



# Selective contestation: The impact of decentralization on ethnoterritorial party electoral strategy

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Contestation  
Selective entry  
Decentralization  
Ethnoterritorial party  
National legislative election

## ABSTRACT

Since the 1970s, national governments across Western Europe have decentralized significant powers to subnational authorities. Recent work has found that the degree of decentralization affects ethnoterritorial party vote in national and subnational elections. This article asks the prior question: what effect does decentralization have on a party's decision to field candidates? I find that as decentralization reforms shift power to the region, ethnoterritorial parties likewise shift their electoral strategy away from contesting national elections. An examination of regional-level data from nine Western European countries reveals ethnoterritorial parties reduce their contestation of national elections when a directly elected regional assembly is established and significant administrative, fiscal and policymaking competencies are transferred to the region. Further supporting the view of decentralization as policy appeasement, this exit effect is limited to ethnoterritorial parties demanding regional autonomy; secessionist parties continue to pursue full contestation strategies regardless of the level of decentralization.

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, national governments across Western Europe have transferred significant administrative, political and fiscal competencies to subnational authorities. The nature and extent of these decentralization reforms have differed across and within countries, from no change in the centralized structure of power in Iceland to the creation of subnational assemblies with directly elected officeholders and significant, but varying administrative, policy-making and tax-raising powers across regions of Belgium, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

In response to these institutional trends, there has been an increase in the political science research on the effect of decentralization on political party fortunes, with an emphasis on the vote share of ethnoterritorial parties.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have examined how this institutional change affects party vote share in national elections (Brancati, 2006, 2008; Lublin, 2012; Massetti and Schakel, 2013, 2017; Meguid, 2015) and subnational elections (Massetti and Schakel, 2013, 2017; Meguid, 2015), and for secessionist and autonomist regionalist parties (Massetti and Schakel, 2013).

However, less is known about the causally prior question: what effect does decentralization have on a political party's decision to contest individual districts in an election?<sup>3</sup> Do parties shift their electoral strategy away from competing in the increasingly less powerful national arena? Or, as argued by the party nationalization literature, do parties increase their contestation of districts for national-level government in response to reduced disincentives for regional party formation and entry?

The possibility that a party may strategically alter its entry decisions is not far-fetched; while it is commonly assumed that most political parties contest every seat in a given election, a survey of district-level election data across 40 democracies finds that 75% of parties selectively enter districts in any given national legislative election (Potter, 2013: 11). Moreover, this phenomenon is not restricted to electorally marginal actors. According to Potter (2013: 11), "(selectively entering) parties garnered more than 60% of all votes cast across all elections." Selective entry – contesting one district, but abstaining from another – is even more common among smaller or newer parties, including ethnoterritorial parties.

In this article, I examine the effect of decentralization reforms on

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to 2011, only the region of Scotland received this level of decentralization in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> An exception is Meguid (2015), which examines both governing party vote and ethnoterritorial party vote.

<sup>3</sup> Notable exceptions include Potter (2013), Weiner (2011) and Borz and de Miguel (2017). But neither of the first two focuses on the effect of institutional change on the entry decisions of smaller, niche parties. Borz and de Miguel control for regionalist party family and decentralization in a party-level model of contestation, ancillary to their main research project, and find support for the negative effects of each individually. Unlike my analyses, their paper examines national contestation patterns, is limited to one election, and does not consider multiple facets of decentralization.

the entry and exit strategies of ethnoterritorial parties in national-level legislative elections. Ethnoterritorial parties have emerged as critical players in the electoral and political systems of Western Europe. Their popularity among voters has shaped the electoral fortunes of their political competitors and even determined the governmental status of mainstream parties, as examples from Spain to Belgium and Italy highlight (Heller, 2002; Meguid, 2008; Hopkin, 2009). They have also routinely been the most vocal champion of decentralization reforms.

Using an original dataset of party entry decisions across 144 subnational regions of nine Western European countries from 1974 to 2009,<sup>4</sup> I find that ethnoterritorial party contestation of national-level legislative elections is affected by the level of decentralization in a region. As implied by the literature on decentralization as appeasement (Rudolph and Thompson, 1989; Sorens, 2004; Meguid, 2008; Toubeau, 2011; Massetti and Schakel, 2013), but in contrast to the broad expectations of the party nationalization literature (Chhibber and Kollman, 2004; Brancati, 2009), ethnoterritorial parties shift their electoral strategy away from contesting national elections when significant administrative, fiscal and policymaking competencies are transferred to the regions, and directly elected assemblies are established. The existence of regionally chosen executives, on the other hand, has a positive effect on ethnoterritorial party entry.

There is an important exception to these findings: the contestation effects of decentralization are limited to ethnoterritorial parties demanding regional *autonomy*. Consistent with the appeasement theory, but unanticipated by the party nationalization view of decentralization, independence-desiring secessionist parties do not withdraw from national elections following the implementation of greater regional autonomy. Indeed, decentralization reforms have no significant effect on secessionist party entry patterns; these parties generally pursue full contestation strategies regardless of the level of decentralization enacted in a given region.

This article has important implications for research on political parties, party systems and political institutions in general. By examining changes in party contestation strategies, this paper not only contributes to the literature on why parties emerge, but it also allows us to examine the overlooked question, pointed out by Potter and Olivella (2015: 85) and others, of why existing parties exit specific electoral contests. Furthermore, in answering why enter and why exit, this paper offers a meso-level mechanism behind the broader findings of party system heterogeneity in decentralized or decentralizing states (e.g., Schakel, 2013).

Turning to political institutions, this article emphasizes that institutional changes in general affect not just voter behavior as the extensive literature on electoral rules, compulsory voting, and presidential systems highlights. We also see clearly that political parties and their elite react to changes in the electoral and governmental environment by altering their *own* strategies. Whereas these strategic changes can include shifts in party issue positions, as noted by the standard spatial literature, they may also include changes in parties' electoral contestation patterns.

The article proceeds as follows: in the first section, I review the existing literature on the effects of decentralization and identify a set of hypotheses about ethnoterritorial party strategic entry and exit. In the second section, I discuss the data, and in a third, I present the models and discuss the results. In a fourth section, I explore the robustness of the findings to different models and alternative explanations. In the final section, I conclude, discussing the implications of my findings and identifying avenues for future research.

