Devolution: a credibility-enhancing strategy

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Abstract

In this article I propose a model that explains first time devolution in unitary, centralised states with geographically concentrated minorities. I contend here that political devolution is not intended to accommodate and neutralise the peripheral parties' agenda of decentralisation within the state or independence from the state. It would be a futile attempt, since devolved institutions strengthen peripheral parties and encourage their drive to demand further decentralisation, as real life examples continuously show. State politicians know this, if only because they have seen it happen before, so there must be some other reason that encourages them to support devolution regardless. Political devolution is, instead, an electoral strategy that allows state parties to compete effectively with peripheral parties and cause them electoral losses without losing face in front of the electorate and without raising suspicions of opportunism.

INTRODUCTION

Peripheral parties defend intrinsically territorial demands: they want devolution of political power from the state to the peripheral territory that they claim to represent. According to their view, this territory is, by history and culture, different to the rest of the state territory and, therefore, should be treated as different and should be able to remain different. The ideology of peripheral parties, in its most extreme form, defends the secession of the peripheral territory from the state. Unlike religious, class or ethnic diversity, therefore, peripheral diversity poses a threat to the territorial integrity of the state. For this reason, the electoral growth of peripheral parties is often viewed as a challenge for representative democracy. The puzzle to be solved is how to deal democratically with the demands of peripheral parties in a way such that the political and institutional measures taken to appease them –and thereby avoid the secessionist threat– do not, at the same time, strengthen them and help them succeed in their separatist intentions (Erk and Anderson 2009; Kymlicka 1998; Sorens 2009). One such measure, widely used by governments all over the globe, is regional autonomy or devolution. The paradox of devolution is that, while it is intended to appease the secessionist threat, it also offers peripheral parties the instruments to push it ahead.

The main objective of this article is not to solve the paradox of devolution but to understand the political decision behind the move from a centralised to a decentralised state. I shall argue here that first-time devolution is a decision adopted in order to make it more difficult in the long term for peripheral parties to increase their electoral support by claiming the monopoly of representation of a peripheral territory and the people in it. First-time devolution is preferred over short-term tactics of programmatic convergence towards the peripheral agenda because the pro-periphery moves of state parties in unitary centralised states are not credible in the eyes of voters. The price that state parties pay for making their electoral moves credible is the 'entrenchment' of the devolution programmatic agenda in the electoral arena.

NEUTRALISING SEPARATISM OR RETAINING ELECTORAL PREDOMINANCE?

Political decentralisation (or devolution) is widely seen as a response by state politicians to accommodate political unrest in the periphery. Alfred Stepan, for example, argues that federalism –or federal-like institutions– allow peripheral minorities to govern themselves while maintaining the territorial integrity of the state: "India in late 1948, Belgium in 1969, and Spain in 1975 were countries with strong unitary features *until their political leaders decided that the best way –indeed the only way– to hold their countries together in a democracy would be to devolve power constitutionally and turn their threatened polities into federations* [emphasis added]" (Stepan 1999: 21)[1]. The attractiveness of this argument lies in its apparent empirical confirmation: a majority of the existing multinational democracies are federations, confederations or "regionalised" states (Belgium, Canada, India, South Africa, Switzerland, Spain, Italy, United Kingdom), or have, at least, federal-like arrangements for their culturally distinct territories (Denmark, Finland).

Political decentralisation, however, is not exclusive of countries with a centre-periphery cleavage. The United States and Germany, for example, are two highly decentralised countries with no such cleavage. In fact, countries all over the world have been decentralising political authority in favour of the sub-state level of government since the early 1970s. The figures in the *Index of Regional Authority* elaborated by Gary Marks, Liesbet Hooghe and Arjan H. Schakel (2008) leave no room for doubt. The Index measures the amount

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[1] The accommodation thesis is also part of the *argumentario* of some political parties to justify their decision to decentralise. In its 1997 manifesto, the British Labour Party stated: "A sovereign Westminster Parliament will devolve power to Scotland and Wales. The Union will be strengthened and *the threat of separatism removed*" [emphasis added].

of sub-state authority in the hands of sub-state governments for 42 developed countries between 1950 and 2006[2]. The measurements provided by the *Index of Regional Authority* show that "there has been a marked increase in the level of regional authority over the past half-century" (Marks *et al.* 2008: 167). The great leap forward toward increased political decentralisation has taken place after 1970, when the number of decentralising institutional reforms has mushroomed. This tendency has also been detected by other authors. The data collected by Rodden (2004) show an important trend toward decentralisation after 1970. This worldwide tendency tells us that state politicians decentralise for reasons that are not necessarily related to a conflict with culturally distinct peripheries.

Therefore, how can we be sure that politicians in culturally heterogeneous states decentralise in response to peripheral unrest and not for alternative reasons, such as economic efficiency or democratic enhancement? We know it by looking at the way they do it: the *timing* of political decentralisation (why exactly at one particular time, and neither before nor later, given that the presence of peripheral unrest has been a constant, with intermittent periods of decline, since the late 1890s); the *degree* and *scope* of political decentralisation (how much self-government, and how widely applied, is enough to appease peripheral unrest and why do politicians choose different degrees of autonomy for different territories both within the same country and across countries); and, finally, the *actors* of decentralisation (why politicians within any one country are commonly divided between those who favour decentralisation and those who oppose it).

The accommodation thesis, therefore, needs some refinement. Apart from the obvious problem that devolution does not put a stop to separatist demands and that, as a result, there must be some other rationale behind state politicians' decision to devolve, this thesis needs to explain two further puzzles: first, why devolution, if only intended to appease peripheral parties, is extended to regions without peripheral mobilisation, as in Spain and Italy; and, second, why devolution reforms do not adjust to the electoral growth of peripheral parties in all cases and at all times (Brancati, 2007). Devolution failed in the UK in the late 1970s despite a dramatic growth of peripheral parties' vote shares, while it was implemented in Italy in the early 1970s despite the absence of a peripheral threat. Finally, the thesis downplays the fact that devolution is never a unanimous decision by a political leadership convinced of its virtues to manage peripheral conflict but the decision of some state politicians against the preferences of other state politicians.

The accommodation thesis is right to connect political devolution with peripheral unrest, for such a connection exists; however, it wrongly assumes that devolution is implemented *in order to neutralise* the growth of peripheral parties and the risks of separatism. Instead, I contend that devolution cannot be explained exclusively as the result of peripheral parties' pressure to decentralise even though they are too willing to take the credit. As others have shown before me, devolution is the rational act of political parties seeking to maximise their electoral possibilities (León, 2006, Meguid, 2009, O'Neill, 2003, Sorens, 2009). State parties will not opt for devolution unless they see net electoral gains resulting from such decision. Devolution is intended to save the threatened state party, not the state.

