The Paradox of Territorial Autonomy:
How Subnational Representation Leads to Secessionist Preferences

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Abstract The quest for peace, democracy and political stability has led a number of divided societies in Europe to opt for arrangements that entail segmental autonomy in order to accommodate ethnic diversity, avoid secession or even civil war. Although there are various institutional devices through which this idea can be implemented, in practice, one of its typical manifestations involves the devolution of legislative competences to the regional level. This process is in turn accompanied by the establishment of subnational representative institutions: governments, parliaments and elections. Although, such decentralization of political authority aims at accommodating the centrifugal tendencies existing in a given plurinational State, it may also have long-term unintended consequences. By focusing on Spain, the paper examines how subnational elections strengthen subnational identity, disseminate views in favour of further decentralization and may potentially cultivate secessionist preferences.

1 Introduction

Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, Europe witnessed the gradual dissolution of the plurinational Empires and the genesis of the sovereign nation-States. This historical and political trend that has favoured the building of mono-national over plurinational States in the old continent reached its peak in the aftermath of the fall of the ‘Iron Curtain’ and the subsequent dissolution of Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Still, there is a significant number of European multinational States whose institutional structures aim at accommodating ethno-linguistic diversity such as Belgium, Bosnia, North Macedonia and Spain.
The quest for peace, democracy and political stability has led those divided societies in Europe to opt for arrangements that entail segmental autonomy in order to accommodate ethnic diversity, avoid secession or even civil war. Although there are various institutional devices through which this idea can be implemented, in practice, one of its typical manifestations involves the devolution of legislative competences to the regional level. This process is in turn accompanied by the establishment of subnational representative institutions: governments and parliaments.

Although such decentralization of political authority aims at accommodating the centrifugal tendencies existing in a given plurinational state, it may have long-term unintended consequences. Instead of bridging the cleavages of a divided society and alleviating secessionist demands, it may actually exacerbate them. Representative institutions at any level of aggregation require elections, which in turn invite party competition. Such institutions do not initially enjoy redistributive competences. Consequently, parties cannot compete under conventional dimensions of political conflict. As a result, they opt for priming an identity dimension, which may gradually feed nationalist claims. This practice is further facilitated by the second-order character of these elections, which provides incentives to political actors for more polarized stances. This self-reinforcing practice institutionalises secessionist demands and transfers the identity conflict into national party competition.

In order to test our theory, we focus on Spain. After analysing its system of territorial autonomy, we examine how subnational elections strengthen subnational identity, disseminate views in favour of further decentralization and may potentially cultivate secessionist preferences.

2 Territorial Autonomy in Spain

While in cases such as Kosovo, South Sudan and even Scotland, partition has been understood as a way to settle the conflict over their constitutional future, in the case of Spain, such option has been vehemently rejected. Instead, the accommodation of the centrifugal tendencies has been dealt by providing territorial autonomy to the different regions while following the principle of territorial integrity.

Territorial autonomy denotes ‘home rule’ by the relevant ethno-linguistic groups over issues of their exclusive concern within their own territory. States usually opt for territorial forms of autonomy when there is a clear territorial concentration of the relevant groups. In that sense, this variant of autonomy may be institutionalised in the form of federalism as is the case in Bosnia, Belgium etc. or regionalism/quasi-federalism as is the case in Spain, the UK and even Italy.

‘Historically, Spain emerged from a process that involved the unification of different kingdoms and territories […] Its constituent units […] had and continue to have strong cultural identities, including different languages’ (López-Laborda et al. 2007). Especially, the Basque country and Catalonia have had a tradition of nationalist movements that fought for political autonomy (Ferrer Comella 2013, 162). This is why the Second Spanish Republic (1931–1936) tried to accommodate the
territorial problem by the enactment of regional Statutes guaranteeing a certain degree of political autonomy (ibid.). In fact, Catalonia in 1932 and the Basque Country four years later ‘were granted self-government, after referenda [sic] were held in those regions’ (ibid., 163).1

General Francisco Franco’s dictatorship put a violent end to this ‘regionalist spring’. Franco imposed an unbinding and repressive policy of state centralism in Spain for almost four decades. So, as part of post-Franco democratisation and as a means of balancing powerful regional interests fostered by the revived Basque and Catalan nationalisms, Spain pursued anew a process of regionalisation. The result of it has been a negotiated settlement that is known as the Estado de las Autonomías.2 This hybrid formula has been described by academics as a ‘unitary State that is decentralised in regions’ (García Pelayo 1984, 242–244), as a ‘regional State’ (ibid.), as a ‘federation in all but name’ (Elazar 1994, 222), as a ‘federal system in practice’ (Burgess 2012, 19) as an order that exhibits ‘virtual federalism’ (Seijas Villadangos 2014, E-164), ‘federalism in the making’ (Moreno 1999, 149) and ‘unfulfilled federalism’ (Beramendi and Máiz 2004, 123).