### 1.1. The effects of decentralization

Over the past 40 years, decentralization reforms have swept across countries around the globe. Countries have reallocated responsibilities, resources and decision-making authority on administrative, fiscal and political matters from the central government at the national level to the subnational level.<sup>5</sup> In Western Europe, decentralization has been a profoundly asymmetrical process, to an extent not seen in other areas of the world. Thirteen countries have enacted decentralization reforms since 1970, with wide variation in the degree and timing of the competency transfers. More atypically when compared globally, the nature, extent, and timing of those reforms have also varied within countries; some subnational regions have gained directly elected assemblies with significant fiscal, administrative and policymaking powers (e.g., Catalonia, Galicia, Scotland, Sicilia) whereas others have been granted fewer competencies (e.g., Basque Country, Wales, Abruzzo) or no regional assembly at all (e.g., English regions).

Given the significance of these shifts in powers, scholars have explored the impact of decentralization on a variety of political outcomes,<sup>6</sup> including the vote share of the ethnoterritorial parties that demanded these reforms. Massetti and Schakel (2013) and Meguid (2015) find that ethnoterritorial parties lose support in national elections following the enactment of significant levels of decentralization. Massetti and Schakel (2013) further argue that this effect is mediated by the issue demands of the ethnoterritorial party, with the vote share of pro-autonomy parties altered more than that of parties desiring regional independence.

These previous findings offer support for the claim that decentralization appeases voters of ethnoterritorial parties in national elections. However, it remains an open question as to whether this effect on ethnic vote is caused solely by voters abandoning the ethnoterritorial party once their policy demand is met, or because, in the changed institutional environment where subnational governments have become more important, ethnoterritorial parties reduce the number of candidates they field in national elections. Shedding light on this question is the focus of this article.

That parties might engage in a strategy of selectively entering (or exiting) districts is not implausible. As noted in this article's introduction, Potter (2013) finds that 75% of parties contesting national elections across 40 democracies do not run candidates in all districts. Among ethnoterritorial parties in the nine Western European democracies examined in this article, parties fail to contest all districts in a region in 74% of the region-election year observations. Likewise, a party's decision to contest districts is not fixed over time. New parties emerge. Existing parties make decisions to contest new districts or regions, and, very importantly although understudied, parties sometimes choose to exit races.

#### 1.1.1. Party nationalization theories: the effect of decentralization on party contestation

Research on party nationalization offers some insights into the effects of decentralization on party entry. Focused on the heterogeneity of parties' vote shares across districts, these scholars argue that processes

<sup>5</sup> While each scholar maintains his or her own definition of decentralization, this statement captures the common understanding of the phenomenon shared by many. See O'Neill (2003); Rodden (2006); Falletti (2005). I define the more specific form of political decentralization 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. Following the definition given by Treisman (2000: 837), fiscal decentralization is "the allocation of greater revenue-raising authority and/or expenditure responsibilities to subnational levels of government."

<sup>6</sup> On decentralization's effects on macroeconomic performance, see, for example, Treisman (2000); Rodden (2006); Wibbels (2005). On corruption and political participation, see, respectively, Lederman et al. (2005) and Foweraker and Landman (2002). Examples of work on ethnic conflict include Brancati (2009); Roeder (2007); Horowitz (1985).

<sup>4</sup> An online appendix with supplementary tables is available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2018.01.001>.

of decentralization increase the incentives parties have to form and to field candidates (e.g., Jones and Mainwaring, 2003; Chhibber and Kollman, 2004; Morgenstern et al., 2009; Borz and de Miguel, 2017). For instance, decentralization transfers important policymaking powers from the national government to subnational governments.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Chhibber and Kollman (2004) argue, parties have less of a need to coordinate across districts to win control of the now-weaker national office, in order to affect policy. With subnational office more prominent, parties can develop around subnational interests. Using evidence from India, Great Britain, Canada and United States, they show that greater numbers of regional parties – parties of any ideological position that restrict their contestation to a given region, which includes regionalist parties – emerge and contest elections following periods of decentralization.<sup>8</sup>

Brancati (2009) arrives at a similar conclusion, but posits that a different mechanism is at work. She argues that decentralization reduces the costs of participating in national elections for the regional parties, who, she argues, formed to contest legislative elections at the newly strengthened or newly created regional level. Brancati concludes that decentralization, specifically those reforms that create directly elected regional legislative bodies, increases the number of regional parties. This, in turn, leads to an increase in the percentage of districts regional parties contest in national elections.

Although based on different mechanisms and, thus, different dimensions of decentralization, a common prediction about its effect on regional parties – regionalist parties included – emanates from this literature:

**H1.** As decentralization levels increase, entry levels of regionalist parties in national legislative elections increase.

### 1.1.2. Decentralization as a strategy of policy appeasement: the effect of decentralization on party contestation

The predictions of the party nationalization literature rest on the assumption that the main effect of decentralization on parties comes from the structural multiplication of important offices. But this is not the only dimension of decentralization critical for electoral politics, as the work on decentralization adoption points out (Rudolph and Thompson, 1989; Sorens, 2004; Meguid, 2008; Toubeau, 2011; Massetti and Schakel, 2013, 2017; Toubeau and Wagner, 2013, 2016). Decentralization reform is also a substantive policy goal prized by certain parties and their voters. Ethnoterritorial parties, in particular, are strong proponents of decentralization. Identified as actors embracing “a nationalism based on ethnic distinctiveness and territorial claims within established states” (Levi and Hechter, 1985: 128), ethnoterritorial parties have campaigned for greater regional autonomy, including the transfer of competencies and the establishment of directly elected representatives at the subnational level. This issue demand is the point of commonality across the party family and, for many parties and their voters, is seen as its single electoral *raison d'être*. As noted by Massetti and Schakel (2013: 801), the primary goal of the ethnoterritorial party in the national arena is to “exert pressure on the state in order to extract transfers of powers from the center to the periphery.”

