

## **Regionalist parties in government: A theoretical framework of analysis**

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# **Regionalist parties in government: A theoretical framework of analysis**

This article proposes a general theoretical framework to look at regionalist parties in regional or national government. Government participation is depicted here as a three-stage process. For each phase we describe if and how incumbent regionalist parties adapt their ideological profile. First, regionalist parties ‘anticipate’ before entering cabinet. To create programmatic convergence with potential coalition partners, they moderate their issue positions and devote attention to a broader scope of issues.

Next, during a legislature in executive office, regionalist parties keep close to their ideological core business. And after having spent a term in cabinet, regionalist parties are ‘contaminated’ by the ideas of their coalition partners. If a regionalist party remains in government for successive terms, the party shows flexibility on its secondary issues but also on its primary issues. If rather a regionalist party returns to the opposition benches, it re-sharpens its positions and narrows the scope of issues emphasized.

Keywords: Regionalist parties, government participation, issue ownership, territorial decentralization, party change

## **Introduction**

In Western democracies, an increasing number of regionalist parties has enjoyed electoral victories. Throughout the Postwar II period, several of them have participated in government, either regional or national. Although, their experiences in cabinet have been met with varying success. Recent stories range from the ‘Junts per Catalunya’ and ‘Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya’ who jointly organized a disputed regional referendum in 2017, over the ‘Coalition Avenir Québec’ who obtained an absolute majority in the National Assembly of the Quebec region in 2018, to the ‘Scottish

National Party' who rules the northern part of Great Britain ever since 2007.

Regionalist parties are often perceived by other parties as disruptive for the state's integrity (Harb 2019). Their electoral uprising has been a pretext for demands for greater autonomy or even full separation. Together with the changing societal reality of ethnic and linguistic diversity in Western countries, this has put statewide parties under great pressure to give more power to sub-national units and to decentralize the structure of formerly centralized states (Bäck, Debus and Müller 2013: 368).

Regionalist parties' demands challenge the institutional and territorial status quo of the country (Mc Angus 2015: 634). Consequently, their co-governance often leads to serious political and civic upheaval. Yet, the regionalist party family is internally more heterogeneous (De Winter and Türsan 1998: 204; Gomez-Reino 2008) compared to other established party families – e.g. the socialists, liberals and Christian-democrats. Their internal diversity makes it more difficult to formulate general observations that uphold for the entire regionalist party type. Nevertheless, it is the aim of this contribution.

The prospect of government participation triggers parties to change. If a party accurately adapts to the situation, it increases its odds for coalition entry. Party change has different faces, e.g. organizational, electoral but also ideological (Hopkin 2003: 227). It is the latter aspect that constitutes the focus of this article. We argue that, when it concerns the programmatic component of party change, regionalist parties behave in a way that is sometimes very different from traditional party types. This discrepancy is not surprising since regionalist parties' goals, i.e. changing the institutional and territorial status quo of the country, contradict with the conventional objectives of established party families.

Any party who aspires to govern will need to establish programmatic convergence with

potential coalition partners (Dandoy 2014: 629). For niche parties, such as the regionalist party type, bridging this gap poses a bigger challenge than for mainstream parties (Adams et. al. 2006: 513). Hence, programmatic changes are more explicit among the subgroup of regionalist parties who successfully cross the Rubicon.

Within the regionalist party family there is a vivid and ongoing debate about which approach is preferable (Elias and Tronconi 2011: 505). Exert external pressure through continued opposition or change the system from within through government participation? Both strategies have their merits and disadvantages. While one party realizes its objectives by pushing other state-wide parties towards state reform, this article focuses on the second subgroup.

For sure, parties are still the dominant political actors in modern democracy. Those who enter executive office can have direct influence on the daily lives of citizens in society (Walgrave and De Swert 2007: 37). If we recall the main goals that drive regionalist parties, their impact on the outcomes of political decision-making is not to be underestimated. A better understanding of how (regionalist) parties behave in government will also improve our appraisal of the results that these cabinets generate.

Our description of a general conceptual framework aims to fill three particular gaps in the literature. First, scholars have assessed the evolution in policy preferences of various state-wide and traditional party families (Laver and Budge 1992), but not so thoroughly of the regionalist party type. Second, there is much research on how political parties cope with taking up government responsibility (Laver and Shepsle 1996), but these studies do not disentangle how specific kinds of parties behave once they are in cabinet. Third, there is a growing body of literature dedicated to specific regionalist parties (e.g. De Winter and Lynch 2006), but only a few contributions paint a more general picture

for the party family as whole.

The proposed framework is comprised of four parts. A first one describes to what degree regionalist parties (re)act differently or similarly to the strategic choice of government participation. Indeed, for 'established' parties as well as for several 'new' party types such as the Greens, this kind of research on party change already exists (e.g. Laver and Shepsle 1990; Rüdig 2006: 127). These studies serve as a valid reference point to describe regionalist parties' behavior. In the end, crossing the threshold of governance is a highly similar trade-off that every party aspiring to govern will need to make (Strøm and Müller 1999: 255). The decision is one of the defining moments in a party's lifecycle and may seriously affect a party's future outlook.

Next, we split up government participation in three different stages - before, during and after. They form the following three parts of our theoretical framework. Thus, a second part of our framework analyses how regionalist parties deal with the issue of government participation on beforehand. Parties who aspire to govern will 'anticipate' or 'prepare' for cabinet entry by adapting their programmatic profile. As a consequence, ruling regionalist parties differ as such from those who remain in the opposition. Taking up more moderate stances and emphasizing a broader range of societal topics make it easier to gain access to executive office.