THE CENTRE-PERIPHERY DIMENSION OF ELECTORAL COMPETITION

For an electoral dimension of competition to emerge, an issue must exist in which the preferences of the electorate are divided. The political status of culturally-distinct and geographically-concentrated minorities is one such issue. I use the term 'periphery' to designate territorial units with a differentiated history within the state, territories that are home to cultural

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[2] Regional government is defined as the "government of a coherent territorial entity situated between local and national levels with a capacity for authoritative decision making" (Marks *et al.* 2008: 113).

minorities and that at the time of the state- and national-building processes of the 18th and 19th centuries were subject to the homogenisation policies of the state's central elites. However, the post-Second World War waves of peripheral mobilisation are not like those of the late 19th and early 20th centuries which attacked most forms of modernity for uprooting the features of traditional society. Contemporary peripheral movements are more progressive than their kin movements in the past. And yet they all share, in the present as in the past, the defence of the peripheral territory's differentiation within the state, the right to be and to remain different.

In a nutshell, the centre-periphery cleavage is intrinsically territorial; it is about political control over a (peripheral) territory. Political control can, in turn, take several forms: cultural, economic, administrative, institutional, constitutional. For this reason, the centre-periphery cleavage has a complex issue structure and draws together at least three issue dimensions along which are ordered the cultural, the fiscal and the institutional preferences of the political actors that mobilise this cleavage.

The typical policy issues belonging to the centre-periphery dimension are well captured by the opposed alternatives 'centralised versus decentralised state' or 'centralisation versus decentralisation policies'. Decentralisation is "a process of state reform composed by a set of public policies that transfer responsibilities, resources, or authority from higher to lower levels of government in the context of a specific type of state" Falleti (2005: 328-329)[3]. The reader may wonder why, if the issues of the centre-periphery dimension overlap so closely with the centralisation-decentralisation dimension as to be nearly the same, I stick to the label *centre-periphery*. The reason is that the

centralisation-decentralisation dimension may, or may not, be connected with a centre-periphery conflict as I have defined here. Many countries enter debates about how much centralisation or decentralisation is good for a functioning democracy. Not all of them have culturally distinct peripheries organised by peripheral parties that demand decentralisation as a way to defend their minority culture and their control over the peripheral territory against the state's policies of nation-building and state-building. Therefore, a peripheral party and a state party may have a similar position about how much decentralisation is beneficial for a democracy but they hold this similar position for very different reasons. Moreover, they probably have opposed preferences concerning the degree of asymmetry that decentralisation should assume; the peripheral party wants the peripheral territory to be clearly differentiated from the rest of regions inside the state. The issue overlap exists but there are good reasons to keep the analytical distinction.

Those parties whose agenda is to defend the peripheral territory's distinctiveness and differentiation inside the state constitute the *peripheral* party family and the parties belonging to this category are *peripheral parties* (Rokkan and Urwin 1983). The parties whose agenda is state-wide and whose priority is to defend the interests of the state constitute the *state* party family and the parties belonging to this category are *state parties*. Peripheral parties, by definition, organise exclusively in their peripheral territory and present candidates to elections –state, regional or local– exclusively within their territory. Peripheral parties aspire to govern their territory but not necessarily the state (unless participation in the state government will bring some tangible benefits for their peripheral territory). Peripheral parties only care about the rest of the state as far as this has an impact on the peripheral territory or on their electoral fortunes. Peripheral parties limit their appeals to the peripheral territory's electorate. State parties, in contrast, organise throughout the geography of the state, presenting candidates in all constituencies –or nearly all. State parties aspire to govern the state and the problems

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[3] Decentralisation may include different types of devolved authority, with different effects concerning the final degree of autonomous power *de facto* devolved to the sub-state institutions. For this reason, Falleti further differentiates between administrative, fiscal and political decentralisation.

affecting the totality of the state are their main concern. State parties appeal to the whole state electorate and, when in office, claim to represent all the citizens of the state. State parties may have diverse positions along the centralisation-decentralisation dimension; peripheral parties' preferences only move in one direction: decentralisation. However, within the 'periphery side' of the centre-periphery dimension, peripheral parties vary greatly in their more radical or moderate positions (De Winter 1998; Massetti 2009).

There is another criterion to classify parties along the centre-periphery dimension that often appears in the literature (Pallarés *et al.* 1997). According to it, parties can be classified attending to their geographical dispersion within the state. Parties that organise exclusively at the local and regional level and that, in state elections, propose candidates exclusively at these sub-state levels are defined as *non-state-wide parties*. Parties that, on the contrary, organise at the state level and that, in state elections, propose candidates in all –or nearly all– the constituencies of the country are denominated *state-wide parties*. The use of this criterion to classify parties along the centre-periphery dimension is based on an implicit assumption according to which the geographical location of a party predetermines its centre-periphery preferences. However, a non-state-wide party may exist that pays no attention whatsoever to centre-periphery issues, something that in terms of centre-periphery party competition would make no sense at all.

ELECTORAL COMPETITION ALONG THE CENTRE-PERIPHERY DIMENSION

State parties have two main movements along the centre-periphery dimension. They can either converge towards the issue position of their peripheral party competitor (*pro-periphery convergence*) or move away from it and closer to the centralist pole of the dimension (*anti-periphery polarisation*). Pro-periphery convergence is an attempt to take voters away from the peripheral party by challenging the exclusivity of the peripheral party's

programmatic stance. Only state parties directly threatened by peripheral parties will attempt a pro-periphery move (Harmel and Svasand 1997) for the risks are high that the strategy may backfire, as I will soon explain. Anti-periphery polarisation, in turn, aims to attract those voters whose preferences go against the proposals of peripheral parties and who give more relevance to centre-periphery issues than to left-right issues when deciding their vote. Both strategies signal to the electorate that the state party cares about the voters' territorial identities as well as about their social class.

Let us suppose there are two large state parties, A and B, who compete against each other along the left-right dimension. Faced with a peripheral party growth, state party A will continue to ignore centre-periphery issues in its statements if (1) the peripheral party does not directly threaten its capacity to form governing majorities or if (2) state party B is also ignoring centre-periphery issues. There are times, however, when one or both of these scenarios are present. First, it is possible that the electoral growth of the peripheral party makes it a credible electoral threat to state party A (not to party B). In this case, avoiding the issue will signal to party A's voters, a part of which are obviously inclined towards pro-periphery issues since they are defecting to the peripheral party, that party A does not care or does not dare to face the demands put forward by the peripheral party. Second, it is possible that state party B, with a reputation as a state nationalist party with centralisation preferences, decides to emphasise anti-periphery issues in an attempt to attract voters with anti-periphery preferences who would not otherwise vote for party B but for party A. Third, it is possible that scenarios (1) and (2) occur simultaneously. In any of the three scenarios, the centre-periphery dimension becomes more salient in the electoral arena. The best strategy for state party A is, at this point, to position itself along this dimension. Otherwise, the increasing saliency of the centre-periphery dimension will lead voters to cast their ballot according to their territorial identity and state party A will lose votes to the peripheral party and to state party B.

