

## INFORME

**THE POSITION OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES  
ON DECENTRALISATION**por **Simon Toubeau**Investigador García Pelayo, Centro de Estudios Políticos  
y Constitucionales (CEPC)**RESUMEN**

En este texto se pretende investigar las variables que determinan cuando los partidos socialdemócratas favorecerán u oponen procesos de descentralización. Con ello se pretende explicar la variación en sus preferencias hacia la distribución territorial del poder. Para ello se lleva a cabo un análisis comparativo de los partidos socialdemócratas en cuatro países –Bélgica, Italia, España y el Reino Unido– países donde la descentralización ha sido un tema destacado y un aspecto de recientes reformas constitucionales.

**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this article is to investigate those set of circumstances, that is, to identify when Social Democratic parties will favour or oppose decentralisation. In doing so, it pretends to explain the variation in their attitudes towards the territorial distribution of authority. It conducts a comparative case analysis of Social Democratic parties in four countries –Belgium, Italy, Spain and UK– countries where decentralisation has been a salient issue of competition and a highly consequential aspect constitutional reform in recent decades.

**I. INTRODUCTION**

In past decades, a pronounced shift of political authority towards regions has occurred across a number of countries (Marks et al. 2010). This decentralisation of power is an important matter because it touches the core of politics, namely the power of the state to make and execute its laws. As a result, it has become a prominent issue of debate between political parties. Evidence from recent constitutional reforms in multinational states like Spain or Belgium reveals that the territorial distribution of authority is indeed a deeply political issue that is contested by political parties. For instance, the Spanish Social Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE) actively pursued the reform of regional statutes of autonomy during its first term in office (2004-08), often in the face of vociferous opposition by the Conservative *Partido Popular* (PP). In contrast, the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) of Belgium was reticent to approve the recent constitutional reform (2011) advocated by the centre-right Flemish parties that decentralised aspects of the country's welfare system.

These examples reveal that political parties are crucial actors in shaping the process of decentralisation: they articulate and manage territorially-based conflicts; they offer different policies to voters regarding the appropriate distribution of authority and compete with one another for votes on the basis of these programmatic pledges. Finally, they form the national governments that undertake the territorial reforms that lead to the decentralisation of power. Therefore, understanding the attitudes of parties on the issue of decentralisation is central to understanding changes in the distribution of power in federal systems.

Social Democratic parties have played an especially important role in shaping the territorial structures of the state- given their ubiquitous presence and predominance over the centre-left across party systems. They are associated with the significant territorial reforms that created decentralised political structures in multinational countries like Belgium, Spain or UK. But, Social Democratic are also associated with resistance to such reforms. For example, devolution to Scotland in the 1970s was a question that split the British Labour party- a division that eventually led to the defeat of the devolution bills in a referendum. So, there is an important variation in the attitudes of this party family that is worth investigating.

This variation reflects the fact that Social Democratic party family exhibits competing ideological traditions towards decentralisation. Early 'utopian' socialist doctrine, expounded by thinkers such as Joseph Proudhon or Robert Owen, developed their vision of the economic basis of society in opposition to large-scale industrial systems, opting instead for the establishment of local industrial cooperatives. Their views resonated with syndicalism, which saw the emancipation of the working class as something to be achieved by autonomous, democratic trade union organisations. This tradition was gradually supplanted with the advent of parliamentary socialism during the Great Depression and with the increasing prominence of statism, a belief that recognised the possibilities offered by controlling the state machinery for the purpose of realising the principle of equality, through economic planning and resource redistribution (Lichtheim 1969). The ideology of Social Democratic parties thus features values that are both in favour of and opposed to decentralisation, and each tradition will tend to predominate the party's attitudes under different sets of circumstances.