The third part of the framework outlines regionalist parties' behavior during government incumbency. Regionalist parties cannot depart too long or too far from their ideological roots, i.e. territorial, linguistic and institutional policy domains, without hampering their own credibility. Once in government, regionalist parties stick close to their initial core business by re-emphasizing territorial and institutional demands. At the same time, regionalist parties are highly flexible when it concerns issues that are of

secondary importance to them.

Finally, the fourth part is devoted to how regionalist parties' profiles are affected after they have spent a legislature in cabinet. Indeed, taking up government responsibility may impinge a party's ideology, its electoral strength, future office-aspirations,... Again, we zoom in on the ideological aspect of party change. How are their programmatic profiles affected afterwards? Do regionalist parties get 'contaminated' by their coalition partners? Do they permanently compromise – from a salience or positional point of view - on their former core business?

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, we introduce the main concepts and its corresponding definitions. Second, we apply these keywords to construct a general framework for analysis. This frame includes the three stages of government participation. For each stage, regionalist party change is seen both from a salience (emphasis) and a positional point of view. In our assessment, we also distinguish between the regional and national level of government. This distinction is important because, depending on the level, the main incentive (i.e. office, policy, votes) that steers party behavior may vary. Third, a final section of this article brings the different parts of the framework together for a conclusive analysis. Do regionalist parties adapt and how do they adapt? And to what extent does this contrasts or resembles with how 'traditional' party families behave in the same situation? We highlight the major identified behavioral patterns and relate these back to the broader literature on issue ownership, party competition and party research.

This conceptual description of regionalist parties' thoughts and actions improves our general understanding of these parties' behavior. In what follows, we provide a comprehensive analysis of the changes in their programmatic profile when they take up

government responsibility. Developing more insight in this matter is important because, due to the growing specialization and the increasing ministerial autonomy in modern Western democracies, a governing party's ideology is to a large extent carried through in contemporary political decision-making, its processes and institutions. In that way, ruling parties continue to exert a major impact on society and its people. Hence, having an accurate view on their evolving policy preferences also enhances our conception of what direction modern society is headed towards.

### **Main concepts and definitions**

Over the last decades, politics in Western democracies has become increasingly denationalized. Former unitary structures are being replaced by multi-level models of governance and decision-making. So called 'non-statewide' parties have gradually expanded their electoral market share. Their territorial and linguistic demands have led to significant institutional changes in a vast number of developed countries (Hopkin 2003: 227).

Upheaval by concentrated linguistic or territorial groups continues to be present in various Western multi-level democracies. Highly visible cases such as Catalonia, Scotland or Flanders constitute merely the tip of this iceberg. In each of these obstinate regions, desires ranging from more self-rule to a more equal treatment are advocated by a specific type of political parties who are active on that territory. Nowadays, these 'regionalist parties' are often well-represented in Parliament at the regional - and increasingly also - at the national level of government (Müller-Rommel 1998: 17).

### ***Participationists***

Müller-Rommel (1998: 17) defines regionalist parties as ‘political actors that refer explicitly to geographically concentrated minorities who challenge the existing democratic order by demanding recognition of their own distinct cultural identity’. Indeed, regionalist parties articulate discontent at the constitutional status quo of their territory, advocating anything from cultural autonomy to national independence (Mc Angus 2015: 634). While all regionalist parties share the notion of territorial politics as central theme in their discourse, their underlying economic and cultural motivations might differ (De Winter and Türsan 1998). Territory is surely their most important feature, but this may be built along either ethnic, linguistic or cultural lines (Dandoy 2010: 197).

In contrast with their statewide counterparts, regionalist parties question the institutional and territorial integrity of the State as such. In that way, they challenge the status quo of the country within they operate and upset existing models of political decision-making (Alonso 2012). Their shared ideology is rather thin: apart from the territorial and institutional core business, there is above all a broad internal variety when it comes to other (e.g. social-economic) issues (Alonso, Cabeza and Gomez 2015: 851).

Scholars have provided empirical evidence that the regionalist party family is internally homogenous on territorial topics, but heterogeneous on the other ideological dimensions of party competition (De Winter and Türsan 1998: 204; Gomez-Reino 2008). Members range from parties who openly defend separatism to others who advocate the cultural protection of minority groups. There are the ones who consider independency as an end in itself and those who see regional autonomy as a means to advance a party’s own social or economic policy preferences (Barrio 2013).

Scholars have called for more attention for this ‘territorial dimension of politics’: spatial

and geographical points of debate in party competition remain under exposed (Hopkin 2003: 227). Regionalist parties take up a specific position here, since the ‘center-periphery’ divide naturally forms their major point of political action (Alonso, Cabeza and Gomez 2015: 851). In contrast, established and statewide party families prioritize the left-right cleavage (Rovny 2015: 912) and consider the territorial dimension as of secondary importance to them (Toubeau and Wagner 2013: 97).

In the literature, regionalist parties get a variety of conceptual labels, such as ‘non-state wide actors’ (Fabre and Swenden 2013: 342), ‘policy entrepreneurs’ (Wagner and Meyer 2017: 84), ‘niche parties’ (Mc Angus 2015: 634), ‘challenger parties’ (De Vries and Hobolt 2012: 246), ‘peripheral actors’ (Tronconi 2015: 579) or ‘single issue parties’ (Elias, Szocsik and Zuber 2015: 839). All these depictions have in common that they point at a major programmatic cleavage with the state-wide and established parties – i.e. their potential coalition partners.