The strategy of anti-periphery polarisation can be used as a reaction to a threatened state party that has taken a pro-periphery move in order to benefit from the difficult position in which the converging state party finds itself (Meguid 2008). The direct benefits of party B's strategy of polarisation would come from those voters who are against the agenda of peripheral parties and for whom the centre-periphery dimension is more important than the left-right one when deciding their ballot. The indirect benefits would come from the electoral harm that the polarisation strategy may impinge upon the converging state party A (Meguid 2008). Party B presents itself as the only one committed to save the nation-state from the peripheral attacks. This polarisation will give state party B an electoral advantage *vis à vis* its opponent, state party A, because now the two camps ('the centre' and 'the periphery') are well defined and very salient. The periphery camp would be owned by the peripheral party and the centre camp by polarising state party B. Under these circumstances, converging state party A would risk losing its anti-periphery voters to party B[4].

The strategy of anti-periphery polarisation may be *primed* and *framed* in such a way as to transform a position issue (i.e., defending the centralised state) into a valence issue (defending the territorial integrity of the state). Maravall (2008) has been the first author to describe and explain the electoral strategy of conversion of a position issue into a valence issue by way of issue framing and issue saliency[5]. This extreme polarisation is intended to attract the vote of the majority of voters outside – and even inside– the peripheral territory that do not want to see the territorial integrity of the state at risk.

To sum up, state parties can converge towards the pro-periphery positions of their peripheral adversaries or move away from these positions and polarise their programmatic agenda. They can also ignore centre-periphery issues completely and intensify their ideological left-wing or right-wing profile.

In a country where the policy space is made up of two main dimensions of competition –the centre-periphery and the left-right dimensions– parties will appeal to voters by using issue saliency and issue position in both dimensions *simultaneously*. However, the behaviour of parties in the primary dimension of competition (i.e. the dimension in which the party has an acquired reputation and credibility) will differ from those in the secondary dimension. This is so because parties 'own' the issues of the primary dimension whereas the credibility of parties is always at stake on issues of the secondary dimension. This limitation is compensated by the fact that parties have more room to manoeuvre in their secondary dimension of competition than in their primary one. In the latter, lack of integrity or responsibility could be severely punished (Downs 1957). In the former, by contrast, parties can more flexibly adapt to the circumstances, moving from a catch-all to a positional tactic and even leap-frogging between positions.

Parties do not aim at *issue ownership* along their secondary dimension of competition. Thus, state parties that adopt a pro-periphery position do not intend to become the "true proponents" of the issue, as Meguid (2008) claims. For strategising parties, it is enough that they have credibility in their tactical adoption of the pro-periphery programmatic agenda and that, by gaining this credibility, they deprive peripheral parties of their monopoly over the issue. How effective are these strategies in achieving their goal partly depends on the institutional setting in which they take place. In centralised unitary states the state party's pro-periphery moves are so hindered by credibility constraints that convergence will not be effective as a way to stop the defection of voters to the periphery competitor or to attract back the voters already lost to such a competitor.

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[4] The Belgian Liberal Party, for example, benefitted from the growth of peripheral parties by adopting an anti-periphery strategy, defending anti-periphery issues, because this provoked the desertion of the "most moderate and unitarist clienteles" of the Christian Democrats and the Socialists to the Liberals and this "made them vulnerable to federalist pressure at their fringes" (Kelly 1969).

[5] He has described this strategy as part of the repertoire of state parties in the United States and Spain (Maravall 2008: 104).

THE CREDIBILITY CONSTRAINTS OF ELECTORAL MOVES IN UNITARY STATES

Electoral strategies are not without limits. A party is not free to move anywhere it wants in the political space if it cares about the impact on the voters' opinion of the party; and it does care. Parties must show integrity and responsibility: they must be credible in their statements and promises (Downs 1957).

Voters believe that parties will implement their promises if selected for office (Downs 1957; Hinich and Munger 1997; Klingemann *et al.* 1994). Otherwise, they would not vote for the party of their choice or, in some cases, they would not vote at all. The voters' belief that parties will abide by their promises is based on the observation of the parties' past actions. For this reason, the ideology of a party is consistent with its actions in prior election periods, with its statements in the preceding campaign, or with both (Downs 1957: 103). This means that the party is *responsible* (i.e. its statements during the campaign can be projected from its past actions) and *reliable* (i.e. its future actions can be accurately predicted from its statements). A party that changes position, moving far from its established ideological identity may damage its reputation and lose credibility among its voters and support among its members.

The centralised structure of the state imposes credibility constraints on the strategic moves of state and peripheral parties along the centre-periphery dimension. State parties' moves are limited by their state-wide constituency: they are parties that organize and mobilize throughout the state, that aim to govern the state and that address the whole state electorate. Consequently, they cannot convincingly defend particularistic territorial interests (Van Biezen and Hopkin 2006). If state parties defend a pro-periphery agenda[6] and voters believe that

the state party's convergent move is truthful, it would be seen as an irresponsible and an unreliable state party and, therefore, its reputation would be damaged. As Heller has put it: "Any concern about treating all citizens equally conflicts with the kind of locally differentiated policy making that allows local credit claiming" (Heller 2002: 658). If, on the contrary, the state party's pro-periphery move is not credible it would be seen as the opportunistic behaviour of a party willing to pay any price to get to –or stay in– office. In turn this would also damage the party's reputation. As long as state parties remain state-wide they will have difficulties when trying to counteract their peripheral competitors by partly assuming their pro-periphery agendas. Unless state parties justify their move as being positive for all citizens of the state equally, and for all the territories of the state equally, the credibility of the party will be questioned. As a consequence, their reputation will suffer. This often collides with what peripheral parties most want, i.e. recognition of their territories' particularities and differences or, in other words, differential treatment inside the state.

Peripheral parties also face credibility constraints on their strategic moves: but, these are less acute than those faced by state parties. The main credibility constraint appears when there is more than one peripheral party competing for votes in the same peripheral territory. Competition between peripheral parties forces them to occupy diverse positions along the pro-periphery side of the dimension with one party always being more extreme or radical (nearer the periphery extreme) than the other. Thus, a moderate peripheral party competing with a state party has to pay attention to what its radical peripheral adversary is doing. Pro-periphery radicalisation will be difficult for the moderate peripheral party because the more

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[6] Let us remember that a pro-periphery agenda is not equivalent to a preference for a decentralised state. A pro-periphery agenda implies making concessions to peripheral parties' demands of territorial differentiation and self-government for the geographically

concentrated cultural minorities that are commonly –although not necessarily– self-defined as nations with the right to self-determination.

radical position is already occupied[7]. When only one peripheral party exists, it faces no credibility constraints along the pro-periphery side.

Attempts at diversifying their issue agenda may also impose credibility constraints on peripheral parties because it may make them lose their credibility as owners of the pro-periphery stance. However, this is unlikely to happen since the issue structure of the centre-periphery dimension offers peripheral parties wide room to manoeuvre. For example, the peripheral party can combine constitutional issues (for example: a demand for a directly elected parliament) that would satisfy their intensely pro-periphery voters with economic and social propositions for their respective peripheral territories thereby attracting voters worried by the economic and social situation of the territory in which they live. The latter issues would belong to the left-right dimension and emphasising them would be part of an issue diversification strategy. Contrary to what happens when state parties want to converge towards pro-periphery positions the issue diversification strategy of peripheral parties allows them to spread their appeal without damaging their reputation and credibility.

