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TRANSFERRING POWER TO MAINTAIN CONTROL

Decentralization as a National-Level Electoral Strategy in Western Europe

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ABSTRACT

Why do national governments choose to transfer some of their administrative, political, and fiscal powers to regional authorities? This article develops and tests a nationally focused strategic account: decentralization is a targeted means to bolster a governing party's national-level electoral strength by appeasing the voters of threatening ethnoterritorial parties in national parliamentary elections. Statistical analyses of decentralization across the subnational regions of Western European countries confirm that governing parties transfer additional competencies to regions in which an ethnoterritorial party threat exists, when the government is legislatively vulnerable. In contrast, if a government is not dependent on a region for maintaining national parliamentary control, the presence of a strong ethnoterritorial opponent will not motivate the government to decentralize. These findings help to explain patterns of asymmetrical decentralization across regions within a country and why governing parties decentralize competencies to subnational governments that they do not expect to control.

WHY do existing governments choose to give away some of their powers to regional authorities? Given that scholars have assumed power maximization to be a central goal of political actors, it may seem puzzling that parties controlling the vast administrative, political, and fiscal competencies of a central government would be willing to transfer some of them to other levels of government. And yet over the past fifty years, countries across the globe have enacted decentralization reforms.¹ In Western Europe, for example, levels of decentralization to subnational regions changed in thirteen of sixteen countries between 1970 and 2009.² That said, the nature, extent, and even the direction

¹ The range of state structural reforms enacted globally has been wide, including the creation and endowment of new levels of government, from supranational to regional to municipal. The focus of this article is on the processes of decentralization to regional authorities within a country.

² For a full list of countries, see the supplementary material.

of regional reforms have varied across and within these countries, from the maintenance of centralized rule in Luxembourg to the creation (and sometimes the elimination) of regional assemblies with directly elected officeholders but varying administrative, policy-making, and tax-raising powers across regions of Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. And asymmetrical decentralization is fairly common: 48 percent of subnational regions in countries with decentralization reforms experienced decentralization levels different from another region in their country in at least one election year.

Explanations offered for why national governments voluntarily weaken their own power have often focused on decentralization's effect as a multiplier of powerful regional offices through which policy is created and enacted (that is, office multiplication theories of decentralization). Scholars have argued that governments decentralize either because it benefits the country in terms of efficiency, economics, or political stability,³ or because it benefits the governing party specifically by increasing the party's power at the newly strengthened regional level.⁴

Although popular, these office multiplication–based explanations leave important puzzles unsolved. The first set of theories suggests that the economic, political, and efficiency advantages of decentralization should be recognized and supported by all political actors in ethnically divided societies or countries with heterogeneous regional preferences. Yet support for regional decentralization schemes has varied across governments and over time within these countries, as cases from Belgium to Spain demonstrate. Moreover, national-level factors, such as country area and population examined by some scholars, and the country-level analyses conducted by others, cannot fully account for the differences in competencies extended to particular regions within a given country. Contra the second set of theories, research shows that political parties have consciously transferred significant powers to regions even when they anticipated faring poorly in subsequent subnational elections.⁵

In treating decentralization as just one of many forms of institutional rearrangement that parties can use to benefit themselves or their country, these theories downplay the importance of decentralization to voters. But especially in countries with ethnoterritorial parties, decentralization is also an explicit policy demand of those parties and their

³ E.g., Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly 1999; Panizza 1999; Bolton and Roland 1997; Stepan 1999; Stepan 2001; Garrett and Rodden 2003; Beramendi 2007; Beramendi 2013; Brancati 2009; Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010; Zuber 2011; Hooghe and Marks 2013; Hooghe and Marks 2016.

⁴ O'Neill 2003; O'Neill 2005; Escobar-Lemmon 2003; Sorens 2009.

⁵ E.g., Hopkin 2009; Colino and del Pino 2011; Massetti and Toubeau 2013; Meguid 2015.

voters. To help account for the pattern (the degree and timing) of decentralization reforms across regions, this article tests an alternative strategic explanation rooted in the exigencies of national-level party competition. Building on the observation that decentralization can be a form of policy appeasement,⁶ I develop a nationally focused strategic theory specifying the motivations behind and conditions under which governing parties give away their national competencies to regional levels of government. Specifically, I argue that vulnerable governing parties facing threatening ethnoterritorial parties in national-level elections will implement decentralization reforms in the specific regions contested by those ethnoterritorial parties in an effort to steal away their pro-decentralization voters in future elections. Thus, in contrast to work by Jason Sorens, Kathleen O'Neill, and Maria Escobar-Lemmon,⁷ I argue that the focus of the governing party is on bolstering its national, as opposed to subnational, electoral support. I furthermore contend that the degree of decentralization enacted in a region depends on the degree of governing party legislative vulnerability and the level of ethnoterritorial party threat, which vary by region. This theoretical story yields predictions of asymmetric decentralization—reforms that differ not only across countries, but also across regions within a country.⁸

I examine the appeasement theory using an original data set of 247 subnational regions in sixteen Western European countries from 1970 to 2009. Western Europe was chosen as the focus of this examination because of the wide cross-national and within-country variation in decentralization reforms as well as the presence of a range of strong and weak ethnoterritorial parties in its subnational regions. The analysis examines the origins of decentralization at the level of subnational regions, as it is the unit at which decentralization can (and often does) vary.

Consistent with the logic of decentralization as appeasement, I find governing parties transfer additional competencies to regions in which an ethnoterritorial party threat exists, but only when the governing party is legislatively vulnerable—that is, at risk of losing its parliamentary majority. The companion interactive relationship also holds. Decentralization reforms are extended to regions on whose seats the governing party depends for maintaining national parliamentary control, but only when an ethnoterritorial party threat exists. In the absence of either

⁶ Meguid 2008; Meguid 2015; Meguid 2018; Hopkin and van Houten 2009; Swenden and Madens 2009; Toubeau 2011; Lublin 2014.

⁷ Sorens 2009; O'Neill 2003; Escobar-Lemmon 2003.

⁸ This latter variation is unusual when considered globally and in light of existing theories.

high levels of ethnoterritorial party threat or governing party vulnerability, decentralization levels in a region do not increase.

These findings have important implications for the study of institutional reform. First, the article and its statistical analyses not only add to our knowledge of the factors driving changes in decentralization levels, they also provide an explanation for the specific pattern of asymmetrical regional decentralization common within countries of Europe but understudied by most cross-national work. I find that variation in the level of decentralization across regions is not simply a reflection of the size of a country or even its pattern of subnational ethnic or economic diversity; decentralization decisions are driven by regionally varying electoral conditions. Second, by recognizing the nationally focused appeasement motivation behind decentralization, this study allows us to understand the puzzle of why parties transfer powers to a level of government at which they expect to lose voter support. For instance, Labour Party elite in Britain adopted decentralization reforms in 1998 despite knowledge that it would disadvantage their candidates at the subnational level.⁹ Scholars note that this expectation was common across Western Europe.¹⁰ As this article suggests, the objective behind this ostensibly irrational decision was the maintenance of national, not regional, governmental control.

Beyond these empirical puzzles, my findings also speak to the larger debate in the literature on the causes versus the effects of decentralization. The results provide additional support for the claim that ethnoterritorial party vote share is a cause, rather than simply the effect, of greater regional decentralization.¹¹ That said, my conclusion that decentralization is a strategic reaction by governing parties vulnerable to ethnoterritorial party threat has implications for the predicted effects of decentralization reforms. If the strategy is successful in appeasing pro-decentralization voters, we should expect governing party support to increase and ethnoterritorial party support to decline in national elections following significant decentralization. These predictions—which run counter to the expectations of the office multiplication theories of Dawn Brancati, O'Neill, and Sorens—are consistent with the findings of Emanuele Massetti and Arjan Schakel and Bonnie Meguid.¹²

⁹ Hopkin 2009; Meguid 2008.

¹⁰ Hopkin 2009; Colino and del Pino 2011; Massetti and Toubeau 2013.

¹¹ Rokkan and Urwin 1982; De Winter and Türsan 1998; Lublin 2012; although see Kollman and Worthington 2021 on the broader debate related to party system nationalization that extends beyond ethnoterritorial parties.

¹² Brancati 2009; O'Neill 2003; Sorens 2009; Massetti and Schakel 2013; Meguid 2015.

WHY, WHEN, AND TO WHAT EXTENT DECENTRALIZE?
PAST ARGUMENTS

Uncovering the origins of decentralization has been the focus of a wide range of research across the social sciences. Scholars have sought to understand why governments reallocate responsibilities, resources, and decision-making authority on administrative, fiscal, and political matters away from the central government at the national level to the subnational level, often with a focus on the regional level.¹³ Two broad sets of explanations have emerged that focus on decentralization's role as a strategy to create additional important regional offices. The first identifies decentralization as a structure benefitting the welfare of a country, whereas the second sees such reforms as benefitting governmental parties at the subnational level.

