

Bringing Government Back to the People?  
The Impact of Political Decentralization on Voter Engagement in Western Europe

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# Bringing Government Back to the People? The Impact of Political Decentralization on Voter Engagement in Western Europe

## **Abstract:**

Political actors have often justified processes of political decentralization as means to “bring government back to the people.” While this claim is consistent with broader scholarly theories of voter engagement, aggregate-level analysis does not reveal the expected shifts in voter attitudes and behavior in decentralizing countries of Western Europe. Rather than these results signaling the relative unimportance of institutional reform for voter engagement, I find that decentralization differentially affects members of the electorate. In line with the idea that the winners of decentralization are more likely to be receptive to the effects of these reforms than the losers, analysis of survey data from the decentralizing case of Scotland reveals that partisans of the ethnoterritorial Scottish National Party, unlike their mainstream party counterparts, experience increased engagement levels. This paper suggests that the effect of institutions on voter attitudes and behavior is mediated by the individual-level characteristics of those voters.

Over the past forty years, waves of political decentralization have swept across countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe. While scholars have emphasized the impact of these reforms on economic efficiency (Tiebout 1956; Weingast 1995; Oates 1999), policy credibility (Bednar et al. 2001) and even ethnic cohesion (Zariski 1989), political elites in these nations have instead stressed the degree to which decentralization brings government back to the people. The message spun to the electorate is “greater voter access and political efficacy” rather than “less policy inefficiency.” These effects are not mutually exclusive, but few scholars – whether studying decentralization or voter engagement – have investigated whether these voter-oriented electoral promises are ever achieved. Does political decentralization actually lead to greater voter engagement? Specifically, do voters experience higher levels of political efficacy and trust in government and turn out at higher rates to regional elections after the implementation of decentralization? Conversely, do turnout rates in national elections drop after the transfer of significant powers to the subnational levels of government?

When these questions are asked in the context of Western European countries, unexpected answers emerge. Aggregate analyses of survey and electoral data reveal that most countries, whether centralized or decentralized, have experienced a general decline in their levels of voter engagement since 1970. A closer examination of regional election turnout – over time and relative to local election turnout – does offer some support for the decentralization hypotheses. Yet even in these cases, the effects of institutional reform are more muted than expected by politicians or scholars.

Rather than signaling the relative unimportance of political decentralization for voter engagement, these findings suggest that a more nuanced process is at work. Trading aggregate-level analysis for an examination of individual-level data, I find that decentralizing reforms

differentially affect members of the electorate. Specifically, decentralization more strongly alters the attitudes and behavior of partisans of ethnoterritorial or regionalist parties than those of national parties. Consistent with the claim that decentralization is a form of appeasement to regionalist political actors (Heller 2002; Eaton 2007; Meguid 2008), the creation of powerful regional governing structures increases the regional turnout and satisfaction levels and decreases the national turnout levels of supporters and beneficiaries of the reforms – the reform’s winners – leaving those not politically mobilized around this institutional change relatively unaffected. We therefore cannot conclude that structural factors are ineffective. Rather, this study finds that their impact is mediated by the characteristics of voters.

In the next section, I examine the theoretical underpinnings of the commonplace claim that decentralization should increase voter engagement. Once these hypotheses have been derived, I briefly analyze the trends in voter efficacy, political interest and turnout across centralized and decentralized Western European countries since 1970. I then provide a partisanship explanation for the muted trends we observe. I test my hypothesis that ethnoterritorial partisans will be more receptive to the effects of decentralization through an in-depth examination of individual-level voter engagement rates in the newly decentralized nation of Scotland. I conclude with implications of these aggregate- and individual-level findings for other decentralized countries around the globe.

### Theoretical Background: Predicted Effects of Political Decentralization on Voter Engagement

The truth is that the citizenry of each town and city can choose better than anybody people who are knowledgeable of their problems and can solve them.

– Colombian President Belisario Betancur campaigning for decentralization (O’Neill 2005: 112)

The Government are determined that the people of Scotland should have a greater say over their own affairs. With their agreement we will change the way Scotland is governed by legislating to create a Scottish parliament with devolved powers within the UK. – British Labour Party’s 1997 White Paper on Scottish Devolution (Paterson 1998: 287)

In an attempt to win popular support for decentralization reforms, political actors from across Western Europe and around the globe often reach for one appeal: they claim that the transfer of political and legislative powers to a directly elected subnational level of government – i.e., political decentralization – brings government back to the people. These actors imply that having politicians close at hand increases the voters’ access to them. As suggested by the Colombian and British statements quoted above, greater access is thought to translate into greater voter influence over the policy-making process. But the politicians’ logic does not end there. It seems only reasonable to think that the more efficacious a voter is, the more satisfied he or she will be with the political system. Decentralization, therefore, is presented as a means to increase both the efficacy and satisfaction of the voter.

This message touted by politicians may be deliberately designed to drum up voter support for a given institutional reform and its political party sponsor. Closer analysis shows, however, that it is not inconsistent with the conclusions of broader scholarly work on voter engagement. To be clear, there is little existing research that examines the voter-engagement effects of decentralization per se.<sup>1</sup> Yet, if we view political decentralization in terms of the structural changes that it produces, we can derive hypotheses based on the current theories of political engagement. And, as will be seen, the resulting hypotheses closely approximate the politicians’ expectations.

Following the existing literature on decentralization (see O’Neill 2003, 2005; Rodden 2006), political decentralization is defined as the reallocation of political and legislative powers

over a set of policy areas from the central government at the national level to directly elected subnational assemblies.<sup>2</sup> The most critical structural changes brought about by political decentralization include a decrease in the distance between voters and policy makers, an increase in the power of the subnational – typically, regional – government and a decrease in the power of the national government.

### *Increasing the Proximity of the Government to the Governed*

The creation of subnational governments means that more people live in close proximity to legislatures and political representatives; this characteristic is no longer limited to those who reside in the capital city. The mere shrinking of the constituency size, as argued by Dahl and Tufte (1973) and shown by Frandsen (2002), increases voter perceptions of access to policy makers. In addition, the multiplication of the number of elected officials that accompanies decentralization reduces the ratio of citizens to representatives, again increasing the elector's potential access to such officials and feelings of efficacy, particularly regarding the new subnational government.

Similar, albeit more tentative, arguments about the effect of proximity can be derived with regard to political interest and trust. Decentralization ensures that politics no longer happens elsewhere. As a result, local media are more likely to cover political issues, increasing the likelihood that voters will be exposed to and perhaps will become interested in and discuss politics. Likewise, with politicians closer and more visible, it is possible that citizens' faith and trust in government, especially trust in the proximal subnational government, will rise. Voters will be confident that improprieties will not go unnoticed, the logic being that such schemes would thus be occurring in their own backyard. Politicians, therefore, should reduce their

improper behavior, and government should become more trustworthy. This claim, however, is more tentative than the previous ones because politicians might not change their behavior and thus decentralization could just lead to the relocation of political scandals into voters' backyards. This might sour voters' opinions of and trust in government more than when such problems were out of sight and out of mind.<sup>3</sup>

Although the literature on voter engagement has not examined the effects of decentralization, scholars have established how the aforementioned attitudinal changes affect voter participation. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) and Teixeira (1992), among others, have argued that efficacious people are more likely to vote than non-efficacious individuals. Similarly, Teixeira (1992) and Abramson (1983) have found, in the American case, that voters with higher levels of interest in politics and those who trust the government to do what is right are more likely to participate in elections. Thus, based on the expectation that decentralization will increase efficacy, interest in politics and trust, the existing literature on voter engagement would also predict a rise in voter participation rates. If pushed, this proximity logic implies that, especially for voters in large national legislative districts far from the site of the national legislature, rates of voter participation should be higher in regional elections than in national elections.

#### *Increasing the Importance of Regional Elections (and Decreasing That of National Elections)*

Increasing voter proximity to the government is not the only means by which the voter engagement literature might expect decentralization to influence voters. Scholars of voter turnout have long argued that participation rates vary by the degree of policy-making power of the body to be elected. Elections to councils with few political and legislative competencies are

perceived to be less important than elections to councils or parliaments with significant powers. Voters are expected to turn out at lower rates to these “second-order” elections than to the “first-order” ones.