Credibility constraints are further enhanced or reduced according to the incumbency status of the party. Incumbent parties show responsibility and reliability both through their statements and their actions. Opposition parties however cannot take action (Downs 1957: 104). They rely on their statements to show responsibility and reliability. Peripheral parties in centralised states are most of the time opposition parties[8]. At the state level they are too small to become governing parties

and it is generally against their interests to participate as the small partner in coalition governments with state parties. Therefore, they cannot show responsibility and reliability through their government actions but only through the consistency of their statements internally (in relation to their ideology) and externally (across time). This inability to show responsibility and reliability is not necessarily a disadvantage for peripheral parties. Voters know that peripheral parties do not aspire to govern the state and therefore, in state elections, they cannot be judged according to their incumbency record. This allows peripheral parties to avoid some of the dilemmas that come with office (i.e., when government parties are forced by external circumstances to do something different from what they had promised) thereby risking the punishment of voters for their unreliability or their opportunism. The status of peripheral parties as opposition parties is, therefore, something that they can use to their advantage while the state is centralised. The few times that peripheral parties have participated in state governments they have paid for it with vote losses in the following election and their credibility as owners of the pro-periphery agenda has been damaged (Pulzer 1988; Rudolf and Thompson 1985).

The incumbent state party at election time will try to replicate the same majority that put the party in office in the previous election since this majority was proven a winning combination. Therefore, the incumbent state party will repeat whatever centre-periphery position and saliency it had in the previous election and will focus the campaign on its incumbency record and on the issues it owns. Thus, the party will show responsibility and reliability in the eyes of the voters. Incumbent state parties which are directly threatened by peripheral parties do not strategise along the centre-periphery dimension between two consecutive elections (the election that put the party in office and the election in which its continuity in office is decided). Instead, they stay put. When governing state parties implement periphery-friendly policies is because these policies were part of their promises as opposition parties and not because the parties' leaders have changed

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[7] This is precisely what happened to the Flemish peripheral party *Volksunie*. Forced out of its moderate pro-periphery position by the regionalised Christian-democratic competitor (Flemish split of the Belgian Christian-democratic Party), *Volksunie* tried to radicalise its pro-periphery stance to no avail, since this position was already 'owned' by the secessionist *Vlaams Blok*.

[8] In decentralised states, a peripheral party may be the incumbent party at the sub-state level of government.

their minds while in office. This move would show irresponsibility and unreliability; it would be criticised by the adversaries and punished by voters for its opportunism.

The incentives for opposition state parties are completely the opposite to those of parties in office, regardless of whether they are directly threatened by a growing peripheral party or not. They need to find an alternative majority that will throw the incumbent out. As Klingemann *et al.* have put it, "[o]pposition parties, in particular, have a *strong incentive for innovative framing of alternatives to current policy* [emphasis added]" (1994: 24). As opposition parties, they have strong incentives to use the centre-periphery dimension to prevent the incumbent party's electoral victory if they think that a left-right move alone will not do it. Therefore, the opposition state party will move strategically between two consecutive elections (the election that put –or kept– the party in the opposition and the election that will decide whether it remains in the opposition) by changing its centre-periphery saliency and/or position[9].

To sum up, state and peripheral parties strategising along two dimensions –the centre-periphery and the left-right– must be credible in their moves and not look

opportunistic. The question is whether they can manage this or not. In this respect, peripheral parties have an advantage over state parties in centralised states. Peripheral parties can strategise along the two dimensions without raising suspicions of opportunism, unreliability and/or irresponsibility thanks to the versatility of their issue "package", whereas state parties have to be careful as to how they justify their pro-periphery moves if their electoral strategy of convergence is to be successful. Without such care, and against the original intention of causing the peripheral party electoral losses, the state party could end up losing even more votes to its peripheral and state adversaries.

Therefore, a centralised state is an institutional environment that sets insurmountable credibility constraints for threatened state parties that want to converge towards pro-periphery positions in order to stop the defection of voters with intense pro-periphery preferences from their ranks. The pro-periphery convergence strategy of threatened state parties will be ineffective and will not put a stop to the growth of peripheral parties because of the credibility constraints attached to it. These constraints are further strengthened by a likely move of anti-periphery polarisation of the adversary. The only way that threatened state parties can effectively compete with peripheral parties along the centre-periphery dimension is if the threatened state party reduces the credibility constraints that accompany a pro-periphery convergence move. In order to reduce these credibility constraints, a politically decentralised institutional structure is necessary. Therefore, *political devolution is an electoral strategy intended to make the state parties' pro-periphery tactics credible and consequently effective to attract voters with pro-periphery preferences that are defecting to the peripheral adversary.*

DEVOLUTION AND THE WEAKENING OF CREDIBILITY CONSTRAINTS

A state party that is threatened by the growth of a peripheral party faces a double challenge. On one hand, it needs to move closer to the peripheral party's agenda with

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[9] The limiting effect of past trajectories on future strategies is not deterministic; state parties can try to make their 'leapfrogs' look as reasonable moves, but only if they are restricted to positions along the centralisation-decentralisation scale. No leapfrog along the centre-periphery dimension can pass as anything but sheer opportunism in the eyes of the voters. There are empirical examples of parties that have made successful shifts from a position against decentralisation to a position in favour of it, being rewarded with more votes at election time. Among them are the British Conservative Party, the Belgian Liberal Party, the Spanish Popular Party and the Italian Communist Party and Christian Democracy. However, these re-positioning along the centralisation-decentralisation scale was presented to the electorate with arguments that emphasised aspects of decentralisation in which these parties had more credibility and better reputation than their Socialist and Social-democratic competitors. Subsequent chapters will deal with these cases in detail.

credibility (that is, without the move seeming like sheer political opportunism). On the other hand, credibility cannot come at the expense of responsibility and integrity. The state party has to be credible without looking irresponsible or unreliable and thereby losing face in the eyes of the voters. A centralised unitary state makes this double challenge insurmountable. In the absence of sub-state electoral arenas, it is difficult for a state party to convince voters that the party's leaders really care about what happens in one or two regions of the country[10] for the simple reason that the electoral arena is state-wide and the party will be rendered accountable at the state level. Therefore, the incentives to care about regional particularities, which are at the core of the centre-periphery conflict, are low.

The presence of regional electoral arenas changes the incentives. When regional parliaments and governments exist state party elites will have to be responsive and accountable to regional electorates as well as to the state-wide one. Regional elections deal with regional issues, even more so the higher the level of competencies placed in the hands of the regional administration. León (2006) has demonstrated that as decentralisation increases electoral externalities become weaker. The main reason behind this is that the existence of regional governments and legislatures eventually leads to the development of differentiated constituencies that vote differently depending on the level of government (León 2006: 75). Regional institutions become a ubiquitous reality. They have their own symbols and their particular names. People are born into these political communities; they become familiarised with them and grow an identity

with them. Differentiated regional constituencies are formed who, through time, develop a taste for decentralisation or at least grow accustomed to it. State parties develop institutional interests at the regional level (Van Houten 2000). According to Martínez-Herrera, "it is not rare for incumbents to try to gain support for their structures, and for their management of them, by appealing to identification with the regional community" (Martínez-Herrera 2002: 429). Regional governments actively try to produce regional identities and the incumbents of regional governments engaged in this process of regional *nation-building* are not necessarily peripheral parties (Beramendi 1995; Brancati 2009; Núñez-Seixas 2005).