Because of their heterogeneity, there is room for debate about which parties do (not) fall under the regionalist party type. We opt not to intervene in this discussion and rely on the authoritative inventory from Massetti and Schakel (2016) for our analysis. Our case selection is further limited as we only look at those parties who effectively cross(ed) the threshold of regional or national governance. Deschouwer (2008) once described passing this milestone as the fifth and most mature phase in his integrated ‘party lifespan model’.

Yet, we do not judge which side of the family is most successful in realizing its shared policy objectives. Surely, not all regionalist parties ‘deliver the goods’ when they take part in government, while other regionalist parties are successful in pushing traditional parties to implement the desired reforms from the opposition benches. In addition, the

electoral success of a regionalist party is generally not only due to a party's own actions but rather a confluence of factors. For instance, popular citizen movements also play a decisive role in encouraging decentralist tendencies (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2015: 277). These mobilizing civic groups co-create the microclimate for stronger regionalist political actors to flourish – and vice versa (Brancati 2006: 651).

### *Owning the issue*

In what follows, we describe regionalist parties based on their programmatic profile and their ideological *raison d'être*. For this, we rely on the seminal theories of issue salience, position and party competition. Parties' beginnings determine their subsequent 'issue ownership': they sustain an identity that is anchored in political cleavages and hold issues that gave rise to their birth. It is a matter of reputation: if parties are credible and reliable on a certain issue, they are considered as being better able than others to handle the problem at stake (Petrocik 1996: 825). Issue ownership is therefore stable, persisting and long-lasting. Only by slowly emphasizing alternative issues while downplaying others there is also a dynamic aspect in claiming, maintaining and loosening issue ownership. Parties can modify their ideological profile but have to proceed with caution.

The literature on issue salience sees political parties as autonomous and unitary actors (Stefuriuc 2013: 97). Parties are the dominant actors on the political scene and structure the decision-making process. Parties pronounce their preferences in public, e.g. through publicizing electoral manifestos. They try to carry out their promises once they are elected, e.g. by securing the appropriate minister portfolios (Gianetti and Laver 2005: 91). Salience theories typically focus on the supply-side of the electoral market:

political parties anticipate by pushing certain societal topics and through undertaking deliberate strategic actions (Walgrave, Varone, and Dumont 2006: 1021).

Parties also take up well considered positions in political debates. These positions can be either clear or blurred, consistent or ambiguous, left or right,... The directional theory combines both insights: every issue involves two different components, i.e. a salience component and a positional component (Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989: 93). Harmel and Janda (1995: 171) argued that, whereas salience gives a party an image or packaging, positional information reflects its substantive identity. They assume that parties are more flexible about the package of their manifesto, i.e. issues they emphasize, than about the concrete positions they seek to defend. There also exists a hierarchy of issues: whether large policy shifts are made depends on the issue at hand. Parties will pursue stability on core issues but are more flexible on secondary issues (Bouteca and Devos 2016: 298).

### *A tale of two arena's*

Parties compete with each other on different dimensions. In a multi-level governance context, the dominant dimensions of party competition are the left-right and center-periphery (Elias, Szocsik and Zuber 2015: 839). The center-periphery cleavage is essentially about territory and political control. It encompasses diverse institutional, cultural, linguistic,... issues. Our analysis focuses on these two axes. Parties can emphasize or downplay distinct dimensions of party competition, hold or adopt moderate or extreme positions on the center-periphery or left-right cleavage, depending on the political environment and the parties' goals (Field and Hamann 2015: 900).

In addition, we distinguish between the regional and national level of government in our

analysis. Regionalist parties are naturally ‘non-statewide’ actors who are active in multi-layered political systems. Therefore, it is imperative to study the national as well as the regional level of government. In both arenas the political landscape, party goals and underlying motivations may be very different (Pogorelis 2005: 992).

For instance, regionalist parties are generally just a small national factor but often an important regional actor (Verge 2013: 337). Nevertheless, regionalist parties may occasionally play a bigger role in national decision-making than one would expect. Not because they act as a kingmaker between state-wide parties, but because it is easier to conclude a deal with them. Their mutual issue priorities are often non-conflicting, which allows for example to trade regional autonomy in specific policy domains for support to social-economic measures taken at the national level. Several Spanish regions such as Catalonia, the Canary Islands and the Basque Country have benefited from reaching such an understanding.

Furthermore, the displayed party behavior is the result of deeper underlying motivations that propel political parties forward. Strøm and Müller (1999: 255) identified three main ‘incentives’: votes, policies and offices. Depending on the level and the circumstances, the party may assign a different priority to each of these goals. Since coalition formation typically takes place right after elections, office-seeking and policy-seeking incentives are prominent at this stage (Budge and Laver 1986: 485). Therefore, in our assessment of government participation, we also limit the trade-off between offices and policies.

Prior scholars have showed that regionalist parties are primarily driven by office-seeking motives at the regional level of government and by policy-seeking motives at the national level (Tronconi 2015: 579). For instance, national co-governance enables regionalist parties realize some of its main policy goals – i.e. constitutional reform and

further decentralization (Elias and Tronconi 2011: 505); to prove the political competence of their party officials vis-à-vis the broader public; to break societal taboos that still rest on some of their core issues; etc.

