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A Framework for Analysis**

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Introduction

Since the 1970s, processes of decentralisation in Western Europe have created new regional electoral arenas within many states (Hough and Jeffery, 2006). In many places, regionalisation was the state's response to demands from a territorially concentrated minority that greater autonomy be granted to a culturally and (sometimes) linguistically distinct 'national' community (Swenden, 2006: 148). Once a tier of regional government has been established, state-wide and autonomist parties¹ compete against each other for control of the new regional institutions. It is widely recognised in the academic literature that the resultant dynamics of party competition will be structured along two dimensions. Thus parties will compete along the traditional left-right dimension, involving differences over how to organise and distribute socio-economic resources within the region. But there is also scope for parties to disagree on the degree of competencies that should be granted to regional institutions (the territorial or de/re-centralisation dimension).

Beyond this observation, however, scholars have paid surprisingly little attention to the way in which state-wide and autonomist parties compete in regional elections. There has been little study, and even less comparative analysis, of the factors that impact on the electoral performance of political parties at the regional level. This paucity of work has been partly addressed by a new academic interest in examining and explaining voting behaviour in regional elections (Jeffery and Hough, 2003; Pallarés and Keating, 2003; Wyn Jones and Scully, 2006). These authors have provided compelling evidence of how voters behave differently in regional elections in territories with a strong sense of regional identity. Voters in such places have been demonstrated to prefer 'regional parties for regional issues', with the result that autonomist parties tend to perform better than their state-wide counterparts in regional elections. This work on multi-level voting goes a significant way towards explaining why some political parties tend to do better than others in regional elections. However, this general trend aside, these studies cannot explain why political parties still experience fluctuations in electoral support from one regional election to the next.

Other work has focused more specifically on explaining why political parties competing in regional elections have "good" and "bad years" in terms of their electoral performance. Several authors have argued that political parties that fail to adapt their internal organisations, strategies and programmes to a regional political context will experience a decline in their electoral fortunes (Hopkin, 2003; Biezen and Hopkin, 2006; Hopkin and Bradbury, 2006; Roller and Van Houten, 2003; Fabre *et al.*, 2005). However, this literature has been dominated by individual case studies.

¹ The label 'autonomist party' is used to refer to a party that has as its core goal the territorial re-organization of the state, in order to secure self-government for the national community that they claim to represent. State-wide parties are defined as parties that compete at both state and regional levels of government in all or most of the territory of the state (Fabre, 2008: 25). They are thus distinguishable from autonomist parties who, although they also take part in state-wide and regional elections, their political activities are limited to one (or at most a few regions) of the state (Swenden and Maddens, 2009: 9).

To date, there has been no systematic comparative analysis of what and how intra-party factors (such as party organisation, strategy and programmes) impact on the electoral performance of political parties at the regional level. This work has also focused exclusively on the adaptation of state-wide parties to regional political contexts, and has nothing at all to say about the factors that affect the electoral performance of autonomist parties in these arenas. This is surprising given that, in many places, autonomist parties have been electorally highly successful, and have been able to push for a programme of constitutional reform that challenges the constitutional integrity of the state (Elias and Tronconi, 2011).

Finally, scholars of regional party politics have not examined the ways in which state-wide and autonomist parties compete against each other for votes on the regional level. As noted above, it is generally acknowledged that the existence of a territorial dimension to party competition in regional political systems is highly likely to lead to the emergence of a distinctive regional party system, where new patterns of party competition emerge. And yet, very little attention has been paid to the specific ways in which state-wide and autonomist parties seek to develop new electoral strategies in these regional contexts of party competition.

In light of these short-comings in the study of party competition in regional elections, this paper provides a framework for undertaking a study of the factors affecting the electoral performance of state-wide and autonomist parties in regional party systems. It offers a starting-point for undertaking a systematic comparative empirical analysis of the dynamics of party competition in regional elections. The next section identifies the different strategies that political parties may adopt in regional elections, in response to their perceptions of voter preferences as well as to the strategies pursued by their competitors. The paper then examines the different factors that impact on parties' strategic choices, and which may constrain a party's ability to select electorally optimal strategies in a given political context.

Mapping Party Strategies in Regional Elections

There is an extensive scholarly literature on party competition that posits that parties' electoral strategies will be shaped, in the first instance, by voter preferences on a range of issues structured along key dimensions of competition. The majority of studies posit the left-right dimension as the most salient basis of party positioning. In the regional electoral space, where autonomist parties have mobilised in defence of a distinct national community and its rights to self-government, there will also be competition along a second, territorial dimension. Parties thus compete on issues related to territorial culture (and in many cases, language) and the extent to which political authority is decentralised to the regional level (Fabre and Martínez Herrera, 2009). The spatial logic of party competition (Downs, 1957; see also Clarke, et al., 2009) leads us to expect that political party positioning on these two dimensions will be informed by the left-right and territorial preferences of regional voters. In other words, political parties will seek to adopt the policy

positions that are closest to the policy positions of the median voter, and that will therefore maximise electoral success.