While research on decentralization as a strategy of policy appeasement has not explored the reform's effects on party contestation, we can derive this literature's predictions from the logic of their argument. If we recognize that decentralization has a substantive policy dimension

<sup>7</sup> While not part of the party nationalization literature, scholars including O'Neill (2003, 2005) and Escobar-Lemmon (2003) also highlight the role of decentralization in bolstering subnational competencies. Their focus on the electoral effects of decentralization on governing parties and in countries without ethnoterritorial parties, however, reduces the applicability of their theory to this examination of ethnoterritorial party entry.

<sup>8</sup> Hug (2001: 115) makes a similar argument, yet finds that federalism decreases new party emergence.

and that ethnoterritorial parties and their voters are decentralization-seeking actors, the theory implies that ethnoterritorial parties are likely to engage in selective entry strategies. We expect them to contest national elections at high levels when decentralization is lacking. This is consistent with the empirical finding that ethnoterritorial parties have higher levels of national election vote share at lower levels of decentralization (Massetti and Schakel, 2013).

On the other hand, when national governments enact significant decentralization reforms – transferring administrative, fiscal and policy competencies from the national level to directly elected regional governments at the subnational level – ethnoterritorial parties can be expected to reduce their presence in national elections. The literature suggests that this shift away from the national arena is driven by two related mechanisms. First, the enactment of high levels of regional autonomy signifies the achievement of the ethnoterritorial party's national-level goal to advocate for and achieve self-government (Massetti and Schakel, 2013: 798). The party can then shift its focus to the newly created or strengthened subnational arena, contesting those elections in the hope of gaining control of the regional government (Gomez-Reino et al., 2006: 258). In other words, the appeasement argument does not expect the party to completely disappear from electoral politics – only to stop contesting national elections when its policy goals of decentralization for a particular region have been achieved (Massetti and Schakel, 2017: 436; Meguid, 2015).<sup>9</sup>

Second, this party flight from the national arena may be further encouraged by their increasingly weaker national-level election results. Meguid (2015) and Massetti and Schakel (2013) find that ethnoterritorial parties, and autonomy seeking parties in particular, lose vote share as levels of decentralization increase. This is consistent with this literature's argument that voters support ethnoterritorial parties on the basis of the regional autonomy issue (Meguid, 2008), and that once that policy demand is met, “the utility of continuing to support the single-issue ethnoterritorial party in national elections is significantly reduced” (Meguid, 2015: 382). Add to this the increased costs associated with having to contest multiple levels of elections – national elections and now the new regional ones created by decentralization – and it follows that decentralization should lead ethnoterritorial parties to reduce their participation in this electoral arena.

This negative relationship rests on the idea that decentralization is the culmination of the ethnoterritorial party's policy demands. However, not all ethnoterritorial parties will be equally satisfied, or appeased by decentralization. While there, no doubt, is diversity within each of these categories, the literature on decentralization as appeasement has drawn a clear distinction between autonomist and independence-desiring secessionist parties. Massetti and Schakel (2013) find that secessionist parties are less likely than autonomist parties to lose support following decentralization. Unlike autonomist parties whose ultimate goal may be decentralization, parties demanding regional independence may still find participating in national elections useful following decentralization, as a means to exert pressure to achieve their policy demands. Therefore, an additional hypothesis emerges, modifying the previous one. The two decentralization-as-appeasement-based hypotheses are:

**H2a.** As decentralization levels increase, entry levels of ethnoterritorial parties in national parliamentary elections will decrease.

**H2b.** As decentralization levels increase, secessionist parties will not reduce entry in national parliamentary elections as much as autonomist parties.

<sup>9</sup> In addition, the logic of the decentralization-as-appeasement argument implies that decentralization reforms to a region that the ethnoterritorial party does not identify with or advocate for should not alter the party's decision to contest elections in that “non-core” region (Massetti and Schakel, 2013). That dimension of the argument will be addressed in the party-level models.

While the above appeasement argument serves as the main counterpoint in the literature to the party nationalization-based claims, there is an alternative expectation of the effects of policy appeasement on ethnoterritorial parties' entry decisions: ethnoterritorial parties might be office seekers and decide to remain in the national arena despite achieving their policy demands. Their motivation might be office itself [the "income, prestige and power" cited by Downs (1957: 28)], or the continuing acquisition of "pork" to send to their constituents (e.g., Heller, 2002). The findings by Meguid (2008, 2015) and Massetti and Schakel (2013) – that ethnoterritorial party vote declines after significant decentralization – suggests that many voters perceive the utility of ethnoterritorial parties to be limited to decentralization enactment. That said, if this paper's analyses reveal that autonomist ethnoterritorial parties remain in national elections following significant decentralization (as the party nationalization literature also predicts), we will not be able to rule out ethnoterritorial party desire for office or pork.

## 1.2. Data

In order to test the effects of decentralization reforms on selective entry strategies, I assemble a data set of the decisions of ethnoterritorial parties to run (or not run) candidates in national legislative elections across the 144 regions of nine countries in Western Europe from 1974 to 2009. A country was included if it had at least one ethnoterritorial party contesting a national-level election as recorded in the *Global Elections Archive (GEA)*.<sup>10</sup> I follow the categorization of Western European ethnoterritorial parties of De Winter and Türsan (1998), Müller-Rommel (1998) and Gordin (2001), who identify as ethnoterritorial those parties that combine claims of cultural, ethnic, linguistic or territorial distinctiveness with demands for greater regional autonomy and view these issues as their primary focus.<sup>11</sup> Ethnoterritorial parties are included regardless of their peak vote, yielding a total of 121 parties across the nine countries.<sup>12</sup>

I aggregate party contestation decisions to the regional level because, unlike the standard national-level (e.g., Amorim Neto and Cox, 1997; Bernauer and Bochsler, 2011) or even the more recent district-level analyses of party entry (e.g., Selb and Pituctin, 2010; Potter, 2013), the region is the geographic level at which decentralization reforms vary across and within these countries.