Country-level benefits have been differently construed by various scholars. For those researchers coming out of the economics tradition, decentralization is a means to achieve efficiency gains in heterogeneous environments. Based on the fiscal federalism literature,¹⁴ scholars have suggested that governments will decentralize to maximize social welfare by more efficiently satisfying the divergent policy preferences of culturally or sectorally distinct groups.¹⁵ Similar arguments have been extended to address economic inequality across regions within a country.¹⁶ The desirability of decentralizing decision-making powers to smaller units is likewise highlighted by scholars who point to the disadvantages of information sharing and governmental responsiveness in large unitary countries,¹⁷ although disagreement exists about whether the effect stems from overall area or population size.¹⁸

Within the European context, the degree of European integration has likewise been advanced as having a positive effect on the likelihood and desirability of decentralization.¹⁹ These scholars argue that the economic risks of regionalization are lower in an environment in which a supranational organization controls economic policies and that the EU

¹³ Although each scholar maintains his or her own definition of regional decentralization, this statement captures the common understanding of the phenomenon shared by many; O'Neill 2003; O'Neill 2005; Rodden 2006; Falleti 2005.

¹⁴ E.g., Tiebout 1956; Inman and Rubinfeld 1992; Oates 1999.

¹⁵ Alesina and Spolaore 1997; Alesina, Baqir, and Easterly 1999; Alesina, Baqir, and Hoxby 2004; Schakel 2010.

¹⁶ Bolton and Roland 1997; Beramendi 2007; Beramendi 2012; Stegarescu 2009.

¹⁷ Ostrom and Ostrom 1977; Hooghe and Marks 2013; Hooghe and Marks 2016.

¹⁸ On the former, see Panizza 1999; Garrett and Rodden 2003. For work on the latter, see Hooghe and Marks 2013; Hooghe and Marks 2016.

¹⁹ Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010, 59; Jolly 2015.

has also provided economic incentives for the creation and strengthening of regional governments. Turning to more political arguments, the literature on ethnic conflict and secession likewise touts decentralization's role as a means of holding together ethnically divided societies.²⁰

The second set of explanations explicitly recognizes decentralizing governments as power-seeking actors. Proponents of this approach argue that decentralization is a strategy to consolidate the power of governing parties at the subnational level; decentralization reinforces the power—competencies and often fiscal resources—of subnational government, thereby increasing the importance of subnational offices. Analyzing case studies of five Western European countries, Sorens finds that mainstream parties facing a decline in their national parliamentary vote share advocate decentralization reforms if they are popular electorally at the subnational level.²¹ O'Neill and Escobar-Lemmon arrive at similar conclusions about the role of subnational electoral concerns in their studies of decentralization in Latin America; although, unlike Sorens, they limit the applicability of their story to countries without ethnoterritorial parties.²²

AN INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGY OF POLICY APPEASEMENT

Although clear differences exist between these explanations of decentralization, these accounts make little mention of voters. Parties maneuver to improve their fiscal and political power or the welfare of the country without regard to the demands and behavior of voters.²³ Yet it should not be forgotten that decentralization also has a particular policy content—that is, to bring government and decision-making power closer to the people. Just as voters may express policy preferences on issues such as taxes, the environment, and health care, the electorate may also hold opinions on whether administrative, political, or fiscal powers should be decentralized to subnational and regional officials.²⁴

²⁰ Stepan 1999; Stepan 2001; Brancati 2009; Hooghe and Marks 2016, but see Horowitz 1985; Roeder 2007.

²¹ Sorens 2009.

²² O'Neill 2003; O'Neill 2005; Escobar-Lemmon 2003; Sorens 2009.

²³ Beramendi 2012, Escobar-Lemmon 2003, and Sorens 2009 are exceptions, although Sorens ultimately dismisses a voter-based hypothesis in favor of the regional government office-seeking (RGOS) story described above.

²⁴ Voter preferences over decentralization and federalism have been recorded across countries, especially ethnically divided ones. E.g., Massetti and Toubeau 2013; Strebler and Kübler 2021; Kam and Mikos 2007; Deschouwer 2013; Brancati 2009; Barrio and Rodríguez-Teruel 2017; Pallarés and Keating 2006; Reuchamps et al. 2017; Balcells, Fernández-Albertos, and Kuo 2015.

Recognition that decentralization is a substantive policy stance has implications for why and when parties decentralize. If voters have preferences over decentralization versus centralization, then parties can advocate positions on that policy dimension to attract like-minded voters. Decentralization thus becomes a campaign issue similar to a pledge to reduce taxes, increase environmental regulations, or improve health services. It is the programmatic tactic standard to the Downsian spatial conception of party competition—behavior designed to sway the voting decisions of the electorate.²⁵

Why would a party campaign on and enact decentralization reforms? According to O'Neill, decentralization is not often seen as a salient campaign issue.²⁶ But while it may be difficult to mobilize the masses in some political systems with calls for greater fiscal responsibility at the subnational level, decentralization takes on a new importance when regionalist or ethnoterritorial parties compete in the national electoral arena. Embracing “a nationalism based on ethnic distinctiveness and territorial claims within established states,”²⁷ these niche parties campaign for greater regional autonomy with demands ranging from recognition of their cultural and linguistic differences to political and fiscal decentralization. The decentralization issue they promote becomes a potential source of voter support in the wider competition between all political parties.

Under these conditions, decentralization can become a tool of appeasement. This general observation has been suggested by several scholars, including Robert Thompson and Joseph Rudolph, Simon Toubeau, Sonia Alonso, David Lublin, and Massetti and Schakel.²⁸ But the resulting literature has not focused on the details behind the adoption of that appeasement or tested the argument quantitatively and comprehensively across subnational regions, countries, and over time, especially across Western Europe. In this article, I develop the theory of decentralization as appeasement, identifying the specific goals of the appeasers, the mechanism by which such appeasement strategies work, and the conditions under which such strategies will be adopted.

Decentralization is one of several tools that governing parties have to shore up their future electoral support in response to competitor party demands. In this article, I focus on decentralization as a response to

²⁵ Downs 1957.

²⁶ O'Neill 2005.

²⁷ Levi and Hechter 1985, 128.

²⁸ Thompson and Rudolph 1989; Toubeau 2011; Alonso 2012; Lublin 2012; Massetti and Schakel 2013.

ethnoterritorial party threat.²⁹ Ethnoterritorial parties have been identified as the main party proponents of decentralization in Western Europe, and several studies report their role in the enactment of such institutional reforms. Lublin, for instance, observes, “Spanish decentralization efforts consistently stemmed from demands articulated by ethnoregional parties.”³⁰ In Belgium, he finds, “regionalist parties pressed for decentralization,”³¹ and, in an era that predates the time period of this analysis, he reports, “Sardinia and Sicily gained (decentralization) statutes in an effort to release separatist pressures expressed by votes for regionalist parties in the 1946 elections.”³² Alonso similarly highlights the centrality of ethnoterritorial party electoral threat to later Italian decentralization decisions: “The decentralization reforms of the 1990s and 2000s would be precipitated by the electoral threat that the LN (Lega Nord) represented for the Christian Democrats before 1993 and for Forza Italia afterwards.”³³

I argue that vulnerable governing parties faced with threatening ethnoterritorial parties will advocate decentralization reforms to attract away the voters of those parties or otherwise reduce the pressure of the pro-decentralization parties in future elections. The focus of the appeasement strategy is on national-level electoral politics. Rather than being motivated by the anticipated effects of decentralization at the newly created or strengthened subnational level,³⁴ governing parties attempt to satisfy the ethnoterritorial voters’ demands to transfer more fiscal power or policy-making competencies to the regional level—the natural territorial unit of the ethnoterritorial party—to bolster the governing parties’ continuing support in national elections and their ability to maintain control of the national parliament.

The effectiveness of decentralization as policy appeasement rests on a central tenant of the Downsian party competition literature: policy convergence alters the voting calculus of individuals. Voters now closer to the policy stance of the mainstream party should shift their support toward it. And those who are now indifferent between two parties on

²⁹ While they are not the central story of Western European decentralization, there are cases in which decentralization has been demanded by and used to appease nonethnic parties, as Lublin’s 2014 discussion of Portugal suggests (although see Howe 1976 on the central role of Madeiran and Azorean independence movements in Portuguese decentralization decisions). These cases are outside the scope of the theory of appeasement tested here, but the strategic use of decentralization as nonethnic appeasement is consistent with this article’s general argument and is a subject for future research.

