<sup>1</sup> If niche parties are distinguished by their singular, non-economic issue focus and their attraction of issue-based voters (Bischof, 2017; Meguid, 2005; Wagner, 2012), what does a niche party do when its primary policy has been implemented by a governing party? Assuming that the enacted policy meets the niche party's demand, do these parties shift to a more extreme issue position? Do they emphasize new issues? Or are they 'prisoners' of their initial issue position (Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow et al., 2011) and agenda? Answering these questions is critical in light of the finding that mainstream parties regularly employ issue appeasement tactics against threatening niche parties (e.g., Abou-Chadi, 2016; Chou et al., 2018; Massetti & Schakel, 2013).

This article examines the programmatic strategies – changes in issue position and issue emphases – of regionalist parties following changes in the decentralization status of their region. Like other niche parties, regionalist parties are the targets of governmental appeasement and experience similar electoral effects from those strategies. But unlike for green and radical right parties, there is cross-national data on both regionalist party policy goals and the achievement of them. This article is thus novel in being able to examine niche party strategy in response to

*implemented* policy demands; most work on responsiveness can only assess niche party reactions to manifesto promises.

Statistical analyses of 52 regionalist parties across 45 regions in eight Western European countries from 1971 to 2009 reveal that these parties are more ideologically flexible than the original niche party research assumed. While they do not adopt more extreme demands – remaining prisoners of their original issue position – regionalist parties broaden their issue appeals following increases in a region’s decentralization level; they decrease their emphasis on regional issues, while increasing their overall issue content and specifically, their attention to nationalist issues. This clear diversification, however, extends only to those parties demanding greater regional autonomy; decentralization reforms do not lead dissatisfied secessionist parties to change their emphasis of non-regionalist issues.

These results have important implications for research on niche parties and party competition in general. While reconfirming that niche parties are different from mainstream parties, the analyses highlight that niche parties are strategic and have in their arsenal previously unrecognized tools of agenda diversification. As such, these findings provide answers to unexplained variation in the outcomes of mainstream-niche party competition; they suggest that mainstream party appeasement may fail or have differential results not necessarily because mainstream parties hesitate or avoid boycotting strategies (e.g., Meguid, 2008; van Spanje & de Graaf, 2018), but because niche parties diversify, relying less on voter support based on their initial issue dimension.

### **Niche party programmatic responsiveness to appeasement**

Since the 1970s, niche parties (e.g., green, radical right and regionalist parties) have emerged as regular participants in party systems across advanced industrial democracies. Interest in these parties has led to a burgeoning literature about their role in broader party systems and mainstream party competition. While recent work has begun to explore the strategic nature of niche parties, examining their behaviour in elections (Lublin, 2012; Massetti & Schakel, 2013; Meguid, 2018; Spoon, 2011) and legislatures (Elias & Tronconi, 2011; Jensen & Spoon, 2010), there is no comprehensive examination to date of the policy responsiveness of niche parties to competition on their issue dimension. There is evidence that appeasement has been effective in encouraging niche voter flight to the mainstream party (e.g., Chou et al., 2018; Massetti & Schakel, 2013, yet see van Spanje & de Graaf, 2018). But do niche parties shift their policy position, like mainstream parties, when faced with converging competitors, implemented goals and an issue position that may cease to attract voters (e.g., Adams, 2012; Adams et al., 2006; Downs, 1957)? In addition, or instead, do they shift to emphasize a new issue dimension on which to garner support when their *raison d’être* is challenged?

The answers to these questions depend in part on factors common to all party competition: the credibility of the policy shift, how closely the proposed policy matches the demands of the target party and the threat posed by that policy approximation. Appeasement would seem more consequential to any party if (1) the policy is implemented, as opposed to just being promised in a manifesto; (2) the policy is identical to its stated goals; and (3) the policy convergence reduces the electoral attractiveness of the target party (Abou-Chadi & Orlowski, 2016; Downs, 1957). Beyond these factors, however, we expect that niche parties, as largely single-issue parties, are faced with different constraints than their multi-issue mainstream party competitors. A review of the work on

party competition reveals two conflicting yet plausible sets of expectations about a niche party's ability to change its issue position and issue emphases.

### *Niche party issue stability*

The first set of literature presents niche parties as ideologically inflexible actors and suggests that they have limited programmatic options. Consider the definition of niche parties: according to Meguid (2005), niche parties reject the centrality of economic issues for politics, campaign on novel issues that crosscut existing lines of political division, and limit their issue appeals. Subsequent scholars have offered variations on this definition, highlighting the centrality of issue specialization and issue differentiation (Bischof, 2017; Meyer & Wagner, 2013; Wagner, 2012), but despite these differences, niche parties are commonly described as having narrow issue appeals on which they attract voters. As a result, we would expect, and scholars (Ivaresflaten, 2008; Rovny, 2013) have found, that the preferences of a niche party's voters are fairly homogeneous on its singular issue, but ideologically heterogeneous on non-core issues.

This pattern of voter support introduces ideological rigidity to niche party competition. With niche parties dependent upon one policy position to garner support, they may suffer reputational and electoral costs if they abandon that issue position. Research focusing on party movement on the left-right dimension (e.g., Adams et al., 2006; Ezrow, 2008; Ezrow et al., 2011) has found that niche parties, unlike their mainstream competitors, both fail to track the median voter and are more likely to be punished electorally when they moderate their issue position. And this positional inflexibility also appears to extend to niche party responsiveness on non-economic issues; Wagner and Meyer (2017) find that radical right parties have not changed their position on the liberal-authoritarian dimension over time, even as mainstream parties in general have become more authoritarian. Meijers and Williams (2020) highlight an advantage to this rigidity: an issue-owning niche party may actually benefit electorally from the increase in voter attention to their core issue that accompanies governing party appeasement.