An alternative model of party competition, however, posits that rather than confronting their rivals' policies and proposing their own alternatives (as spatial theories of party competition contend), parties prefer to compete by emphasising issues that are thought to bring greater electoral advantage (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Budge et al., 1987; Budge et al., 2001). This is partly dependant on which issues are important - or 'salient' - for voters at any given point in time. Within the constraints of public issue salience, however, parties choose to emphasise issues that they 'own'. Issue ownership is established on the basis of party identity and reputation for handling policy problems (Petrocik, 1996; Budge and Farlie, 1983: 24-6; Klingemann et al., 1994: 24). With regard to party identity, political parties are likely to benefit electorally from emphasising issues that are strongly associated with them in the electorate's mind (such as left-wing parties and issues of wealth redistribution and welfare, and right-wing parties and issues of defence and taxation (Budge and Farlie, 1983)). But calculations about a party's judgement, competence and performance – usually referred to as 'valence' concerns - are also important in determining voter choice and, consequently, party behaviour in elections (Stokes, 1963, 1992). This second dimension of party ownership – a party's reputation or policy "handling" ability (Petrocik, 1996: 826) - is more variable, since it depends on short-term factors such as record in government or response to a salient problem at any given moment. Information-poor and politically indifferent voters that lack a strong ideological framework as the basis for vote choice, will instead use different heuristic cues to make judgments about which political parties 'can do the job' (Clarke *et al.*, 2009: 46-7). One such cue is a party's reputation for being able to resolve problems of concern to voters; this is built up gradually over time with past policy performance being taken as a basis for making judgements about how parties will behave in the future (Fiorina, 1981; Petrocik, 1996: 826). Another is the image of party leaders, which serves a proxy for the overall capability of a party to govern (Clarke *et al.*, 2009: 11). But how voters judge political parties will also depend on non-policy related factors, such as general competence, integrity and unity. Clark (2009) finds that events such as political scandals and party divisions contribute to voter perceptions of a party's incompetence, and can cause parties to lose votes.

Given their different assumptions about how voters decide and how parties compete in elections, spatial and salience models are usually presented as competing accounts of how voters choose and parties compete in elections. However, several authors have argued that these should be considered as complimentary, rather than competing approaches (Green and Hobolt, 2008; Clarke *et al.*, 2009). The work by Meguid (2005, 2008) in particular provides the basis for a more dynamic explanation of the way in which political parties change issue positioning, salience and ownership in the process of competing with their rivals for votes. The following section considers this work in greater detail, and draws on it to develop a framework for analysing party competition in regional elections.

A 'toolkit' for analysing party competition in regional elections

Meguid (2005, 2008) examines the competition between mainstream parties and "niche" parties, the latter defined as parties that "reject the traditional class-based orientation of politics", "challenge the content of political debate" by raising novel issues that do not coincide with existing lines of political division, and limit themselves to "a restricted set of issues" (Meguid, 2005: 347-8). One manifestation of this mainstream-niche competition is that between mainstream parties and autonomist parties (the others being between mainstream parties and radical right and green parties).

In responding to the electoral challenge posed by niche parties to established mainstream parties, Meguid argues that the latter can adopt one of the following three strategies:

- a *dismissive* strategy: a mainstream party can choose to dismiss the issues raised by a niche party, thus signalling to the electorate that the issue lacks merit. This strategy is attractive when the electoral threat posed by the niche party is minimal.
- an *accommodative* strategy: the mainstream party adopts a position similar to that of the niche party in a bid to encourage voter flight from the latter; in doing so, the mainstream party also challenges the niche party for ownership of that particular issue. In the event that this challenge for issue ownership is successful, then the mainstream party can expect electoral success at the niche party's expense.
- an *adversarial* strategy: a mainstream party will adopt a contrary position to that adopted by the niche party; this is intended to declare hostility towards the latter, reinforces the niche party's issue ownership of a specific policy, and encourage voters to make a choice between opposing policy positions.

These strategies involve three strategic moves by mainstream parties. First they can change their issue position, for example by approximating or distancing themselves from the issue positions assumed by a niche party. Secondly, they can change the salience of different issues, either by dismissing a niche party issue as unimportant or by accentuating a niche issue and competing directly with the neophyte. In the latter case, a mainstream party seeks to manipulate issue ownership, thus presenting itself as the party best able to deliver on the policy in question.

The three competitive strategies outlined above (dismissive, accommodative and adversarial) and the three programmatic shifts that they involve (issue positioning, salience and ownership) provide a basic conceptual toolkit for studying the competition between mainstream and niche parties. In order to apply this framework to the study of party competition in regional elections, however, a major shortcoming in Meguid's work must be addressed. If Meguid's 'position, salience and ownership' framework provides a starting-point for examining how state-wide parties may choose to compete with autonomist parties in regional elections, Meguid fails to provide guidance on how the competitive strategies and responses of autonomist parties can be

conceptualised. Niche parties are denied the strategic capacity to formulate their own electoral strategies and respond to the competitive behaviour of their state-wide/mainstream rivals. This omission is justified on the grounds that niche parties are strongly ideologically motivated (that is, policy-seeking rather than vote-seeking) and are unwilling to modify their policy stances in order to attract greater electoral support. It is also argued that there is a strong electoral disincentive for niche parties to change their position, since doing so will provoke internal divisions that will not only tarnish the party's 'valence' image in voters' eyes, but will also demobilize the activists relied upon to campaign and deliver the niche party vote (Adams *et al.*, 2006). It is therefore assumed that niche parties will not engage in strategic adaptive behaviour in the same way as mainstream parties do when their electoral shares are threatened by a niche party.