As a result of all this state parties can adopt pro-periphery positions more freely or, put it differently, state parties are less likely to raise suspicions about their credibility, their consistency or their opportunism if they defend regional interests at state elections. Decentralisation makes it easier for state parties to successfully compete against peripheral parties on their own terms: those of the centre-periphery dimension.

Credibility constraints do not disappear fully in a politically decentralised state. The conflict is no longer between 'centralisers' and 'decentralisers' but between different types of political decentralisation. State parties are still constrained to defend a symmetrical type of devolution that guarantees the equality of state citizens throughout the state territory irrespective of where they live. Clearly, this is difficult to reconcile with the asymmetric type of devolution that protects territorial particularities which is defended by peripheral parties. Yet a decentralised state allows state parties to adapt their electoral offer to the level on which they are competing and to their interests at each particular level. This means that, in regional elections, state parties can compete against peripheral parties emphasising exclusively regional issues and defending regional particular interests vis à vis the state as convincingly as peripheral parties can.

The problem for state parties in a decentralised state is no longer how to make a pro-periphery move with credibility

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[10] I use the term region to refer to a geographically defined area within the state that can serve as the basis for a self-governing administrative unit in between the state and the local levels, with an elected parliament and a government accountable to it. A peripheral territory is a special type of region, in the sense of being the homeland of a minority culture which, through social movements and political parties, claims the right of the peripheral territory to self-government or to national self-determination.

but how to avoid that credibility comes at the expense of the state party's unity and the state party's territorial cohesion and consistency. Inter-governmental relations are now a fundamental feature of the system (see Table 1). The same party may be in government at the state and regional level simultaneously and have contradicting interests and aspirations on each level. Moreover, the incumbent state party at the state level may find itself in need of parliamentary support from peripheral parties and peripheral parties may condition this support to their own interests at the regional level. These interests, in turn, may contradict with the interests of the regional branch of the incumbent state party. The outcome may be that a peripheral party may become the main opposition or rival party of a state party at the regional level whereas at the state level a state party's more likely rival is another state party.

The multi-level institutional structure of electoral competition introduces centrifugal pressures within the structure of state parties (Hough and Jeffery 2006; León 2006; Roller and Van Houten 2003: 3; Van Biezen and Hopkin 2006). Regional elections give the regional branches of state parties an independent source of representative legitimacy and a power stronghold. The prestige of a regional political career increases and making a state career relies more strongly on making a regional one. The central party elite has to take into account the regional *barons* because, among other things, if disagreements go utterly wrong it is credible for the regional party elite to split up from the state party. And this is less costly than before devolution. The aftermath of decentralisation will empower the regional branches of the state party and will set the respective regional and state-wide strategies apart. Those state parties that are directly threatened by peripheral parties will have incentives to get ever closer to the positions of peripheral parties in regional elections irrespective of the consequences that these converging moves may have for the state party's central leadership at the state level (Alonso and Gómez Fortes 2011).

The centre-periphery conflict is institutionalised as a result of political devolution. Issues that set the centre against the regions, or some regions against other regions, will be part of daily politics in a decentralised state. Therefore, the relevance of the dimension is, in a way, institutionally guaranteed. Its relative saliency with respect to other lines of conflict will, of course, vary from one election to the next but this saliency will never disappear completely.

The establishment of elected regional assemblies and governments, and the subsequent institutionalised saliency of the centre-periphery conflict, allow peripheral parties to trade "(national) policy for (regional) authority" (Heller 2002: 658). The peripheral party is in an advantageous position to press for further decentralisation whenever the state party at the central/federal government does not have a sufficient majority to govern (Field 2009b). Thus, the peripheral party will offer its parliamentary support to the state party so that the latter can see its policies implemented at the state level. The peripheral party will do this in exchange for further authority devolved to the regional institutions. Decentralisation offers incentives to parties for this type of exchange and, as a result, a built-in tendency towards the radicalisation of the peripheral agenda is created. Radicalisation also serves to artificially create a climate of emergency for the peripheral cause which contributes to make the centre-periphery dimension the most salient in voters' minds when they cast their vote. The more demands granted to peripheral parties the more peripheral parties can present them as achievements to their constituencies and get rewarded with votes in return. The claim that the assimilation of the pro-periphery agenda by state parties would eventually lead to the neutralisation of the centre-periphery conflict is unwarranted since such neutralisation would require a degree of consensus among state parties that the dynamic of electoral competition disincentives. There will always be electoral benefits to reap from manipulating the centre-periphery conflict in the state party's own benefit.

Devolution also facilitates radicalisation in an indirect way. In a decentralised state it is more likely for peripheral parties to

TABLE 1. The Institutional Setting of Political Devolution

Institutions		Processes	
Sub-state arena of democratic representation	Regional legislature Regional executive Regional party system Regional electoral system Regional exclusive and shared competences	Multilevel governance	State government-state opposition relationship Regional government-regional opposition relationship State government-regional government relationship
		Multilevel party competition	State party competition Regional party competition Intra-party competition (central leadership versus regional branches)
		Multilevel constituencies	Differential voting

become government parties. Being a governmental party at the regional level strengthens the position of the peripheral party *vis à vis* its competitors and enhances its credibility as a party with policy experience and governmental aspirations. Incumbency also offers the peripheral party the opportunity to influence voters' preferences on the centre-periphery dimension through the implementation of *nation-building* public policies. In this manner, the peripheral party is better situated to initiate a radicalisation of its pro-periphery agenda, since it has the institutional instruments and the credibility to push it ahead.

This is, very likely, the most enduring and deep effect of political devolution: it changes the distribution of centre-periphery preferences in the electorate. As a growing literature on policy feedback and political behaviour is showing, the implementation of particular policies has direct effects on two fundamental aspects of political behaviour: defining membership and forging a political community or delineating groups (Mettler and Soss 2004). A policy of decentralisation may have the unanticipated side-effect of making the electorate in general more receptive to pro-periphery issue positions.

Political devolution seems, therefore, a costly electoral strategy best summarised in

one main result: the centre-periphery dimension is made a permanent line of conflict. Why would state parties support devolution if it is so costly? The answer is that state parties discount the costs of devolution when these are not assumed individually by the party that implements devolution but collectively by all the parties in the political system while the benefits are expected to benefit the devolutionist party more than any other party in the system. In the post-devolution era, all state parties will be subject to the same kind of strategic trade-offs and will have to deal with the same divisive pressures that were described in the previous paragraphs. However, only the devolutionist state party will be able to compete effectively against peripheral parties using strategies of pro-periphery convergence.