This ambivalence with regard to the classification of the constitutional system reflects the fact that the ‘Spanish constitution of 1978 omits any reference to the form of the state’ (Ruiz Almendral 2013, 14). Article 2 of Constitution proclaims that it ‘is based on the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation’ but also ‘recognises and guarantees the right to self-government of the nationalities and regions of which it is composed and the solidarity among them.’ However, neither the term ‘nationalities’ nor the term ‘regions’ are defined anywhere in the Constitution (Ruiz Vieytez 2004, 136). Instead, the constitution provides for an ‘optional autonomy system’, the so-called principio dispositivo (Fossas Espadaler 2007). According to it, certain groups of ‘bordering provinces with common historic, cultural and economic characteristics, insular territories and provinces with a historic regional status’ had the right to become self-governing Communities (Comunidades Autónomas).3 If they decided to do so, they could assume the competence to legislate over a list of areas that are enumerated in Articles 148 and 149 of the Constitution. In fact, the Constitutional Court has held that the political autonomy of the Spanish regions is reflected precisely in the fact that they may have the necessary competences to manage their own interests.4

In order to assume this legislative autonomy, the Comunidades Autónomas had to adopt a Statute of Autonomy (Estatuto de Autonomía). To this effect, the Constitution provided for two ways to achieve autonomy: the ‘normal route’ (vía normal) (regulated in Article 143) and the ‘rapid route’ (vía rápida) (regulated in Article 151). The ‘normal route’ meant that the relevant Autonomous Community that would opt for it would first assume a relatively small set of competences enumerated in Article 148 of the Constitution. It could only assume further competences and thus achieve

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1 A regional statute was also discussed in Galicia. However, the referendum took place just a few weeks before the Civil War started and Franco’s forces occupied Galicia.
2 See inter alia Spanish Constitutional Court, sentencia no. 32/1981.
3 Spanish Constitution, Article 143(1).
4 Spanish Constitutional Court, sentencia no. 4/1981.
a ‘higher level’ autonomy at a later stage (at least five years afterwards) by actually amending its Estatuto. On the other hand, an Autonomous Community that followed the ‘rapid route’, could reach the highest level of self-government immediately.

In order to achieve the highest level of autonomy, the relevant region had to surpass a number of procedural hurdles. Most importantly, according to Article 151, the citizens in the region had to support in a referendum the initiative to follow the ‘rapid route’. If the initiative received the necessary support, the voters would also have to ratify the Statute of Autonomy in a second subsequent referendum. However, this cumbersome procedure did not apply to the three regions that had enjoyed self-government during the Second Republic. By virtue of a special transitional rule in the constitution (Disposición Transitoria 2a), the regions that had already approved a regional statute during the Second Republic, i.e. Catalonia, Basque Country and Galicia could achieve the highest level of autonomy by a simplified procedure that just required the approval of the Estatuto in a referendum. Unsurprisingly, those three regions opted for this procedure.

Despite the fact that this was only an ‘optional autonomy system’, it actually led to the division of the whole Spanish territory into 17 Comunidades Autónomas and 2 ‘autonomous cities’. Apart from the three nacionalidades históricas that followed the exceptional transitional procedure, Andalucía opted for the cumbersome ‘rapid route’ of Article 151 as well. Finally, Navarra had access to autonomy through a special organic law adopted by the Spanish Parliament (Cortes Generales), ‘after negotiation with the Diputación foral of that province’ (Ferreres Comella 2013, 162).

Notwithstanding the procedural differences that every route entailed, the approval of the Spanish Parliament (Cortes Generales) through the enactment of an ‘organic law’ was a necessary requirement for the establishment of a certain Comunidad Autónoma. The approval of the Cortes Generales is also necessary for the amendment of an Estatuto, although the initiative for the procedure to start lies with the regions. The requirement for approval from the Cortes is in accordance with the view that the drafting of a given Estatuto is an act emanating from the wills of both the State and the respective region. In fact, this is what the Tribunal Constitucional has held in a judgment on the constitutionality of the Statute of Autonomy of the Comunidad Valenciana. There, it clarified that an Estatuto is an act that cannot be disposed of by the sole will of the national State or of the respective Comunidad Autónoma. So, within the Spanish constitutional order, the Statutes of Autonomy are both the

5 Transitional Provision 2 (Disposición Transitoria 2a) of the Spanish Constitution.
6 They are: Andalucía, Aragón, Asturias, Baleares, Canarias, Cantabria, Castilla-La Mancha, Castilla y León, Catalonia, Comunidad Valenciana, Euskadi (the Basque Country), Extremadura, Galicia, La Rioja, Madrid, Murcia and Navarra.
7 The two Spanish enclaves in Africa are Ceuta and Melilla.
8 Spanish Constitution, Article 144.
9 Spanish Constitution, Article 147(3).
10 Spanish Constitutional Court, sentencia no. 247/2007.
‘highest norm of the region’\textsuperscript{11} and a government law subject to the constitution’ (Ruiz Almendral 2013, 14).