The aim of this article is to investigate those set of circumstances, that is, to identify when Social Democratic parties will favour or oppose decentralisation. The paper conducts a comparative case analysis of Social Democratic parties in four countries -Belgium, Italy, Spain and UK- countries where decentralisation has been a salient issue of competition and a highly consequential aspect constitutional reform in recent decades, and evaluates the conditions under which Social Democratic parties are likely to favour or oppose decentralisation. Before undertaking the empirical work, however, the next section develops a theoretical framework in which our expectations about the factors shaping the position of Social Democratic parties are spelt out.

## II. THE DETERMINANTS OF SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES' POSITION ON DECENTRALISATION

### II.1. Strategic incentives

The premise of this article is that parties are rational utility-maximizers driven by vote, office and policy-seeking motivations (Müller and Strom 1999) that adopt a specific position towards decentralisation in according to the structure of competition, in order to maintain or bolster their strength in the party system and in government.

*Regionalist party threat.* The first reason for Social Democratic parties to favour decentralisation is to respond to the demands of regionalist parties for territorial autonomy or independence.<sup>1</sup> The ability of regionalist parties to advance these constitutional objectives will depend on whether they can exert their blackmail or coalition

1. Regionalist parties compete in a geographically delimited area, mobilise electoral support on the basis of a territorial identity and campaign on platforms that seeks greater autonomy within the state, sometimes up to the point of demanding independence

'relevance' (Sartori 1976) against Social Democratic parties. Using the terminology of Meguid (2005, 2008), we can surmise that if a Social Democratic party faces an electoral threat from a regionalist party on the centre-left, it has the incentive to adopt an 'accommodative' strategy (decentralist position) in order to undermine the latter's 'ownership' of the territorial issue, to persuade voters to switch allegiance and to recoup electoral losses. Conversely, if a regionalist party threatens a centre-right mainstream party, a Social Democratic party has the incentive to adopt an 'adversarial' strategy (centralist position) and oppose the accommodative strategy of its mainstream competitor. But, Social Democratic parties' strategies are also linked to their desire to control office, both at the central and regional level: a party will also accommodate the demands of a regionalist party if it cannot hold office without the latter's legislative support or government participation. Thus, a first hypothesis (H1) is that a Social Democratic party will adopt a decentralist position, if it faces an electoral threat from a regionalist party, or if it depends on its legislative support/governmental participation.

*Incumbency.* Electoral calculations that underlie the competition between mainstream parties, will also affect a Social Democratic party's position on decentralisation. A Social Democratic party may manipulate the territorial issue in order to maximise its share of the vote relative to a rival centre-right party (Adams et al. 2005; Meguid 2008). The decision to do this will depend on whether it is in government or in opposition. Parties in government are less likely to support decentralisation, especially after a long period in office, since they must maintain the status quo to implement their policies and to enjoy the spoils of office (Swenden 2006). In contrast, parties in opposition endorse decentralization in order to secure the support of territories with regionalist parties, to maximize votes and return to office, as well as to create a regional arena in which they can govern whilst in central opposition (O'Neill 2003). This strategy will be all the more tempting, if the centre-right party in office has centralist position, since this will provide the opportunity for a party to distinguish itself from its adversary. Thus, a second hypothesis (H2) is that a Social Democratic party will adopt a decentralist (centralist) position, if it is in opposition (government)

## II.2. Internal constraints

While strategic incentives may be necessary for a Social Democratic party to support decentralisation, they may not be sufficient. Most vote and office-seeking assumptions see party strategies as resulting from short-term cost-benefit calculations. But, parties may not select the strategy that generates an optimal pay-off.

*Policy credibility.* The ability of a Social Democratic party to follow strategic incentives is conditioned firstly by the tension between ideological purity and marginal vote-seeking. Before following strategic incentives, the party leadership must be certain that the gains in votes this will generate will be higher than the loss of votes it may provoke, if the party's core voters feel that it is sacrificing the party's ideological beliefs. The ability of a Social Democratic party to undertake a decentralist policy shift is thus conditioned by the 'credibility' of its strategy (Downs 1957; Robertson 1976; Budge 1994; Meguid 2008; Alonso 2012). A programmatic re-adjustment can only be electorally rewarding if the party exhibits a historic tradition or an existing policy commitment to decentralisation that voters could use as a guide for assessing the sincerity of its re-positioning (Bowler 1990). Thus, a Social Democratic that has supported a decentralised state can expect to reap electoral rewards from its accommodative strategy. In contrast, a Social Democratic party that has been traditionally averse to decentralisation will find it difficult to deploy an accommodative strategy, because a sudden and radical adjustment will appear insincere and in conflict with what voters perceive to be the traditional party 'brand'. This yields