³⁰ Lublin 2012, 1084.

³¹ Lublin 2012, 1083.

³² Lublin 2012, 1084.

³³ Alonso 2012, 155.

³⁴ See O’Neill 2003; Escobar-Lemmon 2003; Sorens 2009.

a given dimension will vote on the basis of other issues. In the case of decentralization as appeasement, the effectiveness of the strategy is magnified by the fact that policy appeasement is not simply a manifesto policy promise, which voters can judge as more or less credible, but rather involves concrete decentralization reforms that have already been enacted. As such, uncertainty about party intention to follow through is reduced. In addition, governing parties are competing against ethnoterritorial parties, which prioritize the decentralization issue and draw much of their support on the basis of this issue position.³⁵ Combine that with the fact that many ethnoterritorial party supporters have only recently defected from mainstream political parties, and appeasement is expected to lead many of those pro-decentralization voters to shift their support away from the ethnoterritorial party and return to the ideologically attractive multi-issue governing party or abstain from voting in national elections altogether.³⁶

If decentralization is a strategy to bolster a party's electoral support and allow it to remain in control at the national level, governing parties will decentralize only when they face regionalist parties that jeopardize their national-level electoral strength. To what extent and when a party advocates decentralizing reforms depends, I argue, on two factors: how many votes the ethnoterritorial or regionalist party is taking from the governing party and the vulnerability of the mainstream party to that vote loss.

First, the strategizing party will offer concessions only to a regionalist party that is a threat (defined as attracting voters away from the governing party).³⁷ If the pro-decentralization party is not stealing many or any of the mainstream party's voters, then decentralization is unlikely to be a popular position among the governing party's electorate.³⁸ Under those circumstances, policy appeasement would fail to result in a net gain of voters for the mainstream party, and the potential flight

³⁵ See De Winter and Türsan 1998, 5; Benoit and Laver 2006; Müller-Rommel 1998.

³⁶ Meguid 2015; Lublin 2014. The strategy to attract pro-decentralization voters is less likely to work on voters who profess strong, noninstrumental attachments to the ethnoterritorial party.

³⁷ Factors identified by various scholars as affecting the popularity of the decentralization issue among voters include subjective feelings of national identity (Brown, McCrone, and Paterson 1996), dissatisfaction with the central government over the persistence of regional economic disparities (Hechter 1975; Zariski 1989), and deepening European integration (Dardanelli 2005; Jolly 2015; Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010). But the effect of these variables on the government's decision to advocate decentralization depends on whether that support for the issue manifests itself as political and electoral pressure.

³⁸ This is consistent with the Toubeau and Wagner 2015 finding that the likelihood a mainstream party will be pro-decentralization is affected by the ideological proximity of regionalist parties.

of anti-decentralization voters accompanying the institutional reform could actually hurt a governing party's chances of maintaining power.³⁹

Second, the ethnoterritorial party threat must be jeopardizing the electoral security of the mainstream party. But decentralization decisions do not turn simply on the size of the government's legislative majority. Decentralization will be employed when the votes that the ethnoterritorial party wins are concentrated in regions so as to threaten the national parliamentary strength of the mainstream party. This situation arises, for example, when the mainstream party loses votes in districts that are traditional party strongholds or even marginally held seats, and upon whose support the party depends for legislative success.⁴⁰ In these cases, regional vote loss is tantamount to loss of national governmental control.

If, conversely, the distribution of vote losses does not jeopardize a mainstream party's hold on specific seats, and, by extension, its dominance of the national legislature, the mainstream party is less likely to embrace decentralization. Not only are there few strategic advantages to adopting decentralization when a governing party is not actively facing an ethnoterritorial opponent jeopardizing its control, but also there are significant disadvantages. Decentralization is always costly. It reduces the powers of the very national government that the strategizing mainstream party seeks to control. Additionally, by legitimizing the perceived need for greater regional control of government, the governing party's decentralization policy reinforces the claim that the region and its subnational government are the ethnoterritorial party's natural sphere of influence. Consequently, decentralization may be accompanied by an increase in ethnoterritorial party strength at the new or newly empowered subnational level. Indeed, in earlier work, my analysis of substantial decentralization reforms in Western Europe confirms that while decentralization works to increase governing party national vote share, ethnoterritorial parties generally gain support in regional elections relative to their pre-reform, national-election vote.⁴¹

Given these externalities, the theory suggests that governing parties seeking to maintain their national-level electoral control will decentralize only when they face ethnoterritorial parties that jeopardize their

³⁹ Parties may adopt decentralization despite expectations that doing so will lead to a net loss of votes in the rare case that the votes gained result in the winning of seats and the votes lost do not jeopardize the party's hold of other seats.

⁴⁰ Pro-decentralization vote loss could result in the mainstream party directly losing a seat to the ethnoterritorial party or becoming runner-up in that seat to another mainstream or nonethnoterritorial party.

⁴¹ Meguid 2015.

national electoral strength. In other words, this institutional reform—like most institutional changes—will be adopted only under a circumscribed set of conditions. In the absence of either ethnoterritorial threat or governing party vulnerability, the governing party has disincentives to transfer competencies away from the national government to the region. If a governing party is threatened in a particular region, it will only devolve as few of the national government's competencies as necessary to appease ethnoterritorial party voters and reduce ethnoterritorial party threat. I expect the degree of the reforms to increase with ethnoterritorial party threat and the vulnerability of the mainstream party.

My expectations about the causes of decentralization emanate from its role as a strategy of voter appeasement. Although agreeing that decentralization is used to mollify ethnoterritorial voters in electorally vulnerable regions, Alonso offers an additional prediction that governing parties in countries with other threatened and vulnerable regions will also pursue decentralization reforms in legislatively vulnerable regions lacking ethnoterritorial party threat.⁴² Her logic rests on the ideas that these reforms may be more credible when enacted countrywide and that governing parties can use decentralization in regions in which they are not threatened to reinforce their control of the newly created subnational governments. I also test her prediction in the analyses that follow.

DATA

I examine changes in the level of decentralization during an electoral term across the 247 regions⁴³ of sixteen countries in Western Europe from 1970 to 2009.⁴⁴ Processes of decentralization, and, to a lesser extent, recentralization, have reshaped governmental arenas during this period. Thirteen Western European countries enacted decentralization reforms during these years, with wide variation across them in the degree, timing,

⁴² Alonso 2012.

⁴³ Following Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010 and Hooghe et al. 2016, 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 multiple tiers of government exist, I use the highest regional tier, as defined by Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010, for which national and subnational election data were available.

⁴⁴ The countries are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK. Inclusion is restricted to those country cases in which there is a territorial conception of seats, with seat allocation done at the regional level or lower, which results in the exclusion of the Netherlands. Ireland is also omitted because its extreme reorganization of subnational units during these decades renders the construction of region panels, and thus cross-time analyses, infeasible. The elections included in the analyses vary within this time frame by country, based on the availability of regional-level data on party vote and seat share, and the RAI decentralization measure; Hooghe et al. 2016.

direction, and resulting level of the competency transfers.⁴⁵ In contrast with other parts of the world, the nature and timing of regional reforms in Western Europe have also varied within countries. Ninety-one percent of the regions in these thirteen countries have experienced change in their decentralization level, and 48 percent of the regions have had levels of decentralization different from another region in their country in at least one election year. For example, some subnational regions have gained directly elected assemblies with significant fiscal, administrative, and policy-making powers (for example, Catalonia, Galicia, Scotland, and Sicily), whereas others have been granted fewer competencies (for example, Wales until 2011, Abruzzo, and the Basque Country) or no regional assembly at all (for example, English regions), and the timing of these reforms has not necessarily been uniform. Asymmetrical reforms have affected federalist and unitary states alike, as cases from Belgium and Spain, on one hand, and France and the UK, on the other, show. Importantly, 83 percent of decentralization reforms and 95 percent of decentralization increases have occurred in countries with ethnoterritorial parties. In addition, decentralization changes are not a very frequent occurrence. Within the almost forty-year span of this analysis, shifts in decentralization levels have occurred in only 15 percent of region-electoral period cases.⁴⁶

Examining regions as units of analysis allows me to capture the wide variation in the decentralization levels, the degree of electoral vulnerability of governing parties, and the level of ethnoterritorial party threat that exist within countries in Western Europe, and to identify the sources of asymmetrical transfers of powers across regions within a given country.⁴⁷ The time period of my analysis, limited by data availability,⁴⁸ coincides with the timing of this global and Western European trend in decentralizing reforms.