In that sense, the \textit{Estatutos} as the ‘basic institutional rule of each Self-governing Community’\textsuperscript{12} may include additional contents but they still have to comply with the provisions of the Constitution.\textsuperscript{13} In its famous decision on the 2006 Catalan \textit{Estatut},\textsuperscript{14} the Constitutional Court made clear that ‘statutes of Autonomy are rules subordinated to the Constitution, as it [sic] corresponds to normative provisions that are not an expression of a sovereign power, but of a devolved autonomy based on the Constitution, and guaranteed by it, for the exercise of legislative powers within the framework of the Constitution itself’ (Hanschel 2014, E-252). And although the \textit{Estatut} had obtained the support of the people in a regional referendum,’ (Ferreres Comella 2013, 162) the \textit{Tribunal Constitucional} ‘rejected \textsuperscript{14} and read down 27 out of the 114 articles’ (Hanschel 2014, E-252).

Concerning the division of competences, while in a number of States with legislative regions the Constitution provides for the distribution of competences between the various tiers,\textsuperscript{15} in Spain, ‘the constitutional design is neither exact nor complete’ (Argullol i Murgadas and Bernadí i Gil 2006, 244). The Constitution lists three sets of competences: those that exclusively belong to the central government\textsuperscript{16}; those that may be assumed by the Autonomous Communities through their Statutes of Autonomy\textsuperscript{17}; and those that may be devolved from the central government to the Autonomous Communities through organic laws.\textsuperscript{18} In addition, the \textit{Comunidades Autónomas} may also assume all those powers that are not explicitly allocated to the State.\textsuperscript{19} Finally, ‘[j]urisdiction on matters not claimed by Statutes of Autonomy fall with the State’.\textsuperscript{20}

Clearly, because of the ‘open’ nature of the Spanish system of competences, the Statutes of Autonomy are necessary to complement the Constitution. ‘As provided in Article 147(2)(d) of the Constitution, the Statutes of Autonomy are the rules whose role it is to establish “the competences assumed within the framework established in the Constitution”, articulating in this manner a system of competences based on the Constitution and the Statutes.’\textsuperscript{21} This is why they are considered together ‘with certain state laws to which the Constitution refers in order to frame the distribution

\begin{footnotes}
\item[11] Spanish Constitution, Article 147.
\item[12] Spanish Constitution, Article 147(1).
\item[13] Spanish Constitutional Court, \textit{sentencia} no. 31/2010.
\item[14] ibid.
\item[15] See for instance Austrian Constitution Articles 10–15; Belgian Constitution Articles 105–114 and 127–140; German Basic Law, Articles 71–74; Italian Constitution, Article 117.
\item[16] Spanish Constitution, Article 149.
\item[17] Spanish Constitution, Article 148.
\item[18] Spanish Constitution, Article 150.
\item[19] Spanish Constitution, Article 149(3).
\item[20] ibid.
\item[21] Spanish Constitutional Court, \textit{sentencia} no. 76/1983.
\end{footnotes}
of powers’ (ibid.) to form part of the so-called *bloque de constitucionalidad.* In fact, the Spanish Constitutional Court has recognised the central role of the statutes in determining jurisdiction over particular areas. According to the Court,

in order to determine if an area falls within the jurisdiction of the State or of the Autonomous Community, or whether a system of concurrent jurisdiction applies, in principle it is the text of the Statute of Autonomy of the Autonomous Community, in which competences are assumed, that shall be decisive. [...]  

The constitutional reliance on the Statutes of Autonomy and the political asymmetries between the *nacionalidades históricas* on the one hand and the other regions on the otherhave led to an asymmetrical power distribution. Practically speaking, this has meant that the central State might have a competence with regard to a certain part of the Spanish territory while a Comunidad Autónoma might have assumed the very same competence over another part of the State. Equally, it means that not all the regions can exercise the same amount of competences.

This was particularly evident during the first years of the Transición given that the Autonomous Communities that followed the ‘normal route’ could only assume a relatively small set of competences enumerated in Article 148 of the Constitution. On the other hand, Catalonia, Basque Country and Galicia that used the Transitional Provision and Andalucía that used the ‘rapid route’ could also assume the powers provided by Article 149. As time went by, and after the period of five years elapsed, even the low autonomy regions have progressively assumed the vast majority of the available competences. So, the constitutional asymmetry has been reduced between those regions which assumed their powers through the ‘rapid route’ and the rest.

3 Theory

The core premise of our argument is that the delegation model of representative democracies requires that the transfer of competences to the subnational level be accompanied by the corresponding accountability mechanisms. This process gives room to subnational governments, elected via parliaments, which operate in the same way as national parliaments, i.e. via elections. The actors that compete in these elections have incentives to prime identity for at least four reasons.