the third hypothesis (H3) that a Social Democratic party will adopt a decentralist position, if it is a 'credible' strategy

*Decentralised party organisation.* The ability of a Social Democratic party to deploy a 'credible' accommodative strategy is also conditioned by its organisational structures. Decisions about electoral strategies are a matter of internal debate and there may exist, between a party's different organs, variable degrees of attachment to the party's different ideological traditions and thus conflicting views about the likely value of different strategies (Iversen 1994; Kitschelt 1994). Which view prevails will depend on the decentralization of power within the party. In centralized organizations, the party executive will impose the party strategy on subordinate organs through its control over policy formulation, candidate selection and party coffers. Conversely, in decentralized parties where regional branches have substantial autonomy and influence over national party leaders, it is they that will set the party's policy (Garman et al. 2001). Typically, mainstream parties exhibit a 'congruence' between their stance on decentralisation and their organisation, so we can expect centralised parties to be centralist in their outlook, and vice versa (Swenden and Maddens 2009). This yields the fourth hypothesis (H4) that a Social Democratic party will adopt a decentralist position, if the party has a decentralised organisation.

### III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

To verify these hypotheses, I examine the territorial policy of Social Democratic parties in Belgium, Italy, Spain and the UK. These countries are selected because they: i) feature regionalist parties that have voiced demands for territorial autonomy and independence; ii) have gone through a significant process of decentralisation in which power has been ceded to Regions and Communities (Belgium), Regions (Italy), Autonomous Communities (AC)s (Spain) and devolved governments (UK). Specifically, I examine the *Parti Socialiste Belge* (PSB) and the *Parti Socialiste* (PS), the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS), the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE), and the British Labour Party, as these parties have headed several central governments in the past five decades and played a key role in accommodating and opposing the demands of regionalist parties. I undertake a systematic comparative analysis of 13 different observations, identified in the four countries as critical episodes of territorial reforms, and divide the observations into two broad types— *decentralist reforms* and *resistance to change*, in order to establish empirically the set of conditions under which Social Democratic parties will endorse or oppose decentralisation.

#### III.1. Decentralist reforms

##### *Regionalist party threat as the driver of a decentralist position*

The main driver pushing Social Democratic parties to adopt a decentralist position is the capacity of regionalist parties to exert a threat, by exercising blackmail or coalition 'relevance'. But, the micro-level variables that shape the capacity of regionalist parties to threaten Social Democratic parties vary according to the context.

In the UK, the *Scottish National Party* (SNP) exerted blackmail relevance in the late 1980s by adopting a centre-left platform and competing directly against the Labour party. Again, following the Scottish elections of 2007, the SNP drained electoral support from the Labour party, displaced it from office, and formed a minority government committed to independence, marking the first time that Labour lost control of its Scottish fief.

During the late 1960s in Belgium, the PSB also responded to the electoral pressures of the left-wing *Rassemblement Wallon* (RW), a party that rose to electoral prominence with the de-alignment of the Belgian electorate (Delruelle 1970). These pressures persisted into the late 1970s, as the RW consolidated its position and was co-opted into government to advance the regionalisation of Belgium (CRISP 1978). But, by the late 1980s, the RW disappeared, having lost its *raison d'être* in the face of the federalisation of the Belgian state and the organisational split of the PSB along linguistic lines in 1978, which allowed the latter to become the predominant left-wing regionalist political force

Similarly, in Italy, the *Lega Nord* (LN) set the agenda of the centre-left *Ulivo* coalition (the core of which was the PDS) in 1996, by registering its best electoral performance. This was achieved by the party's strategic repositioning towards the centre-left through its commitment to social protection and by the extension of its base to left-wing social segments, such as teachers and public sector workers (Biorcio 1997, 1999).