This argument is problematic, not least due to the conceptualisation of niche parties on which it is based. I have argued elsewhere (Elias, 2009) that understanding autonomist parties as being defined by, and exclusively concerned with, the core business of territorial autonomy is inaccurate. Whilst the notion of 'niche' party may have been a useful characterisation of autonomist parties in their earliest years, it cannot accommodate important ways in which the goals and priorities of these actors have evolved over time. Firstly, the vast majority of autonomist parties complement their territorial demands with a positioning on the left-right ideological spectrum. These parties are thus ideologically more sophisticated than the 'niche' categorisation allows. Secondly, case study evidence has demonstrated that autonomist parties have been highly adept at manipulating their political programmes on both the territorial and left-right dimensions in order to gain electoral advantage over their mainstream rival (see contributions in Hepburn, 2010a). As posited by Adams *et al.* (2006: 526), such strategies have on occasion resulted in electoral losses for these parties. Autonomist parties have had to confront the well-documented trade-offs between policy compromise and electoral gains that often face political parties (Elias and Tronconi, 2011). However, and contrary to that expected by Adams *et al.* (2006), only in very few cases has electoral decline prompted autonomist parties to retreat to core ideological principles. Instead, these parties have undertaken further ideological and strategic adaptation in order to cast aside the 'niche party' mantle and present themselves as credible mainstream political actors in the regional (and state-wide) political spaces within which they have mobilised. This transformative effort – from niche to mainstream party – is not exclusive to autonomist parties; a growing literature has documented similar attempts at adaptation on the part of green and radical right parties. In contrast to Meguid, therefore, it is arguable that niche parties are capable of strategic competitive behaviour in the quest for votes. Moreover, these strategies can be conceptualised on the basis of the strategic toolkit outlined above. The next section turns to the task of applying this toolkit to party competition in regional elections.

Conceptualising party competition in regional elections

If Meguid's framework of party competition is extended to regional elections, state-wide parties may be expected to respond to the presence of autonomist parties in one of three ways: by ignoring the territorial issues they raise and focus on other issues (for example, left-right or valence

issues) that are deemed more likely vote-winners; by adopting a similar position in the hope of attracting the votes of autonomist sympathisers; or by rejecting autonomist party proposals in order to give voters a clear choice between contrasting territorial projects. None of these strategies are risk-free. The general distribution of voter preferences on the territorial dimension will constrain the degree to which the efforts of state-wide parties to manipulate their positions on, and the salience of, the territorial dimension. Firstly, a state-wide party that dismisses the territorial issues raised by its autonomist competitors when this is something that is important to voters is likely to be punished due the perception that it is out of touch with political reality. Secondly, a state-wide party that adopts an accommodative strategy will only reap electoral benefits if it manages to convince voters of the credibility of its territorial agenda. In an effort to establish issue ownership, state-wide parties will thus have to look for ways to present its new position to voters in such a way that plays to its own issue strength (see Petrocik, 1996: 829 and Damore, 2004: 393).² Thirdly, a state-wide party adopting an adversarial position must be sure that there is sufficient voter sympathy for its oppositional strategy, otherwise it too risks failing to undermine the electoral appeal of its autonomist rival.

How might autonomist parties respond to these state-wide party strategies? One option is to do nothing at all (Meguid's 'dismissive' strategy): if state-wide party responses to the territorial issues do not threaten an autonomist party's electoral appeal, then there is no incentive to change either its stance on, or the salience of, the territorial dimension. However, in the event that state-wide party strategies threaten the electoral position of an autonomist party, then several other options may be considered; these propositions are consistent with Meguid's 'position, ownership and salience' framework outlined above. Firstly, an autonomist party may shift its positioning on the territorial dimension, by moderating or radicalising its demands for autonomy. This may be the preferred option of parties who believe that there is support among voters for such a change of position, and who hope to mobilise new electoral support as a means of forcing its territorial demands onto the political agenda. Secondly, an autonomist party may choose to re-assert its ownership of the territorial issue; as Green and Hobolt (2008) note, when there is very little policy difference between two competing parties, then issue ownership becomes an increasingly important determinant of vote choice. Thirdly, an autonomist party may try to manipulate the salience of issues in its election campaign. If we recall that there is usually more to the ideological profile of autonomist parties than just the core business of territorial reform, then it is possible that salience may be given to other policy priorities, such as those informed by its left-right profile. In so doing, autonomist parties may pursue dismissive, accommodative or adversarial strategies vis-à-vis the left-right positioning of its state-wide rivals. This is perhaps the riskiest of all strategies, given what is said above about the potential electoral implications of a niche party betraying its core ideological principles. Alternatively, autonomist parties may appeal to valence credentials, if this is deemed more likely to resonate with public opinion.

² Damore (2004: 393) notes that "by using an alternative frame to present an issue [electoral] candidates may be able to reshape voters' understanding of an issue in a manner that highlights their perceived strengths."