First, doing so helps to motivate participation in elections where the national executive is not at stake. Such elections are characterized by lower turnout rates and are seen as mirror images of the elections for the European Parliament, used by voters as a way to punish national incumbents (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Franklin and

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22 See, for instance, Spanish Constitutional Court, *sentencia* no. 76/83.

23 Spanish Constitutional Court, *sentencia* no. 18/1982. The Court goes on to say that: ‘This statement, however, does not imply that once the Statute of Autonomy has been enacted its text is the only one that should be considered in the process of interpretation required to delimit areas of jurisdiction. To proceed in such manner would be to ignore the principle of the supremacy of the Constitution over the rest of the legal system.’.
This pattern is well-documented in the literature, giving rise to the characterization of these elections as second-order elections (Reif et al. 1997; Marsh 1998). Bringing subnational identity into the electoral fray is thus a useful device to maintain high levels of interest and to deviate support away from the national mainstream parties.

Second, identity can operate as a vehicle to shift accountability from the subnational to the national level. Multi-level governance tends to blur responsibility and subnational political actors can make use of this ambiguity to deviate blame attribution (Hobolt and Tilley 2014; Johns 2011; Papadopoulos 2010). In regions above the median of income distribution, interregional redistribution can be employed as a funnel to assign responsibility to the national incumbent. In regions below median income, partisan differences between subnational and national executives can be employed to explain suboptimal transfers from the central government. In both instances, framing subnational identity as distinct from national identity helps to highlight distinct interests between the two levels of government, thus adding credibility to blame attribution (Alesina et al. 1997).

Third, increasing the saliency of identity makes voters less responsive to policy shocks, such as bad socioeconomic management and corruption (Finseraas 2008; Baldwin and Huber 2010). When identity is politicized, it typically cross-cuts existing partisan coalitions and leaves voters with fewer alternatives. This tendency is particularly evident when the identity generates polarization, because polarization blocks partisan alternatives that stand in the opposite side of the political debate (Eggers 2014).

Fourth, successful inculcation of ethnic identity from elites to voters can enhance public pressure for devolution, which if successful can extend the policy domains of subnational authorities. In this respect ethnolinguistic heterogeneity serves to advance the demand for policy transfers from the centre to the periphery. Erk and Koning provide empirical evidence for this tendency, showing that in ethnolinguistically diverse polities, political mobilization along linguistic lines has been used as a vehicle to achieve higher levels of fiscal decentralization. In expectation, this practice gives room to parliamentary actors who converge along the identity dimension (Erk and Koning 2010).

Shifting our focus on supply-side explanations of peripheral nationalism does not mean that demand ceases to be important. Institutional interventions are not assigned in a haphazard fashion. More often than not, they build upon pre-existing societal demand, stemming from deeply rooted social cleavages (Amorin-Neto and Cox 1997; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Mozaffar et al. 2003). Such pre-existing cleavage structure can thus partially account for variation in the level of inclusiveness of electoral systems. By the same token, we expect decentralization, accompanied by the introduction of subnational representative institutions, to be driven by an underlying demand for regional autonomy in the decision making process. As Beramendi puts it, ‘insofar as federal institutions reproduce the underlying tastes of the relevant political coalitions, they do not really matter per se’ (Beramendi 2007).

Empirically, this process of endogenous decentralization generates a serious challenge, as it becomes very difficult to disentangle the role of supply from that of
demand in the development of peripheral nationalism. Theoretically, however, the two processes are distinct. Demand, on the one hand, leads to institutions that aim at accommodating the underlying taste for territorial autonomy. Supply, on the other hand, serves to strengthen this process by providing resources and incentives to subnational political entrepreneurs to increase the saliency of identity in the political debate. Seen in this way, the introduction of subnational governance structures represents a critical juncture, with unintended long-term consequences (Capoccia 2007).

We think of supply operating in two ways: via party discourse and political campaigns on the one hand and via policies enacted by successful political coalitions on the other. While it is notoriously difficult to measure and assess empirically the impact of political discourse on people’s attitudes and preferences, gauging the impact of institutional changes put forward by political actors appears to be more tractable.