Competing on a new issue dimension may also be problematic for an appeased niche party. Perceived as single-issue parties, these actors do not always have a natural second or third issue dimension stance on which to attract or maintain voters (Rovny, 2013; Rovny & Polk, 2020). With notable variation in supporters' policy stances on other issues, it is not necessarily obvious to which issue niche parties should turn when the continued relevance of their initial issue dimension is threatened. Choose incorrectly, and the party will divide its existing electorate. Diversify at all, and the party risks betraying its reputation as champion, or owner of a given issue position and dimension (Walgrave et al., 2009). To quote de Sio and Weber (2014, p. 870), '(d)ownplaying the main dimension of competition may attract new voters, but might also jeopardize the party's traditional identity'.

It follows that a niche party may maintain both its existing issue position and emphases in the face of policy appeasement (defined as government policy approximating the issue goal of the niche party). Not only will policy and emphasis stability reduce any electoral risks of policy change, but it may also help maintain demand for the newly passed policy or be a strategy of 'credit claiming', especially on an issue the party owns. It follows therefore:

- H1: The niche party will not change its policy goal in response to policy appeasement.  
 H2: The salience of the niche party's issue will not change, and the party will not emphasize other issues, in response to policy appeasement.

### *Niche party adaptation*

Whereas the previously discussed literature points to niche party inflexibility, other arguments lead us to expect niche party adaptation to policy appeasement and threats to their survival. Because niche parties attract voters on the basis of a core policy dimension, maintaining a status quo approach in the face of policy achievement or even appeasement is particularly risky. Single-issue voters may not see the value of continuing to support the niche party after the fulfilment of its *raison d'être*. Research by Chou et al. (2018), Meguid (2008; 2015) and Massetti and Schakel (2013) highlights the costly electoral effects of policy accommodation: whether because of the loss of their issue ownership to the accommodating party or simply the existence of another party promoting the same issue position, these works find patterns of niche party vote loss following the adoption of their policy demands by mainstream competitors.

If policy accommodation can lead to electoral loss, what actions can niche parties take? Satisfied with having achieved their core goal, niche parties might just stop contesting elections and disappear.<sup>2</sup> However, despite Downs's (1957) claim that parties are either office or policy seekers, parties prioritizing policy rarely disband completely after that policy is implemented. Indeed, the trend is towards party creation, not elimination (Brancati, 2009; Hug, 2001). Motivations for continuing to exist and compete in the electoral arena are multiple, including the 'power, prestige and income' (Downs, 1957, p. 28) of office. If niche parties seek to ensure their survival, they may follow mainstream party strategy and react to goal appeasement and fears of future vote loss by shifting their policy position. Whereas mainstream party policy shifts are driven more by moving away from an unpopular issue position than a solved political problem (e.g., Adams, 2012), niche parties facing goal achievement might change the extremity of their original policy stance to capture new voters. Even in the absence of full goal achievement, the niche party might be seeking to maintain its differentiation from an appeasing mainstream competitor (Abou-Chadi & Orłowski, 2016; Bischof, 2017).

While an underdeveloped area of comparative parties research, there is some evidence to this effect. Hall and Evans (2019) find that green and radical right parties have shifted to more extreme positions on cultural issues from 1990 to 2010 (although see Wagner & Meyer, 2017). And links have been drawn to policy appeasement as the cause of such party extremism. For instance, the empirical literature on ethnic conflict reports the inflammatory effects of decentralization on secessionist impulses (e.g., Brancati, 2009; Roeder, 2007; although see Lustik et al., 2004; Stepan, 1999). Similarly, there is anecdotal evidence that mainstream parties fear that decentralization reforms will lead formerly autonomist regionalist parties to demand secession (e.g., Mitchell, 1990, 93).

Another option for niche parties facing appeasement is policy dimension diversification. Emphasizing a new issue is a means for a niche party to try to maintain support of its 'satisfied' issue voters or increase support by attracting an additional set of voters; it is motivated by concerns of future vote loss.<sup>3</sup> In the short term, the niche party either transforms itself into a new single-issue party or a multi-issue mainstream competitor. Unlike the mainstream party strategies discussed by Riker (1982), Carmines and Stimson (1986), and Hobolt and De Vries (2015), niche parties are not

necessarily aiming to introduce a novel issue previously ignored by the established parties; while this could occur, their immediate goal is to highlight an issue *new-to-them* on which to keep their electorate mobilized or gain new voters (Bergman & Flatt, 2020) following appeasement.

Recent empirical work offers support for these arguments. There is evidence of significant party transitioning from traditional niche to more mainstream (i.e., diversified issue) profiles following niche party vote loss – movement suggestive of niche party issue diversification (Meyer & Wagner, 2013). Abou-Chadi et al. (2018) similarly show that vote-losing parties are more likely to diversify. These large *N* results, suggesting strategic niche party issue diversification, are consistent with numerous in-depth case studies (e.g., de Winter, 2011; Elias, 2009; Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro, 2002) of niche parties expanding their issue portfolios.

This literature suggests that niche parties are not ideologically inflexible. Witnessing the appeasement of their initial and primary policy goal and fearing future vote loss, niche parties can (1) change their position on their core issue and/or (2) deemphasize the issue on which there was policy appeasement and emphasize other issue dimensions. It follows that:

*H3:* When the niche party's policy goal is appeased, the niche party will shift its policy position.

*H4:* When the niche party's policy goal is appeased, salience of the niche party's issue will decrease and the party's emphasis of other issues will increase.

