

***Political Decentralisation and Party Organisational Adaptation:
A Framework for Analysis***

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Introduction

The apparent ‘denationalisation’¹ of electoral politics in a number of western democracies, and the decentralising reforms adopted by a number of these democracies in recent years, necessitate a reevaluation of our understanding of the way political parties organise and compete in the electoral arena. The traditional view of party politics and party competition as essentially taking place at the national level between national parties over national issues appears increasingly inadequate to capture the dynamics of contemporary party democracy. Instead party scholars need to take on board what we could call the ‘territorial dimension’. In this paper I will suggest how this territorial dimension might affect the way parties organise, and offer a preliminary framework for orienting research into changing patterns of party organisation in a context of ‘denationalised’ party politics.

Studying ‘Denationalised’ Party Politics: Concepts and Theories

Much of the attention paid to the subnational level of party competition in western democracies has tended to focus on the emergence of subnational or ethnoregionalist parties, and the challenges they pose to the existing order in centralised states (eg De Winter and Tursan 1998). Two features of ‘denationalised’ politics have, in contrast, been largely ignored. The first is the extent to which ‘denationalised’ party politics may be driven by factors other than ethnoregional cleavages, such as clientelism, or simply the presence of powerful political figures at the subnational level. The second is the way in which statewide or national level political parties adapt to the electoral and political threat posed by ethnoregionalist parties, and the increasing importance of subnational and supranational electoral arenas. Both of these questions are important in understanding the implications of an increasingly ‘denationalised’ party system, and this paper will focus on understanding the causes and consequences of the shifting organisational balance of power between centre and periphery in statewide political parties.

A valuable starting point for such an analysis is the conceptual framework for the study of party organisations developed by Panebianco (1988). Panebianco sees parties as organisations, rather than simply as parts of a party system, and therefore emphasises the internal dynamics which condition parties' ability to adapt in optimal ways to environmental changes. In particular, he places great emphasis on the concept of institutionalisation and the rigidities this imposes on party organisations, and stresses the effects of a party's origins on this process of institutionalisation (what current historical institutionalist work refers to as 'path dependency'). This perspective is important because it moves the analysis beyond a simple assessment, from the position of an external observer, of what it would be 'rational' for a party to do given a change in its environment, such as for example the emergence of an ethnoregionalist challenger party or the upheavals caused by a decentralising institutional reform. Instead it permits us to understand why parties will often have great difficulty in adapting successfully to such challenges, and why dramatic changes in electoral behaviour may occur as the process of 'denationalisation' gets underway. Finally, Panebianco provides a conceptual roadmap which is useful in reconstructing organisational dynamics; although now somewhat dated, the concepts he introduces (such as the emphasis on diverse incentives facing party actors, or the importance of political resources or control of 'zones of uncertainty' in the party organisation) can help map changes in party's internal workings.

I will also consider more recent developments which have rather different implications to Panebianco's emphasis on institutionalisation. Extensive research in the 1980s in particular argued that the foundations of electoral stability in western democracies had been undermined by social change and that traditional parties were consequently weakened and vulnerable. Although this view was strongly challenged by Bartolini and Mair (1990), and the Katz and Mair party organisations project (1992, 1994) tended to emphasise the ways in which parties had been able to consolidate their organisations by leaning on the resources of state power, events in the 1990s have tended to confirm the parties' increasing vulnerability (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). The collapse and disappearance of the Italian ruling parties (PSI and DC) and their replacement by new and unconventional political forces, the dramatic electoral defeats (with subsequent recoveries) of the French Socialists and Canadian Conservatives, and

the moribund state of the most successful of western European parties, the British Conservatives, reflect an increase in electoral volatility (Dalton, McAllister and Wattenberg 2000). Recent research on party memberships suggests that parties' organisational weakness and distance from civil society is increasing (Scarrow 2000, Mair and van Biezen 2001), and in some countries has reached critical levels (Britain, France, Italy). All this points towards a potential for significant party system realignments, which could well take the form of a strong impetus towards denationalisation of party politics in some countries, even independently of institutional reforms in a decentralising direction.

Organising Parties in a Denationalising Political System

Notwithstanding this latter point, it is clear that one of the main sources of party organisational change along the territorial dimension is institutional reform, such as the recent 'devolution' of powers in Britain or the creation of the 'Autonomous Communities' in post-France Spain. It is also the case that such reforms do not tend to be welcomed by national-level party organisers, since 'severe functional or territorial changes dislocate the party organisation and upset channels of patronage' (Ashford 1982: 1-2). Ashford argues that 'urging structural change is most often the argument of oppositions, more often than not because they see it as a way of increasing their power' (*ibid*), and recent examples from Western Europe seem to support this interpretation. The regional reforms in Italy (1970) and France (1980s) were the result of socialist parties demanding reforms while in opposition, and implementing them after finally getting access to political power; in Spain (post-1978) and Britain (post-1997) socialist oppositions linked up with ethnoregionalist parties for the same purpose. National-level party leaderships are much more willing to talk about decentralisation when they are out of power, for the obvious reason that they do not have much power to lose. Once in power, they are likely to be much more reluctant to embark upon organisational reforms which distribute power from the national to subnational levels.