Comparisons of national level turnout to turnout for the European Parliamentary elections and local elections confirm the validity of these claims (Morlan 1984; Eijk et al. 1996; Blais 2000; Achen and Sinnott n.d.). But what are the implications of these hypotheses for a country undergoing decentralization? The transfer of political and legislative competencies to subnational units increases the relative importance of those governing institutions. If there exists a positive relationship between the importance of a level of government and participation in its elections, turnout to subnational, or regional, elections should increase relative to other levels, with the magnitude of the increase dependent on the extent of decentralization. Where regional governments have more power than local governments, participation rates in the regional elections should be higher than local election turnout. Similarly, because decentralization decreases the importance of the national government, turnout levels in national elections should decline.<sup>4</sup>

Whether one considers the impact of decentralization in terms of how it alters a voter’s proximity to the government – and thus, levels of efficacy, political interest and perhaps even trust in government – or how it increases the salience of regional elections, its effects on voter engagement based on the propositions and findings of the broader participation and turnout literature mirror the claim made by vote-seeking politicians: decentralization should contribute to higher levels of voter engagement, specifically at the new subnational level. And, although not discussed by the decentralizing politicians, participation rates in elections to the now-weakened national governments should decline.



## Decentralization in Western Europe: Assessing the Trends in Voter Attitudes and Behavior

The proliferation of decentralized countries over the past forty years provides the impetus as well as the data for testing these relationships between political decentralization and voter engagement.<sup>5</sup> In Western Europe alone since 1970, five countries – Spain, Belgium, Italy, France and the United Kingdom – have decentralized legislative power, creating 67 regions with directly elected office holders. Another six countries in Western Europe have increased the legislative and executive powers of their existing regional governments.<sup>6</sup> Thus, whether and how decentralization affects voter engagement attitudes and behavior has wide-reaching implications for the democratic health and political stability of this part of the world, not to mention others.

### *Attitudinal Effects of Political Decentralization*

What do the aggregate data reveal about the engagement levels of decentralizing states in Western Europe? Based on the extant engagement literature, we would expect decentralization to lead to an increase in attitudinal measures of voter engagement, starting with the first set of elections for the new subnational bodies.<sup>7</sup> However, such a clear, positive relationship between decentralization and voter attitudes does not emerge from the existing data. According to Eurobarometer (EB) surveys from 1973 to 1982, the perceived efficacy of respondents in nine Western European countries increased along with the level of decentralization in the country, but the relationship is not statistically significant.<sup>8</sup>

The predictive power of the decentralization hypotheses does not improve if we consider other aggregate-level attitudinal measures. The EB data allow us to examine the effects of decentralization on levels of political interest in thirteen Western European countries from 1983

to 1994. Counter to expectations, the percentage of respondents who claimed to be interested “a great deal” or “to some extent” in politics across these countries is negatively and significantly correlated with the country’s level of decentralization.<sup>9</sup>

### *Behavioral Effects of Political Decentralization*

Turning next to voter behavior, we find mixed support for the predictions about the expected effects of decentralization. Among those five countries that created regional governments since 1970, none consistently has election turnout rates for the more powerful regional governments that are higher than those for the weaker local governments.<sup>10</sup> See Figure 1.<sup>11</sup> The turnout patterns in Spain and the UK regions of Northern Ireland and London come closest. However, even in the Spanish case, the pattern only holds for those regional elections held on the same day as local elections. In Belgium, another country in which regional governments have markedly more powers than local governments, turnout for the regional elections is lower than provincial election turnout. The same holds true in Scotland, where turnout for the regional elections is (marginally) lower than that for the local elections despite the fact that (1) significant political and some fiscal powers were devolved to the regional Scottish Parliament and (2) the regional and local elections have been held on the same day! While the Welsh Assembly is weaker than its Scottish counterpart, an identical and similarly unexpected pattern emerges, with local election turnout exceeding regional.<sup>12</sup>

[FIGURE 1 about here]

That more voters turned out to local than regional elections does not always run counter to our hypotheses. Municipal election turnout in France exceeds that for the regional elections. But given the small number of competencies and low level of authority of the French regional

governments relative to the local governments, these observations are in line with the expectations of the second-order-election theory. Likewise, the observed drop in turnout for the Northern Irish regional assembly elections in 1982 to a level below that recorded for the local elections is expected given the decline in the importance of the regional body relative to local governments between 1972 and 1999 (Hooghe et al. 2008).<sup>13</sup>

With the transfer of significant policy competencies to subnational governments, does subsequent turnout to elections of the weakened national government decline as expected? As shown in Figure 2, there is a clear decline in turnout rates to national parliamentary elections across Western Europe from 1970 to 2006; this negative trend is statistically significant.<sup>14</sup> And, during the same period, the degree of decentralization generally increased across and within countries, as also shown in Figure 2. But, the observed drop in voter turnout is not restricted to those countries experiencing decentralization or a strengthening of existing decentralization reforms. Indeed, when we control for the negative time trend, statistical analyses reveal an unexpected positive, albeit insignificant, relationship between decentralization and national election turnout.<sup>15</sup>

[FIGURE 2 about here]

Given that decentralization has been a relatively asymmetrical process within Western European countries, with some regions being granted more powers by the national government than others, and at different times, a more conclusive test would be to examine how a particular region's degree of decentralization affects its electorate's turnout to the national elections.<sup>16</sup> Calculation of the bivariate correlation between the level of decentralization and national election turnout for 254 regions across 17 Western European countries from 1970 to 1998<sup>17</sup> reveals a negative and statistically significant value, which follows our expectations.<sup>18</sup> Voters

are less likely to turn out to national elections the more powers have been transferred away from the national government to their region. However, the sign and significance of this relationship do not hold in multivariate analyses when the time trend and the panel-based error structure of the data are controlled for.<sup>19</sup> Thus, while turnout to national elections is declining, the decline is not being driven by decentralization.

The effects of decentralization on turnout to the elections of regional governments, on the other hand, appear more in line with the politicians' expectations. While we clearly cannot compare post-decentralization regional election participation rates to regional election turnout rates before these very subnational governments were created, we can explore whether regional election turnout rates are higher where subnational governments have more competencies.<sup>20</sup> In bivariate and multivariate analyses, the degree of decentralization has a positive effect on regional turnout, as our initial hypotheses would expect. However, the statistical significance of the regression findings varies widely depending on the model specification, reducing our confidence in the positive result.<sup>21</sup>

To summarize, the above analyses have yielded little consistent support for the hypotheses. In general, attitudinal and turnout trends in decentralizing countries resemble those in their more constitutionally static Western European counterparts. In contrast to the original predictions, decentralization has not caused overall increases in efficacy levels and interest in politics or been responsible for declining participation in national-level elections. There is some limited evidence that turnout in regional elections – both relative to local elections and across countries – matches our expectations. Thus, we cannot say that decentralization has no impact on voter engagement; we can only conclude that its influence is weaker, often much weaker, than politicians promised and the literature might expect.

## Accounting for Muffled Effects: Explaining the Impact of Decentralization on Engagement

While one goal of this analysis is to assess the degree to which typical claims about decentralization are realized, a second and related goal is to explain its observed effects on voter engagement. Why are the relationships between the variables either absent or not as strong as expected based on the existing voter engagement literature? Are there generalizable factors that can systematically account for the observed variation over time?

In the work on voter turnout, a common explanation for muted change in national or subnational election participation, especially in Western Europe, is compulsory voting laws (Powell 1986; Jackman 1987). Consistent with the government proximity and second-order election theories, one could argue that the deepening of European Union integration, with the transfer of significant national powers to the supranational level, could depress voter efficacy, political interest and national turnout levels, thereby potentially hiding the simultaneous effects of decentralization.<sup>22</sup> Lastly, institutional changes that often accompany decentralization could have been a factor in the declining subnational election voter turnout. Research by Powell (1986) and Jackman (1987) suggests that plurality rules and bicameral legislatures depress levels of voter engagement.