One example comes from Catalonia. Hierro finds that the school reform that took place in that region in 1983 resulted in a gradual strengthening of dual identity, with the Catalan identification becoming almost as important as the Spanish one (Hierro 2015). The reform was made possible by the transfer of competence in education to the autonomous communities. The nationalist government (pre-electoral) coalition, already elected with absolute majority in the inaugural 1979 post-Franco Catalan elections, began to implement policies to motivate the usage of the Catalan language. As a result, in 1983, the Catalan Parliament approved the Law of Linguistic Normalization, which introduced a model of bilingual Spanish–Catalan education throughout Catalonia (ibid., 467). The law made teaching in Catalan compulsory in all schools and prohibited the separation of children into different schools on the basis of language. As Hierro finds, the outcome of this policy was progressive inculcation of Catalan identity. Using survey data from 2014, the author finds that more years of schooling increase a dual identity and they do so significantly more among those cohorts whose education took place after the 1983 reform. Similar evidence is provided by Martínez-Herrera and Clots-Figueras and Masella (Martínez-Herrera 2003; Clots-Figueras and Masella 2013). An interesting comparison confirming the link between schooling and identity formation comes from Aspachs-Brachons et al., who compare Catalonia with the Basque Country. Whereas in Catalonia teaching in the vernacular language was made compulsory, in the Basque country the reform, which was also initiated in the same period, let parents choose the language in which children were educated. The authors find that schooling was more powerful in disseminating a subnational identity in Catalonia than in the Basque country (Aspachs-Brachons et al. 2008).24

More explicit attempts to delve into the impact of subnational political entrepreneurs require focusing directly on the role of regional parties and elections.

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24The expansion of mass education has been also important in explaining why Catalan identity became salient and persisted south but north to the Pyrenees. As argued by Balcells, literacy appeared in the Northern part of the region under French rule. Such scholastic revolution was absent in Spain at least until the beginning of the 20th century. This delay allowed for the successful sowing of a Catalan national identity during the first decades of that century (Balcells 2013).
An important contribution in this respect comes from Amat, who has tried to unpack the impact of partisan actors on preferences for interregional redistribution. Looking at survey data from 2009, the author finds that inter-generational redistribution preferences are driven not only by the standard economic indicators (GDP per capita within the region and regional fiscal balance) but also by the saliency of the decentralization dimension (Amat 2012). More importantly, building on Riker’s theory of heresthetics, Amat tries to look explicitly at the role of political parties in strategically priming the identity dimension in party competition (Riker 1984). As the author finds, this strategy is followed by subnational parties of both the left and right (Amat 2012). Quite interestingly, decentralization seems to also generate incentives for identity priming among national political actors, as the example of Popular party’s Spanish nationalism discourse reveals (Maravall 2008; Fernandez-Albertos 2002).

We build on this work but also try to extend it by looking at a specific feature of subnational representation that has been thus far neglected, namely the role of elections. We expect that receiving the parties’ campaign signals and actually participating in the elections for the subnational parliament signifies a key element of identity socialization. These elections offer ample room for identity to be primed, debated and exalted. Parties can outbid each other along identity lines. Receiving these cues, voters are likely to develop more rigid understandings of the political importance of their subnational identity. We thus expect that taking part in subnational elections increases a sense of belonging within the subnational community and in so doing it instils pro-devolution preferences. As decentralization deepens and the role of identity in the political debate escalates, we expect the impact of these elections to also increase. Thus, our overarching hypothesis is that elections for subnational parliaments strengthen subnational identities and shape decentralization preferences accordingly.

4 Research Design

Examining the impact of subnational elections on the formation of national identities presents itself with an important methodological obstacle. People choose whether to participate in these elections and if so how to vote. Individuals with strong feelings about subnational issues are more likely to take part in these elections. These are also the people who are more likely to hold strong subnational identities. Thus, comparing participants with abstainers does not allow us to disentangle the potential effect of elections from the underlying subnational identities that have already led people to either take part or abstain in these elections.

We try to overcome this methodological challenge by making use of a specific attribute associated with the act of voting. Previous evidence has identified significant learning effects stemming from individuals early socialization experiences (Gerber et al. 2003; Meredith 2009). Voting in a given election reinforces prior attitudes about the chosen candidates and parties (Mullainathan and Washington 2009; Dinas 2014). This effect seems to be particularly strong in individuals’ first eligible election. The
impact can touch upon different attributes, depending on the underlying context. For example, voting for the first time in American presidential elections seems to increase the feeling of attachment to the chosen party. Voting in elections for the European parliament seems to leave a long shadow in people’s political preferences, making them more likely to opt for a small party (defined as none of the first two parties of the national party system) (Dinas and Riera 2018). The mechanism driving this effect stems from the fact that when people manifest an attitudinal preference into a behavioral choice often seek for rationalizations as a way of alleviating dissonance for their decision. An alternative but complementary theorization sees individuals as generating identities by observing their own overt behavior. Bringing these findings from cognitive and social psychology into the context of subnational elections, we expect those who voted for the first time in a subnational rather than a national election to denote stronger levels of decentralization preferences.