WHEN DEVOLUTION MAKES STRATEGIC SENSE

For this part of my argument, I rely on Meguid's explanation of devolution (2009), according to which a state party supports devolution when faced with a peripheral party taking votes from the party in state elections in regions in which the party is electorally vulnerable (i.e., upon whose seats the party depends for legislative success). However, my argument moves away from Meguid in two main respects.

First, we have a different understanding of the costs of devolution that brings us to different predictions about state parties' behaviour. Second, I provide an explanation for all-round devolution whereas Meguid's model does not account for this outcome. These differences between Meguid's explanation and that which I present here will become more obvious as I unfold the argument.

When can a threatened state party expect that the costs of devolution will be assumed collectively and the benefits individually by the devolutionist party? I argue that this depends on the country's electoral geography. Electoral geography (i.e., the geographical distribution of parties' votes and the diverse electoral relevance of a country's constituencies) partly determines the incentives for parties to support first-time devolution and the institutional resources available to push it ahead. In this respect, I shall present two main theses, the first of which is taken from Meguid (2009). First, the capacity of a peripheral party to threaten a state party in state elections is determined by the electoral geography of the country. Second, devolution will be supported by threatened state parties with a double, simultaneous, electoral aim: as a means to stop and reverse their state-level electoral losses *and* as a way to secure regional-level electoral majorities.

O'Neill (2003) was among the first to connect political decentralisation to parties' electoral calculations. She analyses five presidential systems of Latin America in order to explain their respective processes of political and fiscal decentralisation. The trigger of a process of decentralisation is a situation in which national parties are nationally weak but sub-nationally strong (I am using O'Neills's terminology here). This happens when national parties have strong pockets of support throughout the country but low expectations about their abilities to remain in the national government (O'Neill 2003: 1069). O'Neill demonstrates that governing parties devolve fiscal and political power to those sub-national arenas in which they are most likely to gain control of it (O'Neill 2003: 1087). Her conclusion is that decentralisation is a strategy of power-seeking at the sub-national level intended to

compensate for the weakness of the governing party at the national level[11].

Meguid (2009) extends O'Neill's model to the European context. She also assumes that devolution is the result of a rational political calculation. The trigger of devolution in Europe, as in Latin America, is a situation in which a party is becoming weaker at the state level. However, in contrast to Latin America, the cause of this weakness is the electoral threat coming from peripheral parties with a devolutionist agenda. In Meguid's model, devolution is a strategy of electoral competition aimed at reversing the state party's growing weakness at the state level. Thus, we arrive at the reverse logic of O'Neill's analysis: parties seek power at the state level and are willing to trade it for less power at the regional level (Meguid 2009). Meguid sees no advantage for the state party at the regional level and, therefore, concludes that devolution will be implemented only when the threatened state party prioritises state-level power over regional control (Meguid 2009).

Sorens (2009) compares the two rationales for devolution to see which of them can better account for parties' support of decentralisation in five European countries (Belgium, France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom). He refers to them as the regional-government-office-seeking motivation (RGOS), which would roughly correspond to O'Neill's model of political and fiscal decentralisation, and central-government-office-seeking motivation (CGOS), which would more or less fit Meguid's model of devolution.

According to Sorens's argument, the RGOS motivation is present when the state party expects to join at least one regional government if devolution were to be implemented but does not expect to either join or remain in government at the state level (2009: 257). The implication is,

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[11] Although O'Neill's model says nothing about opposition parties' support for decentralisation, the motivations that her model attributes to governing parties would explain equally well – or even better– the opposition parties' support for decentralisation, particularly when opposition parties have been out of power for a long time.

Sorens claims, that opposition parties are more likely to support decentralisation than parties in central government, the more so, the more regionally concentrated is the opposition's support. If we are to believe Sorens then government parties would seldom be moved by a RGOS motivation.

The CGOS motivation is present when the state party is convinced that supporting devolution will maximise its countrywide electoral support. This will depend on the electoral system in which the party operates. Always according to Sorens (2009), the more proportional –and multiparty– the electoral system, the more diverse will be the positions of state parties on the issue of devolution, since different parties will cater to voters with different preferences. The author concludes that in proportional systems the CGOS motivation does not yield strong predictions as to which parties will support devolution (Sorens 2009: 258). In less proportional systems with fewer parties the positions towards devolution will tend to converge towards the median voter. Therefore, says Sorens, support for devolution will only occur when significant majorities in the periphery support it and voters in the core of the country are not significantly opposed (2009: 258).

Sorens concludes that state parties' support for devolution follows more closely the RGOS logic (2009: 269). He finds little evidence of CGOS motivations, a result that he explains because "the votes won in the periphery can be cancelled out by votes lost in the core" (Sorens 2009: 269) and, therefore, supporting devolution is hardly ever a net vote-winning strategy. Paradoxically, while Meguid's model, based on the state-level logic, satisfactorily explains the British case and this case alone, Sorens claims that this logic (CGOS) leaves the British case unexplained (2009: 261).

Meguid's and Sorens' models share the same weakness. The authors exclude a priori the possibility that state parties' motivations to support and/or to implement a devolution reform simultaneously combine a state-wide defensive logic *and* a regional proactive logic. And yet it is evident that, in the European cases under analysis, both logics are simultaneously at play, because state parties need to gain credibility as both state-wide parties and parties with a regional agenda.

How Electoral Geography Matters for the Emergence of a Peripheral Party Threat

Peripheral parties are, by definition, geographically concentrated. This implies that their electoral ceiling and, consequently, their threat capacity, is demographically and institutionally determined. Demographically, their electoral ceiling depends on the size of the peripheral territory's population. Institutionally, this population size has a reflection in the electoral system. A peripheral territory (i.e., the territory that is home to a cultural minority within a country) is assigned a number of seats in the state parliament that is more or less proportional to its population size according to the country's electoral rules. How these seats are won is also determined by the electoral system but this is less relevant for the argument at this point so I will return to it at the end of this section. What matters now is the way in which the population size of the peripheral territory translates into the number of seats that the peripheral territory contributes to the state parliament. The larger the number of seats it contributes the larger the electoral relevance of the peripheral territory for state parties with government aspirations. The threat capacity of a peripheral party is therefore defined by the peripheral territory's population size and, through the electoral system, by the number of seats that this territory contributes to the state parliament. Its maximal threat capacity equals the peripheral territory's population size and/or number of seats.

Like Meguid's (2009), my first thesis claims that a peripheral party is an electoral threat to a state party when the peripheral party takes votes away from the state party in state elections *(1) in an electorally relevant region in which (2) the threatened state party has a high concentration of its total state-wide vote.* In these circumstances the challenged state party must develop strategies to counteract the peripheral threat if it wants to obtain or retain a

parliamentary majority. These strategies are divided into two kinds: those aimed at stopping the defection of voters to the peripheral competitor in the peripheral territory and those aimed at compensating the electoral losses in the peripheral territory by incrementing electoral support in other regions of the state.