In the cases analyzed here, however, these national, European and regional institutions are not to blame. The insignificant effects of decentralization on national turnout were found despite the inclusion of a compulsory voting variable in the statistical models discussed previously. Likewise, controlling for the simultaneous deepening of European integration also failed to alter the insignificant or unexpected effects of decentralization on voter efficacy, political interest or turnout to the national elections. In addition, none of the five Western

European countries undergoing political decentralization since 1970 adopted vote-depressing plurality rules or bicameral legislatures for its regional governments.<sup>23</sup>

*Decentralization's Winners: The Partisanship Explanation*

The reason for the systematically muted effect of decentralization, I argue, lies in a different set of intervening variables. It has often been assumed by institutional explanations of voter turnout that structural changes to the electoral environment have a consistent effect across individuals (e.g., Powell 1980; Jackman 1987; Jackman and Miller 1995, Franklin and Hirczy 1998). According to this logic, the empowerment of regional governments should cause all voters to recognize the importance of the subnational elections. However, as we know from individual-level research on voter engagement, the characteristics of voters alter their attitudes and behavior. For example, age, gender, race and educational level have long been considered good predictors of voter turnout, both directly affecting turnout rates and mediating the effect of the institutional environment on individual turnout rates (e.g., Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Powell 1986; Leighley and Nagler 1992; Highton 1997; Franklin 2004).

While these specific traits appear unrelated to the issue of institutional reform, there are theoretical reasons to suspect that the impact of decentralizing reforms on voter engagement is influenced by another individual-level characteristic. That characteristic, I argue, is partisanship, specifically *which* party a voter is attached to. I expect partisans of the winners of decentralization – those who have achieved their policy goals and have a greater likelihood of gaining governmental office – to be more likely to manifest the attitudinal and behavioral changes that are theorized to accompany decentralization.

In Western Europe, those winners include regionalist parties. Partisans of regionalist parties are typically the strongest proponents of the reforms. Research on these parties (De Winter 1998; Müller-Rommel 1998; De Winter, Gómez-Reino and Lynch 2006; Meguid 2008) has shown that support for decentralization is often the main issue driving individuals to vote for and identify with ethnoterritorial parties, and, in fact, it may be the only common issue position held by those parties' voters. Moreover, while there is some debate over the exact nature of the regionalist actors' threat – e.g., electoral, legislative or in terms of national security – scholars agree that most decentralizing Western European countries adopted these reforms in order to appease threatening regionalist parties and interests (Stepan 1999; Heller 2002; Meguid 2008).<sup>24</sup> It is important to note, therefore, that despite the enactment of decentralization by mainstream parties, their partisans are not necessarily natural advocates of the reform.

Decentralization further benefits regionalist parties and their partisans by increasing the party's likelihood of gaining office. As discussed previously, political decentralization leads to the creation of a powerful level of governmental offices. While all parties theoretically have a chance to obtain these positions, the decision to increase regional autonomy reinforces regional identities and validates the regionalist party's claim to be the natural party of the subnational level. Consequently, regionalist parties are expected to do particularly well in the new regional elections (Brancati 2006: 655).<sup>25</sup>

This advantage stands in contrast to the expected fortunes of the mainstream parties, especially the decentralization adopter. Since, as shown by previous research (Meguid n.d.), parties that adopt decentralization reforms tend to be centralized, with their power, priorities and identity concentrated at the national level, it follows that the new regional focus of politics will not necessarily help them electorally.<sup>26</sup> Those parties that emphasize the regional dimension and

presumably have some regional autonomy and identity – like the ethnoterritorial parties – are more likely to benefit from the multiplication of offices.

For ethnoterritorial parties and their partisans, therefore, decentralization does not just bring government back to the people. It brings those important policy-making offices to a level that they identify with and that they champion. It provides them with opportunities that other partisans and parties are less likely to realize, at least in the short term. As a result, the ethnoterritorial partisans should be most likely to experience an increase in trust in the government, interest in politics, a sense of efficacy and turnout in regional elections, and a decline in national level turnout – the attitudinal and behavioral changes hypothesized to be caused by decentralization.

My finding of the muted effect of decentralization on aggregate measures of voter engagement across the decentralizing countries would be consistent with this hypothesis. If only a portion of the electorate reacts to the closer proximity of the government and to the increased importance of the subnational elections,<sup>27</sup> we would not expect overall rates of efficacy, interest in politics and turnout in regional elections to be high. Bringing government back to only *some* of the people is not as effective as bringing it back to all of them.

#### Testing the Partisanship Hypothesis: Examining Voter Engagement in Scotland

In the rest of the paper, I test my partisanship hypothesis of engagement. To avoid ecological fallacies and conclusively establish a relationship between voter characteristics and the behavior and attitudes of those particular voters, I employ individual-level data. Because of the paucity of relevant questions on cross-national surveys, I must restrict my analysis to one



country. Here I focus on how voter attitudes and behavior change as a result of decentralization in one of the regions discussed above – Scotland.

Not only is this a case in which pre- and post-decentralization data on voter attitudes and behavior are abundant, but Scotland also serves as an ideal, but not atypical, case for the testing of the decentralization and partisanship hypotheses. Significant political, legislative and even financial competencies were devolved to the new Scottish Parliament, creating a powerful subnational government. The institutional form of the new government – a unicameral legislature elected via the Additional Member System – is considered conducive to political turnout (Powell 1986; Jackman 1987).<sup>28</sup> Unlike in Belgium, there is no compulsory voting law in Scotland to mask the independent effects of decentralization on voter participation. Similarly, unlike in other countries, the timing of Scottish decentralization did not coincide with the extensive deepening of EU supranational powers under the Maastricht Treaty; thus, we are able to more readily identify the distinct effects of decentralization. As is critical to the partisanship hypothesis, the main proponent of Scottish devolution was the regionalist Scottish National Party (SNP). Indeed, the British Labour Party and Labour governments only reluctantly supported decentralization when their electoral standing was threatened by the regionalist actor (Meguid 2008). Given these characteristics, Scotland emerges as a most-likely case; if decentralization does lead to increased levels of voter engagement, especially among regionalist partisans, these elevated levels of engagement should occur in Scotland.

#### *Typical Findings at the Aggregate Level*

If we begin by considering aggregate levels of voter engagement in Scotland, we find data consistent with the mixed trends seen across the decentralizing countries of Western Europe.

Decentralization in Scotland did not produce bold changes in general voter behavior or attitudes. Turnout in the inaugural election to the Scottish Parliament in 1999 was much lower than most politicians hoped and than the broader voter engagement literature would have predicted. At 59.1%, it was less than the election turnout for the less-powerful local Scottish councils held on the same day (which was 59.4%).<sup>29</sup>

The unexpected turnout level was paired, however, with an anticipated drop in Scottish participation in the first national parliamentary election following decentralization. Scottish turnout to the 2001 Westminster General Election was 58.1% as compared to 71.2% in 1997. While voter turnout to the 2001 General Election was markedly poor across all of the United Kingdom, the participation rate in Scotland was even lower – and the extent of the drop, even greater – than in the rest of the country.<sup>30</sup>

#### *Partisanship Effects Present in Scottish Engagement at the Subnational Level*

The mixed turnout results seem to suggest that the Scottish institutional reform was not the powerful motivator that politicians had promised. However, our conclusions about the muted effect of decentralization change once we switch to individual-level analysis and examine engagement trends by partisanship. According to the 1999 Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey conducted just after the inaugural elections to the Scottish Parliament, only 56% of all respondents claimed that it mattered “a great deal” or “a lot” which party wins in Scotland. See Table 1. This figure was just slightly more than the proportion of people who cared which party wins in elections to the less powerful local governments.<sup>31</sup> Yet, this perception of the importance of the subnational elections was not evenly shared across the electorate; voter attitudes differed by partisanship. As shown in Table 1, SNP partisans were more likely than any

other group of mainstream party identifiers to view the Scottish Parliamentary elections as important.

[TABLE 1 about here]

Similar partisanship differences emerge in the attitudinal measures associated with increasing the proximity of the government to the governed. Eighty-one percent of those surveyed trusted that the Scottish Parliament would work in Scotland's interest at least most of the time.<sup>32</sup> Yet, as seen in Table 1, SNP partisans were more trusting of the regional government than those affiliated with other parties. Likewise, while 64.2% of all survey respondents indicated that the creation of the regional parliament would give them more say in government, the level was even higher among SNP supporters at 74.5%. There was one exception to this general finding. While levels of political interest did vary by partisanship, it was the Liberal Democrat supporters, not those of the SNP, who maintained the highest level of interest in politics in general.<sup>33</sup>

On the whole, these figures suggest that SNP voters were more receptive to the attitudinal shifts linked to decentralization. It is therefore not surprising that SNP partisans were more likely than most party supporters to turn out for the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary election. As shown in Table 2, close to eighty percent of regionalist party identifiers participated in the election, as opposed to just over three-quarters of Conservative and just over seventy percent of Labour partisans.<sup>34</sup> Only the Liberal Democrat partisans participated at higher rates than the SNP partisans. Consistent with the results of other turnout studies (e.g. Powell 1986; Blais 2000), those individuals without any partisan ties were much less likely to vote.