Looking at the first election still does not solve the problem, however, because people can still choose whether to vote or not and they can base their decision on their prior taste for decentralization. For this reason, instead of looking at actual turnout, we only compare individuals on their basis of eligibility. Having information about their year of birth, we can detect the type of the first eligible election, i.e. national or subnational. Given that national and subnational elections alternate each other there is no reason to believe that, within a range of age groups, older people are more likely to face a national rather than a subnational election (and vice versa). The zigzagging pattern that governs the relationship between age and subnational eligibility, shown in Fig. 1, makes it feasible for us to draw a comparison that is not driven by people’s demographic characteristics (e.g. how old they are or what is the social background or gender) but only by their eligibility status: some people by accident encounter first a subnational election and then a national one; others, again by accident, become of age before a national election and thus face first a national election and then a subnational one. Based on our reasoning, we expect the first group to develop more subnational identity than the second group.

Using a 2009 survey particularly designed to unpack the spatial dimension of Spanish politics, we turn our focus on the case of Catalonia. Catalonia as a region presents an interesting case for the analysis, due to its dynamic feature of decentralization. As shown in Fig. 2, the degree of self-rule in Catalonia has escalated along the party system consolidation after the democratic transition. This process seems to have been incorporated in the political debate, with various successful parties priming decentralization. As a result, Catalans register high levels of dual voting, thus making the two types of elections likely to generate distinct types of voting choices. Two additional features of the survey make it a fertile ground for an in-depth exploration of the role of subnational elections on national identity formation. First, it provides a variety of survey items to unpack different aspects of identity traits and decentralization preferences. Second, Catalonia is purposely oversampled, providing in total approximately 900 respondents to use for the empirical analysis.

Unfortunately, the survey does not include information about the exact date of birth of each respondent. Thus, in some cases we need to make an (informed) guess whether individual’s first election was a subnational or a national one. The problem
lies with those individuals who turn eighteen on the year of the election. In this case, the respondent is coded as having been eligible to vote in that election only if the poll day is after the end of June. If the election takes place in June, the observation is not included in the analysis, whereas if it is before June the assumption is that the individual has not been eligible to vote in that election and thus next election is taken as the first eligible election.

Our primary interest lies in the impact of eligibility on decentralization preferences. We also want to assess to what extent subnational elections matter more as they become more politicized, along the deepening of decentralization in the region. We thus interact (multiply) our variable that distinguishes between types of elections (those first-eligible in a subnational election are given the value one whereas those first-eligible in a national election are given the value zero) with another variable that takes values from one to nine and each value indicates how old the respondent is,
Fig. 2 Trajectory of the regional autonomy index in Catalonia, 1979–2010. Note Estimates based on the Regional Authority Index used in Hooghe et al. (2016)

i.e. which election was the first eligible election, covering all the period from 1979 to 2008.\footnote{The fieldwork for the survey take place in April 2009 and respondents were asked how old they were in their last birthday. We thus stop at 2008 as we assume that most of them had their birthday in 2008.}

We measure decentralization preferences with a multitude of indicators. Perhaps most crucial in this respect is our measure of individual-level identity. We follow previous work on this issue and use the so-called Linz measure (Amat 2012), which measures identity as a bipolar 5-point scale, with one extreme representing only one, national, identification and the other extreme denoting only one, subnational, identity. Dual identities are indicated in the intermediate categories.\footnote{The exact wording of this question is: Which of the following sentences best describes your feelings:} Moreover,
Table 1  Balance statistics between regional- and national eligibles

|                          | Regional-eligibles | National-eligibles | p-value (t-test) | p-value (KS-test) |
|--------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Female                   | 45.18%             | 48.28%             | 0.4943           |                   |
| Any schooling            | 99%                | 99%                | 0.862            |                   |
| Education (11-point scale)| 5.32               | 5.47               | 0.4961           | 0.952             |
| Unemployed               | 21.8%              | 18.2%              |                  |                   |
| Employed                 | 66.5%              | 68.3%              | 0.311            |                   |
| Self-Catalan             | 85.3%              | 80.9%              | 0.201            |                   |
| Parent Catalan           | 57.4%              | 55.1%              | 0.627            |                   |
| Catholic                 | 52.9%              | 58.6%              | 0.262            |                   |
| Age (18–93)              | 32.05              | 35.02              | 0.001            | 0.000             |

Note: The last column denotes the p-value for the test of differences in distributions for the two non-binary indicators used in this exercise (education and age). Average age is low because the analysis focuses only on respondents born after 1959. This is done to ensure balance in age and other confounders between regional and national eligible.

we use a measure of national versus subnational authority across a range of policy domains. In particular, respondents were asked about whether central or regional authority should be enhanced in a series of policy domains, ranging from immigration and public order up to foreign affairs, welfare and economic policy (nine in total). Finally, we use a measure of interregional redistribution preferences. We assume that those voting first in a regional election are more likely to feel Catalan, hold more pro-decentralization views, ask for more policies to be transferred into the subnational government and less likely to perceive interregional inequality (given that Catalonia is above the median income and thus a net contributor in such transfers).