The different strategic choices sketched out above point to a complex dynamic of party competition, as state-wide and autonomist parties seek to gain electoral advantage within a two-dimensional political space. The permutation of possible strategic choices and responses is not exhaustive. Rather, the discussion above serves to identify the different options open to state-wide and autonomist parties as they try and respond to the twin imperatives of voter preferences and the competitive moves of their rivals in regional elections. These options can be summarised as follows. Parties will respond to issues raised by their competitors in one of three ways: by adopting a *dismissive*, *accommodative* or *adversarial* strategy. In the event that these strategies pose a serious electoral challenge to a competitor, the latter has a further three choices: to change its *position* on an issue, manipulate issue *saliency*, or (re-)assert its *ownership* of an issue.

Explaining the Strategic Choices of Political Parties in Regional Elections

Thus far, this paper has outlined the different opportunities and constraints that political parties may face in regional elections, and the different strategic responses available to them in the face of voting preferences and party-competitive dynamics. The implication of the discussion so far is that parties that are in tune with public opinion and that respond effectively to the behaviour of their competitors are the most likely to do well in an election.

However, political parties do not always pursue electorally optimal strategies in elections. An overview of the electoral performance of state-wide and autonomist parties in regional elections across Western Europe shows that all parties lose as often as they win. Adapting to a new context of electoral competition, as parties must do when new regional institutions are created, can be particularly difficult (Hopkin, 2003: 228). But even when regional institutions have been established and operational for some time, parties will still face difficult strategic choices in their efforts at vote-maximisation. What, therefore, are the constraints on the strategic choices of political parties competing in regional elections? The rest of this paper examines the factors that can be expected to shape the strategic decisions taken by political parties in regional elections, decisions that in turn affect whether a party is electorally successful or not.

External factors: Systemic, behavioural and multi-level constraints

The specific features of the context in which political parties compete in regional elections can impact upon strategic choices in several ways. Here, the focus is on three external factors: the nature of the regional institutional settlement, voting patterns in regional elections and multi-level constraints. Each factor will be considered in turn.

The nature of the regional institutional settlement

Decisions to decentralise political authority to regional institutions are relatively recent in most Western European states, with acceleration in this trend since the 1970s (Hough and Jeffery, 2006). Moreover, it is often the case that the regional political settlement is subject to evolution

after the initial process of decentralisation has taken place (often in response to demands by autonomist parties for enhanced self-government for their nation). In countries such as Italy, the UK, Spain and Belgium, for example, new powers have been transferred to the regional level over time, with the result of increasing regional autonomy beyond that initially granted by state authorities.

Both of these features of the regional institutional settlement - its 'newness' and subsequent evolution - may impact on the strategic choices of political parties competing in regional elections. Thus the context in which a new decentralised tier of government is established may inform the ways in which political parties approach the first regional elections. For example, a party that was instrumental in delivering these reforms is likely to choose to emphasise this fact of 'having delivered' on territorial re-organisation, whilst a party that opposed decentralisation may struggle to define a clear political space within a political arena that it did not support in principle. Autonomist party strategies may well depend on the extent to which the territorial reforms meet their aspirations; in the event that they do, then a party may well choose to focus on other non-territorial issues, whilst those that remain dissatisfied may prefer to press for greater autonomy than has been granted.

This last observation also suggests the dilemma that is likely to face political parties in the event that their territorial demands are met, and new competencies are decentralised to the regional level. In such a situation, a state-wide party may choose to re-focus on other core issues of its political project, such as left-right issues. For their part, autonomist parties face the prospect of either radicalising their territorial demands, or defining a new role for themselves in the political system if their core autonomist goal has been fulfilled. The latter option may lead them to focus on non-territorial (left-right) issues as the basis for an alternative electoral appeal; this is a particularly risky prospect since, as noted above, any strategic change of focus or profile must be credible in the eyes of voters if it is to provide a platform for electoral success. As the case of the Flemish Volksunie demonstrates, autonomist parties may be consigned to electoral doom if voters perceive the party's function in the political system as having been exhausted (see De Winter, 2006).

Patterns of regional voting behaviour

As noted in the Introduction, there is evidence that voters behave differently in regional elections in territories with a strong sense of regional identity. Voters in such places have been demonstrated to focus to a great extent on region-specific issues when making their electoral choice, which translates into higher electoral support for autonomist parties than for state-wide parties. This trend is accentuated when regional elections do not coincide with, or are not held close to, state-wide elections (Jeffery and Hough, 2003). Such patterns of 'multi-level' or 'dual' voting provide a strong incentive for political parties to focus on region-specific issues in their regional campaigns.

This will be easiest for autonomist parties, since their core political project is defined by the need to defend the nation's interests. However, they may also seek to develop a programme which

ventures beyond the core business of territorial reform to offer a more comprehensive set of socio-economic and cultural policies aimed at 'building the nation'. Such an expanded policy repertoire is necessary if an autonomist party is to successfully present itself as a credible party of potential government at the regional level. For state-wide parties, on the other hand, maximising voter appeal may require giving prominence to region-specific issues (Hopkin, 2003; Hopkin and Bradbury, 2006). In this way, state-wide parties can try and compete with autonomist parties for the mantle of the party best able to respond to the regional electorate's specific concerns and priorities.