[TABLE 2 about here]

The importance of the SNP's differential rate of turnout should not be underestimated. Indeed, it signifies a break from past levels of SNP turnout. Whereas partisans of the regionalist party participated at an above-average rate in the 1999 election, survey results reveal a below-average turnout level for the Scottish nationalists in the pre-decentralization 1997 General Election; according to the 1997 Scottish Election Survey, 78% of SNP partisans reported voting, as opposed to 81% of all Scots interviewed.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, this change in voter participation – from being less likely to turn out than the average Scot in 1997 to being more likely in 1999 – was not observed for any other partisan group. In direct contrast to the SNP partisans and consistent with my hypothesis about their status as subnational “losers” of decentralization, Labour identifiers moved from being more likely than average to turn out in 1997 to being less likely in 1999. While the turnout rates for the Conservative and Liberal Democrat partisans fell from 1997 to 1999, they continued to display participation percentages above the mean.<sup>36</sup>

SNP partisans were also more likely than the average survey respondent to have turned out for the Scottish Parliamentary elections but *not* to have participated in the weaker local council elections. Recall that the decentralization hypotheses predicted that regional turnout rates would surpass those for the less important local elections. Observed aggregate turnout rates discussed earlier reveal that this did not happen, but there were some voters who followed the pattern anticipated by the decentralization theory of engagement: 3.9% of SNP identifiers as opposed to 2.9% of survey respondents in general participated in the Scottish Parliamentary elections but did not vote in the local council elections. The SNP partisans' level of differential turnout exceeded all other partisan groups except that of the Liberal Democrats; 5.2% of their identifiers followed this pattern.

While the number of survey respondents following this differential turnout pattern is admittedly small, the fact that SNP (and Liberal Democratic) identifiers stand out from the rest reinforces my conclusions about the mediating role of partisanship on the effects of decentralization. The force of these findings is even greater when one considers that the local elections under discussion were held on the same day as the first Scottish Parliamentary election. Any difference in the turnout rates between these two elections therefore cannot be explained by a respondent's inability to get to the polls; if he or she voted in one election, then he or she could have voted – without additional transportation cost – in the second.

Other possible explanations for turnout gaps likewise prove inconsistent with the findings. Studies (e.g., Paterson et al. 2001: 70) show that the introduction of the AMS electoral system for the Scottish Parliamentary elections and the use of multiple paper ballots for the concurrent local and Scottish Parliamentary elections caused considerable confusion among the electorate. Confusion could have led to an increase in the number of invalid ballots or led people to leave before voting for all offices, the latter behavior reducing the turnout rate. However, it is more likely that confused voters would have failed to cast ballots for the Scottish Parliament, which was being elected under a new voting system, than for the old local councils being elected under familiar electoral rules.

Similarly, voter fatigue, a factor highlighted in the US literature on differential turnout rates, is unable to account for the observed Scottish trends. While it is plausible that Scottish voters forwent casting ballots for the less-important local offices during the concurrent regional-local elections because they were overwhelmed and tired as suggested by the literature on “roll off” (e.g., Burnham 1965), this factor should have had a more even effect across partisan groups. The fact that SNP partisans were more likely than most respondents to cast a ballot for the

regional elections and not for the concurrent local elections seems indicative of a conscious decision – a decision consistent with the differences in power and importance of the two levels of government and the advantages they carry for the regional identifiers.

### *Partisanship Effects Present in Engagement at the UK Level*

As this paper's introduction implied, the emphasis of decentralization-peddling politicians has been largely on its effects on attitudes and behaviors at the new subnational level. Recall, however, that decentralization also has implications for subsequent engagement levels at the national level. To what extent did Scottish voters exhibit the predicted declines in trust in and perceived importance of the UK Westminster government after devolution, and turn out at lower rates than before to the first election of the newly weakened UK government? And were these trends similarly shaped by the partisanship of the Scottish voters?

The attitudes of Scottish survey respondents provide some support for the original, undifferentiated decentralization hypotheses. In 1997, prior to decentralization, 75.1% of respondents to the Scottish Election Study reported that they cared who won the UK General Election. Four years later, at the time of the first national election post-decentralization, fewer than half of respondents perceived the UK national elections to be important; in the 2001 SSA, 46.2% of those surveyed stated that it mattered “a great deal” or “quite a lot” who won the General Election. The lack of pre- and post-decentralization survey questions on trust in and efficacy towards the UK government hinders our ability to assess those dimensions of engagement. Data from the 2001 SSA do confirm, as we would expect, that the level of trust post-decentralization was low. A mere 22.3% “trust[ed] the UK government to work in Scotland's best long term interests” at least most of the time.

These statistics suggest that Scots in general were more sensitive to decentralization's erosion of national power than to its augmentation of subnational power. But, further examination of the data reveals that partisanship still played a mediating role in voter engagement at the national level. As shown in Table 3, SNP partisans were less likely than the average respondent or any other party's identifiers to believe that it mattered who won the elections to the UK Parliament. This represents a change from their beliefs before decentralization, when SNP partisans were more likely than the average respondent to the 1997 SES to care who won the General Election.<sup>37</sup>

The effect of regionalist party identification is also clear when we examine respondents' levels of trust in the UK government in 2001. Even though overall trust levels were already very low, SNP partisans were even less convinced than other partisans that the national government would protect Scottish interests.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, with under 11% trusting the UK government at least most of the time, SNP partisans were less trusting than even nonpartisans!

[TABLE 3 about here]

Voter turnout rates mirrored these attitudinal differences. Consistent with my partisanship hypothesis, partisans of the Scottish regionalist party were also less likely than any other set of party identifiers to turn out for the 2001 national legislative election. As shown in Table 4, 70% of SNP identifiers participated in the first UK Westminster election post-decentralization as opposed to over 75% of Conservative and Labour partisans and over 83% of Liberal Democrat identifiers.<sup>39</sup>

[TABLE 4 about here]

And this low participation rate for SNP identifiers represents a drop from their national election turnout rate pre-decentralization. Recalled turnout data from 2001 SSA respondents

indicate that the SNP partisan participation level was 85.4% in the 1997 General Election. While the participation rates of all partisan groups were lower in 2001 than in 1997 – as is consistent with trends over time across most advanced industrial democracies – the drop among SNP identifiers was markedly larger. According to the 2001 SSA, average turnout in Scotland fell 9.8 percentage points between these two General Elections, while that of SNP partisans fell 15.2 percentage points.<sup>40</sup> A logit analysis of the likelihood of turning out to the 1997 General Election and not to the 2001 General Election using the 2001 SSA data demonstrates that the effect of SNP partisanship is statistically significant and robust to the inclusion of standard sociodemographic characteristics and even the aforementioned attitudinal effects associated with turning out (i.e., importance of UK elections and trust in UK government).<sup>41</sup> Decentralization was lowering SNP partisans' incentives to turn out.

#### Combining the Results: SNPers Turn Out for Scottish Elections, but Stay Home for the British

The analyses of findings from the 1999 and 2001 SSA surveys make great strides towards substantiating the partisanship hypothesis, that SNP partisans are more engaged at the subnational level and less engaged at the national level after decentralization. What has not been established yet with data from these two separate surveys is whether any SNP party identifier is following both patterns. If turnout is increasing at the regional level relative to other non-national elections and decreasing at the national level over time, who are the voters who turned out for the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary elections but stayed home for the 2001 General Election?