To prevent the introduction of selection bias by restricting the analysis to only those parties that chose to contest elections in a given region, the initial analyses examine ethnoterritorial party national election contestation rates for every region in a given country.<sup>13</sup> The dependent variable is the percent of districts in a subnational region<sup>14</sup> contested by ethnoterritorial parties in a given national lower-house

<sup>10</sup> These selection criteria result in the inclusion of Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Because district contestation is measured at the regional level, countries with one nationwide district, such as the Netherlands, are necessarily excluded. The elections included in the analyses vary within this time frame by country, based on the availability of constituency-level data from the *Global Elections Archive (GEA)*, supplemented with data from *CLEA* for missing years. See the *Supplementary Appendix* for further information.

<sup>11</sup> Following the literature, regional versions of mainstream parties, such as the CSU in Germany or the PS/SP in Belgium, and regional versions of niche parties, including the Flemish Greens (AGALEV), are not coded as ethnoterritorial.

<sup>12</sup> Parties that ran as part of non-ethnic electoral coalitions in which the individual party contestation and vote share were not reported are not included.

<sup>13</sup> To confirm that these results characterize the entry and exit decisions of individual parties, I supplement these region-level analyses with party-level models of contestation for the set of ethnoterritorial parties that did emerge in a given region during the time period under analysis. These results are reported in Section 1.4.

<sup>14</sup> Following Hooghe et al. (2010) and the NUTS classification, subnational regions are defined as the territorial units situated between the local and national governments with an average population size greater than 150,000. Where there are multiple tiers of government, I use the highest regional tier as defined by Hooghe et al. for which national and subnational election data were available.

legislative election. For ease of interpretation, I multiply the resulting percentages by 100 to arrive at a dependent variable ranging from 0 to 100. For those countries in which there is more than one ethnoterritorial party contesting a given election in a region, the value of the dependent variable reflects the total number of districts contested by at least one ethnoterritorial party.

### 1.2.1. Explanatory variables

The main factor of interest in this analysis is the level of decentralization in a region. For this analysis, I use the measures of decentralization of Hooghe et al. (2016). These data have several advantages over other existing decentralization measures (e.g., Arzaghi and Henderson, 2005; Brancati, 2009; Lane and Ersson, 1999; Treisman, 2002). First, the Hooghe et al. data provide measures of the various administrative, policymaking, fiscal, and institutional facets of decentralization; this disaggregation is critical for correctly testing the predictions offered, as well as adjudicating between the mechanisms proposed, by the existing literature. Second, their measures have the desirable and unique properties of being calculated yearly and at the regional level for all regions in every country in this analysis. With this data, I can therefore capture the asymmetrical decentralization within countries as well as the intertemporal changes in decentralization levels that characterize the Western European decentralization process.

To examine the influence of decentralization on party contestation patterns, I initially employ Hooghe et al.'s (2016) *Regional Authority Index (RAI)*.<sup>15</sup> However, to better understand the specific drivers behind decentralization's effects and to examine those dimensions of decentralization highlighted in the literature, I disaggregate the *RAI* variable into its constituent measures of policy competency, legislative representation, executive representation and shared rule. The competency variable (*Competency*) measures regional control over administrative, policy, fiscal, and borrowing matters. The measures of representation capture a region's ability to directly elect its legislative (*Assembly*) and executive (*Executive*) branches. In contrast to the focus of these three measures on a region's authority over its own territory – the traditional focus of the political science literature on decentralization – *Shared Rule* captures the degree to which a regional government controls national affairs.

While the party nationalization theory expects a positive relationship and the decentralization appeasement posits a negative relationship between decentralization and contestation, each author's predictions focus on different components of that reform. Crediting the creation of a directly elected regional legislature as the mechanism linking decentralization to party entry (2009: 16), Brancati specifically expects a positive relationship between contestation rates and the level of *Assembly*. Chhibber and Kollman (2004) and the decentralization-as-appeasement theories, on the other hand, focus on decentralization's transfer of important competencies to the subnational level of government, albeit with opposite predictions; the former expects positive effects of *Competency* and *Assembly* on entry, the latter, negative effects. The variables of *Executive* and *Shared Rule* are included for comprehensiveness; however, neither of these literature has remarked on the effect of a regionally controlled executive or regional control over national government on party contestation of lower-house legislative elections.

Hypothesis 2b states that the relationship between decentralization and ethnoterritorial party entry is further mediated by the policy goals of the ethnoterritorial party. To differentiate between pro-autonomy and pro-secessionist ethnoterritorial parties, I employ the classification system of Massetti and Schakel (2013). From their data, I create a dummy variable coded 1 if a secessionist party is one of the ethnoterritorial parties contesting that election in the region and 0,

<sup>15</sup> Descriptive statistics of all the variables employed in the analysis are presented in the *Supplementary Appendix*.

otherwise. The ideological coding of a particular party can and does vary across elections. It is important to note that this variable specification likely undercounts the presence of secessionist parties in the analysis; Massetti and Schakel only provide codings for a subset of the ethnoterritorial parties in my dataset. And, as a result, the residual category of autonomist party (coded “0”) probably includes some uncoded secessionist parties. In the absence of more comprehensive alternative sources of information,<sup>16</sup> I employ this variable in my unrestricted region-level analyses.<sup>17</sup> As reported in Section 1.4, I also test party-level models of contestation limited to the parties in Massetti and Schakel’s dataset.

Beyond decentralization, the literature has identified a number of supply- and demand-based factors thought to affect a political party’s decision to field candidates. Starting with the assumption that parties are strategic actors who have finite resources and who seek to maximize their goal of votes or office, scholars of party formation have focused on the structural factors that make office attainment more or less difficult for a party. It has been argued that new parties are more likely to contest legislative elections in systems with more permissive electoral rules and lower electoral thresholds, either conditional or not upon the degree of societal heterogeneity in a polity (see, in general, Duverger, 1972; Amorim Neto and Cox, 1997; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Clark and Golder, 2006; and on regional parties specifically, Brancati, 2009; Selb and Pituctin, 2010; Bernauer and Bochsler, 2011). To control for the effect of national electoral systems on party entry decisions, I include a measure of the *Average District Magnitude* for the region.