To measure the level of decentralization in a region, I use the Regional Authority Index (RAI) measure.⁴⁹ This variable captures a region's

⁴⁵ Across those thirteen countries, 168 regions (or 79 percent) had increases in decentralization (of $RAI \geq 1$), with 38 percent of those experiencing multiple increases between 1970 and 2009. Regions in five of the thirteen countries experienced periods of decline, where, for example, previously extended regional economic autonomy was reduced, or once-created regional assemblies were downgraded or eliminated (e.g., Südtirol, Denmark, N. Ireland). See the supplementary material (figures SA.1–2) for country trends.

⁴⁶ All calculations based on the data from model 1 of Table 1.

⁴⁷ Although existing strategic and welfare accounts of decentralization are premised on addressing regional-level heterogeneity, they typically are tested with national-level analyses; see, e.g., O'Neill 2005; Beramendi 2012.

⁴⁸ Hooghe et al. 2016; Jolly 2015.

⁴⁹ Hooghe et al. 2016.

degree of self- and shared rule. The former is defined as “the authority that a subnational government exercises in its own territory,” and the latter is “the authority that a subnational government co-exercises in the country as a whole.”⁵⁰ Moreover, in contrast to other indices of decentralization,⁵¹ this index has the desirable and unique properties of being calculated yearly and at the regional level for all regions in every country in my analysis.⁵² The values of the RAI variable in the analysis range from 0 (no decentralization) to 26 (high decentralization), with changes in decentralization levels during an electoral term varying from -17.5 to +19.5. Consistent with the costly nature of institutional changes, the mean change in RAI per electoral period is 0.4, rising to 2.6 if one restricts the sample to the set of 354 region-electoral period observations that experience any decentralization changes during the period under analysis.⁵³

The main explanatory variables of interest in the analysis are ethnoterritorial party electoral threat, governing party electoral vulnerability, and their interaction—all measured for the prior national legislative election and aggregated at the level of subnational region. To identify ethnoterritorial parties, I follow the ideology-based categorization of Western European ethnoterritorial parties by Lieven De Winter and Huri Türsan; Ferdinand Müller-Rommel; and Jorge Gordin, in which ethnoterritorial parties are defined as 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.⁵⁴ I include all ethnoterritorial parties contesting at least one national election in a region, regardless of the minimum vote share they received.

According to the appeasement theory, the threat that ethnoterritorial parties pose stems from the number of votes they steal from

⁵⁰ Hooghe et al. 2016, 23.

⁵¹ E.g., Arzaghi and Henderson 2005; Brancati 2009; Treisman 2002.

⁵² While the Hooghe et al. 2016 data assign decentralization reforms to the year in which they are implemented, my interest is in the year (and electoral term) in which the reform was proposed and approved. Based on an individual review of each reform (see the supplementary material for data sources), these dates coincide in 97 percent of cases. For those reforms in which, for example, the inaugural election to a newly instituted regional parliament is held after the next national election, the year of the change in RAI has been adjusted to the end of the electoral term during which the legislation proposing it was approved.

⁵³ Within the mean change in RAI per electoral period, 0.3 is composed of shifts in self-rule and 0.1 of shifts in shared rule.

⁵⁴ De Winter and Türsan 1998; Müller-Rommel 1998; Gordin 2001. Following the literature, regional versions of mainstream parties, such as the Christlich Soziale Union (CSU) in Germany and the Parti Socialiste-Socialistische Partij (PS/SP) and Parti Social Chrétien-Christelijke Volkspartij (PSC/CVP) in Belgium, and regional versions of other niche parties, including the Flemish Greens Agalev, are not coded as ethnoterritorial. See the supplementary material for the list of ethnoterritorial parties.

the governing party in a given region in a national election. Although straightforward, this concept proves challenging to operationalize. The lack of regionally representative cross-national surveys across the set of Western European countries, let alone those that ask about voter support for ethnoterritorial parties, prevents the estimation of this fine-grained information. In its absence, I examine change in ethnoterritorial party national parliamentary vote share calculated at the regional level; I call this *ethnoterritorial party threat*. This is a conceptually simple and transparent measure of whether ethnoterritorial party national election support is increasing or decreasing in a region since the previous national parliamentary election, and it allows us to maximize the number of regions and years included in the statistical analysis. For those countries in which more than one ethnoterritorial party is contesting a given election in a region, the threat variable is calculated based on the sum of those ethnoterritorial parties' vote shares.

To capture governmental vulnerability, I calculate the percentage of seats in the national parliament that a governing party or, for countries with multiparty governments, a coalition government will retain if it loses all currently held seats in a given region. I subtract the resulting value from one so that higher values correspond to higher levels of governmental insecurity and, thus, capture the government's higher vulnerability to ignoring electoral challenges in that region. The resulting variable, *government vulnerability*, ranges from close to 0, when the government controls all the seats in the national parliament except those from the region in question, to +1, signifying that the government retains no seats once the region's seats have been lost.⁵⁵

I construct an interaction term of ethnoterritorial party threat and government vulnerability per the appeasement theory. The expectation is that a region's decentralization level will increase when there is both threat and vulnerability, with the resulting level increasing with these variables. In the absence of a high level of either, I do not expect to see a positive effect on decentralization reforms.

In addition to examining the appeasement theory, I also test the hypotheses advanced by prior research on the origins of decentralization.⁵⁶ To test for the effect of country size, I examine the area of the

⁵⁵ The exact minimum value of the variable varies by region, as it is the percentage of the total parliament seats that lie outside of the region in question. The results are robust to the use of an alternative variable specification that applies the seat-loss penalty to the government coalition seat share only if an ethnoterritorial party was fully contesting that election in that region. See the supplementary material for the sources of national election results and seat shares.

⁵⁶ To be consistent with the timing of the electoral variables, I include the values of the competing variables for the year of the prior national election in which the governing party was elected.

country (in thousands of km²) and its population size, both logged as recommended by Hooghe and Gary Marks.⁵⁷ To capture the effect of EU policy integration, I include Seth Jolly's indicator, *EU index*. Ranging from zero to seven, this variable reports a country's membership in the progressively deepening EU across seven important treaties.⁵⁸ A measure of regional ethnic diversity allows me to test the idea that decentralization is adopted to prevent an ethnically diverse country from breaking apart;⁵⁹ it is also an indicator of unit heterogeneity germane to efficiency-based decentralization arguments. I use Pieter van Houten and James Fearon's *langdif* variable, which captures the extent to which a region's historical language differs from the language of the center. Across Western Europe, the value of this variable ranges from zero (the historical regional language is the same as that of the center) to one (no relationship exists between the two languages).⁶⁰ To test for the impact of regional economic disparities on decisions to decentralize in particular regions, I include a regional economic difference variable capturing the absolute difference between regional and national GDP per capita, following the work of Jolly.⁶¹

To test the subnational strategic explanation that decentralization occurs only when a governing party is weak in national elections but has strong support in subnational elections,⁶² I include the governing coalition parties' previous national election and subnational election vote shares, both calculated at the regional level, and the resulting interaction term.⁶³

MODELS AND ANALYSES

To assess the factors driving decentralization reform, I estimate multi-level random intercept models. Unlike OLS models, these models allow

⁵⁷ Hooghe and Marks 2013.

⁵⁸ Jolly 2015, 66n24.

⁵⁹ Stepan 1999; Stepan 2001; Brancati 2009.

⁶⁰ The van Houten and Fearon measure comes from Sorens 2008.

⁶¹ Regional economic data are not available from a single data series for all countries and regions in my analysis from 1970 to 2009. In Table 1, I employ the data series with most coverage (Eurostat data from Jolly 2015). The results do not change if a second series (Cambridge Economics data from Beramendi and Rogers 2022) is employed instead. Similarly, the results are robust to the use of an alternative operationalization of regional economic disparity, as shown in the supplementary material.

⁶² Sorens 2009; O'Neill 2003; O'Neill 2005; Escobar-Lemmon 2003.

⁶³ It follows therefore that the testing of the subnational strategic account is restricted to the subset of regions and countries in which subnational elections exist. To accurately capture governing party popularity in the subnational arena unbiased by the presence of national election coattails, I examine subnational elections that are held strictly after the previous national election, but before the next national election. As a robustness check, following O'Neill, I run a model specification excluding an interaction term; see O'Neill 2003.

me to account for the nested nature of the data, with regions nested within countries.⁶⁴ As this multilevel model takes into consideration the within-level and between-level variation in the dependent variable,⁶⁵ we can assess the cross-time dynamics of party strategy presented in the hypotheses. Because the focus is on changes in decentralization across time, I model the dependent variable as the level of decentralization at the end of the electoral term, with the lagged level of decentralization from the time of the previous national election included as an independent variable. The results of the models are presented in Table 1.