Not surprisingly given the previous analyses, the answer to this question is SNP partisans. Although partisans following this pattern of behavior were far from a majority in any party, SNP identifiers (at 16%) were significantly more likely than partisans of any other party,



including those of no party (10%), to turn out for the election to the first Scottish Parliament but stay home for the subsequent UK General Election, according to the 2001 SSA. The percentage of Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative partisans turning out in 1999 and not in 2001 were 8.6%, 9.2% and 9.3%, respectively.<sup>42</sup> While there is no accepted wisdom about how much voter attrition is expected between subnational and subsequent national elections simply as a function of declining turnout over time, the drop-off rates of these three other sets of partisans are in line with the average decline in Westminster Parliamentary Election turnout in Scotland between 1997 and 2001 discussed in the previous section. The SNP's larger, atypical decline suggests that the ethnoterritorial partisans were the only ones reacting positively and systematically to devolution's weakening of the national and strengthening of the subnational governments.<sup>43</sup>

Moving from an examination of cross-tabulated data to the results of logistic regression models, we find that the purported relationship between SNP partisanship and voter turnout is robust. In Table 5, I present four models of differential voter turnout. The dependent variable is coded 1 when a respondent turns out for the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary elections but not for the 2001 Westminster Parliamentary Election, and 0 otherwise. Controlling for the standard set of sociodemographic variables used in turnout studies,<sup>44</sup> I find, in Model I, that affiliation with the SNP strongly and significantly increases the likelihood of this pattern of differential turnout. Confirming my decentralization winner's hypothesis, affiliation with the SNP is the only type of partisanship that has a statistically significant positive effect.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, additional regression analyses demonstrate that SNP identification does not play this positive role with regard to any of the other three combinations of turnout between 1999 and 2001; controlling for the set of sociodemographic variables presented in Model I, regionalist partisanship emerges as a negative

and statistically insignificant predictor, *ceteris paribus*, of 1). turnout in 2001 but not in 1999; 2). turnout in both 1999 and 2001; and 3). absenteeism in both 1999 and 2001.<sup>46</sup>

[TABLE 5 about here]

To test the robustness of the finding that SNP partisanship increases the likelihood of a respondent turning out in 1999 and not in 2001, I ran a second model that includes attitudinal measures associated with voter turnout. These variables are the importance of the UK government, trust in the Scottish Parliament, say in Scottish government and political interest. Based on the second-order election and proximity arguments, the transfer of significant policy competencies to the Scottish parliament should lead to a decrease in the importance of the UK government. Similarly, decentralization is expected to lead to an increase in the perceived voter efficacy towards and trust in the regional government and increased political interest in general. Therefore, the expected effects of these attitudinal variables on the likelihood of turning out for the regional and not the national elections should be negative for the first variable and positive for the next three.

The results of the logit regression are presented as Model II in Table 5. Only one of the four attitudinal variables has a significant, independent effect on voter turnout. Consistent with the second-order election effect of decentralization, those voters who believed that it mattered who won the UK General Elections were less likely to have turned out in 1999 and not in 2001. Trust in the Scottish Parliament, perceptions of personal efficacy towards the Scottish Parliament and interest in politics – implications of the proximity effect of decentralization - did not play significant roles in determining the observed pattern of differential voter turnout.<sup>47</sup>

While this regression analysis offers limited support for the independent role of attitudinal variables in this pattern of voter participation, it confirms the lasting power of

partisanship. In Model II, SNP affiliation remained a statistically significant predictor of voter turnout despite the addition of these four factors.<sup>48</sup> This finding is particularly noteworthy, as one might have expected the attitudinal measures, especially the beliefs about the (un)importance of the UK Parliament, to account for turnout in general or for differences in the behavior of regionalist and mainstream party supporters.<sup>49</sup>

The results of Models I and II provide support for my partisanship answer to the puzzle of why decentralization has not led to sizeable shifts in voter engagement levels: those who identify with the “winners” of decentralization are more likely to demonstrate the attitudinal and behavioral effects of decentralization than partisans of other parties. The findings of Models III and IV further reinforce the power of this argument by directly supporting its core mechanism. Consistent with the logic behind the partisanship hypotheses, the models show that the predictive power of the SNP variable derives some, but not all, of its force from the pro-Parliament policy preferences of its partisans. The effect of a variable indicating a “yes” vote in the 1997 Referendum for a Scottish Parliament is strong, positive and statistically significant. The SNP partisanship coefficient is slightly smaller and marginally less statistically significant, as we would expect, with the addition of the policy preference variable. That said, it remains a strong and significant predictor of the differential pattern of voting expected by the decentralization hypotheses.<sup>50</sup>

The lack of appropriate survey questions means that we cannot test for the office advantages also posited to be associated with the SNP’s “winner” status. Yet, the robustness of the SNP variable across all of these models is consistent with the idea that decentralization provides the SNP with opportunities – which stem from its regional emphasis – that are not available to other parties or other partisans simply because they are pro-decentralization or are

members of a party that implemented the decentralization reforms.<sup>51</sup> Thus, despite the fact that all members of the Scottish electorate are faced with the same objective institutional reforms, decentralization brings the government back to *some* people more than others.

### Conclusion: How Individual Characteristics Mediate the Effects of Structural Change

Politicians have commonly tried to attract support for decentralization policies by promising that the reforms would “bring government back to the people.” Indeed, there are theoretical justifications for this claim. Yet, aggregate-level measures of attitudes and voter participation across Western Europe do not yield the expected results. As summarized by Scully et al. (2004: 537) with regard to decentralization, “creating new, elected political institutions does not necessarily engage the interest of the public or revitalize the democratic process.”

However, if we trade this aggregate analysis of voter engagement for an individual-level one, we find that politicians were not offering empty promises to their electorates. Examination of Scottish voter attitudes and turnout in the first regional and national elections post-decentralization reveals, rather, that voters were differentially affected by the decentralization reforms. Consistent with the claim that decentralization provides particular policy and office advantages to regionalist parties, SNP partisans were more receptive than others to the attitudinal and behavioral changes sparked by decentralization. In contrast to their previous behavior, they turned out at higher rates to regional elections and at lower rates to national elections than other partisan groups. This pattern is robust to multivariate analysis.

The analyses also offer some support for the secondary hypothesis that the mainstream party adopters of the decentralization reform are less likely to experience its voter engagement effects. Despite their party’s sponsorship of Scottish decentralization, Labour partisans turned

out at lower than average rates to the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary election and remained highly engaged – at above average levels – in the now-weakened national-level politics. These results, while perhaps *prima facie* surprising, are consistent with the observation that political decentralization was not designed to boost the mainstream party’s subnational support. Rather it was a means to appease electorally threatening regionalist parties and shore up mainstream party support at the national level.

Driven in part by the lack of available and appropriate measures in cross-national surveys, the individual-level analysis in this paper has focused on the effects of decentralization in one region. But these findings have implications that extend beyond the nation of Scotland and even the countries of Western Europe. First, this study suggests that the unexpected drops in voter engagement witnessed in other decentralizing countries may, in fact, be artifacts of the aggregate-level data. Further research is necessary, but it would not be surprising to find that partisans of regionalist parties and other “decentralization winners” in Wales, Belgium, France, Spain, Italy and other countries around the world have higher rates of efficacy, political interest, trust in government and electoral participation than affiliates of the mainstream parties.

Second, the conclusions of this research challenge a fundamental assumption made by most institutional theories of behavior, be they concerned with voter turnout, vote choice, joining a group or participating in a protest. The literature assumes that institutions equally affect all individuals. While structural transformations may objectively alter the political environment for every participant in a given system, the impact of these changes on an individual’s behavior is mediated by his or her personal characteristics and experiences. As confirmed by this study, institutional explanations alone do not accurately depict reality; the whole story may only emerge when individual-level characteristics are also taken into consideration.