In contrast, any regionalist parties cherishes the ambition to rule its own region and people, whereas the national political arena is probably one they ultimately want to get rid of (Elias and Tronconi 2011: 505). Regional government participation is an ideal opportunity for regionalist parties to consolidate their power in their own region on a more long-term basis. By controlling important regional ministries, they can set up patronage systems and clientelistic networks that tie electorates more closely to the party voters' base and secure access to resources and personnel (Hopkin 2003: 227). They can even advance in their territorial demands by instrumentally using regional institutions to this end (Masseti and Sandri 2012: 87). In contrast, entering the contested national level of government means an additional symbolic barrier to regionalist parties: it may affect their long-term credibility and scare off their initial rank and file. National cabinet entry is further complicated because mainstream cabinet parties may be reluctant to hand over the executive keys of crucial pillars of the State to potential disruptive regionalist parties (Brancati 2007: 135).

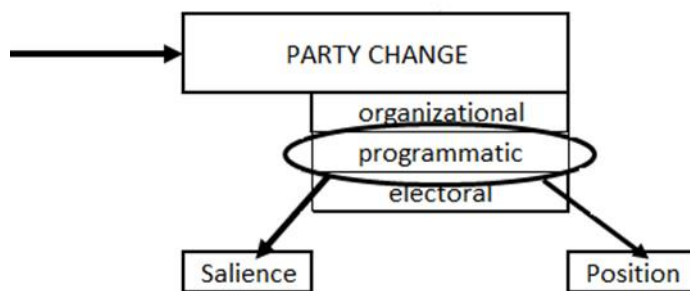
### ***Parties change***

If a regionalist party wants to take part in a next cabinet, it will need to overcome the apparent programmatic cleavages with the other state-wide and established parties (cf. supra). Creating convergence will require party change in order to successfully connect with potential coalition partners. Since regionalist parties are vastly different from the other parties from a programmatic viewpoint, party change may be particularly explicit among the former. Recall that regionalist parties' main objective is to move away from

the status quo, whereas their established and mainstream counterparts are not proponents of changing the institutional and territorial outlook of the country.

Party change can take many forms. Research has shown that parties adapt in varying ways to increase their odds of cabinet entry. There is a vast body of literature devoted to the different party components that are modified in the prospect of (or that are impacted through) government incumbency (e.g. Harmel 2002). There may be important changes in a party's ideological profile, organizational structure and electoral basis. While there is a rich literature on each of these aspects (e.g. Fabre 2008: 309; Hopkin 2003: 227), there are still some blind spots when it concerns the first policy-centered characteristic among regionalist parties (cf. *infra* – Part I). At the same time, we assume that the most significant changes take place in this programmatic component. It is one of the main reasons why we focus our analysis on the ideological feature.

Figure 1. The programmatic component of party change



Although party change may take many forms, it cannot be carried through unlimited. When it comes to a party's ideological profile, the reputations that they hold place serious constraints on the issues they can use to effectively mobilize voter support (cf. *supra*: 'issue ownership'). We agree with scholars (e.g. Marks, Wilson, and Ray 2002: 585) who argue that it is best to describe a party's actions through the lens of 'bounded

rationality'. This means that a party's rational and deliberate long-term choices are significantly determined by historical imperatives, future expectations, institutional constraints, etc. (Rovny 2015: 912). Parties have to move with caution and cannot forget their roots.

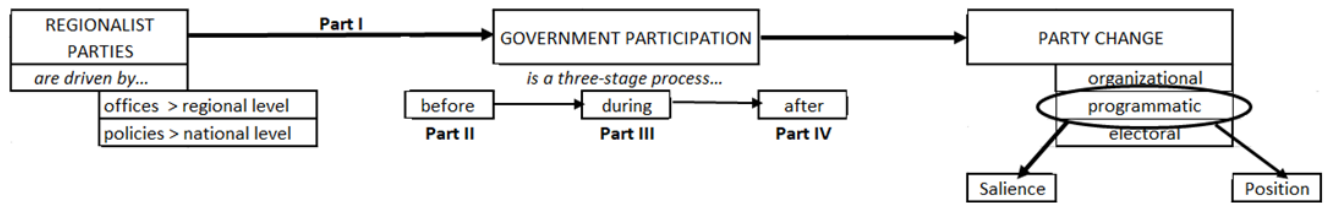
### *A three-stage process*

We build upon the literature on coalition formation and coalition government to unravel the process of government participation. This is probably one of the most advanced subfields of comparative politics. It generally models the decision to enter government as a party-level choice (e.g. Laver and Shepsle 1990: 489; Martin 2016: 281), a reason why we regard political parties as unitary actors in our analysis. The unitary actor approach does not exclude the possibility for a party to make different decisions on different levels of government. A regionalist party may opt to enter cabinet at the regional level while remaining in opposition at the national level.

Government participation is not a 'one-shot' decision but instead a process that ruling political parties go through. In our assessment, we distinguish between three important stages: before, during and after cabinet incumbency. The proposed theoretical framework addresses each stage separately in order to describe regionalist parties' (re)actions.

Taken together, the main concepts that constitute the theoretical framework can be summarized in the following scheme.

Figure 2. Regionalist parties in government : A framework for analysis



## Theoretical framework

After having defined the main concepts, we now use these elements to construct one comprehensive framework of analysis. In the following section, we provide an integrated view on how regionalist parties deal with the strategic challenge of government participation. Our assessment is divided into four parts as they are visualized in Figure two (cf. supra).

### *Part I*

Regionalist parties cultivate the question for more self-rule and for a more equal treatment of minority groups within society. They problematize these issues through exacerbating cultural, ethnical and lingual differences. In that way, regionalist parties try to put territorial and institutional demands high on the political agenda.