INCONSISTENT EXPLANATORY POWER OF THE DECENTRALIZATION- AS-OFFICE-MULTIPLICATION THEORIES

Turning first to the competing theories of decentralization reforms, I examine the effect of the country-welfare-enhancing variables in model 1 (Table 1). The regression results offer mixed support for these theories. Consistent with the previous literature's expectations, a region's level of decentralization is estimated to increase with the distinctiveness of the regional language and the population size of the country. Although existing research uses national population size to explain a country's—not a region's—level of decentralization,⁶⁶ a plausible mechanism behind the relationship estimated here is that a populous country is more likely than a smaller one to decentralize a greater number of competencies to any of its regions. The coefficients of the other two variables, *EU index* and *area*, are not statistically significant.

Although these welfare-based hypotheses may be disadvantaged in this analysis of cross-national, cross-regional, and cross-time variation because their focus is on using time-invariant or slow-moving variables to capture cross-national variation, support for alternative explanations does not increase when I turn to the regional economic disparities and subnational strategic models that emphasize regionally varying and time-varying factors. As model 2 shows, decentralization is not significantly correlated with regional economic difference. The results are also robust to the use of the shorter Cambridge Economics data series (N = 792) or an alternative measure of regional economic disparity. While this boosts our confidence in the null findings, the limited geographic and temporal coverage of those models relative to the other

⁶⁴ Gelman and Hill 2007; Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal 2012.

⁶⁵ Gelman and Hill 2007.

⁶⁶ Panizza 1999; Garrett and Rodden 2003; Hooghe and Marks 2013.

TABLE 1
WELFARE-ENHANCING AND SUBNATIONAL-STRATEGY
MODELS OF DECENTRALIZATION REFORMS^a

	<i>Country-Welfare Enhancing (Model 1)</i>	<i>Economic Disparities (Model 2)</i>	<i>Decentralization as Subnational-Level Strategy (Model 3)</i>
Area	-0.700 (0.984)		
Population	2.607** (0.892)		
EU index	-0.006 (0.026)		
Ethnic heterogeneity	0.935*** (0.258)		
Reg. economic difference		0.005 (0.003)	
Govt. nat. election vote			0.009 (0.008)
Govt. subnat. election vote			-0.029*** (0.007)
Govt. nat. vote × Govt. subnat. vote			0.0001 (0.0001)
RAI _{t-1}	0.705*** (0.012)	0.679*** (0.020)	0.314*** (0.016)
Intercept	-13.247* (5.402)	4.661*** (0.697)	13.394*** (1.233)
Random effect: country	4.685168 (1.798478)	4.830759 (2.075508)	14.96281 (6.424158)
Random effect: region	0.0845233 (0.0647286)	2.01e-13 (7.48e-13)	1.54e-18 (4.86e-18)
Random effect: residual	3.863153 (0.1251248)	3.255343 (.1520979)	1.398936 (.064667)
Log likelihood	-4979.9336	-1893.1608	-1537.1834
N	2348	929	947
Number of countries	16	12	11
Number of regions	247	144	148

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$; standard errors in parentheses

^a Dependent variable is the level of decentralization in a given region. Results are based on multilevel analyses with random intercepts for the country and region levels of the data.

models means the generalizability of these results must be interpreted with some caution.⁶⁷

Model 3 similarly shows little support for the explanatory power of the subnationally focused strategic theory. Recall that these scholars predict decentralization reforms to be enacted by or, in the case of Sorens, supported by governing parties with weak national election results but strong performance at the subnational level; the focus is on bolstering subnational power.⁶⁸ The results of model 3 run counter to these predictions. The interaction term is positive, not negative as expected, and is not statistically significant. As further confirmed by the conditional coefficient plot,⁶⁹ the effect of subnational support on decentralization is negative and statistically significant when national vote share is low, instead of being positive as predicted under these very conditions. Indeed, subnational vote share never has a positive effect on decentralization level across the range of national vote shares. The results are not more favorable if I instead exclude the interaction term—the effect of subnational vote strength remains negative and that of national vote strength is positive and now statistically significant, both variables having signs running counter to the theory's expectations.

STRONG SUPPORT FOR THE DECENTRALIZATION-AS- APPEASEMENT THEORY

The power of strategic explanations emerges if we consider decentralization as a nationally focused strategy of appeasement. I examine the effect of ethnoterritorial party threat, governing party vulnerability, and their interaction in the models of Table 2.

Following the appeasement logic, we expect to see increases in decentralization when an ethnoterritorial party threat exists in a region upon whose seats the governing party depends for maintaining parliamentary control, with the resulting level of decentralization increasing with both variables. To more easily interpret the findings of this interactive story of decentralization, in Figure 1 I plot the coefficient of ethnoterritorial party vote change conditional on the level of governing party legislative vulnerability, based on the results of model 4 (Table 2).⁷⁰ Consistent with the decentralization-as-appeasement theory, this

⁶⁷ The model 2 regressions with the Eurostat data include four fewer countries and 60 percent fewer observations than the data used in model 1. The models lose seven countries and 66 percent of observations relative to model 1 if I use the Cambridge data.

⁶⁸ Sorens 2009.

⁶⁹ See the supplementary material.

⁷⁰ The figures are effectively identical if the results of model 5 are used instead.

TABLE 2
MODELS OF DECENTRALIZATION AS A NATIONAL-LEVEL STRATEGY^a

	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>
Govt. vulnerability	-1.225** (0.450)	-1.183** (0.450)
Ethnoterritorial party threat	-0.186** (0.068)	-0.179** (0.068)
Govt. vuln. × Ethno. threat	0.471*** (0.140)	0.456*** (0.140)
RAI _{t-1}	0.619*** (0.012)	0.608*** (0.014)
Intercept	5.247*** (0.868)	-15.774* (6.811)
Controls	no	yes
Random effect: country	10.83385 (3.972001)	7.894065 (2.962203)
Random effect: region	0.3264052 (0.0860587)	0.3440443 (0.0932444)
Random effect: residual	2.940455 (0.1012561)	2.916582 (0.1018565)
Log likelihood	-4235.6673	-4228.0435
N	2100	2100
Number of countries	16	16
Number of regions	246	246

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$; standard errors in parentheses

^a Dependent variable is the level of decentralization in a given region. Results are based on multilevel analyses with random intercepts for the country and region levels of the data. Controls consist of the country- and regional-level variables from model 1 of Table 1.

conditional coefficient plot shows that governing parties transfer additional competencies to regions in which ethnoterritorial party support is increasing, but only when the government is vulnerable. A close look at Figure 1 shows that the significant positive effect of ethnoterritorial party threat on decentralization levels emerges when governmental vulnerability is at least 0.45, which corresponds to a government having 55 percent or less of the seats in the national parliament once its current seats in the region are excluded. In keeping with the idea that governments seek to maintain a majority in parliament, the results show that governments are willing to decentralize to appease ethnoterritorial parties when their control over the legislature is threatened. And, as the positive slope of the conditional coefficient line reveals, the degree of competencies willing to be transferred increases with the insecurity of the government.

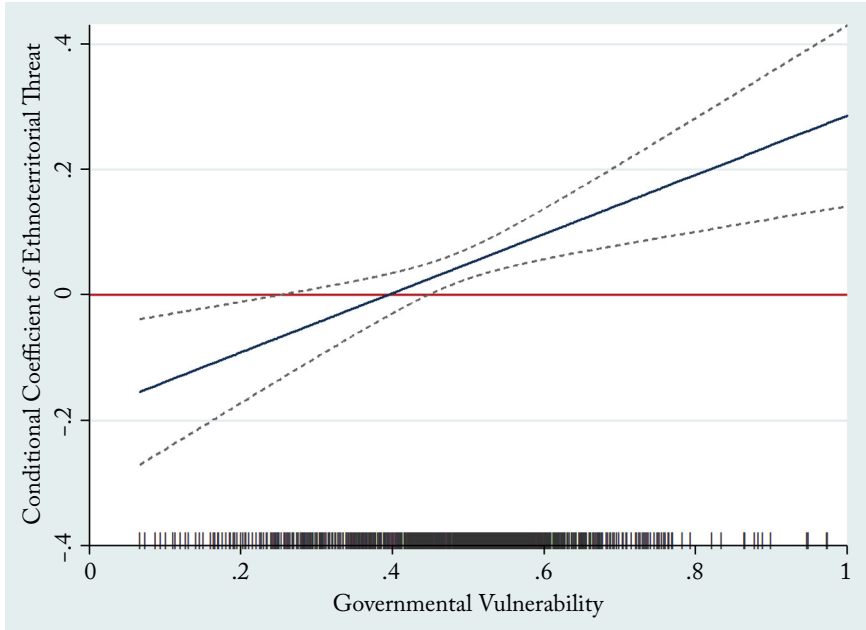


FIGURE 1
THE EFFECT OF ETHNOTERRITORIAL PARTY THREAT ON THE LEVEL
OF DECENTRALIZATION, CONDITIONAL UPON THE DEGREE OF
GOVERNMENT VULNERABILITY^a

^aThe solid line represents the conditional coefficient of ethnoterritorial threat, measured as change in ethnoterritorial party vote share_{*t-1*}, with the 95 percent confidence intervals shown in dashed lines, based on estimates from Table 2, model 4. A rug plot is presented along the *x*-axis.