Multi-level constraints

Competing in a multi-level political system is a fact of life for most state-wide and autonomist parties. On the one hand, state-wide parties that compete in regional elections are part of a larger party organisation that extends across the state's territory, and electoral support is sought at both levels simultaneously. On the other hand, although the regional arena is the 'core level' for autonomist parties (Deschouwer, 2003), and their organisation and activity is limited to a clearly defined territorial area (coinciding with the 'nation'), there is nevertheless an incentive for these parties to seek a voice at other territorial levels. For example, being present at the state-level is important since it is here that decisions about the territorial re-organisation of political authority are taken (Elias and Tronconi, 2011); autonomist parties will seek representation at this level as a means of exerting pressure on state authorities to accede to their demands.

As the result of being active in different territorial spheres simultaneously, it is not unreasonable to expect that what parties say and do in one sphere may have consequences for what they say and do in another (Deschouwer, 2003). The multi-level context within which parties operate can exert different pressures on the strategic choices made by state-wide and autonomist parties in regional elections. Of particular interest to this study is how state-level dynamics may impact on the electoral strategies developed by political parties in regional elections, and particularly the issues a party chooses to emphasise/de-emphasise in these contests. There are several ways in which such pressures can manifest themselves.

Firstly, the timing of regional and national elections may be important. The discussion thus far has assumed implicitly that regional elections will be dominated by regional issues, especially those related to the competences of the regional institutions. However, in certain circumstances, non-regional issues may dominate a regional electoral campaign. Deschouwer (2003: 223), for example, argues that regional elections are at risk of becoming 'nationalized' (that is, dominated by national issues) when they take place either at the same time as state-wide (national) elections or regional elections elsewhere within the state.³ Even when regional and national elections do not

³ In both cases, regional elections are turned into a national test of the popularity of the political party in state government. This hypothesis about the second-order nature of regional elections has been challenged in the work of Libbrecht et al. (2009), however. In their analysis of the issue profiles of state-wide parties in different Autonomous Communities in Spain, no empirical evidence was found of significant issue differentiation between regions where regional elections were concurrent either with national elections or regional elections elsewhere.

coincide, there may be one-off events that emanate from outside the regional sphere that happen to dominate the public consciousness when a regional election takes place, and which requires political parties to respond (in ways that are sketched out above). The timing of regional elections, therefore, may dictate what issues are given salience by autonomist and especially state-wide parties.

Secondly, it may matter whether a state-wide party is in government at the state-level or not. Van Houten (2003: 17) argues that parties that are not in government will be more tolerant of efforts by regional party branches to 'regionalise' its message, since the potential increase in support could provide the basis for a strengthening of the party at the state-level. In contrast, a state-wide party in national government will be keener to ensure that a coherent political message is articulated across the territory; a regional branch may thus be more limited in the campaign messages that it can choose to articulate. Autonomist parties have also participated in, or provided legislative support for, national governments, although their involvement has largely been limited to issues of territorial reform (Elias and Tronconi, 2011). Where autonomist parties have been instrumental in securing such reforms, this may equally bolster their reputation for policy delivery. Failing to deliver, in contrast, may prompt an autonomist party to focus instead on non-territorial issues where its credibility is less tarnished. An autonomist party that is in a coalition government at the national level will also have to be careful that its regional electoral campaign does not antagonise its state-wide partners.

Thirdly, there may also be a valence dimension to multi-level constraints. It has already been stated above that a party's reputation for handling and solving political problems is important in establishing ownership of a particular issue, which in turn can lead to electoral reward. A party in state government that is deeply unpopular may constitute a liability in regional elections, and there is an incentive for the party's regional branch to give salience to other issues that are perceived to be less electorally damaging. The converse also holds, in that a highly popular governing party may be featured prominently in regional elections in order to maximise the regional branch's electoral appeal. Other aspects of 'valence' – such as the impact of a party leader's image and more general perceptions of party competence, integrity and unity – may also assume a multi-level dimension in the case of state-wide parties. This is because the regional branch of a state-wide party is part of a broader organisational structure headed by a national party leader. Voters may thus judge a party's capability to govern on the basis of either the regional party leader, the national leader, or both. Which leader image dominates voters' valence judgements depends to a large degree on the character and visibility of the different leaders. But there is also scope for state-wide parties to manipulate how, and the extent to which, regional/national party leaders feature in a regional electoral campaign. Where a regional leader lacks popular appeal or political experience in government, a party may instead play up the credentials of the national party leader as a proxy for competence in regional government. Alternatively, where a national leader is unpopular or lacks credibility, a party may instead seek to emphasise the capabilities of the regional party leadership as a way of distancing itself from the national-level party organisation.

Internal factors: party organisation and ideology

Kitschelt (1994) has argued that internal party politics – and organizational and ideological factors in particular – will impact on the strategic choices made by political parties in regional elections. The next two sub-sections examine the linkage between the internal life of parties and electoral performance in greater detail.

The impact of party organization

Party organization has been identified as a major cause of variation in party strategy, which in turn affects electoral performance (Kitschelt, 1994; Sferza, 2002). This is because different organizational formats carry distinct comparative advantages in different environments. A match/mismatch between a party's organizational structure and its environment can contribute to electoral success/decline. The electoral success of state-wide and autonomist parties competing in regional elections may thus be affected by the degree to which they are organizationally well-adapted to the regional arena within which they operate.