In some situations, an opposition role can be perceived as the most remunerative electoral strategy. But parties also have a strong desire to fulfill their own policy goals and to directly influence political decision-making. Inside each party, there are different factions and rationales that compete with each other. Party activists are more policy-motivated whereas party leaders are more inclined to appreciate the benefits of holding offices (Ceron 2016: 797). Depending on which faction or rationale is dominant, the party will choose one option over another.

But do regionalist parties act differently in this process from other parties? In providing an answer to this question, this article focuses on their eventual ideological adaptations.

For both established and new party types, there is a large amount of mapped cases readily available. This has allowed scholars to conduct quantitative research in this subfield and to formulate accurate predictions in this matter. Time trends of positional and salience changes have been carefully studied for various party types, e.g. also the radical right (Wagner and Meyer 2017: 84).

These studies have identified recurring behavioral patterns. For instance, parties in government are more likely to change their program than parties in opposition (Schumacher et. al. 2015: 1040). Also, ruling parties deliberately narrow or expand the range of topics they address throughout consecutive legislatures in executive office, a dynamic that is often determined by the current economic circumstances (Greene 2016: 809). Furthermore, in Western democracies such as Spain (Verge 2013: 317), Italy (Basile 2015: 887) and Canada (Dion 1996: 269) the statewide parties in government ‘accommodate’ their issue priorities and policy positions to the demands from arising opposition parties. Finally, ‘new’ party types such as the Greens (Rihoux and Rüdig 2006: 33) and the Radical Right (Rovny 2013: 26) shift their original niche profile towards a broader and more diverse outlook once they hold executive power.

Like for any party type, these programmatic adaptations inevitably also apply for regionalist parties throughout their legislature in government. However, the same dynamic may generate very different outcomes for every specific party type when it comes to the kinds of issues that change. For instance, regionalist parties will be less inclined to compromise on their ideological core business, but are rather flexible on issues that are of secondary importance to them. Indeed, in a context of bounded

rationality, parties should move with caution, especially when it concerns their core issues. For regionalist parties, these are the territorial, cultural and institutional topics. In that respect, Tavits (2007: 151) made an important conceptual distinction between the 'pragmatic' and the 'principal' issues. Giving in on 'principal' issues is clearly a more far-reaching form of programmatic party change.

Finally, many authors have pointed at the important difference between a first and subsequent participations in government (Bolleyer and Van Spanje 2008: 971; Deschouwer 2008). Again, this is a quasi-universal trend that regionalist parties do not escape. Just like for other parties, the magnitude of the induced party change among regionalist parties is biggest the first time and smaller in consecutive legislatures. Rather, the question is what the particular impact is on specific kinds of issues in each stage?

We will go further in discussing each of these trends through the following three parts.

## ***Part II***

The second part describes how regionalist parties 'anticipate' and 'prepare' for cabinet entry by adapting their programmatic profile on beforehand. The literature on party competition and coalition formation provides us with different reasons why such adaptations are in fact logical. First and foremost, parties who are ideologically closer to each other are also more likely to govern together (Budge and Laver, 1986: 485). The usual suspects to form a coalition cabinet with, i.e. the traditional and statewide parties, are typically situated at the heart of the political spectrum. Hence, regionalist parties need to 'prepare' for government participation by portraying themselves in advance as more moderate and/or more centrist. In that way, they 'anticipate' programmatic

differences with potential coalition partners that may arise in the near future (Bawn and Topcu 2012: 433). Indeed, creating ideological convergence is a necessary requisite if one wants to draft a collective government agreement on a variety of policy issues (Dandoy 2014: 629).

Regionalist parties share their original demand for self-government (Alonso 2012; De Winter and Türsan 1998) but have ‘thickened’ their ideological profile over time. Similar to the life cycle of other ‘new’ parties, e.g. the Greens (Adams et. al. 2006: 513), regionalist parties operate as ‘policy entrepreneurs’ in the political arena. Once started up as single issue parties, and often focused on non-economic issues (Wagner 2011: 845), many of them now display the typical programmatic characteristics of mainstream political actors. They espouse broad policy platforms and position themselves over the full ideological scope of the left-right continuum. There is a subgroup of regionalist parties that went through a process of issue-diversification (Adams and Ezrow 2012: 1272); a necessary adjustment for those who aspire to co-govern regionally or nationally. Hepburn (2009: 477) uses the metaphor ‘from niche to normal’ to describe this development that new party types - inter alia regionalist ones – go through. This kind of a transformation implies ideological as well as electoral changes: whereas niche parties typically respond to their core voters (e.g. territorial demands), mainstream parties respond to the median voter (who are interested in a broader range of topics).

Democracy requires forging compromises. Therefore, regionalist parties who want to co-govern will need to establish programmatic convergence with other parties. Blunt political moves, such as attempts for immediate secessionism, are a least-likely scenario in Western democracies. Efforts in that direction (cf. Catalonia) are doomed to fail, largely because of the lack of sufficient political support at the national level. In modern

political systems, it is therefore more appropriate to speak about small evolutionary steps rather than giant leaps forward. Parties who aspire to co-govern will need to adjust their discourse accordingly: proclaiming moderation before radicalism, evolution instead of revolution.

Earlier on, we pinpointed two dominant dimensions of party competition that researchers have identified. We apply those dimensions hereafter: our framework of analysis is aligned with the works of Elias, Szocsik and Zuber (2015). They have developed a theory of party strategies in a two-dimensional ideological space depicted by the social-economic ‘left-right’ and the territorial ‘center-periphery’ dimension.