Conversely, if the government is not legislatively vulnerable—that is, it retains control over a high percentage of national legislative seats even when its seats in the region are lost—the presence of a growing ethnoterritorial party will not motivate it to decentralize; the effect is insignificant at levels of governmental vulnerability from 0.26 to 0.44. When government vulnerability is 0.25 and lower, meaning that the government retains control of at least 75 percent of the legislative seats even when seats from the relevant region are lost, the presence of a strengthening ethnoterritorial party has a negative effect on decentralization. Whether this result suggests that governing parties strategically centralize powers in those regions they do not need electorally—perhaps to hurt threatened mainstream opponents—is unclear and needs to be further investigated, but the results firmly show that the decentralization demands of ethnoterritorial parties are not

addressed when support from voters in a given region is not electorally necessary for the governing party.

I continue to find support for this nationally focused strategic story when I consider the results of the second conditional coefficient plot—the effect of governing party vulnerability on decentralization reforms as it varies by level of ethnoterritorial party vote threat. As Figure 2 shows, legislative vulnerability prompts governing parties to decentralize only when ethnoterritorial parties are electoral threats. This positive, statistically significant relationship emerges and increases when ethnoterritorial parties gain at least seven percentage points over the last national election. Conversely, when the ethnoterritorial party is not a threat because it is stagnating (vote gain of less than 1 percent) or actually losing support, governmental vulnerability has a negative and significant influence on decentralization reforms. In other words, decentralization is not employed as a party-strengthening strategy in the

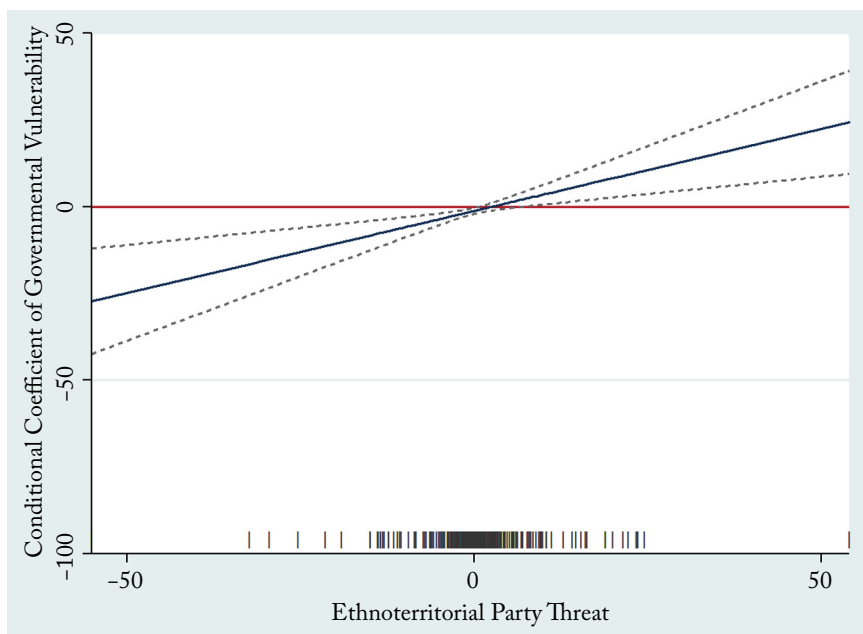


FIGURE 2
THE EFFECT OF GOVERNMENT VULNERABILITY ON LEVEL OF
DECENTRALIZATION, CONDITIONAL UPON ETHNOTERRITORIAL PARTY THREAT^a

^a The solid line represents the conditional coefficient of governing party vulnerability, with the 95 percent confidence intervals shown in dashed lines, based on estimates from Table 2, model 4. A rug plot is presented along the x-axis.

absence of ethnoterritorial threat; indeed, there may even be incentives, under those conditions, for a government to recentralize.

The above figures consistently offer support for the use of decentralization as appeasement toward ethnoterritorial party threats by vulnerable governing parties. Additional evidence emerges from placebo tests in which I rerun the Table 2 analyses only in countries lacking ethnoterritorial parties. If the ethnic appeasement story is correct, I should find that governing party vulnerability has no effect on the level of decentralization when ethnoterritorial parties do not exist. In analyses reported in the supplementary material involving seventy-two regions from five Western European countries without ethnoterritorial parties, I find that governing party vulnerability, indeed, has an insignificant effect on decentralization reforms. Together, the results from models 4 and 5 and the placebo test show that in the absence of ethnoterritorial party threat, whether because the ethnoterritorial party loses support or because it does not exist at all, governing party vulnerability does not lead to an increase in decentralization.⁷¹

ROBUSTNESS CHECKS

I perform several tests to evaluate the robustness of the findings.⁷² The results do not change if I employ different estimation methods, including OLS with country fixed effects and standard errors clustered by region, or robust standard errors, or restricted maximum likelihood (REML). Similarly, the results are robust to the addition of country- and region-level controls. Following the scope conditions for decentralization as appeasement, the results of models 4 and 5 do not change if the analysis is restricted to the eleven countries that have ethnoterritorial parties contesting at least one national election in at least one region during the time period under examination.⁷³ Given that processes of decentralization are not uniform across Western European countries or regions, I check for the sensitivity of the results to individual observations. Reassuringly, the results are robust to sensitivity tests controlling

⁷¹ Further, these results run counter to an alternative explanation of decentralization as blame avoidance, by which central governments decentralize competencies and the problems associated with them to subnational-level actors. If that explanation held, the decentralization decisions of electorally vulnerable parties would not depend on the level of ethnoterritorial party threat.

⁷² Results presented in the supplementary material.

⁷³ This specification excludes Austria, Iceland, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Sweden. Although every country included has at least one ethnoterritorial party, ethnoterritorial parties do not compete in every region or in every election in each of these countries. There is also variation in the level of ethnoterritorial party threat across the regions examined.

for the presence of influential observations through multilevel robust regression models.⁷⁴

The conclusions also remain robust to testing other explanations. Inclusion of a variable capturing ethnoterritorial participation in a government's coalition does not alter the main findings.⁷⁵ Similarly, the results are not dictated by the federalist nature of the country or whether the country engages in symmetrical versus asymmetrical reforms across its regions. Likewise, the results are robust to the inclusion of a dummy variable indicating whether the region is unusual—with a lagged level of decentralization greater than the average level of other regions in the country. Additional testing further highlights the importance of direct ethnoterritorial party threat for decentralization decisions. In contrast to Alonso's supplemental strategic hypothesis that legislatively vulnerable regions unaffected by ethnoterritorial threat but located in countries with other threatened and vulnerable regions are likely to see decentralization increases,⁷⁶ analyses show that government vulnerability is neither a positive nor a significant predictor of decentralization in these ethnoterritorially unthreatened regions. The results are also robust to the exclusion of observations in which the governing coalition does not have any seats to lose in a given region, further confirming that the decentralization reform results are not being driven by regionally unaffected but legislatively vulnerable governments.

In addition, although the article casts doubt on the explanatory power of competing theories of decentralization, a reasonable criticism could be that the country-welfare hypotheses and the subnationally focused strategic account were devised to account for reforms under conditions different than those examined here. Robustness checks show, however, that the original results in models 1 and 3 hold when I account for those hypotheses' scope conditions. For instance, O'Neill limits the applicability of her theory to countries without ethnoterritorial parties.⁷⁷ Restricting the observations of model 3 to countries with no ethnoterritorial parties

⁷⁴ Robust regression assigns robustness weights to observations to account for the presence of, rather than to delete, valid influential observations in the data; Koller 2016. The results show the maintenance of the sign and significance of the coefficients, albeit with smaller coefficient values. Two exceptions exist involving the alternative hypotheses: *EU index* becomes statistically significant in model 1, and none of the main explanatory variables is now significant in model 3.

⁷⁵ The conclusions also hold if I instead exclude observations with ethnoterritorial party participation in coalition governments.

⁷⁶ Alonso 2012.