During the democratic transition in Spain, the presence of nationalist sentiment across left-wing social segments in Catalonia and the Basque Country persuaded the PSOE to embrace federal reforms (Gunther et al. 1986; Linz et al. 1981). Following the 1993 and 2004 elections, the centrist *Convergència i Unió* (CiU) and left-wing *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), exploited the advent of a hung national parliament to extract concessions from the minority PSOE central government during its investiture vote (Renu i Vilamala 2001). During the 1990s and early 2000s, the continued grip of the CiU on the Catalan government put pressure on the Catalan wing of the PSOE, the *Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya* (PSC) to adopt a more explicitly Catalanist profile in order to compete better in regional elections and win regional office (Roller and Van Houten 2003).

#### *Policy credibility and decentralised organisation as the 'mechanism' of a policy shift*

Once regionalist parties exert a threat, what conditions are associated with the accommodation of their demands by Social Democratic parties? The evidence shows that Social Democratic parties endorse decentralisation when it is a credible policy that mirrors their decentralised organisation and that is consistent with their strategy in opposition.

For instance, the British Labour Party's endorsement of the Constitutional Convention was partly motivated by its desire to compete better against the Unionist Conservative government (Geekie and Levy 1989). This policy was endorsed by the Scottish branch, which had gained an important degree of informal power within the party as a result of the threat of defection of its members to the SNP. Moreover, this policy was made credible by the commitment to devolution adopted in the 1970s and by the precedent of leading the Scottish National Convention (SNC) in the 1920 (Mitchell 1996: 113-21).

The same conditions shaped the PSOE's territorial policy. During the transition, the PSOE was organised as federation of regional socialist parties that shaped the party's federalist policy (Gunther et al. 1986; Gillespie 1989). This was rendered credible by its historic support for a federation of 'Iberian' nationalities and its association with left-wing nationalist parties in the ratification of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy during the Second Republic. Finally, the PSOE's stance reflected its long-standing opposition to a conservative and centralist dictatorship.<sup>2</sup> Following two terms in

2. The constitution outlined two processes by which different degrees of autonomy. Historical nationalities would follow the 'fast route' established in Art 151, and have immediate access to a higher degree of autonomy in the field of competences listed in Art 149. In contrast, ordinary regions would have to follow the 'slow' route detailed in Art 143 and wait an additional five years before they could demand competences under 149.

opposition (1996-2004), the PSOE renewed its territorial policy (Hopkin 2009).<sup>3</sup> This was inspired by the PSC, which chartered a new course in Catalan politics by putting forth a project for constitutional reform, the commitment to which it secured from the party leadership (Roller and Van Houten 2003). This territorial policy was aligned with its objective of de-throning the conservative *Partido Popular* (PP), by criticising the latter's centralist instincts, evident in its programme of Constitutional Patriotism (Nunez-Seixas 2005).

A similar set of conditions structured the decision of the PSB to call for federal reform in the late 1960s. The party was structured on three regional branches, but was *de facto* strongly anchored in its Walloon component (Deschouwer 1999), which voiced demands for the devolution of economic powers to three regions (Falony 2006). There was a good pedigree to render this policy credible: the party had been built on socialist guilds, trade unions and worker's cooperatives, and its founding doctrinal programme was committed to decentralisation to local authorities (Pierson 1953). The incentive for the PSB to deploy such a strategy was heightened by its desire to mobilise support in opposition to the Christian Democratic-Liberal incumbent, which had imposed a moratorium on constitutional reform.