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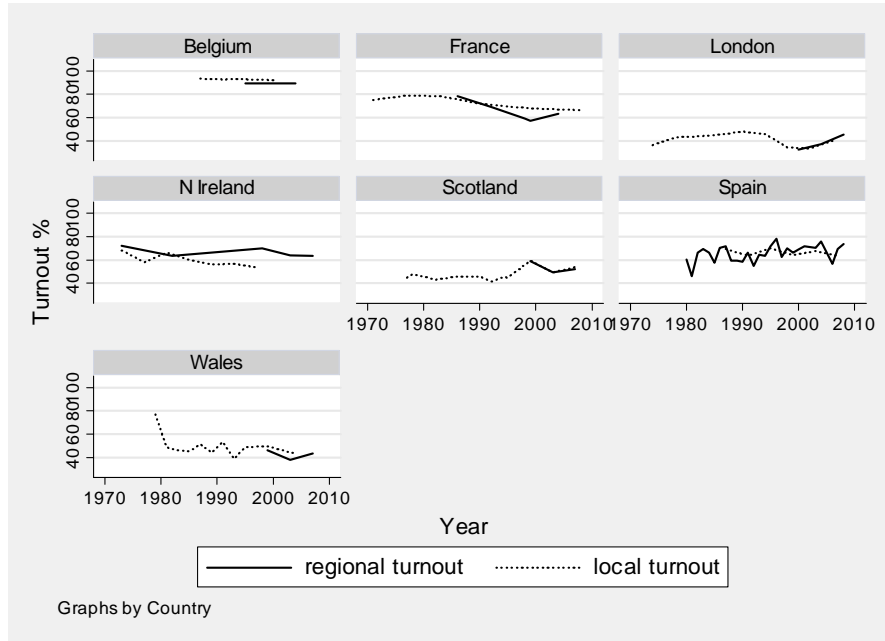
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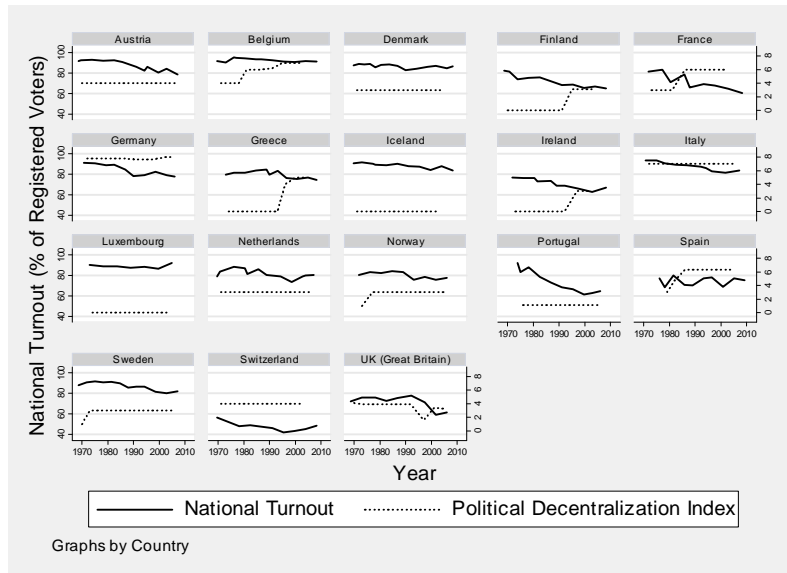
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**FIGURE 1:**  
**Turnout Rates in Regional versus Local Elections in Western Europe, 1970-2008**



Sources: Bréchon 2004; European Union 1999; <http://www.election-politique.com/regionales.php>; <http://www.ibzdgip.fgov.be/result/fr>; [http://www.pre.gva.es/pls/argos\\_elec](http://www.pre.gva.es/pls/argos_elec); [www.research.plymouth.ac.uk/elections/elections/turnout.htm](http://www.research.plymouth.ac.uk/elections/elections/turnout.htm).

**FIGURE 2: Degree of Political Decentralization and Turnout Rates in National Elections in Western European Countries, 1970-2006**



Sources: Turnout Data: IDEA (<http://www.idea.int/vt>); Political Decentralization Index: Hooghe et al. 2008.

**TABLE 1: Attitudinal Measures of Subnational-Level Engagement by Partisanship**  
(as percentage of partisans)

	<b>Importance of Scottish Parliament</b> (great deal/quite a lot)	<b>Trust in Scottish Parliament</b> (just about always/most of the time)	<b>Say in Scottish Government – Efficacy</b> (more say than before)	<b>General Political Interest</b> (great deal/quite a lot)
<b>SNP</b>	63.5 %	89.6 %	74.5 %	23.2%
<b>Labour</b>	59.3 %	82.2 %	66.2 %	22.4%
<b>Liberal Democrat</b>	53.4%	83.3%	69.9%	31.4%
<b>Conservative</b>	52.5 %	69.8 %	44.8 %	27.1%
<b>No partisanship</b>	27.6 %	69.0 %	52.8 %	5.4%
<b>Average across all respondents</b>	56.0%	81.0%	64.2%	23.7%

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 1999

**TABLE 2: Voter Turnout in 1999 Scottish Parliamentary Election by Partisanship  
(as percentage of partisans)**

	<b>Liberal Democrat</b>	<b>SNP</b>	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Labour</b>	<b>No Partisanship</b>	<b>Overall Turnout</b>
<b>Voted</b>	81.1%	79.2%	76.5%	70.9%	35.5%	72.5%
<b>Abstained</b>	18.9%	20.8%	23.5%	29.1%	64.5%	27.5%

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 1999

**TABLE 3: Attitudinal Measures of National-Level Engagement by Partisanship  
(as percentage of partisans)**

	<b>Importance of Who Wins the UK Westminster Parliament</b> (great deal/quite a lot)	<b>Trust in UK Parliament</b> (just about always/most of the time)
<b>SNP</b>	35.0 %	10.7 %
<b>Labour</b>	56.2 %	28.9 %
<b>Liberal Democrat</b>	47.9 %	21.6 %
<b>Conservative</b>	54.4 %	28.1 %
<b>No partisanship</b>	20.1 %	13.1 %
<b>Average across all respondents</b>	46.2 %	22.3 %

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 2001

**TABLE 4: Voter Turnout in 2001 UK Westminster Parliamentary Election by Partisanship (as percentage of partisans)**

	<b>Liberal Democrat</b>	<b>SNP</b>	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Labour</b>	<b>No Partisanship</b>	<b>Overall Turnout</b>
<b>Voted</b>	83.1%	70.2%	75.5%	75.4%	12.6%	68.3%
<b>Abstained</b>	17.0%	29.8%	24.5%	24.6%	87.4%	31.7%

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 2001. Columns may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

**TABLE 5: Logistic Regression Models of Differential Voter Turnout: Likelihood of Turning Out in the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary Elections But Not in the 2001 Westminster Elections.**

Variables	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
<b>Partisanship (Labour)</b>				
None	0.114 (0.291)	0.155 (0.310)	0.393 (0.304)	0.385 (0.321)
Conservative	0.493 (0.314)	0.456 (0.329)	0.811* (0.332)	0.755* (0.345)
Liberal Democrat	0.212 (0.314)	0.252 (0.317)	0.254 (0.320)	0.297 (0.324)
SNP	0.733*** (0.221)	0.773*** (0.228)	0.604** (0.229)	0.597* (0.238)
<b>Attitudinal Factors</b>				
Matters who wins UK General Election		-0.323* (0.190)		-0.391* (0.196)
Trusts Scottish Parl.		-0.063 (0.194)		-0.121 (0.199)
Influence over Scottish Government		-0.101 (0.193)		-0.200 (0.198)
Political Interest		0.263 (0.212)		0.214 (0.217)
Voted Yes on Scottish Parliament Referendum			0.898*** (0.214)	0.975*** (0.223)
<b>Controls</b>				
<b>Age in years</b>	0.057* (0.029)	0.049 (0.031)	0.033 (0.031)	0.024 (0.032)
<b>Age<sup>2</sup></b>	-0.001* (0.000)	-0.001* (0.000)	-0.001 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
<b>Gender (Male)</b>	0.563** (0.185)	0.475* (0.195)	0.564** (0.188)	0.514** (0.200)
<b>Social Class (Salarial)</b>				
Routine Non-manual	0.481* (0.252)	0.473* (0.264)	0.491* (0.254)	0.495* (0.268)
Petty Bourgeoisie	-0.479 (0.504)	-0.498 (0.514)	-0.574 (0.511)	-0.616 (0.523)
Manual Foreman	0.293 (0.364)	0.327 (0.371)	0.263 (0.368)	0.303 (0.376)
Working Class	0.133 (0.237)	0.187 (0.249)	0.081 (0.243)	0.115 (0.256)
<b>Education Level (Degree)</b>				
Higher education below Degree level	0.037 (0.319)	-0.043 (0.330)	0.001 (0.323)	-0.110 (0.335)
A level	-0.266 (0.365)	-0.383 (0.376)	-0.207 (0.368)	-0.305 (0.379)
O level/CSE	-0.048 (0.305)	-0.052 (0.317)	-0.062 (0.310)	-0.068 (0.323)