⁷⁷ Sorens 2009, however, applies an almost identical argument to Western European cases with ethnoterritorial parties—as in this analysis.

continues to yield no statistical support for that argument.⁷⁸ Similarly, there may be reasonable concerns that the national-level country size variables typically used in the country-welfare literature and tested in model 1 are at the wrong level of aggregation to account for this study's region-level observations. Population and area remain insignificant, however, when the analysis is rerun with region-level measures. In other words, changing the context in which these variables are assessed does not change the conclusions about the limited explanatory power of the competing hypotheses of decentralization reform.

CASE STUDY EVIDENCE: ARE GOVERNMENTS MOTIVATED BY ETHNOTERRITORIAL THREAT?

The cross-national results presented in tables 1 and 2 are supportive of the nationally focused appeasement argument while providing less evidence of the centrality of alternative theories. To increase confidence in the strategic nature of decentralization reforms, the motivations behind governmental decentralization decisions must be considered. The brief examples of Western European ethnoterritorial demand for decentralization presented in the theory section suggest the plausibility of the appeasement logic. But to further explore the decisiveness of this combination of governmental vulnerability and ethnoterritorial threat variables for governmental decentralization decisions, an examination of the case of Galicia, Spain, is illustrative. Galicia represents an example of both average-size and large decentralization reforms, with an initial change in RAI of +19.5, followed over the course of twenty-five years by three electoral periods of incremental reforms (+2, +1, +1) interspersed with periods of no change (see Table 3). With both influential and typical on-the-line observations,⁷⁹ the case of Galicia allows us, within one region, to probe the causality and to illustrate multiple implications of the theory of appeasement—to decentralize and to not decentralize.

Decentralization in Spain “consisted of a sequential series of bilateral negotiations between representatives of the central government and

⁷⁸ Similarly, no increase in the power of the country-welfare theory occurs when model 1 is restricted to countries without ethnoterritorial parties.

⁷⁹ The observations from Galicia consist of six typical on-the-line cases and two influential cases (1979–1982; 1982–1986), as measured by Cook's D. Seawright and Gerring 2008 identify both typical and influential case selection approaches as playing a theory-confirming role, and Herron and Quinn 2016 highlight the utility of influential cases for causal identification. Gerring and Cojocar 2016, 397, explicitly recommend cases with multiple observations to allow for a constant context in which to evaluate different implications of the theory.

TABLE 3
DECENTRALIZATION TRAJECTORY IN GALICIA, 1979–2008^a

<i>Electoral Term</i>	<i>Ethnoterritorial Party Threat (Change in Vote % over Previous National Election)</i>	<i>Government Vulnerability</i>	<i>Change in Decentralization across Electoral Term (in RAI)</i>
1979–1982	+9.37	.57	+19.5
1982–1986	-8.43	.45	0
1986–1989	+5.42	.51	+2
1989–1993	+0.14	.53	0
1993–1996	+0.06	.58	0
1996–2000	+4.5	.59	+1
2000–2004	+6.07	.52	+1
2004–2008	-7.4	.56	0

^a Ethnoterritorial threat and government vulnerability are calculated for the national election marking the start of the electoral term.

representatives of the regions.”⁸⁰ As part of this process, on April 6, 1981, Galicia became the third region in post-Franco Spain to have a statute of autonomy approved. The Statute of Autonomy of Galicia (*Estatuto de Autonomía de Galicia*) recognized it as a historical region and created a regional government with a directly elected assembly with significant administrative and policy-making powers and limited tax-rate setting capabilities. The decision of the Unión de Centro Democrático (UCD) government to extend such a significant decentralization reform to Galicia occurred despite the ideological opposition of the party (and Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez) to regional self-government.⁸¹ Instead, the decision was driven by political necessity. Consistent with the logic of decentralization as appeasement, decentralization was the strategic decision of a government facing rising ethnoterritorial threat in a region on which it was legislatively dependent. In the previous national election (1979), Galician regionalist parties (including the Bloque Nacional-Popular Galego and Partido Galeguista) had increased their vote share by 9.4 percentage points (to 11.4 percent), with Galician voters across the political spectrum, including those of the UCD, supporting greater regional autonomy.⁸² In terms of its own vulnerability, the UCD was a

⁸⁰ Gunther, Montero, and Botella 2004, 288.

⁸¹ Pérez Pena 2014. To UCD supporters of Galician regionalism in the 1980s, “Galicianism” meant a label to assure their political survival, but it was not a real feeling and even less still a clearly elaborated political creed”; Núñez 1997, 46.

⁸² On the issue of decentralization in Galicia, Galician regionalist parties were the main electoral threat to the Spanish right; Van Atta 2003.

minority national government. And while the Galician ethnoterritorial electoral support was less than that driving UCD decentralization reforms in the regions of Catalonia and the Basque Country,⁸³ the UCD was dependent on seats from Galicia to a much greater extent than in Catalonia or the Basque Country. As such, Galicia was recognized by the party as “a key territory that the UCD couldn’t afford to lose.”⁸⁴

Consistent with this use of decentralization as an electoral tool to win over voters, the government was particularly sensitive to public support of the reform. When the initial UCD autonomy proposal was met with public discontent in 1979, the government revised it to explicitly “obtain a better public image.”⁸⁵ In a way not seen in other regions, Suárez became personally involved, apologizing for offending voters and increasing the reform to its eventual level—rivalling that of Catalonia.⁸⁶ As a result of this appeasement campaign and the passage of the statute, electoral support for the regionalist parties fell by 8.4 percentage points in the next national election, and the attention and voter support of the regionalist parties shifted, as expected, to the Galician regional electoral arena.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the reputation that the UCD sought to create as the strong pro-decentralization party hindered the emergence of new, especially rightist, regionalist challengers.

The reforms of 1981 in Galicia reflected a political move by the governing UCD to protect its governing power against the ethnoterritorial threat. This politically motivated decentralization tactic would crop up again over the next twenty-five years. Reforms occurred when the Spanish government was vulnerable and facing growing ethnoterritorial party vote share; importantly, reforms did not occur when the government maintained legislative dominance or faced little ethnoterritorial threat. Moreover, these electoral motivations trumped party ideological support for decentralization. For instance, the pro-decentralization Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) Spanish government carried out no decentralization reforms in Galicia in the electoral terms following the 1982, 1989, and 1993 elections when the regionalist vote was

⁸³ Alonso 2012, 100–101.

⁸⁴ Pérez Pena 2014. Alonso 2012, 156. UCD reforms for Galicia stood in contrast to the UCD’s original proposal for Andalucía, which included the transfer of fewer competencies and a slower decentralization pace. The UCD government did not have the same legislative dependence on Andalucía, and it faced a much smaller electoral threat from the regionalist Partido Socialista de Andalucía (PSA), a party whose showing in the previous election was in part bolstered by the UCD. Gunther, Montero, and Botella 2004, 291.

⁸⁵ Pérez Pena 2014.

⁸⁶ Pérez Pena 2014.

⁸⁷ Van Atta 2003, 123.

down, the PSOE was not legislatively vulnerable, or both.⁸⁸ But reforms were implemented by the PSOE following the 1986 election when these variables were both high, as Table 3 shows.⁸⁹

Similarly driven by strategic concerns, the once ardent anti-decentralization Partido Popular (PP) shifted after 1996 to emphasize pro-decentralization positions in Galician-specific manifestos (to even higher levels than Galician socialists),⁹⁰ to court support from the ethnoterritorial Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG),⁹¹ and to extend greater regional tax reforms. This tactical about-face followed its election in 1996 as a minority Spanish government, confronting an electorally strengthening BNG that directly challenged it for the support of Galician-identifying and pro-regionalist voters.⁹² Outspoken support for decentralization, including by regional Galician PP leaders,⁹³ and the passage of a regional borrowing reform also occurred under the 2000 PP Spanish government, as that somewhat stronger national government faced an even stronger BNG threat (with a vote of 19 percent and three seats in the Spanish Congress).

But just as the PP had strategically embraced a pro-decentralization legislative agenda when vulnerable following the 1996 and 2000 elections, its policy stance and legislative priorities once again changed when that threat dissipated. With BNG party support declining at the subnational level after 2001, no additional reforms were forthcoming in

⁸⁸ While the estimates from this article's appeasement model 4—based solely on national election results—predicts some pressure for the PSOE to recentralize following the 1982 decline in regionalist party vote share, the interelection information available to the PSOE government—that new left-leaning Galician regionalist parties were developing post-1982 in this highly fluid newly democratic party system—is consistent with the PSOE's risk-averse decision to maintain the decentralization status quo between 1982 and 1986.

⁸⁹ As its left-right ideological neighbor, but with a greater emphasis on decentralization, the Bloque Nacionalista Galego (BNG) drew pro-decentralization voters away from the PSOE (Van Atta 2003, 218); given this, the PSOE's increasing dedication to regional autonomy could be expected to reverse that voter defection.