If, on the other hand, the niche party's goal is not appeased, this literature would not expect the party to shift its policy goal or diversify its issue agenda. Failure to appease a niche party can occur either because the government does not offer any concessions or because the governmental concessions are qualitatively different from the party's demands. For instance, an independence-seeking party would not be appeased by greater regional decentralization within the existing country framework. Under this circumstance, a niche party might further highlight its unmet policy demand. This leads to:

*H5:* When the niche party's policy goal is not appeased, the niche party's policy position will not change, the salience of the niche party's issue will remain the same or increase, and the party's emphasis of other issues will stay the same or decrease.

## *Data*

To adjudicate between the competing hypotheses requires the identification of niche parties whose policy goal is known and where the presence or absence of credible policy appeasement is clear and measurable. Ideally, there is both variation in the degree of goal appeasement as well as variation in the type of policy goals pursued across parties and across and within countries.

Given these criteria, a quantitative examination of the programmatic responses of all types of niche parties is not feasible. Time-series, cross-national data on the implementation of green and radical right policy goals, let alone the classification of these goals, is not available.<sup>4</sup> Manifesto data only allows us to capture mainstream party promises (and only for some niche party issues); these statements may not correspond to the output of subsequent governments. In light of these limitations, I focus on a subset of niche parties where policy goal and achievement data are available: regionalist parties.

Regionalist parties are well suited for such an analysis. There is an extensive literature identifying the policy goals of regionalist parties. Defined as parties that defend and promote cultural, ethnic, linguistic or territorial distinctiveness with their core demands centring around self-government (Massetti & Schakel, 2015, p. 866), regionalist parties have been successfully categorized into autonomy-seeking and secession-seeking party types (de Winter & Türsan, 1998; Massetti & Schakel, 2013; Newman, 1996); the former seek greater regional powers while remaining part of the state, whereas the latter challenge the unity of the state. Decentralization should appease the former, but not the latter. And the availability of cross-national annual decentralization implementation data across decades (Hooghe et al., 2016) provides researchers with a rare opportunity to test the effects of implemented policy on regionalist party responsiveness.

That said, while regionalist parties are useful for such an analysis, scholars have also found that they are not unique within the niche party family. Research has shown that regionalist parties are equally targeted with policy appeasement by mainstream opponents and are subject to comparable electoral effects as their green (Henceroth & Jensen, 2018; Spoon et al., 2014) and radical right counterparts (Meguid, 2008; Bale et al., 2010; Abou-Chadi, 2016).

And the nature of policy accommodation targeting each type of niche party is more similar than might be assumed. While government appeasement of regionalist parties can involve the creation of subnational institutions, appeasement is neither limited to such reforms nor is it uniquely ‘sticky’. Sixty percent of reforms carried out across Western European regions during the time period under investigation involved policies beyond creating a subnational government (Hooghe et al., 2016). And decentralization reforms are, like most other niche party policy accommodations, reversible; in 25 of the 45 regions in the analysis, central governments have, in a given year, had the ability to unilaterally alter the region’s constitutional relationship with the centre, and, in multiple cases, have decreased a region’s level of decentralization (Hooghe et al., 2016).

On the other hand, governments similarly enter into sticky, often legally binding, climate or migration treaties shaped (or limited) by the demands of green and radical right parties (Jensen & Spoon, 2011; van Haute, 2016; Copelovitch & Pevehouse, 2019; Müller & Gebauer, 2021). Even ‘ordinary’ governmental policies, such as altering energy emission standards or immigration and asylum quotas, often result in the foreclosing of investment options or infrastructural changes that resist reversal, should an opposed government subsequently come to power.<sup>5</sup> Thus, while a cross-national time-series analysis including all niche parties would be optimal, in the absence of that data, similarities between the type and effectiveness of mainstream party strategies towards regionalist, green and radical right parties suggests the generalizability of our findings to the larger niche party category.

My analysis examines the responsiveness of 52 regionalist parties to decentralization reforms across 45 subnational regions in eight Western European countries from 1971 to 2009. This geographic area was chosen because of the large number of regionalist parties, variation in the goals of those parties – decentralization versus regional independence – and wide heterogeneity in the degree of decentralization, across and within those countries. With few exceptions, I employ the categorization of Western European regionalist parties from Massetti and Schakel (2013). A regionalist party was included if it contested at least two consecutive national-level elections in a given region as recorded by Massetti and Schakel (2013). The unit of observation is country-region-party-election year.

## Examining policy position change

To investigate whether and when regionalist parties move from autonomist to secessionist policy goals or vice versa, I employ Massetti and Schakel's (2013) dichotomous and time-varying coding of regionalist party goals. This dataset represents the largest categorization of regionalist party goals to date across Western European countries and over time. Unlike manifesto-based data which measure emphasis, these expert codings allow for the identification of specific party goals. The variable is coded 1, if the party seeks independence, and 0, if it demands regional autonomy.

The main explanatory factor of interest is decentralization reform. I examine the interelection change in the level of decentralization in a given region. I employ the *Self-rule* measure of Hooghe et al. (2016), calculated for the region-year. It captures the 'authority that a subnational government exercises in its own territory' (Hooghe et al., 2016, p. 23) and includes measures of institutional depth, policy scope, fiscal autonomy, borrowing autonomy and representation. In other words, *Self-rule* is a combined indicator of what the literature typically conceptualizes as comprising administrative, political and fiscal processes of decentralization. And it encompasses the aspects of decentralization central to the demands of regionalist parties. By examining a measure of *implemented* policy, rather than manifesto policy promises, we are in a better position to adjudicate between hypotheses, by ruling out the possibility that niche party policy and emphasis stability are based solely on fears of non-credible policy accommodation.

According to H1, decentralization should have no effect on a regionalist party's policy stance. In contrast, the adaptability literature expects policy position responsiveness, conditional on the demands of the niche party: decentralization will lead pro-decentralization (autonomist) parties to shift their policy stance (H3), whereas decentralization will fail to appease pro-secessionist parties and they will not change their policy position (H5).