Scholars have observed changes on both dimensions from two important viewpoints, i.e. issue salience (emphasis) and issue position (centrist or radical). In our analysis, we combine the two dimensions and the two viewpoints in order to unravel a party’s behavior. Recall that party change is said to be bigger when there is change in position (content) than change in salience (packaging). Also, party change is clearly bigger when a party shifts on its primary dimension than on its secondary dimension.

In general, various factors have an impact on the odds of government participation. We think that at least the following ones are important to mention:

- The number of competing parties. Naturally, a regionalist party will face more competitors in the national arena than in the regional arena. Also, ‘oversized’ or ‘surplus’ coalitions are more frequent at the regional level (Tronconi 2015: 579).
- The electoral market share of the regionalist party. Naturally, as a non-statewide party, the vote share of a regionalist party will be larger at the regional than at the national level. A party who lacks electoral leverage will not be successful in

pushing preferred policies nor in realizing its objectives, and will find it difficult to enter any coalition government.

- The status of the bilateral relationship (positive or negative) with other potential coalition parties. Is the party seen by others as a competent and reliable partner? Maintaining good personal relations with mandate holders of other parties is most helpful. This emotional factor is more difficult to measure, however.
- Previous cabinet experience: if a party was in cabinet in the past, it is more likely that it will be part of another coalition government in the future (Bäck and Dumont 2008: 353). Like with many things in life, the first time (entry) is the most difficult one.
- The ideological distance with other parties: a lack of programmatic proximity or compatibility will hamper a party's coalition potential. This factor can be measured through estimating issue salience and issue position.

Other impact factors surely also play a role. The focus of this article is just on the last factor of the list, however. Research on traditional and statewide party types, who have successfully entered government, brings forward two typical observations in this matter. First, established parties moderate their positional stances on their primary dimension, i.e. the left-right scale (e.g. Field and Hamann 2015: 900). Second, they accommodate their attention devoted to topics that are just of secondary importance to them (= territorial, cultural, identity, institutional,... issues) (e.g. Pogorelis 2005: 992; Toubeau and Wagner 2016: 340).

Our central argument in this second part is that a mirroring 'anticipation' effect takes place among regionalist parties. First, they take up more centrist positions on the left-

right axis. This is a necessary move if regionalist parties want to increase their coalition potential vis-à-vis the traditional and statewide parties. Positional change is the more radical form of party change. Yet, the left-right axis is just regionalist parties' secondary dimension. Second, regionalist parties lower the attention devoted to territorial-institutional issues in their discourse. This is also a necessary move because, as a 'non-state wide' and 'peripheral' actor, regionalist parties hold a minority position with regard to these issues. Saliency change is the less radical form of party change. Such a limited adaptation comes as no surprise because the center-periphery dimension is the primary axis for regionalist parties. Here, the theory of issue ownership applies again: loosening their core business too much could cost regionalist parties their short-term credibility and their long-term *raison d'être*.

Table 1. Regionalist party change BEFORE cabinet entry

<b>PARTY CHANGE</b>	<b>BEFORE</b>
<b>LEFT-RIGHT</b>	positional change: moderation
<b>TERRITORIAL- INSTITUTIONAL</b>	saliency change: de-emphasize

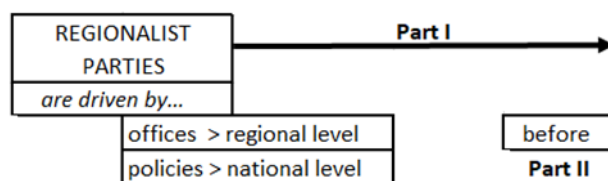
Furthermore, we find it important to distinguish between regional and national government participation throughout our analysis. In multi-level democracies, both political arenas have their own logics and dynamics. In order to develop a nuanced analysis, it is therefore better to describe party behavior separately in the two contexts. There are numerous examples available of regionalist parties in regional government, but national cases are rather scarce, however. Think for instance about the Lega Nord in Italy in the 2000s, the Swedish People's Party in Finland (1979-2015) and the N-VA in Belgium (2014-2018).

Since institutional and territorial reform is ultimately decided at the national level (Toubeau and Wagner 2013: 97), policy-seeking incentives are dominant at this level among regionalist parties. It is in the national arena that they can realize their own policy goals through State reform. Yet, paradoxically, any regionalist party is initially reluctant to enter a national coalition cabinet in fear of losing its credibility and core voters. For a party who questions the status quo of the country as such, stepping into national executive office implies an additional symbolic barrier to overcome. Accusations of betrayal linger around the corner, which limits their margin for programmatic maneuvering. A regionalist party will only cross the national Rubicon if it gets specific guarantees that government policies will not impoverish the current situation in some of its core themes during the next legislature.

At the same time, statewide and traditional parties are well-aware of this vulnerable position that regionalist parties find themselves in. This may trigger the former to ‘spare’ the latter when it concerns territorial, cultural or institutional issues during negotiation talks.

On the other hand, regionalist parties have more maneuvering space in the foresight of regional government entry. National symbolism and imminent accusations of betrayal are absent here. It is also a regionalist party’s natural preference to co-govern its own region, which render office-seeking motivations to be dominant here.

Figure 3. Two arena’s, two main incentives



### ***Part III***

This third part clarifies how regionalist parties' preferences evolve during government incumbency. In what follows, we answer one question in particular: do regionalist parties stay close to their ideological roots (i.e. territorial, cultural and institutional issues) in this phase?