⁹⁰ Gómez, Alonso, and Cabeza 2022.

⁹¹ The PP under José María Aznar initiated governmental formation negotiations, which included increased decentralization in exchange for coalition or at least investiture pacts with threatening regionalist parties. In the end, the BNG did not formally agree to support the PP minority government (and was chided by Aznar for that), thereby remaining less electorally compromised by the subsequent PP decentralization appeasement; Valdecantos 1996.

⁹² The BNG's political relevance and electoral threat was further bolstered by its 24 percent vote share in the 1997 Galician regional elections (an increase of almost seven percentage points just as the PP's vote share fell) and its formation of a programmatic pact with other heavy-weight regionalist parties (the Catalan *Convergència i Unió* [CiU] and the Basque *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* [PNV]), to advance common regionalist goals; Elias 2009. Van Atta 2003, 120.

⁹³ Galician PP leader Manuel Fraga increased efforts to win concessions for Galicia from the Spanish government; Van Atta 2003, 226.

this electoral term.⁹⁴ For the second half of its government, the PP once again “opted for a Spanish nationalist strategy oriented towards rallying support in opposition to regional nationalists.”⁹⁵

As the case of Galicia shows, decentralization decisions were not being driven by deep-seated party ideology. The start-and-stop trajectory of reforms in Galicia did not reflect static country- or regional-level factors like size or linguistic distinctiveness. The level and timing of the numerous decentralization changes also cannot be explained by Galicia’s relative regional economic position, which declined significantly from 1982 to 1986 and then was essentially unchanging from 1986 to 2004. And unlike the claims of the subnational strategic theory, Spanish governments were not preoccupied primarily with their subnational-level electoral standing, as reform after reform across the country only drove up regionalist support in regional parliamentary elections.⁹⁶ Rather, the decentralization process in Galicia, as seen across these electoral periods, was reflective of a government’s need to appease the voters of threatening ethnoterritorial parties to shore up its national legislative security.

CONCLUSION

That governing parties would voluntarily choose to reduce their administrative, political, and fiscal competencies is a puzzle for a literature that typically sees the maximization of power as the critical, if not the only, goal of political actors. Previous work has tried to address this dilemma by viewing decentralization as a tool to boost economic and other efficiencies, to mitigate information sharing problems, to hold together an ethnically divided state, or to strengthen party support at the subnational level.

This article recognizes that decentralization is not just one of many office-multiplying institutional rearrangements to solve party and national problems. It is also a specific policy goal that voters desire. Based on this perspective, I provide and empirically test a different answer to the puzzle of why parties decentralize: a governing party transfers

⁹⁴ No reforms occurred in the next electoral term either. With the BNG losing votes in the 2004 national elections, no decentralization reforms were enacted by the incoming PSOE Spanish government. Similarly, by 2005, the PP’s attention to decentralization in their Galician regional manifesto fell to below 1981 levels; Gómez, Alonso, and Cabeza 2022.

⁹⁵ Gunther, Montero, and Botella 2004, 312.

⁹⁶ As anticipated with a national-level appeasement strategy, ethnoterritorial voters across Spain, including in Galicia, split their support, voting for statewide parties in national elections and ethnoterritorial parties in regional elections; Pallarés and Keating 2006.

additional competencies to a particular region to appease voters of threatening ethnoterritorial parties and thereby bolster its own support at the national level. Decentralization is the institutional manifestation of a vote-seeking Downsian policy convergence strategy.

An analysis of the decentralization reforms across the regions of Western Europe from 1970 to 2009 supplemented by qualitative evidence from the region of Galicia, Spain, confirms the power of this nationally focused appeasement story over that of competing hypotheses. Governing parties decentralize competencies to regions in which they face strong ethnoterritorial parties, but only when they are legislatively vulnerable and risk losing parliamentary control with the loss of that region. Conversely, weak governing parties do not turn to decentralization strategies in the absence of ethnoterritorial threat.

These results make theoretical sense. Significant changes in decentralization level should be fairly uncommon. Decentralization is, after all, a risky strategy because while such reforms may be able to satisfy the demands of an ethnoterritorial party and return its voters to the governing party, they also result in an immediate loss of policy, administrative, and fiscal power for the national governing party employing them. In addition, by creating and strengthening regional government, decentralization creates a future source of opposition to the governing party's electoral and legislative legitimacy. Indeed, this subnational counterbalance to the national government has regularly emerged in Western European countries following decentralization, with nationally appeased pro-decentralization voters supporting ethnoterritorial parties at the newly strengthened regional level and regional governments being controlled by parties that did not initiate decentralization.⁹⁷

In challenging the standard structural perspective of the decentralization literature, my work demonstrates the utility of institutional reform as a party strategy to capture voters. The findings raise several avenues for further research. First, the analysis has looked at decentralization as an appeasement response targeting ethnoterritorial parties, but the degree to which ethnoterritorial parties and their voters demand greater regional autonomy varies, as highlighted by the existence of autonomy- versus independence-seeking ethnoterritorial parties. Based on the logic of appeasement, governing parties may be more likely to use decentralization, which preserves existing national borders, to target threatening autonomist parties rather than secessionist ones.

⁹⁷ Pallarés and Keating 2006; Schakel 2013; Dandoy and Schakel 2013; Field 2016.

The limited coverage of existing variables of ethnoterritorial party goals prevents the direct testing of this theoretical extension.⁹⁸ That said, my findings engender confidence because 1) decentralization has an electorally appeasing effect on even independence-seeking parties,⁹⁹ and 2) the analyses produce conservative estimates. Given the pooling of secessionist and autonomist parties and the possible attenuated impact of secessionist parties on the adoption of decentralization reforms,¹⁰⁰ my findings likely underestimate the real impact of threat on decentralization.

Second, by highlighting the role of decentralization in a government's arsenal, the article also raises questions about the tactical use of this institutional reform by and against other parties. Do we see evidence of the same logic driving decentralization support among parties in opposition?¹⁰¹ Furthermore, to what extent is decentralization employed to stem voter defection to non-ethnoterritorial pro-decentralization parties? Indeed, in some countries, regional actors of various ideological stripes campaign explicitly for greater regional autonomy.¹⁰² While my findings suggest that governmental vulnerability is not a significant predictor of decentralization in the absence of ethnoterritorial parties, the scope of the study does not allow for the examination of nonethnic regional actors as proponents and targets of asymmetrical decentralization. Further research should explore the role of these actors, especially in countries without ethnoterritorial parties.

Third, in showing that regional decentralization can be an electoral strategy, this article also suggests that the origins of other institutional reforms may be best understood as forms of voter appeasement. Although a burgeoning literature on institutional change exists,¹⁰³ less attention is given, for example, to whether the adoption of new electoral rules, the repeal of compulsory voting, or even the strengthening of the powers of municipal governments reflect a direct response by governments to the demands of the voters of threatening parties. The

⁹⁸ The existing data sets of ethnoterritorial party ideology (e.g., Massetti and Schakel 2013; Szöcsik and Zuber 2015; Zuber and Szöcsik 2018) have limited country, party, and year coverage relative to the observations in this analysis. Even if we accept this loss of cases, the presence of multiple ethnoterritorial parties in a given region makes it almost impossible to cleanly divide all regions along autonomist and secessionist ideologies.

⁹⁹ Massetti and Schakel 2013; Meguid 2023. This finding is consistent with the idea that at least some secessionist party voters (and by extension, their strategic vote-seeking parties) will be satisfied with greater regional autonomy.

¹⁰⁰ Massetti and Schakel 2013; Brancati 2009.

¹⁰¹ Research has begun to explore the determinants of party policy position on the decentralization issue (e.g., Toubreau and Wagner 2015), but these specific factors have not been examined.

¹⁰² Lublin 2012; Lublin 2014.

¹⁰³ E.g., Boix 1999; Benoit 2004; Birch 2009.

logic of office maximization—devoid of the role of voters—cannot be dismissed a priori, but the plausibility of a strategic claim is suggested by the explosion of citizen groups and new, often populist, parties demanding very specific institutional reforms ranging from the abolishment of compulsory voting in Venezuela in the 1990s and the 1996 adoption of a mixed-member proportional system in New Zealand to the holding of referenda in the UK on the creation of a directly elected London mayor and assembly in 1998 and on Brexit in 2016. Such questions and propositions invite future research.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary material for this article can be found at <http://muse.jhu.edu/resolve/223>.

DATA

Replication files for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JHHTXP>.

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appeasement, decentralization, ethnoterritorial party, region, strategy, Western Europe