The literature on party competition has identified other factors behind party position changes. To test for Somer-Topcu's (2009) finding that parties losing votes are more likely to alter their issue stance, I include a party's lagged change in national election vote share calculated at the regional level. To explore whether a given regionalist party would be more likely to change its position when competing against other regionalist parties, I include a dummy variable capturing the existence of multiple regionalist parties in a given national election in a region. Lastly, I include Fearon and van Houten's (2002) regional ethnic heterogeneity variable (*Langdif*) to control for the possibility that parties in regions with higher ethnic distinctiveness are more likely to shift to or to maintain secessionist goals.<sup>6</sup>

### *Modelling policy position change*

I specify transition models of policy goal change to determine if regionalist parties alter their policy stances in response to decentralization reforms.<sup>7</sup> Commonly found in research on regime transitions (e.g., Epstein et al., 2006; Przeworski et al., 2000) or the onset or termination of war (e.g., Gleditsch & Ruggeri, 2010; Sambanis, 2001), transition models are well suited to account for the relatively infrequent changes in regionalist party goals. In 9.6% of autonomist party observations in the data, there is a switch to secessionist goals in the next election. Likewise, 10.9% of secessionist party observations see a switch to autonomist goals in the next election. Following the recommendations of Beck et al. (1998) and Beck (2003) for time-series cross-sectional data with a binary dependent variable, I estimate two probit models: Model 1 examines the likelihood of

Table 1. Models of niche party policy position change

Variables	(1) Autonomist to Secessionist	(2) Secessionist to Autonomist
ΔSelf-rule	0.034 (0.034)	0.118 (0.070)
Other Regionalist Party	-0.504 (0.423)	-1.631** (0.515)
ΔVote lagged	-0.015 (0.016)	-0.029 (0.032)
Ethnic Heterogeneity	-0.525 (0.512)	-1.625 (0.833)
Time	0.238 (0.204)	-0.167 (0.135)
Time <sup>2</sup>	-0.009 (0.008)	0.004 (0.005)
Time <sup>3</sup>	1.02e-4 (9.05e-05)	-4.14e-05 (5.50e-05)
Intercept	-2.454* (1.039)	1.412 (1.049)
Log Pseudolikelihood	-87.061	-33.049
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.0942	0.4775
Observations	308	184

Notes: \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ . Results based on probit models with standard errors clustered by party. Robust standard errors in parentheses.

an autonomist party transitioning to secessionist goals, and Model 2 examines the likelihood of a secessionist party transitioning to autonomist goals. To address concerns with duration dependence (Carter & Signorino, 2010), I employ time, time<sup>2</sup>, and time<sup>3</sup> variables as indexed by goal, where time captures the number of years since the adoption of that goal. I cluster the standard errors by party to account for unobserved within-party variation over time.

The results in Table 1 reinforce the view of niche parties as prisoners of their original issue position. Consistent with H1, decentralization reforms do not have a statistically significant effect on a party's likelihood of shifting its policy goals. As shown in Model 1, autonomist parties are not more (or less) likely to become secessionist parties following an increase in *Self-rule*; this finding runs counter to the slippery slope fear propagated by anti-decentralization proponents and to the findings of the ethnic conflict literature, that appeased autonomist parties will shift to espouse more extremist positions. Similarly, as seen in Model 2, the likelihood of a secessionist party switching to autonomist goals is not affected by the implementation of decentralization. The control variables all prove insignificant predictors of a party's goal transitions, with one exception: consistent with an empirical pattern reported by Massetti and Schakel (2017, p. 440), the existence of another regionalist party in the region decreases the likelihood that a secessionist party will shift to an autonomist policy goal (Model 2).

To evaluate the findings' robustness, I rerun the analyses with alternative model specifications, including employing multilevel probits and region-specific party clustered standard errors. Following Massetti and Schakel (2013), I restrict the analysis to the subset of regions to which a regionalist party is historically tied and for which they demand independence or greater regional authority. I also test for regionalist party-focused explanations of goal change, by including variables capturing regionalist party participation in national government, the presence of another secessionist party in the region and the ability of the central government to reverse decentralization reforms. As reported in the Supporting Information Appendix, the main findings are unchanged across these specifications.

The previous analyses are based on the assumption, supported by past work (e.g., Massetti & Schakel, 2013; Chou et al., 2018), that policy achievement has electoral costs for niche parties. There are scenarios, however, where appeasement might be seen as less threatening to a given party, perhaps explaining the observed non-responsiveness. While my research design reduces the likelihood of this situation by considering only the impact of implemented policy (not less credible manifesto promises) and measuring the extent of decentralization change (not just presence or absence), I also test for this possibility by rerunning the models restricted to cases in which decentralization reforms lead to high levels of decentralization, to better approximate autonomist party goal achievement as opposed to their mere appeasement. I continue to find that decentralization reforms have no statistically significant effect on party position change.

### **Examining issue emphasis change**

Having found that regionalist parties do not shift their issue positions in response to issue appeasement, I explore their use of emphasis-based strategies. To examine whether regionalist parties decrease their attention to regionalist issues and diversify their issue appeals, I use MARPOR data; this dataset records the percentage of quasi-sentences devoted to specific topics in a given party's election manifesto. I follow the work of Bäck et al. (2010), Meyer and Wagner (2013), Greene (2016) and Bischof (2017) and aggregate MARPOR categories into issue areas.<sup>8</sup> To test for the stability of a regionalist party's core policy emphasis, I construct a regionalist issue profile variable, which is the percentage of pro-decentralization quasi-sentences in a party's manifesto.<sup>9</sup> It captures a party's attention to and support for the subnational, as opposed to the national, level.