Table 1 compares the means between national eligibles and sub-national eligibles across a series of covariates. As expected, no significant differences are found between the two groups. The only exception is age, where we still find national eligible as being on average three years older than regional eligibles. Although the difference is quite small and probably non-consequential, we add age in our model to control for its potentially confounding effect.27

1. I feel only Spanish
2. I feel more Spanish than [Region]
3. I feel as Spanish as [Region]
4. I feel more [Region] than Spanish
5. I feel only [Region]
6. DK/DA.

27Turning into estimation issues, instead of using a linear interaction term, we relax linearity in the variation of the effect of eligibility along the election cohorts variable, by using a more flexible kernel estimator, as suggested by Hainmueller et al. (2019).
5 Results

Figure 3 presents the effect of having a regional as compared to a national first-eligible election on the identity scale, ranging from “I feel only Spanish” to “I feel only Catalan”. We find significant variation over time. Early regional elections have if anything the opposite effect, turning individuals into a more pro-Spanish identification. As the devolution process escalates, however, the impact of first eligible election turns positive, indicating that over the more recent years being first eligible to vote in a subnational election strengthens a Catalan identification. Although the lower number of observations increases uncertainty in the first and last election intervals,

Fig. 3 Marginal effect of a first-eligible regional election on Spanish versus Catalan identity. Note: The black line denotes the average difference in the Spanish-to-Catalan identification between those first eligible to cast a vote in a regional vs national election over the election cohorts. The shaded area encapsulates the 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals and the histogram denotes the distribution of the electoral cohorts in the data.
the overall pattern indicates an upward trend, consistent with the idea that as identity becomes more salient in the political arena, elections for subnational parliaments leave a shadow upon people’s regional identities.

Figure 4 shows how the same pattern applies also to perceptions of intergenerational equality. Being first-time eligible to vote in a regional election has a positive effect on the economic interregional equality scale, ranging from “high levels of inequality” (1) to “high levels of equality” (5). This effect, however, requires time as the socialization of subnational identity is forged via both formal and informal institutions. As a result, those being in position to vote for the first time in a subnational election are increasingly more likely to also perceive that there high levels of equality between regions, thus implicitly opposing to further increase in transfers from Catalonia to other regions.

**Fig. 4** The marginal effect of regional eligibility on perceptions of interregional equality. *Note* The dependent variable is a five-point scale, with higher values indicating perceptions of greater interregional equality.
Figure 5 extends the analysis to preferences about national vs subnational authority across a wide range of policy domains. In total, nine areas are asked and in six of them we find the same pattern: those eligible to vote in the first regional election come prefer with higher likelihood a transfer of competencies from national to subnational government. The three exceptions, justice, policing and the economy, are areas with particularly high levels of support for regional authorities, thus probably generating ceiling effects in the estimation. All in all, the observed pattern provides at least suggestive evidence that by increasing identity, eligibility in a regional election also implies higher levels of support for self-rule in various policy areas.

Figure 6 looks more directly at attitudes towards secessionism. The dependent variable is a scale ranging from zero to ten, with zero implying an indifferent reaction to the scenario of one of the regions of Spain separating from the country. Ten denotes a reaction against this possibility. As seen in the Figure, starting from higher

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**Fig. 5** The marginal effect of regional eligibility on preferences over subnational versus national authority. Nine issues. *Note* The blue curve denotes the effect of first-eligibility in subnational election and the dashed curves cover the 95% confidence intervals (obtained via bootstrapping)
values and gradually going to negative ones, indicates that over time those eligible to vote in regional elections become more indifferent towards a secessionism scenario. The overall difference between types of eligibility seems to stay far from conventional levels of statistical significance, however. It seems that the effect of voting in a regional election might not result in more positive views towards secessionist scenarios.
6 Implications

What are the implications of the accumulation of regional elections within a political context of peripheral nationalism? Figure 7 presents the difference in subnational identity levels between Catalans and the rest of Spain, across different age groups. We see that as we move to older individuals, which were already socialized before the Estado de Autonomías, the difference between Spanish and Catalan residents in identity terms is small. It is substantive, however, for those younger cohorts that have been experiencing politics under the prism of regional elections and have been more influenced by the discourse and issues put forward by the regional political parties.