None	0.188 (0.320)	0.232 (0.335)	0.282 (0.328)	0.312 (0.342)
<b>Religion (Protestant)</b>				
Roman Catholic	0.462 (0.285)	0.322 (0.305)	0.489* (0.292)	0.339 (0.314)
Other	0.758** (0.276)	0.806** (0.283)	0.874** (0.282)	0.904** (0.289)
None	0.320 (0.225)	0.353 (0.232)	0.404* (0.229)	0.433* (0.237)
<b>Housing Tenure (owners)</b>				
Rents: Local Authority	0.487* (0.211)	0.463* (0.220)	0.467* (0.217)	0.441* (0.226)
Rents: Other	-0.000 (0.293)	0.071 (0.299)	0.026 (0.297)	0.107 (0.303)
Constant	-4.247*** (0.776)	-3.853*** (0.820)	-4.258*** (0.795)	-3.753*** (0.837)
N	1605	1511	1548	1459
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	0.0461	0.0549	0.0631	0.0745
Log Likelihood	-492.6	-459.1	-469.4	-436.1
$\chi^2$	47.6***	53.4***	63.2***	70.2***

\*\*\* p $\leq$ .001 \*\* p $\leq$ .01 \* p $\leq$ .1 in two-tailed tests. Standard errors below coefficients in parentheses. The reference category for each type of variable is shown in parentheses in the first column. Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 2001

<sup>1</sup> Whereas there is a literature that relates decentralization to the degree of ethnic conflict, by arguing that decentralization increases opportunities for voter participation in government (e.g., Gurr 2000; Lustick et al. 2004; Brancati 2006), these scholars are not focused on directly testing the relationship between decentralization reforms and voter participation. Putnam (1993) looks at levels of voter engagement after decentralization across Italian regions, but his focus is on how other forces, rather than decentralization, can account for regional variation in voter attitudes and behavior. The notable exception is Foweraker and Landman (2002) who, looking at 40 countries (6 in Western Europe) from 1970 to 1998, find that federal states have lower rates of participation than unitary ones. As the authors recognize (2002: 59), the results are based on a crude dichotomous measure of state structure, which does not capture varying degrees of decentralization. Downs (1999) also examines the effects of federalism, but mainly with regard to institutional dimensions of democratic accountability and only in the case of Belgium.

<sup>2</sup> For Treisman (2007), political decentralization is a larger category of reforms, which includes the specific constellation of institutional changes (what he calls “decisionmaking decentralization” and “appointment decentralization”) discussed in the definition above.

<sup>3</sup> That said, even if decentralization brings an incompetent government “closer to the people” and trust declines as a result, we might still see an increase in the political efficacy of these more proximal individuals.

<sup>4</sup> A fourth structural change associated with decentralization – an increase in the number of elections held – has also led to predictions of decline in voter turnout, especially at the national level (Morlan 1984; Powell 1986; Downs 1999). The individual-level analyses of Scottish engagement later in this article reveal that the declining importance of the national elections was more important than voter fatigue in shaping the effect of decentralization on voter turnout.

<sup>5</sup> For this examination of voter engagement, I am focusing on those countries that have created subnational (e.g., regional or state) levels of government with at least political and legislative powers. It is less clear how the decentralization of financial powers alone (i.e., fiscal decentralization) should affect voter engagement.

<sup>6</sup> This calculation is based on increases in the representation index constructed by Hooghe et al. (2008: 260), which measures “the extent to which a region is endowed with an independent legislature and executive.” See Hooghe et al. (2008: Appendix B) for more information on the coding of the variable.

<sup>7</sup> The paucity of consistent cross-national and time-series survey data limits our examination to trends in voter efficacy and political interest. Shifts in political trust will be analyzed in the Scottish case study later in this article.

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<sup>8</sup> This conclusion is based on analysis of the percentage of Eurobarometer survey respondents who answered “yes, I can” to the following question: “Do you think that if things are not going well in [your country name here] people like yourself can help bring a change for the better, or not?” Neither this question nor a comparable one was asked after 1982 (Schmitt and Scholz 2005). In these analyses, efficacy is regressed on decentralization, year, and the lagged dependent variable. Due to its availability yearly and for each region and country in the dataset – in contrast to other existing indices – Hooghe et al.’s (2008) representation index was used as the measure of decentralization. This result holds whether or not we control for the negative time trend. The results are also robust to different error specifications (panel-corrected standard errors or robust, clustered standard errors) and the inclusion of a variable capturing the deepening of EU supranationalism. These regression results, as well as others discussed later in the text and notes, but not shown in the paper, are available from the author upon request. *See Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers.*

<sup>9</sup> Models of political interest regressed on decentralization and a lagged dependent variable reveal a negative and statistically significant coefficient for the decentralization variable. This result emerges regardless of the model specification (panel corrected standard errors or robust, clustered standard errors) or the addition of a year variable. Moreover, the results are robust to the inclusion of variables about deepening EU supranationalism; the latter include a dummy variable capturing the transfer of significant national powers to the EU with the enactment of the Maastricht Treaty and a dummy variable capturing when direct elections to the European Parliament began in a given country, thereby increasing the number of elections held. *See Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers.*

<sup>10</sup> Based on the very limited local election data available, I find that local turnout – at the provincial level – in Italy surpasses regional turnout in a given year. However, more election observations are needed to confirm the presence of this pattern. I have therefore not included this country in Figure 1. *See Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers for the limited information.*

<sup>11</sup> Turnout was defined as the percentage of registered voters. This was the only measure consistently available for these election levels across countries over time. Due to the extreme asymmetrical decentralization of the UK, the figure includes only those regions which experienced political decentralization and saw the creation of elected regional governments.

<sup>12</sup> In Wales, the local and regional elections of 1999 were held on the same day.

<sup>13</sup> This also implies that turnout to the next regional assembly elections, held in 1998, should also be lower than local election turnout. The lack of local election turnout figures after 1997 prevents the conclusive testing of this relationship, however.

<sup>14</sup> A correlation rate of -0.32, significant at  $p=0.000$ , is reported for turnout as the percentage of the registered electorate (the measure more commonly employed across Western European countries). The rate is identical if turnout is calculated instead as the percentage of the voting age population (VAP).

<sup>15</sup> The conclusions are robust to the addition of a compulsory voting dummy variable or variables capturing the deepening of EU integration. The effect of political decentralization remains statistically insignificant if the dependent variable of national election turnout is operationalized as the percentage of the voting age population (VAP). *See Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers.*

<sup>16</sup> I follow Hooghe et al. (2008: 267) and look at the largest subnational administrative units, or “highest regional tier” in a country. This approach avoids the possibility that the behavioral shifts in decentralized regions are obscured by the stability of voting behavior in the regions without decentralized powers.

<sup>17</sup> The national election data disaggregated to the regional level come from Caramani 2000 and are only available until 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Due to repeat and extensive changes in district boundaries in Ireland, data from this country could not be included in the regional-level time-series analysis. Any concern about bias caused by its exclusion is reduced by the fact that my previously discussed conclusions about the relative insignificance of decentralization as a determinant of national turnout do not change if I exclude Ireland. *See Supplemental Appendix for Reviewers.*

<sup>19</sup> These results are also robust to the addition of compulsory voting and EU integration variables. *See Supplemental Appendix for Reviewers for detailed regression results.*

<sup>20</sup> The main sources of subnational election turnout data include Bréchon 2004; European Union 1999; Instituto Centrale di Statistica (various years); Pallarés and Keating 2003; Vatter et al. 2004; <http://www.cor.europa.eu>; <http://www.election-politique.com/regionales.php>; <http://www.ibzdgip.fgov.be/result/fr>; [http://www.pre.gva.es/pls/argos\\_elec](http://www.pre.gva.es/pls/argos_elec); [www.research.plymouth.ac.uk/elections/elections/turnout.htm](http://www.research.plymouth.ac.uk/elections/elections/turnout.htm); <http://www.stembusuitslag.com>.

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<sup>21</sup> Regional election turnout is regressed on decentralization, the year, and a lagged dependent variable. The same mixed conclusions emerge if we add dummy variables for compulsory voting laws and EU integration to the models. *See the Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers.*

<sup>22</sup> The development of the EU might also influence voter engagement levels because, with the direct election of the European Parliament after 1979, it served to increase the frequency of elections held in a given country.