To determine whether these parties expand their platforms, I first examine the effective number of issue domains that a given party discusses in each manifesto (Budge, 2001; Volkens, 2001). I follow the advice of Greene (2016) in constructing a measure of issue diversity based on a Shannon's H entropy index, which 'more accurately represents the true distribution of topics or issue categories in a document than the traditional measure (*Herfindahl index*) of party diversity' (p. 812).<sup>10</sup> This measure captures the overall agenda responsiveness of regionalist parties to goal appeasement.

But to understand where any new attention might have turned, given the debate over the evolution of a party's 'niceness' (Wagner, 2012; Meyer & Wagner, 2013; Bischof, 2017), I then examine the parties' manifesto emphases on individual issue domains associated with niche parties and those identified more with mainstream party competitors. I examine the ecological and nationalist issues associated with green and radical right parties, respectively. Following Meguid (2008) and Mudde (1999), these include environmental protection and an anti-growth

economy for the former, and the national-level issues of law and order, support for a national way of life and opposition to multiculturalism for the latter. I also examine the two MARPOR categories associated with European integration to capture the issue profile of the more recent set of Eurosceptic niche parties (Wagner, 2012; Bischof, 2017). I construct an economic segment to capture the typical issue content of the mainstream left-right dimension. This set of variables allows me to explore whether regionalist parties react to appeasement by branching out towards more mainstream issue areas or other niche party topics. Based on the limited availability of regionalist party manifestos coded by MARPOR, the resulting dataset includes the issue emphasis strategies of 23 regionalist parties across 32 regions in five Western European countries (Belgium, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and the UK) from 1974 to 2008.<sup>11</sup>

As with the issue position models, decentralization reform is the main factor of interest. I again employ the *Change in Self-rule* variable described previously. According to the stability literature, there should be no effect of decentralization reforms on niche party diversification (H2). In contrast, H4 and H5 expect niche party adaptability, conditional upon a regionalist party's goals being appeased: changes in decentralization should lead to changes in issue emphasis for autonomist parties, but not for independence-seeking parties. To test for these effects, I construct an interactive term with change of decentralization and Massetti and Schakel's regionalist secessionist variable.

As control variables, I include lagged change in vote share, to test the argument by De Vries and Hobolt (2012) that electoral 'losers' are more likely to embrace issues beyond their original dimension. A dummy variable of regionalist party participation in the previous national government is included to test the proposition that the act of governing leads parties to diversify their issue agendas, regardless of the achievement of their policy goals (Greene, 2016; van Heck, 2018). Fearon and van Houten's (2002) *Langdijf* variable is included to test the expectation that niche party issue diversity (or lack thereof) might be correlated with a region's degree of ethnic distinctiveness. Following Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010), Toubreau and Wagner (2016), and Spoon and Williams (2020), I control for the party-system-level salience of each issue to account for the possibility that parties' agendas respond to the average level of issue discussion by parties in a country. Similarly, as a niche party's likelihood of expanding into a new issue area might be influenced by the presence of that issue's owner in the political system already, I include green party and radical right party national parliamentary vote shares (aggregated to the regional level) as proxies for issue ownership in the emphasis models of ecology (Spoon & Williams, 2020), and nationalism and EU issues (Williams & Spoon, 2022; Mudde, 2016), respectively. I include the lagged dependent variable to address any autocorrelation issues and to reflect the possibility that a party's issue emphasis is likely to be a function of past levels.

### *Modeling issue emphasis*

I estimate multilevel random intercept models to examine the effect of decentralization reform on regionalist parties' issue emphasis strategies. Unlike OLS models, these models allow me to account for the nested nature of the data, with parties nested within regions, and regions nested within countries. A further advantage of the random intercept multilevel model is that it takes into consideration the within-level as well as the between-level variation in the dependent variable (Gellman & Hill, 2007). Thus, while accounting for the hierarchical structure of the data, we can assess the cross-time dynamics of party strategy presented in the hypotheses.

The limited number of countries in this analysis, due to MARPOR manifesto coverage, prevents the simultaneous modelling of country, region and party as three separate levels in a random intercept model. Therefore, I run multilevel models which account for the unmeasured effects in region and party levels. Following the work of Massetti and Schakel (2013; 2015) and Fortunato and Stevenson (2013), parties participating in more than one region are treated as separate parties in the analysis to avoid the further practical problems of estimating a two-level random intercept model with parties and regions crossed.

In Table 2, I present the results of models of regionalist party issue emphases. Recall that these models include interactive terms testing H4 and H5: that the degree and direction of regionalist party response depend jointly on (1) the extent of decentralization reform and (2) the niche party's policy goals. In Table 3, I summarize the coefficients of the decentralization reform variable conditional on the dichotomous goals of the regionalist party. Regionalist parties are coded as having either autonomist (0) or secessionist (1) goals, so the effect of decentralization reforms conditional on each goal can be fully captured in Table 3 by two coefficients per model.

The results demonstrate that niche parties are not simply prisoners of their original single-issue *emphasis* strategy; they respond to both policy appeasement and disappointment, with issue salience strategies. Consistent with H4, autonomist regionalist parties de-emphasize their core regionalist agenda following increases in decentralization levels. In terms of substantive effects, a shift from one standard deviation below to one standard deviation above the mean value of *Change in Self-rule* would result in a loss of over 9 percentage points of regionalist issue manifesto coverage.<sup>12</sup> This is a substantively, as well as statistically, significant reduction since the mean change in regional issue attention between elections is only +0.07 percentage points of quasi-sentences.