Fig. 7 Catalan versus Spanish identity and moderating role of age. Note For a given level of age, the curve denotes the average difference in subnational identity (the Linz measure) between Catalans and the rest of Spain (excluding the Basque Country). The shaded area denotes the 95% bootstrapped CIs whereas the histogram presents the distribution of age in the sample.
Taking this line of argumentation a step further, we should expect that infiltration of identity via elections would imply that the new cohorts, introduced into politics via these elections, would weigh more decentralization issues in their voting decisions than older cohorts. To examine whether this is the case, we use a decentralization scale, which measures respondents’ preferred state of decentralization and their perceptions about where each of the parties stand in the same dimension. In particular, the decentralization dimension is captured by an 11-point scale, ranging from “maximal centralization” to “maximal decentralization”. Respondents had to locate both themselves and the parties in this scale. Following standard practice in this literature, we try to gauge the impact of decentralization concerns by applying the smallest distance criterion (Downs 1957). We obtain the absolute difference between respondent and each party in the scale and use this difference as a predictor of the Propensity to Vote (PTV) for each of the parties asked in the survey. PTVs range from 0 (very unlikely) to 10 (very likely). The results for Catalonia appear in the first panel of Fig. 8. We expect a negative coefficient, in that smaller distance is associated with higher utility for the party in question. This is what we get, but again this negative association is gradually diminished as we move to older age groups. Evidently, there is a monotone age-driven pattern which makes decentralization concerns a more salient factor in the voting choices of young Catalans than their older counterparts.

As a way to assess this pattern, we replicate this analysis but looking at Spanish voters. We use the same exact measurement and estimation strategy, looking however at the sample outside Catalonia. The results appear in the second graph of Fig. 8. We find a less clear pattern, with lower, on average, weight placed to this issue and no monotone relationship between the importance of this predictor and age. It clearly cannot be just age that explains the pattern in Catalonia as it would yield a similar pattern in rest of the country. It seems at least quite plausible that this

![Fig. 8 The impact of Decentralization on PTVs, Catalonia and the rest of Spain. Note Each graph presents the impact of perceived proximity between respondents and each party in the issue of decentralization on respondents’ voting decisions. The first panel presents the results from the Catalan sample whereas the second panel presents the results from the Spanish sample.](image-url)
difference stems from the impact of regional elections and party competition have in
the socialization of identity among new-coming Catalan cohorts. In expectation, this
pattern should reinforce subnational identity among the society, exercises pressure
for further decentralization. The mid-term consequences of this pattern have been
already observed in the 2015 regional election, which was framed by the subnational
political elites as a de facto referendum for the region’s future permanence as member
of Spain.

Finally, these results imply that subnational identity formation is not built only
through informal socialization means but can be also forged via institutional means.
As a consequence, we should thus expect that the impact of family socialization
should diminish through the accumulation of subnational electoral experience. We
try to test this expectation by looking at the impact of having a Catalan parent in the
formation of subnational identity. The results appear in Fig. 9. As can be seen, for
younger cohorts a Catalan family background does not seem to add much into the
average identity score of respondents. As we move to older cohorts, however, the
presence of a parent from the same region exerts a much stronger impact on Catalan
identity. We find a relatively steep slope, whereby the difference in the identity scale
ranges from less than a point (in a 5-point scale) to up to two points. It seems that
for younger Catalans, institutions render part of the early family socialization less
consequential for offspring’s subnational identity outlook. Without presenting the
Figure here, the equivalent exercise when looking at Spain yields null findings, with
younger cohorts being equally likely as older to cohorts to increase their subna-
tional identity as a result of common parental background. Even more importantly,
throughout the age range, the impact of having a parent from the same background
remains much lower for the rest of Spain than for Catalans.

7 Only a Catalan Story?

Without aiming at a full-fledged examination of the same argument in the Scottish
case, we only provide a very small piece of suggestive evidence regarding the mech-
anism at play. The first panel of Fig. 10 shows the relationship between the Scottish
National Party and age, in two time points, i.e. in 1983 and in 2015. SNP partici-
pates in the Westminster elections already before the 1997 devolution arrangement.
Moreover it is more popular among the young. The party dynamics generated since
1997 however, and culminating with the 2015 referendum, qualify this relationship,
as shown in the second panel of the figure, where we find much steeper relationship
between age and support for the SNP. Although only indicative, this pattern speaks
in the heart of our argument about how subnational representation in the context of
self-rule generates secessionist preferences.
8 In Lieu of a Conclusion

In the present paper, we focused on how subnational elections strengthen subnational identity, disseminate views in favour of further decentralization and may potentially cultivate secessionist preferences. However, the paper should not be read in any way as a polemic against constitutional systems that entail segmental autonomy. In fact, it is precisely those systems that have allowed the citizens in many turbulent places in the world to enjoy a more peaceful political life.

We should, however, problematize the unintended consequences of territorial autonomy. As we said in the beginning of this paper, the majority of the regional
parliaments do not enjoy redistributive competences. And this was definitely the case for the Spanish ones apart from the Basque Country and Navarra. As a result, political parties in the regional legislatures opt for priming an identity dimension, which gradually feeds nationalist claims. So, perhaps, a way to counter-balance those unintended consequences is exactly to devolve such competences to the regional level.

A regional parliament which enjoys both tax-raising powers and significant powers over expenditure might somehow paradoxically address the problem. And the reason is that in such a parliament a significant part of the debate will not be about identity politics any more but about the proper administration of funding.

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