The pattern was to repeat itself in the late 1970s and 1980s, when the PSB renewed its doctrinal charter, identifying a new role for regions in the constitution and putting forth a programme of 'integral' federalism that would transfer powers to regions in economic areas. These changes were motivated by the incentive to criticise the socio-economic policies of the Christian Democratic-Liberal coalitions and their weak progress in matters of regionalisation, and were facilitated by the continued predominance of the Walloon branch in setting the party's goals, especially after the party split along linguistic lines in 1978, which furnished an exclusively regional basis of support and a strongly regionalist identity (Deschouwer 1994).

#### *The limited effect of incumbency*

The factor that has an ambiguous effect on decentralist policy shifts is incumbency, because while policy shifts are, overall, more associated with Social Democratic parties in opposition, they may also take place when a party is in central government.

For instance, the adjustment of the Labour party's policy in response to its defeat to the SNP in 2007 took place while the party was in office. But the policy change was enabled by the way in which its commitment to the status quo was relaxed alongside the gradual decentralisation of its party structures. Initially, the Labour party maintained a centralised organisation, but the party executive gradually eased its grip over the running of the regional branches (Hopkin and Bradbury 2006). In Scotland, the Scottish Labour Party adopted a distinct stance on the constitutional issue by proposing 'enhanced powers' as an intermediate option between the status quo and independence and by calling for the establishment of a commission (Calman Commission) to review the existing constitutional arrangement.

Similarly, the PSOE's change in territorial policy in 1993 –which revived an inactive policy that enhanced the fiscal responsibility of regional governments– was facilitated by changes in its internal structures. The space for this policy to emerge was

3. The Declaration of Santillana de Mar included the reform of the Statutes of Autonomy, the participation of Autonomous Communities (AC) in the European Union (EU), a Conference of Presidents and the reform of the Senate. The party recognised the pluralism of national identities in Spain, but also underlined the defense of of citizens' equal rights and reforming institutions, for ensuring a better functioning political system.

created by the replacement of the centralist Alfonso Guerra with the decentralist Catalan Narcís Serra of the PSC as vice-president of the cabinet and by the increasing assertiveness of the regional barons at the expense of the centralist *Guerrista* faction within the party organisation (Puhle 2001). These informal changes enabled the revival of the federalist tradition within the party and eased the granting of concessions to regionalist parties.<sup>4</sup>

The mission of the *Ulivo* government to federalise the Italian state in the late 1990s was, in part, motivated by the strategic objective to harm the electoral prospects of the rival centre-right *Polo* coalition, which was deeply divided on the issue of territorial reform (Cento Bull 2002). Thus, a Social Democratic party could manipulate the territorial issue against its mainstream rival, even in government. This strategy was rendered credible by the PDS' earlier stance: its predecessors –the Communist (PCI) and Socialist (PSI) parties– had been consistent proponents of regionalisation during the 1960s and 1970s (Leonardi et al. 1987). The enthusiasm for federal reform was also spurred by the gradual decentralisation of the PDS's organisational structures, as the party leaders gave regional and local branches more autonomy and weight in the party executive committee (Pamini 1998 ; Pasquino 1993).

### III.2. Resistance to Change

#### *Regionalist party threat as the driver of decentralist position*

Even in cases where Social Democratic parties resist making changes to state structures, the threat of regionalist parties does provide them with a strong impetus to do so. In Great Britain, the factor that placed devolution on the agenda was the SNP's triumph in the elections of February and October 1974, in which it became the second party of Scotland. The SNP benefited from its centrist position, the weakening of the class cleavage and the dealignment of partisanship to threaten the Labour party which was in a minority government, dependent on its Scottish seats for being in power (Crewe et al. 1977).

In Spain, CiU and the PNV did not threaten the PSOE during the 1980s, following the advent of a dominant party system in the 1982 election, in which the PSOE secured an absolute parliamentary majority (Caciagli 1986; Puhle 1986). However, both parties were nevertheless 'relevant' at the regional level: they controlled regional government and could use this position to exert pressures on the regional branches of the PSOE, who confronted the choice between adapting their profile or remaining in regional opposition.