This decline in the appeased autonomist party's attention to regionalist issues is accompanied by an increase in its issue diversity. As shown in Model 2, the effective number of issue dimensions discussed in autonomist manifestos increases significantly following decentralization reforms. We find clues as to where the attention of the autonomist party turns in the results of Models 3–6, with an increase in autonomist parties' discussion of nationalist issues following decentralization reforms. This shift in emphasis is striking as regionalist parties – originally focused on regional-level autonomy and regional sentiment – increase their attention to radical right party-associated issues that exalt national identity; a national, as opposed to a regional, way of life; and law and order. Appeasement of the autonomist parties' goal does not affect their emphasis of the environment, European Union, or the economy. This failure of the party to expand to economic issues is particularly noteworthy given an alternative claim that issue diversity is mainly attributable to a regionalist party's role as a national or regional governmental actor.

Secessionist parties, on the other hand, respond differently. As shown in Table 3, consistent with H5, there is no evidence that changes in decentralization lead to increases in the overall diversity of secessionist party manifestos, or to their increased attention to specific niche issues or mainstream economic issues. However, support for H5 is somewhat mixed. Model 1 shows that secessionist parties, like appeased decentralization-seeking parties, reduce their emphasis on regionalist issues following increases in decentralization. That said, the impact of decentralization reforms is statistically different from and smaller than for autonomist parties.<sup>13</sup> And the substantive effect on change in issue attention following a shift from one standard deviation below to one standard-deviation above the mean of *Change in Self-rule* is –5 percentage points (not statistically significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ ). While this, albeit weak, finding leaves open the possibility that secessionist

Table 2. Multi-Level Models of Niche Party Issue Emphases

	Regional Issues (Model 1)	Effective # Manifesto Dimensions (Model 2)	Ecology Issues (Model 3)	Nationalist (Positive) Issues (Model 4)	EU Issues (Model 5)	Economy Issues (Model 6)
$\Delta$ Self-rule	-0.317*** (0.048)	0.091** (0.035)	-0.004 (0.047)	0.140*** (0.032)	-0.011 (0.028)	0.022 (0.016)
Secessionist Party (autonomist = reference category)	0.421** (0.135)	0.298** (0.106)	0.235 (0.133)	0.071 (0.099)	0.264** (0.096)	-0.109* (0.054)
$\Delta$ Self-rule*Secessionist	0.218*** (0.063)	-0.078 (0.046)	0.015 (0.059)	-0.112** (0.041)	0.001 (0.037)	-0.018 (0.022)
$\Delta$ Vote lagged	0.041** (0.014)	-0.002 (0.011)	-0.004 (0.013)	0.004 (0.009)	0.003 (0.008)	0.005 (0.004)
Ethnic Heterogeneity	0.073 (0.194)	0.364* (0.146)	0.317 (0.170)	-0.225 (0.142)	0.804*** (0.177)	-0.164 (0.141)
NatGovt Participation	-0.611*** (0.134)	0.253* (0.116)	-0.092 (0.143)	0.250* (0.103)	-0.030 (0.093)	0.016 (0.048)
Party System Sallience	0.464** (0.157)	1.216*** (0.158)	0.127 (0.230)	0.785*** (0.107)	0.775*** (0.090)	0.514*** (0.109)
Ecology Issue Owner		0.172 (0.112)	0.319*** (0.098)			
Nationalist/EU Issue Owner		0.027 (0.017)		0.037*** (0.010)	0.065*** (0.009)	

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

	Regional Issues (Model 1)	Effective # Manifesto Dimensions (Model 2)	Ecology Issues (Model 3)	Nationalist (Positive) Issues (Model 4)	EU Issues (Model 5)	Economy Issues (Model 6)
LDV	-0.370*** (0.083)	0.453*** (0.074)	0.296** (0.103)	0.429*** (0.070)	0.151* (0.061)	0.083 (0.071)
Intercept	2.577*** (0.194)	-4.322*** (0.934)	0.572 (0.405)	-0.430** (0.149)	-0.425*** (0.117)	1.443*** (0.324)
Random Effect: Region	1.48e-22	6.08e-23	1.92e-16	1.57e-22	5.17e-18	0.017
Random Effect: Party	1.12e-22	1.06e-23	7.78e-17	0.013	0.054	0.023
Random Effect: Residual	0.442	0.235	0.358	0.181	0.127	0.039
N	150	150	150	150	150	150
Number of Regions	28	28	28	28	28	28
Number of Parties	40	40	40	40	40	40

Note: \*\*\*p ≤ 0.001; \*\*p ≤ 0.01; \*p ≤ 0.05. Results based on multilevel analyses with random effects for the region and region-specific party levels of data. Standard errors in parentheses.

Table 3. Coefficients of Change in Self-rule Variable Conditional on Party Goals (based on Table 2)

	Regional Issues (Model 1)	Effective # Manifesto Dimensions (Model 2)	Ecology Issues (Model 3)	Nationalist Issues (Model 4)	EU Issues (Model 5)	Economy Issues (Model 6)
Autonomist	-0.317*** (0.048)	0.091** (0.035)	-0.004 (0.047)	0.140*** (0.032)	-0.011 (0.028)	0.022 (0.016)
Secessionist	-0.099* (0.040)	0.013 (0.030)	0.010 (0.037)	0.029 (0.027)	-0.011 (0.025)	0.003 (0.015)

Note: \*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ .

parties may downplay regionalism despite appeasement short of their policy goal – contrary to both the status quo and adaptability literatures’ expectations – the overall results point towards a view of secessionist parties as distinct from autonomist ones.