The answer is rather short and straightforward. Since parties operate in a context of bounded rationality, they cannot forgo their core issues without losing their credibility and/or *raison d'être* (cf. *supra*). Hence, their maneuvering space is limited here. By all means, regionalist parties in government will keep salience and position for center-periphery issues stable in their discourse and in their actions. It may even be necessary to re-emphasize these topics a bit after having entered cabinet, this in order to bring salience back to its former level of attention.

At the same time, regionalist parties are and remain highly flexible on positions in policy domains that are of secondary importance to them (i.e. social-economic issues). The traditional left-right themes form the bulk of everyday governance and are always on the forefront of statewide parties' minds. Since the latter are often the dominant actors in joint cabinet meetings, giving in on the social-economic terrain seems inevitable for incumbent regionalist parties. Concessions can either be left-wing or right-wing oriented, depending on the dominant position of the statewide parties in cabinet.

Table 2. Regionalist party change DURING cabinet entry

<b>PARTY CHANGE</b>	<b>DURING</b>
<b>LEFT-RIGHT</b>	positional change : concessions towards either left or right

<b>TERRITORIAL- INSTITUTIONAL</b>	keep stable
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In brief, during their term in government, regionalist parties are flexible in adapting positions on their secondary dimensions, while they are reluctant to shift on their primary dimension. Regionalist parties display these same reflexes at both the national and regional level. Yet, the required degree of party change to reach a coalition compromise may be bigger at the national level. This because party positions are often easier to reconcile for regional policy domains (rural development, culture, local economy, education,...) than for more controversial policy domains that are often situated at the national level (fabric of society, migration, taxation, social security,...). On the other hand, the national level is better suited to exchange complementary demands that are located on different dimensions, for instance trading (regional) linguistic or territorial privileges for (national) social-economic measures.

#### ***Part IV***

A legislature in government affects a party's outlook. Being part of the executive branch has an impact on a party's ideology, its electoral strength and its future office-aspirations. Once again, our analysis focuses on the programmatic component of party change.

From an electoral perspective, coalition membership is a concrete action that voters use to update their perceptions of the ideological movements of the ruling parties. Voters discount the policy positions of parties in government (Bawn and Topcu 2012: 433). This in turn causes a real ideological moderation of cabinet parties towards each other's positions (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013: 459).

It is our central argument in this fourth part that, similar to other party types, regionalist parties' profiles get 'contaminated' by their coalition partners. And this generates a lasting effect on regionalist parties' profiles. Indeed, it seems inevitable that 'newer' or more 'radical' parties, who participate in government, become more moderate as they are more actively engaged in the political system (Schumacher et. al. 2015: 1040). They have to loyally defend the government record on a variety of issues and are jointly held accountable for the policies by the public (Dandoy 2014: 629). Therefore, scholars speak of a 'contagion' effect: governing parties moderate because they compete with their coalition partners by adopting each other's policy positions (Van Spanje 2010: 563). In other words, incumbent regionalist parties convergence their opinions towards the coalition partners and devote more attention to secondary issues.

After a (first) term in executive office, a party has two options: extend its stay in power or return to the opposition benches. The outcome depends on a party's own ambitions but also on several exogenous factors. For instance, there is much empirical evidence (e.g. Buelens and Hino 2008) that government incumbency impairs a party's market share in the next elections. This in turn weakens a party's capacity to secure a place at the next cabinet table. On the other hand, parties who govern together converge towards each other, which increases the odds that they form the basis for a next coalition government (Bäck and Dumont 2008: 353). Indeed, government participation is an interactive process: parties are involved in longer-term relationships (Warwick and Druckman 2006: 635). Incumbent coalition partners share experiences, have established communication lines and have more profound knowledge about each other's priorities (Ceron 2016: 797).

The positioning as a majority or opposition party has defining consequences for a party's profile. If the regionalist party enters a successive cabinet, it transforms further

into a 'mainstream' party. This evolution, called the 'contagion effect' (cf. supra), already started in the previous legislature and is now continued.

Above all, regionalist parties who remain in government moderate on their primary axis, de-emphasizing territorial-institutional topics and eventually also taking up less decentralist positions here. Surely, this is a more drastic form of party change, but inevitable, as the party is drawn more into the political system. Furthermore, regionalist parties continue to show flexibility on social-economic themes, leaning either left-wing or right-wing, again depending on the dominant position of the statewide parties in cabinet. Parties in government are under great pressure to respond to public policy on a wide range of different topics (cf. supra). As a consequence, they increase their issue diversity the longer they stay in cabinet (Greene 2014).

At this stage, the required regionalist party change for continued government participation is smaller in the regional arena than in the national arena. Recall that nearly two thirds of the regional cabinets are 'oversized' governments, which makes it easier to become part of them (Tronconi 2015: 579). Also, party positions are easier to reconcile when it concerns regional policy matters (cf. supra). In contrast, continued national participation requires a larger degree of regionalist party change. But the longer regionalist parties put former territorial, cultural and institutional demands on ice, the less likely it becomes that such a reform is realized under their governance. One could speak of 'a window of opportunity' during which regionalist parties can realize part of their core business at the national level. Loosening these issues too long can cost regionalist parties their short-term credibility and their long-term *raison d'être* (cf. supra).