In contrast, in Italy and Belgium, regionalist parties set the political agenda through their insertion on the right-wing of the political spectrum.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Social Democratic parties were formulating their strategic responses in function of a regionalist threat exercised against their centre-right competitors. In Italy, the bargaining power of the LN in 2001 was shaped by two factors. The first was its rightward shift, in particular on cultural issues like immigration, which placed it squarely as a competitor of the centre-right parties, *Forza Italia* (FI) and *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN). The second was majoritarian component of the mixed electoral system introduced in 1993, which created an incentive for the FI and AN to establish a pre-electoral coalition with the

4. However, as a result of the PSOE being in government, a residual centralism continued to colour its autonomic policy, and the party proved loath to honour its commitment– making the cession on income tax a temporary measure in the 1994 budget rather than a permanent feature of the common regime.

5. The successor party of the main Flemish regionalist party, the *Volksunie*

LN.<sup>6</sup> In Belgium, the NV-A also exercised coalition relevance after establishing an electoral cartel with the Flemish Christian Democrats (*Christelijke Democratisch en Vlaams*, CD&V). The NV-A entered the federal government in 2007, from where it asserted its demands for reforming the Belgian state, in particular in matters of fiscal autonomy and social security. And after experiencing a massive increase in support in the elections of June 2010, the NV-A once again set the agenda of the protracted constitutional negotiations that lasted until late 2011.

*Policy credibility and party organisation as barriers to a decentralist policy*

The first reasons why Social Democratic parties would oppose decentralisation is if the place of these parties in government buttresses their centralist attitudes and organisation. Adopting an accommodative strategy was the condition for the Labour party to restore its electoral hegemony in Scotland and maintain the stability of its government. But in spite of these incentives, Labour remained centralist in its attitude. The Scottish branch of the party was hostile to devolution, as it felt that the nationalist advance could be contained by the prevailing system of territorial management.<sup>7</sup> Given the centralised party organisation, the leadership had the power to impose a pro-devolution policy motivated purely by electoral expediency on the rest of the party, but this had very little following. The Labour party had abandoned its commitment to devolution in 1958 and this stance had become ingrained in the party's mind-set (Jones and Keating 1979, 1985). Hostility was prevalent in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), engendering a situation of 'divided government' (Laver 1999), that led to the defeat of the devolution bills in 1979.

Circumstances in Spain were different. The PSOE government decentralised powers during the 1980s, but did so in a way that was inimical to regionalist parties' demands for asymmetric autonomy, by creating a uniform order featuring an important degree of fiscal and administrative centralisation. This reflected the absence of the mechanism for decentralist policy shifts. When the party accessed office in 1982, it affirmed its centralist position, claiming that solidarity was the main principle underlying its territorial policy: this stance resonated with a centralist tradition, manifested during the Second Republic, when the party sought to impose nation-wide labour regulations (Carr 1982). This policy was buttressed by a highly centralised party organisation, in which a nominally federal structure was limited to 'self-rule' of regional branches, where the influence of regional leaders in running the party executive was weak, and where a number of institutional features strengthened the hand of the central party leadership.<sup>8</sup> Compounded by the party's continued place in government, this stymied any effort to indulge the ambitions of the PSC to adopt a Catalanist profile.

6. The system featured a simple plurality system for three-quarters of seats, and a proportional system for the remaining quarter, using a d'Hondt highest average method (Katz 1996; D'Alimonte 2003).

7. The system comprised institutions of territorial representation –the Secretaries of the State, administrative decentralisation– the Scottish and Welsh Offices, and the insertion of a regional dimension to public policy. The Scottish branch's privileged access to the centre was one of the main reasons underlying its hostility to devolution.