The state parties whose support is geographically concentrated in one or more electorally relevant regions where they are losing votes to growing peripheral parties are more likely to support devolution than those state parties who have either an even distribution of support throughout the country –making them less dependent on the votes coming from particular constituencies– or who do not have to compete with peripheral parties in the electorally relevant constituencies in which they are the strongest party (Meguid 2009).

The electoral system is, of course, a relevant intermediating factor between electoral geography and the emergence of an electoral threat (Meguid 2009). The electoral system establishes the threshold that a party must cross in order to win at least 50% of the seats in parliament and this is a fundamental piece of information for a vote-maximising party. Additionally, this information is open for all to see and, therefore, available to all the competing parties in the system.

An electoral system is perfectly proportional when a party needs 50% of the votes to obtain 50% of the seats in parliament. This threshold of the necessary number of votes to gain 50% of the seats has a double reading. On the one hand, the lower the threshold, the more beneficial for large parties and the more likely it is for a large party to achieve governmental office. On the other hand, this threshold informs us as to how large a peripheral party needs to be in order to jeopardise the status of a state party as the largest party in the country[12].

This is why, in general, the lower the minimum percentage of votes necessary to obtain a majority of the seats the more relevant is the threat of peripheral party growth to the threatened state party.

In the case of *winner-takes-all* systems, the value of this threshold depends exclusively on the number of parties. The larger the number of parties, the lower the minimum proportion of votes required to win a majority of seats in parliament[13] (Ruiz-Rufino 2007). In the case of list proportional representation systems, this threshold depends on the assembly size, the number of districts and their sizes and also on the number of parties (Ruiz-Rufino 2007). In any electoral system that is highly disproportional, the larger is the number of parties the larger the possibility of displacement of the majoritarian party by another party[14]. Large state parties will feel more threatened in a highly disproportional system than in a highly proportional one because the number of votes that a peripheral party needs to obtain in order to gain 50% of the seats in parliament is smaller.

Of course, peripheral parties are in general much smaller than state parties. However, within their regions, they can be relatively large, and even the largest party. They can be the ones obtaining a majority

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is, 56 percent- in Scotland on 37 percent of the vote)" (McLean 2004: 151).

[13] Let us see it with an example. Let us assume a winner-takes-all electoral system in which there are only two parties. If one of the two parties obtains 50% of the votes in 50% of the districts it can win the elections, i.e. it can gather 50% of the seats in parliament. This the party could achieve with just 25% of the national vote. Now let us increase the number of parties in this fictitious electoral system to four, instead of just two. Now if a party obtains 25% of the votes in 50% of the districts, it can gather 50% of the seats and win the election. This the party could manage with a mere 12.5 % of the vote.

[14] Politicians are only too aware of these facts. Meguid (2009: 16) quotes a Labour MP from Scotland, John P. Mackintosh, who remarked: "If there was a 3% swing from Labour to the SNP, it would give the party a popular majority in Scotland and with each percentage point a number of the 36 seats held by Labour in which the SNP is now running second, would change hands".

of the region's seats, particularly in disproportional electoral systems when the vote share necessary is relatively low. For this reason, the threat for state parties at the state level is not a threat of displacement of the state party by the peripheral party. Rather, the threat is that of displacement of the state party as the largest party in the country and as the party of government. Put differently, it is the threat of displacement of the state party by another state party competitor. To sum up, the expectation is that the lower the necessary number of votes to win 50% of the seats, the higher the perception of threat of state parties in the event of a peripheral party growth.

How Electoral Geography Provides Incentives to Transit the Devolutionist Path

Meguid (2009) sees devolution as very costly for state parties for two main reasons: first, because it strengthens peripheral parties at the regional level (see also Brancati 2009) and, second, because the powers of the central government are reduced to the benefit of the regional administrations.

In contrast, I argue that *the costs of devolution are not the same across countries but vary with the electoral geography of each country*. On the one hand, the electoral dominance of peripheral parties in regional elections should not be taken for granted, as Meguid does. If the state party is strongly supported in the peripheral territory in which it competes with a peripheral challenger, the newly acquired reputation as "decentraliser" will also help the threatened state party retain and/or regain its support in regional elections as opposed to only state elections as Meguid defends. In this case, devolution will actually increase, rather than decrease, the competition between state and peripheral parties in regional elections. On the other hand, the weakening of the central government is not necessarily mirrored by an equal weakening of the state parties' power as Meguid seems to assume. Governing state parties will certainly have fewer competencies than before devolution but, in exchange, they will have a chunk of the regional power cake. Besides, the multi-

level structure of government offers governing state parties enhanced opportunities for establishing alternative and ad-hoc parliamentary majorities at the centre by giving support of regional legislation in exchange for support of state legislation. These processes contribute to enhance the governability of the country in polities with two very large parties highly polarised (Field 2009a). Therefore, state parties' net control over political power and economic resources in the country as a whole will be increased. Moreover, it is bound to happen that sooner or later a state party will go to the opposition. When this happens, it is not small consolation if it is still in office in one or more self-governing regions, particularly if they include a wide array of competencies and resources.

Different types of electoral geography will therefore render devolution more or less costly to the state parties that face a peripheral threat. Table 2 shows the predicted support[15] of state parties for different types of devolution according to the type of electoral geography present in each election and the incumbency status of the party.

When the threatened state party has concentrated support *only* in regions in which it faces a peripheral challenger, its prospects in a decentralised state are uncertain. I argued before that the state party's reputation as a 'decentraliser' will help reverse its losses to the peripheral challenger in regional elections. The party's regional electoral fortunes, therefore, need not be negative. But there is no guarantee. It may well happen that the state party finds itself in the opposition at both the state and the regional level, a most undesired outcome. The electoral prospects of the state party at the regional level will depend on its relative strength with respect to the other parties in the region –peripheral and state parties alike– as well as on the electoral system. The more the uncertainty about the party's electoral prospects in the peripheral region the more the support for

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[15] Let us remember that for a threat to exist three conditions must be present: the state party has (1) concentrated electoral support in regions (2) that are electorally relevant and (3) in which state parties face a peripheral challenger.

TABLE 2. Threatened State Parties' Predicted Support for Devolution According to the Type of Electoral Geography

Type of electoral geography	State party's incumbency status	Support for devolution inside the state party	Implemented (if incumbent) or promised (if opposition) reform
State party has concentrated support *only* in region/s in which it faces a peripheral party threat	In government	Ambivalent/divided support	No devolution or Partial devolution
	In opposition	Unanimous support	All-round devolution
State party has concentrated support not only in region/s with a peripheral party but also, *simultaneously*, in at least one region without peripheral party threat	In government	Unanimous support	All-round devolution
	In opposition	Unanimous support	All-round devolution

decentralisation inside the party will depend on other factors.

Meguid (2009), with the British case in mind, advanced two of these factors: the level of party centralisation and the state party's leadership's prioritisation of state-level power over regional control. I argue, instead, that the most determinant factor is whether the state party is in government or in opposition and, if in opposition, for how long it has been out of office. After all, power abstinence has a direct fundamental impact on a party's leadership and priorities. As Mazzoleni has put it:

> "[T]here are instances of opposition parties that supported devolution in order to establish new institutional arenas in which they could exercise political power: this was the case for the various left parties in Italy in the 1960s, in France in the 1970s and in Britain in the 1980s-90s" (2009: 214).