If otherwise the regionalist party returns to the opposition benches, it will 'radicalize'

on its primary dimension. In general, opposition parties benefit from having more liberty in the issues they address and take up a more radical stance than incumbents (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). Also, former government parties want to regain some of their lost ideological purity and want to secure their core voters' block. Therefore, regionalist parties in opposition revert to a more decentralist position and devote more attention again to territorial, cultural and institutional topics.

Also, they de-emphasize traditional left-right issues in order to re-focus on their initial core business. And although regionalist parties partly return to their former left-right positions, these will still be more centrist than before they took up government responsibility for the first time. Here, we see a lasting incumbency effect on a party's profile (=more moderate than before). Leaving openings in the political spectrum is not without danger, however. It may create opportunities for new or other parties to jump in. For instance, the rise of a more radical secessionist party could endanger the *raison d'être* of the regionalist party. By radicalizing on its primary issues, a threatened regionalist party may hold off such an opponent.

Table 3. Regionalist party change AFTER cabinet entry

<b>PARTY CHANGE</b>	<b>AFTER</b>
<b>LEFT-RIGHT</b>	<u>IF cabinet</u> : positional change: L or R depending on dominant coalition parties <u>IF opposition</u> : salience change: de-emphasize + positional change: return towards initial positions BUT more moderate than before
<b>TERRITORIAL- INSTITUTIONAL</b>	<u>IF cabinet</u> : positional change: moderation <u>IF opposition</u> : salience change: re-emphasize + positional change: radicalization

In sum, if we look at government participation as a three stage process, we can link together regionalist parties' adaptations as followed:

Table 4. Regionalist party change and government participation : A summary

<b>PARTY CHANGE</b>	<b>BEFORE</b>	<b>DURING</b>	<b>AFTER</b>
<b>LEFT-RIGHT</b>	positional change: moderation	positional change: concessions towards either left or right	<u>IF cabinet</u> : positional change: L or R depending on dominant coalition parties <u>IF opposition</u> : salience change: de-emphasize + positional change: return towards initial positions BUT more moderate than before
<b>TERRITORIAL- INSTITUTIONAL</b>	salience change: de-emphasize	keep stable	<u>IF cabinet</u> : positional change: moderation <u>IF opposition</u> : salience change: re-emphasize + positional change: radicalization

## Conclusions

How do regionalist parties change their programmatic profile when they participate in government? What other issues do they put forward and what happens to their former policy positions? If party ideology is the solid foundation upon which the whole organization was initially built, it is meaningful to learn whether these parties deliberately change their core throughout their lifespan.

Party change can have many faces but here we focus on its programmatic feature. In this article we present a theoretical framework on how regionalist parties deal with government participation. A legislature in government clearly affects a party's outlook. We describe government participation as a three-stage process (i.e. before, during, after)

and assess each phase in detail. Throughout this process, a party's behavior is steered by two main incentives: offices and policies. Our analysis also distinguishes between the national and regional level of government. Altogether, the scheme provides one integrated view on how regionalist parties behave in government.

Some of the same rationales for government participation seem to apply to all kinds of political parties. It is a quasi-universal trend that regionalist parties do not escape: serving a term in the executive branch invariably leads to programmatic party change. This can even take drastic or permanent forms.

On beforehand, regionalist parties 'anticipate' and 'prepare' for cabinet entry. They broaden their initial ideological focus and take up a more moderate stance in left-right issues. During their (first) legislature in executive office, regionalist parties keep close to their roots: they continue to put emphasis on territorial and institutional issues in their discourse and in their actions. At the same time, regionalist parties are highly flexible on policy domains that are of secondary importance to them.

After having spent a term in government, regionalist parties are somewhat 'contaminated' by their statewide and established coalition partners. As a result, they permanently take up more centrist issue positions and tackle a broader range of societal issues. This is not surprising, since these regionalist parties have become more engaged in the political system, which makes them to transition into a more 'mainstream' party type. As a loyal coalition partner they are compelled to divert part of their attention to a variety of other issues, for instance because they have to defend the common government record.

Regionalist parties can either pursue a prolonged stay in cabinet or switch back to the opposition benches. A successive term in office leads to further party change, but the

subsequent adaptations are never of the same magnitude as for the first entry in office. Alternatively, taking up the opposition role means turning back to sharper issue positions and a more narrow scope of emphasized issues. Yet, their party profile will not be as distinctive as it was before. Regionalist parties are eager to regain credibility and to please their own rank and file, but government participation surely has a long-lasting effect on their programmatic profile.

An important nuance in the analysis is that political parties can be driven by different incentives at different levels of government. Regionalist parties are mainly driven by policies at the national level and by offices at the regional level. Regional government participation is an ideal opportunity for them to consolidate their power in their own region on a more long-term basis. Aiming for positions in the national government is vital if regionalist parties are to meet their primary goal - institutional or territorial reform. These different incentives also generate dissimilar effects with regard to party change: regionalist parties are more inclined to adapt their ideological profile in the face of potential regional (rather than for national) cabinet entry.

This article contributes to existing party research as it explains how regionalist parties behave when they up government responsibility. We describe induced changes with regard to their program and profile and show how this is similar or different from other party types. For instance, at any given point regionalist parties are more flexible to give in on their secondary issues when compared to many state-wide and traditional parties.

Our aim is to paint a general picture on how governing regionalist parties behave, but we do acknowledge the limitations of such a theoretical construct. For sure, the proposed conceptual framework will not be able to explain every specific case as it develops in social reality. Every regionalist phenomenon is somehow different and has a

specific context in which it operates. Therefore, continued research is needed that uses inductive methods in order to improve our current knowledge by supplementing it with new empirical outputs.

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