The research on multi-level elections and electoral coattails suggests that the costs of, and therefore, the likelihood of, fielding candidates should also be affected by the simultaneity of other elections. Scholars (e.g., Fabre, 2010) have found that ethnoterritorial parties receive higher vote shares in national elections held at the same time as regional elections. To test for a comparable effect on party contestation, I include a *Concurrence* variable, coded 1 if a national election is held on the same day as a regional election and 0, otherwise.

I include a measure of the direct costs of contesting electoral districts. We might expect the entry decisions of parties – especially resource-constrained parties – to be affected by the existence of laws requiring a party to pay in advance a nonrefundable fee or a reimbursable candidate deposit to contest a given district (Cole, 1992; Hug, 2001).<sup>18</sup> Data on the precise monetary amount of these requirements across Western European countries and over time is largely unavailable. I however construct a *Fees and Deposits* variable, coded 1 for those countries in which such requirements exist and 0, otherwise.

The aforementioned variables are thought to influence the supply of parties. Research on party emergence also argues that entry is a product of voter demand. Inspired by the work of Lipset and Rokkan (1967) and more recently Bernauer and Bochsler (2011) on ethnic minority party entry, I include a measure of ethnic heterogeneity by region. In the absence of regional time-series data on ethnic heterogeneity, I use van Houten and Fearon’s *Langdif* variable which captures the extent to which a region’s historical language differs from the language of the center. Across the regions of Western Europe, the value of this variable ranges from zero (the historical regional language is the same as that of the center) to one (there is no relationship between the two languages).<sup>19</sup> The expectation is that the degree of ethnic diversity in a society should be positively related to ethnoterritorial party entry.

<sup>16</sup> While an important resource, the EPAC dataset (Szöcsik and Zuber, 2012) on ethnonationalism in party competition does not capture cross-time variation in autonomist versus secessionist preferences of parties, and it excludes three of the nine Western European countries with ethnoterritorial parties included in this analysis.

<sup>17</sup> The potential inclusion of secessionist parties in the autonomy category should, if anything, bias the results against my predictions.

<sup>18</sup> While the fee is not refundable, a candidate deposit is reimbursable if the party’s vote in that district surpasses a given threshold.

<sup>19</sup> The van Houten and Fearon measure comes from Sorens (2008).

Lastly, I include the lagged ethnoterritorial party national legislative election vote share in a region, to test the argument that a party is more likely to continue to contest a district when its past effort is rewarded, or, conversely, that it will abandon districts when its past performance is poor.

### 1.3. Models and analyses

To test the effect of decentralization reform on ethnoterritorial parties’ decisions to enter or exit national elections, I estimate multi-level random intercept models. 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 (Gelman and Hill, 2007; Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal, 2012). Thus, while taking account of the hierarchical structure of the data, we can assess the cross-time dynamics of party contestation presented in the hypotheses.

In Table 1, I report the estimates of models of the full set of party contestation observations which measure ethnoterritorial party national election participation rates per region for every region.<sup>20</sup> These models allow us to calculate the impact of party-level, region-level and country-level factors, while accounting for the unmeasured effects in region and country levels. Model 1 examines the effect of the overall level of decentralization on the percentage of districts contested in a region. In Model 2, I disaggregate decentralization into its constituent components to see their individual effects.

The results of the analyses reveal a nuanced effect of decentralization reforms on ethnoterritorial parties decisions to contest national level elections. As shown in Model 1, the undifferentiated *RAI* measure of decentralization, which includes measures of both regional control over its territory and the less commonly studied regional control over national government, does not have a statistically significant effect. However, when we look at its constituent parts in Model 2, a different story emerges. The variables of *Assembly* and *Competency* – two key dimensions of decentralization highlighted in the literature – decrease ethnoterritorial party contestation. Based on the estimates from Model 2, each additional unit of *Competency* reduces the percentage of districts contested in a given region by 4.2 percentage points. The effect of each unit of the *Assembly* variable is a decline in the percentage of districts contested by 12.1 percentage points.<sup>21</sup> Consistent with the understanding of decentralization as appeasement and the prediction presented in H2a, the regression results suggest that ethnoterritorial parties reduce the percentage of districts they contest as their policy goals of greater regional competencies and legislative representation are implemented in a given region. These effects run counter to both the broad expectations (as embodied in H1) and the specific variable relationships identified by the party nationalization literature. They also do not support the predictions of the office or pork hypotheses.

That said, the results do reveal that an aspect of decentralization – the *Executive* variable – is positively correlated with ethnoterritorial party entry. As reported in Model 2, ethnoterritorial party contestation is higher the more independently selected the regional executive. And this effect is substantially significant, even with the small range of this variable’s values; a one unit increase in the *Executive* variable leads to an increase in the number of districts contested by 30.3 percentage points. Given that the entry-boosting mechanism of decentralization that Brancati (2009) identified focused only on legislative representation, the positive effect of the

<sup>20</sup> These analyses are rerun with multilevel models of party-level contestation for the subset of ethnoterritorial parties that did contest national elections in a given region. The similar results are discussed in Section 1.4.

<sup>21</sup> With the mean change in the percentage of districts contested being 1.71 percentage points and the range of *Competency* and *Assembly* being 1–14 and 0–2 respectively, the entry-reducing effect of decentralization reforms is substantively important.

**Table 1**  
Models of party contestation for all ethnoterritorial parties.

	Model 1	Model 2
RAI	0.221 (0.343)	
Competency		- 4.214*** (0.994)
Assembly		- 12.079* (5.994)
Executive		30.329*** (4.627)
Shared rule		0.968 (0.993)
Ethnic heterogeneity	- 10.932* (6.345)	- 8.218 (6.295)
Concurrence	- 0.115 (6.878)	2.850 (6.650)
Vote share <sub>t-1</sub>	160.635*** (17.003)	143.526*** (17.230)
Average district magnitude	0.765*** (0.123)	0.745*** (0.120)
Candidate Fees & Deposits	13.582 (22.598)	25.838 (16.302)
Intercept	19.687 (12.061)	23.584* (9.698)
Random Effect: Country	737.017	344.165
Random Effect: Region	154.216	159.239
Random Effect: Residual	739.929	679.676
Log Likelihood	- 5054.5832	- 5011.7713
N	1053	1053
Number of Regions	144	144
Number of Countries	9	9

Notes: \*\*\*p ≤ .001, \*\*p ≤ .01, \*p ≤ .1. Dependent variable is the percent of districts contested by ethnoterritorial parties in a region. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Results are based on multilevel analyses with random intercepts for the country and region levels of the data.