What organizational features would give state-wide and autonomist parties an electoral advantage in regional elections? Firstly, for parties that prioritise vote-maximisation, strategic flexibility is highly desirable. Strategic flexibility provides parties with the freedom to manipulate policy positions and issue salience in response to perceived changes in voter preferences and the behaviour of competitors, as outlined above. Wollinetz (2002: 151-152) elaborates on the 'ideal-type' organizational features of such a vote-seeking party. An autonomous leadership will oversee a centralized and highly professional campaigning apparatus. The emphasis on winning votes rather than ideological purity is likely to lead to policy manipulation in response to changes in voter preferences and the competitive moves of other parties; leaders will also be sensitive to valence considerations in making their electoral appeals. The party membership is kept at arm's length; whilst they may have a say in the selection of candidates, they have little influence over party policy. A vote-seeking party that lacks these organisational features, and is thus less well positioned to respond quickly and effectively to changes in its competitive environment, is expected to experience electoral decline.

Secondly, in an electoral market characterised by new dimensions of social and political mobilization, a vote-seeking party is "well advised to diversify its appeal and represent popular debates and ideological variety within the microcosm of the party" (Kitschelt, 1994: 212). Organizationally, the implication is that political parties that can accommodate different interests and priorities of the electorate will be best placed to appeal to newly mobilised groups. For state-wide parties competing in regions where there is a strong territorial dimension to party competition, there is thus an incentive to accommodate and integrate alternative viewpoints within intra-party debates and decision-making. Regional branches of state-wide parties with control over activities such as the selection of regional party leaders and election candidates, and the formulation of electoral programmes and strategies, would thus be better placed to appeal to, and target, newly mobilized groups. Regional branches of state-wide parties that do not, or are unable to, respond to

new voter demands are expected to perform less well in regional elections. For autonomist parties, to the extent that voters mobilize around issues that are beyond their core-business of territorial reform (e.g. the left-right dimension), then a similar ability to accommodate and integrate alternative viewpoints within the party will be electorally advantageous.

The observations above suggest a highly deterministic effect of the environment on party organizations. The implication is that parties with sub-optimal organizations that result in electoral losses will adopt organizational structures that are more electorally efficient, and thus re-establish their competitiveness (Kitschelt, 1994: 209; Harmel and Janda, 1994: 263). After all, it is well-established in the academic literature that electoral defeat is a major driver of party change, most of all for vote-seeking parties (Janda, 1990; Strøm, 1990; Harmel *et al.*, 1995; Harmel, 2002). However, the adaptation of party organisations to environmental conditions is neither easy nor inevitable (Panebianco, 1988; Harmel and Janda, 1994). How parties perceive their operating environments, and whether (and how) they choose to adapt their organisations will depend on two factors: the substantive direction of strategic preferences within the party, and a party's capacity for strategic innovation (Kitschelt, 1994: 209).

The substantive direction of strategic preferences

As Mair *et al.* (2004: 11) note, there are several options available to parties seeking to respond to changes in their operating environment that threaten their electoral standing. For example, there may be efforts to professionalise the party's campaigning apparatus; alternatively parties may decentralise or centralise decision-making, either to be closer to supporters on the ground or to increase professional oversight of decisions related to an election campaign. There may also be efforts to change the internal distribution of power within a party. Within state-wide parties, there may be moves to decentralise or centralise power across territorial levels, either to enhance the strategic autonomy of regional branches or to retain strategic control and co-ordination at the state level.⁴

Which of these organisational responses is favoured will depend on the preferences of the dominant coalition within a party. Political parties are composed of different coalitions of actors that compete for dominance of the party organization. Within a political party, therefore, there may well be disagreement about which electoral strategy is most desirable, and what organisational vehicle is best suited for implementing this strategy. Different 'faces' of the party organisation will have distinct strategic goals and motivations (Mair, 1994; Katz and Mair, 1992, 2002). The 'party on the ground' is composed of the party membership, whose primary motivation is ideological and who prioritise the defence of core party values (cf. Kitschelt, 1994: 209). Whilst party members may

⁴ Van Houten (2003) identifies four ideal-typical organizational strategies open to state-wide parties. Firstly, a regional branch can split from a state-wide party to form an independent organization. Secondly, a state-wide party can decide to grant more autonomy to its regional branches. Thirdly, a state-wide party can simply maintain their existing territorial structures, or fourthly, centralise decision-making so as to better coordinate its actions at the regional level. Hepburn and Detterbeck (2009) provide a continuum of state-wide party organizational strategies, spanning from 'unitary' parties with no regional branch autonomy, to 'truncated' parties where regional branches exist independently of the state-wide organization.