8. There were a number of institutions that allowed the party secretary, Alfonso Guerra, to keep a tight grip on the party congress and individual MPs: representation to the party congress was determined by majoritarian rules that reduced factionalism, while the electoral system's provisions for closed and blocked lists empowered party leaders to shape the career and thus command the obedience of candidates (Lopez-Guerra 1984; Gunther 1989)



*Adversarial strategies as barriers to a decentralist policy*

The second reason to oppose decentralisation is if Social Democratic parties do not face any direct threat from regionalist parties, and thus oppose decentralisation for partisan reasons. The opposition of the *Ulivo* coalition to the territorial reforms proposed by the *Casa della Liberta* government in 2005 was driven by strategic reasoning and ideological beliefs. The rightward repositioning of the LN meant that the issue of decentralisation would be burdened by a divided centre-right coalition. So, for the same reason that the PDS chose to instigate a reform in the late 1990s, in order to heighten the salience of those divisions, in 2005, it chose to oppose the centre-right's reform. The Italian party system, characterized by bipolar competition (Bartolini et al. 2004), encouraged such an adversarial strategy. Moreover, the *Ulivo* appealed to its egalitarian values to oppose the LN's project. The latter included the introduction of de jure asymmetry that enabled regions to activate their own legislative powers in areas of concurrent competences such as healthcare and education, which the *Ulivo* characterised a threat to national unity and social equality, since it was geared to the safeguarding of the interests of northern regions and would lead to unequal guarantees of citizens' rights to public services.

Similarly in Belgium, the PS followed its partisan interests and ideological beliefs in opposing the reforms demanded by the NVA and CD&V. The party's electoral hegemony in Wallonia meant that it had good strategic reasons to articulate its core voters' opposition to further decentralisation: for this relatively poorer territory, the weak degree of fiscal autonomy and the centralisation of social security payments (in particular unemployment) ensured that the revenues of the Walloon region continued to be higher than what its tax base could generate. Moreover, it could hope to reap electoral rewards by taking a resolute stance towards the autonomist goals of the Flemish parties. But, in resisting decentralisation, the PS was not only safeguarding the socio-economic interests of its constituents, but also adhering to its ideological beliefs in equality and solidarity and to its Belgian identity, which reflected the higher sense of belonging to Belgium and a identification with the institutions of the Belgian state among Walloons (Billiet et al. 2006). This sense was considerably reinforced by the PS's continued presence in the central government from 1987 to 2007.

**IV. CONCLUSION**

This article has sought to examine the determinants of the position of Social Democratic parties on decentralisation. When examining *decentralist reforms*, it was found that a decentralist policy shift is almost always associated with the capacity of regionalist parties to exert pressures on Social Democratic parties (H1). In addition, Social Democratic parties tend to shift their policy while in opposition, in order to distinguish themselves from their centralist mainstream rival in government (H2). Moreover, it was found that decentralist policy shifts are undertaken by parties displaying a 'credible' territorial policy and a decentralised organisation (H3 and H4). Across the four countries, the mechanism underlying a policy shift was one in which regional branches persuade the central party leadership to adopt a decentralist position. There was however mixed evidence regarding the effect of incumbency (H2), as parties embraced territorial reforms also when in government.

When looking at cases of *resistance to change*, it was found that the regionalist threat a necessary but not sufficient condition for a Social Democratic party to endorse decentralisation. In the UK and Spain, we can link such outcomes to the absence or stifling of the bottom-up demands of its regional branches for decentralisation. Furthermore, in both cases, the absence of decentralist reform is linked with central incumbency,

indicating a close relationship between incumbency and centralist attitudes (H2). Another pathway to resistance was identified in which Social Democratic parties are not under the immediate threat of regionalist parties and thus they adopt centralist postures for strategic reasons, in order to safeguard their electoral interests and make opposition to a centre-right rival.

The findings have considerable bearing for the study of decentralisation elsewhere. The study of the relationship between the threat of regionalist parties, mainstream party competition and decentralisation in multinational parliamentary democracies, such as India, Turkey, or Canada would do well to focus on the strategic incentives underlying partisan positioning towards decentralisation and the key mechanisms underlying territorial policy shifts, in particular among large Social Democratic parties such as the Indian Congress party. Expanding the study to such contexts will make it possible to identify different sets of conditions that are associated with decentralist reforms and resistance to change.

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