*Executive* variable can be seen as offering some support only for Chhibber and Kollman's (2004) party nationalization argument. Lastly, as shown in Model 2, there is no statistically significant effect of *Shared Rule* on ethnoterritorial party entry.

Models 1–2 consider the behavior of the entire set of ethnoterritorial parties. Recall, however, that the appeasement argument distinguishes between the expected effect of decentralization on autonomy-seeking versus independence-seeking parties. It posits that ethnoterritorial parties are only likely to change their contestation strategies if they are satisfied with the decentralization reforms enacted in the region. If they are not satisfied, and they believe that the national government can be pressured into extending additional reforms to that region, they would not be expected to withdraw from national politics.<sup>22</sup> As argued by the appeasement theory and summarized in Hypothesis 2b, secessionist parties are likely to find themselves in this latter camp. Desiring regional independence, the secessionist parties would be less likely to exit national-level elections than pro-autonomy parties.<sup>23</sup>

Even before turning to regression analyses, a glance at the data suggests support for this claim. Secessionist parties almost always engage in full entry strategies, regardless of the level of decentralization; they fully contest all districts in a region in 97% of the observations in the full set of ethnoterritorial parties included in the models of Table 1. The same pattern is not found among the set of ethnoterritorial parties demanding greater regional autonomy. Autonomist parties only fully contest districts in 19% of the observations. And this full contestation is

<sup>22</sup> This argument and expectation of no effect on party exit would also be consistent with the pork-acquiring story of ethnoterritorial party competition. However, the prediction of that pork story should equally apply to autonomist parties as well. Models 5–6 in Table 2 reveal that this expectation is not supported.

<sup>23</sup> Note that the party nationalization story makes no distinction based on the ideology of the regional party.

**Table 2**  
Models of party contestation by type of ethnoterritorial party.

	Secessionist Parties		Autonomist Parties	
	Model 3 (based on Model 1)	Model 4 (based on Model 2)	Model 5 (based on Model 1)	Model 6 (based on Model 2)
RAI	0.034 (0.199)		0.510 (0.393)	
Competency		0.727 (0.961)		- 4.558*** (1.069)
Assembly		1.076 (5.742)		- 15.988* (6.372)
Executive		- 2.913 (5.727)		32.985*** (4.709)
Shared rule		- 0.204 (0.759)		2.906* (1.162)
Ethnic heterogeneity	12.333 (11.152)	11.277 (10.731)	- 20.374*** (5.723)	- 17.694*** (5.545)
Concurrence	2.689 (5.343)	1.864 (5.632)	- 0.253 (7.121)	1.445 (6.819)
Vote share <sub>t-1</sub>	4.022 (15.759)	7.239 (16.335)	214.327*** (18.971)	186.555*** (19.189)
Average district magnitude	0.291 (0.235)	0.252 (0.247)	0.486*** (0.110)	0.452*** (0.106)
Candidate Fees & Deposits	- 17.545 (15.680)	- 20.211 (17.065)	10.220 (21.809)	28.456* (16.719)
Intercept	83.556*** (10.983)	84.260*** (12.194)	15.548 (12.061)	20.624* (10.172)
Random Effect: Country	222.741	239.952	667.807	356.281
Random Effect: Region	137.973	122.230	78.051	76.051
Random Effect: Residual	80.057	81.404	679.137	618.290
Log Likelihood	- 380.2164	- 379.8003	- 4530.0434	- 4484.8575
N	97	97	956	956
Number of Regions	33	33	139	139
Number of Countries	6	6	9	9

Notes: \*\*\*p ≤ .001, \*\*p ≤ .01, \*p ≤ .1. Dependent variable is the percent of districts contested by ethnoterritorial parties in a region. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Results are based on multilevel analyses with random intercepts for the country and region levels of the data.

associated with the *absence*, not presence, of decentralization. Among autonomist parties, a comparison of the mean *Competency* levels of those fully entering versus those selectively entering districts reveals that autonomist parties are more likely to fully enter at lower levels of decentralization.<sup>24</sup>

These trends continue to hold when I test H2b in multiple variable, multilevel regression analyses. Table 2 presents the results of the models conducted separately for the secessionist parties (Models 3–4) and for the autonomist parties (Models 5–6). As shown by the results of Models 3 and 4, decentralization level has an insignificant effect on secessionist party entry. This result holds when examining the overall RAI level and the individual components of decentralization. Consistent with the appeasement story and in contrast to the expectations of the party nationalization and pork-based explanations, when not receiving policies matching their demands, the pro-independence ethnoterritorial parties remain in the national electoral arena.

Decentralization-seeking ethnoterritorial parties, on the other hand, are adjusting their entry strategies based on the transfer of powers to subnational authorities. As with the all-ethnoterritorial-party Model 2 in Table 1, the *Competency* and *Assembly* components of decentralization continue to have negative and statistically significant effects in

<sup>24</sup> The same relationships hold when comparing secessionist versus autonomist parties in the more restricted party-level models described in Section 1.4.

Model 6 consistent with the appeasement story. The substantive effects of the variables remain high, with values similar to the levels seen in the undifferentiated models of Table 1. Model 6 also continues to show the entry-boosting effect of a regionally selected executive (*Executive*). *Shared rule* now also emerges as a significant, positive predictor of contestation, with greater regional control over national government estimated to increase an ethnoterritorial party's level of participation in national elections. This finding, like that for the *Executive* variable, is unexpected by any of the existing scholarship, warranting future investigation.