These cross-national findings of issue diversification and issue stability are evident in the manifesto decisions of individual regionalist parties. For example, the autonomist FDF party, which demanded greater French language rights and competencies for Brussels in a federalist Belgium, decreased its emphasis on regionalist issues, while increasing its attention to nationalist issues four fold, following significant regional autonomy reforms for Brussels in 1989 (Volkens et al., 2017; Hooghe et al., 2016). The issue emphases of the autonomist Italian Lega Nord reveal similar patterns: effectively eliminating regionalist issues while highlighting national way of life and anti-multiculturalism issues following the 2001 decentralization reforms. On the other hand, policy diversification was not seen with the independence-seeking Scottish National Party (SNP) after the 1999 devolution reforms. Failing to be appeased by the creation of a Scottish parliament and greater regional autonomy in general, the SNP presented a 2001 manifesto focused around independence, with almost identical levels of regionalism and nationalism issues as it had presented in its manifesto four years prior (Volkens et al., 2017).

The analyses provide evidence that other factors alter party issue emphases as well. Regionalist party attention to all issues, except environmentalism, increases significantly with party system attention to the issue. The same positive relationship applies to the effective number of issue dimensions as well. Regionalist party attention to the environment, nationalism and EU issues are also positively correlated with the presence of strong party issue owners. While more direct testing would be necessary, this relationship suggests that the existence of issue owners primes competitors to address their issue, rather than encourages them to avoid it altogether.

Support for other explanatory factors is less consistent across issue areas. Participation in national government has a significant, negative effect on the regionalist party’s subsequent emphasis of regional issues and a significant, positive effect on its overall manifesto diversity and discussion of nationalism, but no effect on its emphasis on ecology, the EU or the economy. Vote-losing regionalist parties decrease their attention to their core regionalist issue, but there is no effect on other issues. Lastly, while there is no statistically significant effect of a region’s linguistic distinctiveness on the party’s regionalist issue emphasis, such parties do have a higher emphasis of EU issues and higher effective number of issues in their manifesto than those in less linguistically distinctive regions.

The findings of these models prove robust to multiple robustness checks. The substantive conclusions do not change if I employ alternative model specifications, including multilevel analyses modelling different levels of data; models without lagged dependent variables; Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) models with region-clustered standard errors; or models limited to the ‘historical’ subnational regions of the regionalist parties (Massetti & Schakel, 2013).<sup>14</sup> The conclusions are also robust to alternative operationalizations of the regionalist issue measure – either including both positive and negative mentions of decentralization following the practice of the issue salience literature or variables recording the prioritization of regional culture, distinctiveness and identity. With this latter cultural measure of regionalism, however, the effect of decentralization reform is no longer statistically significant for secessionist parties (consistent with H5).

The conclusions also remain robust to the testing of alternative regionalist party-focused explanations of issue diversification. Inclusion of variables capturing regionalist party participation

in regional government, change in a regionalist party's issue goal, or the presence of other regionalist or secessionist parties in the region do not alter the main findings. Likewise, I do not find support for the idea that the willingness of autonomist parties to diversify stems from the relative 'sticky' nature of their policy appeasement; the results do not change if I control for the ability of the central government to reverse decentralization reforms. Thus, across both the main and supplemental results, there is no evidence that the niche party adaptability found here is being driven by regionalist party-specific factors.

The analysis above examines niche party responsiveness to incremental changes in decentralization levels. This modelling strategy reflects the observation that there is heterogeneity in party policy goals even within the autonomist category, yet the level of *Self-rule* desired per party is not known with such precision. That said, the article's general conclusions continue to hold if the analyses are restricted to cases where decentralization changes lead to high levels of decentralization, consistent with the goals of most autonomist parties. We must interpret the findings with caution given the small *N*, but at levels of *Self-rule* of 13 and higher – where regions in this dataset have directly elected parliaments with significant levels of policy and/or fiscal autonomy – autonomist parties facing decentralization reforms continue to de-emphasize regionalist issues.<sup>15</sup> Autonomist parties also continue to increase their overall number of manifesto issue dimensions,<sup>16</sup> but now secessionist parties, facing reforms short of their goal of independence, experience a statistically and substantively significant *decrease* in the number of issues they discuss (consistent with H5).

### **Emerging evidence of responsiveness among other niche parties**

This article has focused on the responsiveness of regionalist parties to the implementation of decentralization. Unfortunately, the lack of cross-national and time-series data on governmental policy implementation means comparable analyses cannot be conducted for green and radical right parties. However, evidence supporting the generalizability of the party's findings is emerging from the developing research relying on manifesto policy promises. Spoon and Williams (2020) find that green parties diversify their policy agenda, but do not change their environmental issue position, when party system emphasis of the environmental issue is high. While, to date, there is no comparable study of the effect of mainstream appeasement on the multiple forms of radical right party responsiveness, there are similar clues of radical right issue diversification. For instance, in 2019, the Austrian FPÖ downplayed their immigration stance and shifted their attention to environmental issues following their loss of immigration issue ownership.<sup>17</sup> In cross-national analyses, Meguid et al. (2022) show that radical right parties across Europe increase their emphasis of new manifesto issues when losing votes, a finding consistent with the appeasement diversification story. And examining green and radical right parties together, Zons (2016) finds increased party programmatic diversity over time, linking it to niche party responsiveness to mainstream party accommodation of their initial policy goals. With these cases, niche party diversification is occurring despite conditions where governmental policy is merely promised. Even with these potentially less credible forms of appeasement, these studies reinforce the picture uncovered in the article's analysis of niche parties as responsive, strategic actors, diversifying their issue agenda, but (as shown in the green party case) not their issue position, when confronted with appeasement.