consider winning elections as preferable to losing them, they will only be willing to make limited policy sacrifices to this end (Katz and Mair, 1992: 5). The party on the ground's authority is greatest when it has a controlling say on internal decision-making, for example when the party congress is the ultimate decision-making body or when party members are able to hold elected party officials to account. The 'party in public office' comprises the party's elected representatives in parliament and government. Given that their roles depend on the party performing well in elections (thus securing their re-election), vote-maximisation is likely to be a priority for this group. Thus they are expected to be highly pragmatic with regard to the party's policy positioning, preferring "a moderate stance lest the party isolates itself from the values and beliefs of its potential electorate" (Kitschelt, 1994: 210). They will also be highly sensitive to voters' valence evaluations, and to the competitive moves of competitor parties. Strategic flexibility is thus maximised when the party in public office is autonomous from the extra-parliamentary organisation, and thus able to respond quickly to different competitive situations that may arise. The third and final face, the 'party in central office', is made up of the party's professional officials. Their power derives from their expertise in different areas of the party's activity (e.g. policy or technical knowledge), and thus their control over a key 'zone of uncertainty' (Panebianco, 1988: 33-4). More so than the other two groups, the party in central office lives from rather than for politics. The greatest concern of these individuals will thus be the security of their own positions within the party bureaucracy rather than the party's ideological coherence or its position within the political system (Katz and Mair, 1992: 6). This will lead them to serve the interests of the party in public office or on the ground, depending on which group controls their position within the party organisation.

To summarise, the different faces of a party organisation are expected to espouse very different strategic goals (ideological purity/vote-maximisation/defence of the organizational status quo). The substantive direction of party strategy will thus depend on which of these groups (and therefore which goals) dominate within a party. Of particular significance will be the relative power of the party in public office vs. the party on the ground, given that the party in central office will be at the service of the most dominant of these two (Katz and Mair, 1992: 6).

Thus far, the discussion has focused on strategic preferences within a party organisation at one territorial level (the regional level in the case of this study). Of interest is the intra-party distribution of strategic preferences within this arena, which in turn is a reflection of the balance of power between a party's different 'faces'. And yet, as mentioned above, the fact that state-wide parties organise across different territorial levels adds an additional dimension to the panorama of competing strategic preferences. It is assumed that state-wide parties will want to win elections at all territorial levels where they compete. However, state and regional party leaderships may disagree about what strategy can best meet this goal. This conflict of preferences will be most evident between different territorial leaderships since these are the actors most likely to be involved in multi-level discussions on fundamentals such as policy, strategy and organisation (Fabre, 2008: 48).

As noted above, in a regional context where strategic flexibility is highly desirable and where state-wide parties have to respond to the presence of highly competitive autonomist parties, there is a strong incentive for regional branches of state-wide parties to have autonomy over the formulation of a regional electoral strategy. However, this may be resisted by the party's state-wide organisation for several reasons. Such a move may undermine the state-wide electoral aspirations of the party, since adopting a fairly uniform party programme across the state is usually considered important for achieving this (Van Houten, 2009: 143). When different territorial units are making policy and personnel decisions, there is a chance that they will produce inconsistent and contradictory messages about the party. Granting regional branches strategic autonomy may thus undermine a state-wide party's electoral performance in general elections (Carty, 2004). Parties in government at the state level will also be concerned with maintaining a uniform political message across the state, so as not to undermine its general policies. Such parties may even try to centralize control over areas such as candidate and leader selection, party election programmes and strategies in different regions within the state territory. On the contrary, a state-wide party's leadership may be more willing to countenance regional branch autonomy when it is a party of opposition at the state-level (Swenden, 2006: 165; Thorlakson, 2009). As noted above, for opposition parties, granting regional branch autonomy may be a strategy to increase their electoral popularity in specific territories, and thus improve their chances of becoming parties of state government.

In the case of state-wide parties, therefore, the substantive direction of party strategy will also be influenced by the relative predominance of the strategic preferences of different territorial groups within the party's multi-level organisation. This vertical division of power – between the national and regional levels of party organisation – will impact upon the scope for different groups (the party on the ground, in public office and in central office) to compete for power within a state-wide party's regional branch. Only in the case of regional party branches with substantial autonomy are there “power resources” (Panebianco, 1988: 22) up for grabs, which different groups of actors within the party will seek to monopolise.

Party capacity for strategic innovation

If the substantive direction of a party's strategic preferences depends on the distribution of political sentiments within a party, a party's organisational structure influences how effectively different groups can push for their own vision of party strategy. As Kitschelt (1994: 207) notes, “organizational rules directly affect a party's temporal strategic flexibility vis-à-vis new competitive challenges”. Party organisation thus becomes an independent variable that impacts upon a party's ability to adopt electorally optimal strategies. Of interest here is the organisational opportunities for, and constraints on, strategic innovation in two respects: the capacity of different groups within the party at the regional level to implement their strategic preferences; and the capacity of regional branches of state-wide parties to push for greater autonomy from the central party organisation (as noted above, the latter determines the extent to which it is possible for different actors to contest political authority within the regional branch of a state-wide party).

Panebianco (1988: 50) has argued that, due to a strong tendency towards institutional inertia, a party's organisational characteristics depend more on its history than on any other factor. The mode of an organisation's construction and development, for example, can have an enduring impact on the distribution of power within modern political parties and may hinder efforts at organisational change. Parties formed through territorial penetration – that is, under the control of a strong and coherent 'centre' – are likely to become highly institutionalised, with a strong centralised bureaucracy that formalises and channels interactions between different groups within the party and makes any organisational change slow and laborious (ibid.: 58; Kitschelt, 1994: 212). Such structures discourage ideological factionalism and intense debate over party aims, and are thus ill-placed to accommodate new and diverse viewpoints in response to the emergence of new political cleavages (see above). In the case that the party in public office is accountable to extra-parliamentary fora, then strategic flexibility to respond to new competitive challenges will also be undercut (ibid.: 213). Parties with such organisational features will struggle to respond effectively to regional electoral contexts characterised by high competitiveness and cleavage mobilisation.