The aggregate-level results are echoed in the entry decisions of individual ethnoterritorial parties in regions across Western Europe. For example, demanding greater regional autonomy in the form of federalism for Wallonia, Belgium, Rassemblement Wallon (RW) contested 85% of the districts in Wallonia prior to the increase of regional competencies in 1989. Following that reform, the party decreased its participation to only 23% of the districts. That number fell to zero after the further decentralization of competencies and assembly powers to Wallonia in 1995. On the other hand, we see that secessionist parties do not withdraw from national politics as levels of decentralization to the region increase. The pro-independence Scottish National Party, for instance, maintained its full contestation of Scottish parliamentary districts following the creation of a directly elected regional assembly with significant policy scope and fiscal autonomy in 1999. The party nationalization theories cannot account for this outcome, as they expect all ethnoterritorial parties to be equally motivated by the office multiplication of increased decentralization, whether measured in terms of competencies and/or legislative representation.

Beyond demonstrating the effect of decentralization reforms on party contestation patterns, Models 1–6 provide evidence that other factors affect the supply of and demand for ethnoterritorial party entry. As expected, the percentage of districts contested by an ethnoterritorial party increases with the average district magnitude of a region; this result in Models 1–2 and 5–6 is consistent with the claim that parties are strategic entrants of electoral contests, seeking to maximize their chances of office and numbers of seats (e.g., Duverger, 1972; Amorim Neto and Cox, 1997; Bernauer and Bochsler, 2011; Lublin, 2017).<sup>25</sup> In these same models, I also find that the lagged vote share has a significant positive effect: parties contest national elections at higher levels in their electoral strongholds, or conversely, run candidates in fewer districts as their voter support wanes.

In terms of other statistically significant results, it is somewhat surprising to find that the measure of candidate fees and deposits is positively correlated with entry patterns, albeit only statistically significant in Model 6. Similarly unexpected, the linguistic heterogeneity of a region – an indicator of societal demand for ethnoterritorial parties – emerges as negatively and significantly correlated with the percentage of districts contested in Models 1, 5, and 6. However, it is important to remember that both of these variables are time invariant, and therefore behave like regional fixed effects, revealing more about the average level of contestation in a region, rather than capturing its changes in level over time. Lastly, across all the models, I find that the concurrence of regional with national elections has no statistically significant effect on national-election contestation patterns, *ceteris paribus*.

#### 1.4. Sensitivity analyses

I perform several tests to evaluate the robustness of the models and findings.<sup>26</sup> To confirm that the results in Tables 1 and 2 characterize the entry and exit decisions of individual parties as posited by the

<sup>25</sup> The insignificant effect of this variable in the secessionist models (Models 3–4) either reflects the nonstrategic nature of these parties or else stems from the lack of variation in the dependent variable among those parties.

<sup>26</sup> See the Supplementary Appendix for the results of the sensitivity analyses.

hypotheses, I replicate the unrestricted region-level analysis with party-level multilevel models of contestation. These models are run on the set of ethnoterritorial parties that did emerge in a given region at some point during the time period under analysis and for which data on their individual decentralization preferences (Massetti and Schakel, 2013) is available. The dependent variable in these analyses is the percentage of districts in the region contested by a given ethnoterritorial party. The analysis has a hierarchical structure involving 40 parties nested in 25 regions, and clustered in six countries. I provide further details of the model specification and the results in the Supplementary Appendix. Despite the much smaller N, the models yield similar findings to the analyses in Tables 1 and 2: decentralization exerts a negative effect on autonomist party contestation, as captured in the coefficients of the *RAI*, *Competency* and *Assembly* variables, although the *Assembly* coefficient fails to achieve statistical significance. The *Executive* variable also continues to have a positive coefficient. Consistent with the previous unrestricted analysis, decentralization has no statistically significant effect on secessionist party contestation.

Second, I rerun the analyses with an alternative measure of the dependent variable. Given the party nationalization literature's focus on party entry versus party absence, I recode the dependent variable as a binary variable coded 0 for no contestation and 1 for any level of contestation. Results of multilevel logit models continue to support my conclusions about the power of decentralization reforms to drive down autonomist party contestation.<sup>27</sup>

Third, I test for an alternative explanation of the finding that autonomist parties exit as decentralization increases, whereas secessionist parties remain in the national electoral contest. Given that Massetti and Schakel's coding of ethnoterritorial parties allows for parties to change ideology over time, it is theoretically possible that the differential contestation patterns observed are being driven by the re-categorization of parties from autonomist to secessionist in the data and the corresponding removal of those observations from Models 5 and 6, rather than an actual shift in the parties' electoral behavior after the achievement of significant decentralization. A close examination of the data reveals that most autonomist parties did not revise their goals and become secessionist parties following significant decentralization reforms. To test systematically for the impact of any change in party classification on the results, I re-estimate the models including a variable capturing change in party secessionist ideology from the prior election.<sup>28</sup> The change of party ideology variable does have a statistically significant effect on party entry in Models 1, 2, 5 and 6,<sup>29</sup> although not in the secessionist models (3 and 4). But, despite the inclusion of the change in party ideology variable, the entry-altering effects of decentralization on ethnoterritorial parties persist in these new models.<sup>30</sup>

Fourth, I examine the implications of decentralization as an endogenous institution for the relationships examined in this manuscript. Specifically, if decentralization reforms result from ethnoterritorial party threat, as the appeasement literature states, then it is possible that the conditions leading to decentralization, namely high levels of ethnoterritorial party vote, rather than the reform itself are driving the subsequent level of strategic entry under examination in this paper. These concerns are allayed by the results of my analyses. First, the statistically significant effects of decentralization emerge despite my controlling for lagged ethnoterritorial party vote share in all the models. Second, the signs of the decentralization variables run counter to expectation if they were merely proxies for electoral conditions prior

<sup>27</sup> Moreover *Shared Rule* is no longer statistically significant in the logit version of Model 6.

<sup>28</sup> The variable takes the value of  $-1$  when the party becomes autonomist, 0 when there is no change in party ideology, and  $+1$  when the party becomes secessionist.

<sup>29</sup> The variable exhibits a positive and significant effect in Models 1 and 2 and a negative and significant effect in Models 5 and 6.