If the party has been in opposition for a long period of time, the benefits of devolution will be strongly appreciated by many inside the state party. When long in opposition, devolution becomes, in the eyes of both the party's members and leadership, equivalent to more democracy and more accountability. Therefore, state parties in the opposition for a long time and with a geographical concentration of support in regions in which they face a peripheral challenger grow dear to the idea of devolution more easily than state parties in government. If instead the state party is in government when the peripheral threat arises then devolution will be seen by many inside the party as an unacceptable price to be paid for peripheral acquiescence and as detrimental for staying in office. Devolution is, under these conditions, unlikely to be supported inside the party for fear that the party would seem irresponsible and unreliable in the eyes of the voters. If the party's leadership decides to implement devolution regardless by giving in to the peripheral party's pressure out of sheer political opportunism then partial devolution (i.e. devolution of power only to the region or regions in which there is a relevant peripheral challenger) will be chosen.

When the threatened state party has concentrated support not only in regions where there is a peripheral party but also, and *simultaneously*, in regions where it does not face a peripheral challenger then the party will opt for all-round devolution. By extending devolution to all the regions of the state, a state party will actually

enhance –rather than undermine– its future prospects in those regions where there are no strong peripheral parties and where the state party benefits from a high concentration of support. In this case, all-round devolution is a means to increase the threatened party's power regionally while at the same timing stopping or reversing its losses to the peripheral competitor at state elections. The state-wide and regional logics are therefore simultaneously at play.

All-round devolution has one further advantage: it allows framing political devolution as a good in itself, beneficial for all the citizens and all the regions of the state, and not as the price to pay for peripheral unrest. This is particularly important when the state party is vulnerable to accusations by its state adversaries of "selling the country off" to the separatists. Therefore, all-round devolution allows a state party to defend political decentralisation without looking unreliable and irresponsible *as* a state-wide party. Under these conditions, the threatened state party will support all-round devolution irrespective of whether it is in office or in opposition.

Meguid's model is, in fact, ill prepared to explain all-round devolution due to its assumptions about the costs of devolution. Being so costly, Meguid (2009) argues, state politicians will decentralise just enough to appease peripheral parties and their voters. The implication is that in those regions where there are no voters and parties with a pro-periphery agenda there will be no devolution of powers –a prediction that is empirically wrong.

All-round devolution is not equivalent to symmetrical devolution. The competencies that are devolved to the regions need not be exactly the same for all. As a matter of fact, in the presence of a peripheral threat, state parties will choose *all-round asymmetrical devolution*. The reasons have to do with the contradictory demands that state parties are trying to satisfy simultaneously. On the one hand, all-round devolution offers them a credible 'justification' to their pro-periphery strategic move and the opportunity to establish regional electoral strongholds. However, all-round devolution will be opposed by peripheral parties because it does not allow for the differentiation inside the state that they want for their peripheral territories. The solution is to offer peripheral territories more powers than those that will be enjoyed by ordinary (non-peripheral) regions. The problem with this solution is that it is intrinsically unstable. If presented to the electorate as a definitive solution, the electoral selling force of all-round devolution will be lost. This is why it will be put forward as a temporary arrangement until competencial symmetry is finally achieved.

Before concluding, a word is necessary concerning state parties unthreatened by peripheral parties: Do they have incentives to support devolution? They do, when they are threatened by a state adversary that has concentrated support in electorally relevant regions and defends a decentralisation agenda. This is the 'functional equivalent' of a peripheral party. However, this is not a centre-periphery conflict but the centralisation-decentralisation dimension of competition of which I talked before. In this case, the threatened state party will support *all-round symmetrical devolution* given that the pro-decentralisation state adversary has no exigency for territorially differentiated decentralisation.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article I propose a model that explains first time devolution in unitary, centralised states with geographically concentrated minorities. I contend here that political devolution is not intended to accommodate and neutralise the peripheral parties' agenda of decentralisation within the state or independence from the state. It would be a futile attempt, since devolved institutions strengthen peripheral parties and encourage their drive to demand further decentralisation, as real life examples continuously show (Brancati 2009; Erk and Anderson 2009; Lustick *et al.* 2004; Meadwell 2009; Roeder 2009). State politicians know this, if only because they have seen it happen before, so there must be some other reason that encourages them to support devolution regardless. Political devolution is, instead, an electoral strategy that allows state parties to compete effectively with peripheral parties and cause

them electoral losses without losing face in front of the electorate and without raising suspicions of opportunism.

In a nutshell, the argument runs as follows. State parties directly threatened by the electoral growth of peripheral parties need to react in order to retain their electoral majorities or pluralities in state elections. An immediately available response to the peripheral party growth is to tactically defend some of the least costly policies that are at the core of the peripheral challenger's programmatic agenda. This is expected to allow the threatened state party to retain those voters that are close to it along the left-right dimension but who have strong peripheral identities and, therefore, intense pro-periphery preferences. The problem of this response is that tactical moves in the short-term have to be credible for the success of the strategy in the long-term. Given that state parties' tactical moves are taking place in a unitary centralised state the credibility constraints of a pro-periphery move are very strong indeed. Voters with pro-periphery preferences will not believe that the state party's pro-periphery turn is a truthful one and will not vote for it. Voters with anti-periphery preferences will interpret the state party's move as opportunistic and will punish it by not giving it their vote.

Political devolution is the institutional device to transform the tactical pro-periphery moves of state parties into a credible long-term electoral strategy. The fact that devolution has costs for the strategising parties will be no constrain as far the costs are shared equally among all the state parties in the system and the benefits concentrate on the state party that initiates the devolution reform. And this will depend on the electoral geography in place.

Electoral geography refers, on the one hand, to the geographical distribution of votes that characterises each of the parties in the party system and, on the other hand, to the numeric relevance of the country's electoral constituencies in the state parliament. Electoral geography determines in the first place whether a direct electoral threat emerges or not but, moreover, electoral geography also determines the costs and benefits of devolution. If the threatened state party has concentrated support exclusively in regions in which it faces a peripheral adversary, devolution will only be the best option while the party is in opposition. If the threatened state party has concentrated support in several regions of the state, some of which do not have peripheral parties, the party's best choice is to support devolution irrespective of the party's incumbency status, although being in opposition will urge the party towards devolution to a greater extent.

The final implication of this argument is that in democratic systems, i.e. in systems where parties that want to rule need to establish electoral majorities that will put them in office, devolution is not a decision to protect the state from the secessionist threat. It is, instead, a decision by state parties to protect their needed electoral majorities. Whether devolution endangers or guarantees the territorial integrity of the state in the long term is of secondary importance for vote-maximising state parties. Only when the protection of the state's territorial integrity fully coincides with the aim of achieving an electoral majority do state parties care about protecting the state.

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