In contrast, parties formed through diffusion – the independent development of local party organisations that subsequently unified – will be more weakly institutionalised, with an embryonic bureaucratic apparatus that grants substantial autonomy to internal groups and sub-units. Such parties provide more scope for different interests to compete for control of key power resources within the party. Organisational change is thus in principle easier to achieve; strategic flexibility and the ability to accommodate diverse interests are also enhanced (Panebianco, 1988: 58; Kitschelt, 1994: 208). Such parties should be better placed to adapt to the changing competitive environment of regional elections. However, there is a risk that a party's organization is captured by a group of interests whose strategic preferences may not be electorally optimal, and who may introduce new organizational rules that may further constrain how parties behave in the electoral arena.⁵

A state-wide party's origins can also influence organisational responses to process of regionalisation. As Hopkin (2003: 233) notes, parties founded by diffusion are more likely to provide for regional elites to have influence over internal decision-making, given the decentralisation of power that characterises this party type (see above). In contrast, parties created through penetration may be 'locked in' to a highly centralised form of decision-making that provides regional branches with little organisational or decision-making autonomy. These parties will be least well equipped to provide the strategic innovation necessary to compete effectively in regional elections.

The impact of party ideology

Intra-party mechanisms constraining interest-articulation may explain *why* parties diverge from optimal electoral strategies. However, organisational factors cannot explain *how* parties justify their strategic preferences. The strategic direction of parties' electorally sub-optimal strategies will be determined by ideological traditions that shape the internal discourses within parties, and

⁵ Kitschelt (1994: 212) notes that different interest groups within a political party not only espouse different strategic goals, but also different organizational vehicles for pursuing and meeting these goals.

condition the strategic options parties consider to be open to them. Thus, as noted by Kitschelt (1994: 255), “ideas are critical for explaining the *direction in which parties diverge from rational strategies*” (emphasis in original). This expectation is based on an understanding of ideology as an enduring touchstone of identification for party elites, members and voters (refs). Ideology thus provides parties with a stable framework for action: it provides the normative lenses through which the world is interpreted, and through which solutions for its improvement are filtered.

There are several ways in which party ideology may compromise electoral success. For example, a party’s ideological reputation may dictate which policy positions a party can credibly hold; embracing new issues may be viewed as suspect by supporters since they are not traditionally associated with the party. Alternatively, ideology may limit a party’s ability to respond to new issue agendas that are important to voters, and that increasingly feature in party competition. Instead, it may continue to advocate issues that are internally valued but which may have limited resonance with the electorate. In this way, ideology is expected to constrain the strategic moves that parties consider in response to changes in voter preferences and the competitive moves of other parties. Such strategies will be electorally sub-optimal, and will result in electoral decline.

Of interest to this study are the ideological constraints on political parties in regional elections in two respects: on their core business, and on the secondary dimension of party competition. Thus, for state-wide parties, ideology will inform and constrain policy and strategic positioning on the left-right dimension which defines the party’s core identity, as well as on the second territorial dimension. With regard to the latter, for example, Swenden and Maddens (2009: 23) note that state-wide parties from different ideological traditions will hold very different views of the principle of territorial autonomy, with Labour and Conservative parties being less receptive to such demands than Liberal or Christian Democratic parties. Ideology will thus define the range of acceptable policy positions open to these parties on the territorial question. With regard to autonomist parties, it is expected that ideology will inform parties’ positioning on the core territorial dimension, whilst their left-right profile (see Massetti, 2009) will similarly impact upon their positioning on, and responsiveness to, issues relating to this dimension.

Conclusion

As noted in the Introduction to this paper, the aim of this paper was to develop a framework for examining the ways in which state-wide and autonomist parties compete in regional elections. The focus has been on the discursive strategies employed by parties in such contests, and the factors that may constrain the ability of parties to choose strategies that are most likely to maximise their electoral success. The conceptual toolkit developed by Meguid provides a useful starting point for examining the former aspect, although it has been amended to take account of the capacity of autonomist parties to adopt their own electoral strategies and respond to the competitive moves of their state-wide rivals. The application of the toolkit through empirical analysis will serve to validate its usefulness, and will enable more careful specification of the different strategic options open to

parties in such contests. The consideration of factors constraining parties' strategic choices has drawn on the literature which has considered such constraints on state-wide parties operating at the national level, and amended these insights to take account of the added complexities of party competition between state-wide and autonomist parties in regional contexts. As with the analysis of discursive strategies, the relevance and importance of the different factors identified must be verified through empirical analysis, and the propositions about the constraints on parties' competitive behaviour amended in light of these findings. In summary, this paper provides a starting-point for undertaking a systematic comparative examination of party competition in regional elections, with a view to providing new insights into the ways in which elections are won and lost in these sub-state arenas.

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