<sup>23</sup> While this statement applies to more recent incarnations of the Northern Ireland Assembly (1973-1974, 1982-86 and 1998-present), the 1921-1972 incarnation, called the Parliament of Northern Ireland, was both bicameral and elected largely by plurality rules. However, given that this earliest regional body did not hold elections during the time period under investigation here, these “vote-depressing institutions” cannot account for the decline in voter turnout observed in my dataset. <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/fa73.htm>

<sup>24</sup> In Spain, Belgium, France, the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, Italy, regional-level parties or pressure groups campaigned for the transfer of political, legislative and even financial competencies to the subnational level. To quell the threat posed by these ethnoterritorial and regional actors, mainstream parties often reluctantly agreed to the creation of empowered regional governments.

<sup>25</sup> In some cases, this advantage is heightened by the use of electoral rules for the regional elections that benefit smaller parties (although not all ethnoterritorial parties are low vote winners in their regions). These electoral rules could help other parties typically disadvantaged in the region by the national electoral rules. As a result, one might expect more favorable electoral rules to lead to an increase in voter turnout – but not necessarily an increase in trust in government or other attitudinal measure of engagement – among partisans of other political parties that typically capture low vote percentages in the region.

<sup>26</sup> Moreover, research (Meguid n.d.) has shown that the mainstream parties enacting decentralization often expected to (and did) lose electoral support at the newly created subnational level relative to the national level, as a result of decentralization.

<sup>27</sup> Not only are regionalist party identifiers only part of the electorate, but they are, in most countries, a political minority. Therefore, we would expect the impact of their attitudinal and behavioral changes on the overall levels of political efficacy, trust, interest and turnout in a country to be minimal.

<sup>28</sup> The AMS system used in the Scottish Parliamentary elections is a mixed member proportional (MMP) system (Lundberg 2003). Thus, while it is less proportional than the simple PR systems examined by Powell (1986) and Jackman (1987), it should be associated with higher turnout than the highly disproportional plurality systems they also examined.

<sup>29</sup> This outcome runs counter to the expectations of both the decentralization turnout model and the theory of “roll off,” whereby voters “vote for ‘prestige’ offices but not for lower offices on the same ballot and at the same election” (Burnham 1965: 9).

<sup>30</sup> The percentage point decline in Scotland was 18.4%, as opposed to 16.8% in the UK as a whole.

<sup>31</sup> 46% of respondents “cared a great deal” about the outcome of those local elections.

<sup>32</sup> That is significantly higher than the paltry 31.9% who, in the 1999 SSA, reported trusting the UK government to look out for Scotland’s interests.

<sup>33</sup> This question asked about the respondent’s general interest in politics. There were no questions in the 1999 SSA survey specifically enquiring about a person’s level of interest in regional, i.e., Scottish, politics.

<sup>34</sup> In analyses not shown, similar differences emerge when we examine turnout in the 1999 election by vote in the 1997 General Election. *See the Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers.*

<sup>35</sup> Data from the 1997 Scottish Election Survey were used to mitigate against possible inaccuracies of recalling voting behavior responses (see Weir 1975). That said, analyses of recalled 1997 partisan turnout rates taken from the 1999 SSA reveal the same patterns. *See the Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers.*

<sup>36</sup> That the turnout rate of the Liberal Democrats did not also increase (in relative or absolute terms) suggests that the differential participation rate observed among SNP partisans cannot be simply explained as part of a larger phenomenon of institutionally induced strategic turnout; in this alternative explanation of differential turnout, the supporters of smaller parties regularly disadvantaged by the plurality system used in the national UK elections would have incentives to turn out in greater proportions to the electorally more permissive subnational elections. If the difference between the permissiveness of Westminster’s plurality elections and the Scottish Parliament’s AMS elections was driving the increased turnout rate of the SNP partisans, we would also expect it to affect supporters of all other small parties, including the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. As just discussed and as will be seen in the regression results displayed in Table 5 for models of turnout in 1999, but not in the 2001 General Election, this was not the case for the Liberal Democrats. In turnout analyses not shown here, the effect of Green Party identification is similarly statistically insignificant when added to any of the models in Table 5. Moreover, an analysis of Green

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Party turnout rates for previous elections reveals that Green partisans participated in lower rates in the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary election than in the 1997 Westminster election, a finding that runs counter to the predictions of this alternative strategic theory of turnout. *See the Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers.*

<sup>37</sup> The percentage of SNP partisans who cared exceeded the percentage for all other mainstream parties, except Labour.

<sup>38</sup> It is interesting, but not surprising, that partisans of those parties typically dominating the national legislative arena were more likely to trust the national government. Even among them, however, trust levels were very low.

<sup>39</sup> A consistent finding of low relative SNP turnout emerges from the Scottish sample of the 2001 British Election Study. Clarke et al. 2001.

<sup>40</sup> This finding of the differential effect of partisanship on turnout to the national elections is consistent with the claim that turnout is driven by the importance of the level of government. If voter fatigue were driving the decline in national level turnout witnessed after decentralization, as the hypotheses of Morlan (1984), Powell (1986) and Downs (1999) discussed in note 4 suggest, we should have seen similar levels of decline across all voters; there is no a priori reason to expect some groups of voters to be more prone to voter fatigue than others. The greater drop off among SNP partisans suggests the primacy of the second-order election mechanism behind decentralization's effect on national turnout.

<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, consistent with the secondary hypothesis about decentralization "losers," regression analyses also show that Labour partisans are less likely to follow this turnout pattern, although the effect is not statistically significant. *See the Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers.*

<sup>42</sup> That Labour partisans were the least likely of the mainstream partisans and even non-partisans to turn out in this pattern is consistent with my hypothesis that decentralization adopters are among the "losers" of decentralization at the subnational level.

<sup>43</sup> Further confirmation of the direction of this effect on turnout, SNP partisans were less likely than other partisans to turn out for the 2001 General Election and not for the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary election.

<sup>44</sup> In individual-level studies of turnout, these controls are typically age, gender, education and socioeconomic class (e.g., Powell 1986). In the British and Scottish cases, that list has been lengthened to include religion and housing ownership (Paterson et al. 2001: 55). To control for the curvilinear relationship between age and turnout, I have also included age<sup>2</sup>. The results of the partisan and attitudinal variables in all models are robust to the exclusion of age<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>45</sup> The regression results also provide further evidence for my claim that Labour partisans should be less likely to experience the effects of decentralization. When Model I is rerun with a Labour partisanship variable included and SNP partisanship as the reserve category, we find that Labour partisanship is a statistically significant negative predictor of turning out for the 1999 Scottish Elections and staying home for the 2001 General Elections. It is the only statistically significant partisanship variable in the model. This finding is robust to the addition of the attitudinal variables of Model II. *See the Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers.*

<sup>46</sup> Identical findings obtain when the four turnout options are combined into one dependent variable and analyzed in a MNL model with the same set of control variables. *See the Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers.*

<sup>47</sup> The statistical insignificance of these variables did not change when the partisanship variables were excluded from the model. *See the Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers.*

<sup>48</sup> The results of the SNP partisanship variable in regressions of the other three combinations of differential turnout are robust to the inclusion of the four attitudinal factors. *See the Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers.*

<sup>49</sup> In their own work analyzing the effect of SNP voting on turnout in 1999, Paterson et al. (2001: 55-6) similarly concluded "We may have expected these (attitudinal) measures to explain some of the difference between the turnout of Labour and SNP supporters, perhaps expecting that SNP supporters were more likely to consider the parliament important. However, the inclusion of these variables does not change the finding that those who had voted SNP in 1997 were more likely to turn out and vote in 1999 than those who had voted Labour."

<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, when we control for respondent support for the Scottish Parliament in Models III and IV, Conservative partisanship becomes a significant predictor of this turnout pattern. However, unlike the SNP partisans, we cannot conclude that the Conservatives are being motivated by the nature of decentralization per se. The data in Table 2 show that Conservative partisans do not display the attitudes that are expected to follow from bringing government back to the people. The statistically significant Conservative partisanship variable in Models III and IV is instead evidence in support of my hypothesis in note 25 that non-regionalist parties with less support in a region are likely to be advantaged by the permissive electoral rules of the regional elections.

<sup>51</sup> The positive and statistically significant effect of SNP partisanship on turnout in Models I-IV is likewise robust to the inclusion of a variable measuring national identity (i.e., the degree to which a respondent is Scottish versus

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British). This suggests that SNP partisanship is not merely a proxy for Scottishness. *See the Supplementary Appendix for Reviewers.*