<sup>30</sup> The signs and statistical significance of the decentralization variables do not change, except that the coefficient of *Shared rule* becomes statistically significant in Model 2.

to institutional reform. The appeasement theory of decentralization adoption predicts that high levels of ethnoterritorial party support prompt high levels of decentralization. This is more likely with *high*, not low, levels of party contestation. And yet, the results of this article show that, for autonomist parties, high levels of decentralization (i.e., *Competency* and *Assembly*) will be followed by low levels of party contestation. More analyses need to be conducted, but the inconsistencies in the logic between these expectations and my results boost our confidence in the paper's conclusions.

Fifth, I check the robustness of the results by including as controls the number of ethnoterritorial parties that contested the last election<sup>31</sup> and the number of legislative seats for the region.<sup>32</sup> I also replace the *Shared Rule* index with one of its components specifically measuring the constitutional status of decentralization (*Tier\_Constit*).<sup>33</sup> I also rerun the models excluding the time-invariant ethnic heterogeneity and candidate fees variables. Lastly, I replicate the analyses including the percentage of districts contested in the previous election variable to test the claim by *Potter (2013)* that a party is more likely to contest districts where it has already established a campaign infrastructure.<sup>34</sup> None of these changes affects the main conclusions.

### 1.5. Discussion

This paper has begun the investigation into what shapes the decision of political parties to enter or exit individual election districts. Specifically, the focus has been on the contestation patterns of ethnoterritorial parties, regionally oriented actors who campaign for greater regional autonomy and beyond. This article has shown that decentralization reforms affect the national election contestation decisions of ethnoterritorial parties. Consistent with the predictions of the decentralization-as-appeasement theories, but not the party nationalization or pork-based explanations, I find that the deepening of a region's fiscal, political and administrative competencies and the creation of a directly elected regional legislature lead to exit for ethnoterritorial parties demanding decentralization. This result is consistent with the argument that ethnoterritorial parties react to the achievement of their pro-regional-autonomy policy goal and their ensuing national electoral decline by shifting their electoral contestation strategy away from the weakening national arena.<sup>35</sup> Similarly supportive of this logic, the analyses show that pro-independence parties, who are arguably unsatisfied by the reforms enacted, continue to pursue universal entry patterns. Unanticipated by the existing literature,<sup>36</sup> the analyses also reveal that the ability to directly elect or select the regional executive and, in some models, to have greater control over national politics boosts ethnoterritorial party entry in national legislative elections.

The analyses of this article further highlight that the contestation

<sup>31</sup> The lagged number of ethnoterritorial parties is positive, as expected, and statistically significant in Models 1–2 and 5–6. The effects of the decentralization variables remain unchanged, with the exception that *Shared rule* is no longer statistically significant in Model 6.

<sup>32</sup> The effects of the decentralization variables do not change. Moreover, in contrast to *Brancati's* claim (2009: 199, 217), there is no evidence that ethnoterritorial parties are being driven by an efficiency incentive to contest regions with more seats at higher levels. Indeed, the coefficient, when statistically significant, is negative.

<sup>33</sup> I find that autonomist parties are not more likely to withdraw from national politics if the region has control over, or at least veto power with regard to, the constitutional or statutory terms of its decentralization relationship with the national government.

<sup>34</sup> This argument could not be tested in the main models as introducing a lagged dependent variable to multilevel models can lead to severe bias. While the LDV is positive and statistically significant in Models 1, 2, 5, and 6, its inclusion does not change the effects of the decentralization variables.

<sup>35</sup> The expected corollary to this effect is the increasing of ethnoterritorial party contestation of elections to the newly strengthened *subnational* governments. This is the focus of another paper.

<sup>36</sup> While most of the evidence runs contrary to the vote-boosting mechanisms by the party nationalization theories, the positive effect of the *Executive* variable may be consistent with at least a broad interpretation of *Chhibber* and *Kollman's* causal theory.

strategy of ethnoterritorial parties also varies by subnational region. In other words, ethnoterritorial parties are making conscious decisions to pull back in regions with more competencies, and not in regions lacking policy or fiscal autonomy. As the regression results also suggest, these parties' decisions are not merely a reflection of (or a reaction to) the deep ethnic heritage of the region or the party's electoral strongholds in national elections; even when ethnic heterogeneity or a party's prior vote are controlled for, the degree of decentralization emerges as a strong and statistically significant factor governing regional contestation patterns. With their eyes on the prize of regional, as opposed to national, government, this paper suggests that ethnoterritorial parties choose their national contests based on satisfaction with decentralization and declines in national governmental power over a region.<sup>37</sup>

The findings of this article contribute to the ongoing debate over the effect of decentralization on ethnic conflict and ethnic politicization. Some of the previous work on regional parties has argued that decentralization fans the flames of ethnic discontent (e.g., *Roeder, 2007; Brancati, 2009*). We see this effect in the case of the always-contesting secessionist parties; they continue to politicize their ethnic-based demands in the national arena despite decentralization. However, this paper also shows that reforms establishing greater regional control over administrative, fiscal and policy-making matters and legislative representation depress *autonomist* party electoral engagement in national elections. Thus, this paper suggests that whether decentralization is an ethnic palliative – in Western Europe and perhaps beyond – may depend on the congruence of the type of institutional reforms and the policy goals of the relevant ethnoterritorial parties; the satisfaction of party demands reduces party presence in the national electoral arena. Such propositions invite further research.

### Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### Acknowledgements

This paper was presented at the 2016 Meetings of the American Political Science Association and the Midwest Political Science Association, at the Arizona State University, and at the Conference of Europeanists, Paris, France, July 2015. I am grateful to the helpful comments of two anonymous reviewers. I would like to thank Arjan Schakel for sharing data. I am grateful to discussants and panel attendees for their comments, in particular Francesc Amat, Sarah Shair-Rosenfield, and Guillermo Toral. I also thank Chitralakha Basu, Sergio Ascencio Bonfil, Peter Haschke, Matthew Jacobsmeier, Patrick Kuhn and Jessica Stoll for their work on the Multi-level Elections Database of European Regions (MEDER), on which this paper's analysis is based.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2018.01.001>.

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<sup>37</sup> These conclusions suggest that the party nationalization scholars' findings that federalism results in lower party nationalization measures (e.g., *Brancati, 2009; Morgenstern, 2017*) might be driven by and limited to the *non-ethnic* subset of regionally concentrated parties.



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