## Conclusion

This article has begun the investigation into how policy-seeking parties react to the appeasement of their policy goals. Specifically, I have focused on whether and how regionalist parties, as an example of niche parties, have altered their programmatic strategy in the face of decentralization reforms. The results reveal a nuanced picture of niche party responsiveness. In contrast to the ethnic conflict findings, but consistent with Adams et al. (2006), autonomist parties do not adopt more extreme policy stances – that is, secessionism – when their decentralization goals are appeased. Likewise, decentralization reforms do not have a significant effect on the likelihood that secessionist parties adopt autonomist goals. That said, these niche parties do respond to goal appeasement by diversifying their issue agenda. As decentralization levels increase, autonomist parties decrease their emphasis on regional issues, increase the number of issues they discuss, and specifically increase the salience of nationalist issues in their election manifestos. While secessionist parties are dissatisfied with the decentralization policies offered, there is some evidence that they decrease their attention to regionalist issues. But they do not expand their overall issue agenda or shift their attention to new niche or economic issues.

These findings highlight the ability of niche parties to adapt through issue emphasis strategies to the challenges of party competition. The results, though, do not signal the inevitable death-by-transformation of a given niche party into a mainstream party. Rather, I find that their changes to issue emphasis are incremental and in direct response to significant threats to their ongoing policy and electoral relevance. If, as Meyer and Wagner (2013) conclude, the issue agendas of niche parties are beginning to approximate those of mainstream parties, the process seems to be driven less by wide-scale niche party issue diversification and more by mainstream parties incorporating the niche party's initial issue into their own platforms.

This article also highlights the role of success, as opposed to failure, in party adaptation. Scholars from Riker (1982) to Hobolt and De Vries (2015) and Abou-Chadi et al. (2018) have argued that parties losing support employ entrepreneurial issues strategies. My findings demonstrate that policy winners also have a motivation to emphasize new issue dimensions, independent of any short-term vote loss they experience. While a more extended discussion of multidimensional party tactics is the subject of another paper, a key difference distinguishing these two scenarios is the popularity of the strategizing party's policy stance. Here, the diversifying niche party is responding to support *for* its position, whereas in the typical scenario examined previously, the diversifying party is fleeing an unpopular stance. This difference has important implications not only for the study of party issue diversification, but also for our understanding of the range of party tactics more broadly.

These findings raise questions for future research. For instance, in highlighting an important reason why niche parties might change their current message, this article also calls attention to the currently unanswered question of which issues a niche party might add to its platform. The finding that autonomist parties trade their emphasis of regionalist issues to concentrate on nationalist, radical right issues is consistent with anecdotal evidence of party evolution across Western Europe (e.g., Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2020), but more work is needed to help explain which factors lead niche parties to embrace one new dimension over another,<sup>18</sup> and why they might prefer to follow a pattern of 'serial nicheness' rather than becoming mainstream parties. These questions, with important implications for the shape of the party system and the nature of political competition in aging democracies, await further study.

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## Online Appendix

Additional supporting information may be found in the Online Appendix section at the end of the article:

Supplementary Model 1  
Supplementary Appendix

## Notes

1. There are notable exceptions (Spoon, 2011; Zons, 2016; Wagner & Meyer, 2017; Bergman & Flatt, 2020; Rovny & Polk, 2020), but none comprehensively explores the niche party strategic repertoire and rationale.
2. Models in the Supporting Information Appendix confirm that changes in decentralization do not affect the probability that an autonomist or secessionist regionalist party will die before the next election.
3. Focusing on radical right parties, Mudde (2016, p. 303) notes that restricting the niche party's attention to few issues can lead to its 'impotence'.
4. ICRI (Koopmans & Michalowski, 2017) and MIPEX (Solano & Huddleston, 2020) data capturing radical right party policy goals are only available for a subset of countries and few time points (4 and 2 years, respectively).
5. For example, moratoria on the building of nuclear power plants (Dolezal, 2016) or on the use of incandescent light bulbs reduce investment options in the long-term, whereas reinforcing border barriers or expanding police presence to target illegal immigrants (Heinisch, 2003) involve long-term infrastructure and personnel training investments.
6. Temporally invariant, but region-specific, this variable also serves as a region fixed effect.
7. This analysis differs from Massetti and Schakel (2016), who examine a regionalist party's initial policy stance, not the factors behind policy position shifts.
8. See Supporting Information Appendix for variable definitions.
9. Following the suggestion of Lowe et al. (2011) and practices of Bischof (2017) and Bergman and Flatt (2020) for issue profiles, I take the natural log of the sum of the variables (plus 1 to avoid undefined values) to account for how changes in party emphases are perceived by voters over time.
10. Consistent with the argument that voters perceive party policies in terms of broad, not individual, issue categories (Budge, 2001; van Heck, 2018), this diversity variable is based on the seven issue domains of the MARPOR data (Nyblade, 2004). Variable operationalizations that include a given topic in multiple issue dimension categories (e.g., Bäck et al., 2010) were also avoided to not artificially inflate the resulting issue diversity measure.
11. Switzerland is included in robustness checks, but drops from the main models of Table 2 due to lack of variable availability.
12. Calculated with all other variables held at their means. The table of substantive effects for all models is in the Supporting Information Appendix.
13. Moreover, the statistical significance of decentralization's effect on secessionist emphasis of regionalist issues is not robust. It disappears in five of the robustness checks discussed below. See Supporting Information Appendix.

14. With the OLS models, there is more support for H5 as decentralization reforms have no effect on secessionist party attention to regionalist issues. Autonomist parties now also prioritize the economy following decentralization.
15. Secessionists have a negative coefficient as well, but the substantive effect for them, unlike for autonomists, is insignificant.
16. The positive effect of decentralization reforms is significant at  $p = 0.056$ .
17. 'Hofer will Klimaschutz zu "FPÖ-Schwerpunkt" machen'. 2019. June 5. <https://orf.at/stories/3125788>.
18. The issue yield approach of De Sio and Weber (2014) serves as a useful starting point for future work.

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