Nevertheless, national party leaders may have little choice but to adapt organisational practices if decentralising reforms take place. Lancaster argued that ‘regardless of territorial, group, or combined notions of representation, federalism creates additional territorial-based citizen-agent relationships’ (Lancaster 1999: 64), and the point is equally valid for unitary states where institutional or electoral change enhance the importance of the subnational level of party organisation. Where elections revolve around local-regional issues and voters consciously cast their votes for local-regional candidates (rather than voting for them as proxies of the national-level candidates), internal party dynamics will reflect this, and the balance of organisational power will shift from centre to periphery. At the same time, the party’s internal rules and structures tend to be ‘sticky’, and do not change at the same pace as the internal distribution of organisational resources. Instead, party rules and standard operating procedures may resist change for long periods, placing considerable pressure on internal coherence. The following pages will suggest how these dilemmas can be studied in different arenas of internal party life.

Political Recruitment

It has been long established in party organisational studies that one of the key arenas in internal party politics is the development of individual political careers (Michels 1962, Wellhofer and Hennessey 1974, Panebianco 1988). Even if we discard the simplistic ‘economistic’ approach (that politicians are simply looking out for their own material interests), political careers remain important, since any politician hoping to push for the realisation of a political project must get his/her hands on the levers of power. Therefore one of the first areas in which centre-periphery tensions can be played out is in the process of political recruitment in general, and candidate selection in particular.

Candidate selection in western parties has undergone significant changes in recent years, with the increasing direct involvement of mass memberships in the process, through membership ballots and primary elections (Hazan and Pennings 2001). However, outside the US these changes have not permitted candidate selection to escape the control of party elites, since the choice of potential candidates, and the ratification of the results

of selection votes, tend to remain in the hands of party leaders (Hopkin 2001). The centre-periphery conflict is therefore likely to revolve principally around the formal control of the selection process and the ratification of candidacies, which subnational elites will attempt to wrest from the central level. However, the selection votes and primaries themselves are likely to become arenas in which this conflict will be played out, with subnational leaders using selection votes to rally local/regional support against centralising forces. A likely scenario is that attempts by central elites to impose candidates against the will of the subnational organisations could mobilise opposition through the selection process (some examples of these dynamics have been seen in the British Labour party, particularly in the case of the London mayoral election). Therefore this apparent ‘opening up’ of candidate selection processes, although in many ways a failure in terms of internal party democracy, does potentially exacerbate centre-periphery conflicts over political recruitment and may lead to a decentralisation of control over candidate selection.

The second important arena of conflict is the recruitment and career development of non-parliamentary party elites. One of the features of the emergence of ‘cartel parties’ (Katz and Mair 1995) is the use of state resources to consolidate party organisations, and the strengthening of parties’ central offices and territorial bureaucracies with state funding. Although very often these structures are controlled by the parliamentary elites themselves (Mair 1994: 12-3), there is a career structure in party bureaucracies which does not necessarily involve election to public office. These bureaucracies have their own corporate interests and bureaucratic development has inherently centralising tendencies (Panebianco 1988: Ch.12). Blocking decentralising moves may be an important part of these bureaucrats’ strategy for professional survival, and therefore the presence of a distinct bureaucratic structure may act as a force for internal organisational continuity. Recent trends in party organisation have contradictory consequences for such dynamics. On the one hand, the declining importance of traditional pyramidal party bureaucracies (in particular those characteristic of classic communist and labour parties) weakens this inertial effect. On the other, parties’ increasing dependence on state funding, which is very often allocated in terms of national parliamentary representation and directly controlling by the national parliamentary leadership, may strengthen the centralising

influence of parties' extraparliamentary organisations. The extent to which state party funding is decentralised (ie through allocations to party leaderships in subnational assemblies) is an important condition of party bureaucracies' ability to resist decentralising changes.

Programmes and Campaigning

Another important arena for internal conflict is electoral activity. The potential for centre-periphery tensions is strongly related to the extent of nationalisation or denationalisation of the electoral battle. To the extent that voters tend to see themselves as participating in a nationwide electoral event, casting votes for local candidates as 'proxies' for national party leaderships, the subnational level of party organisation will have little opportunity to push for a redistribution of internal authority. Party candidates will be expected to contest the election over national issues on the basis of a nationwide party programme. In this scenario, control over 'zones of uncertainty' (Panebianco 1988) such as campaign strategy, party discourse and programmatic proposals will be essentially in the hands of the central leadership and there will be little space for subnational party elites to develop a differentiated strategy. Party candidates will be 'delegates' of the national party leadership. This scenario is a fair reflection of the situation in the main British parties (Labour and Conservatives) before the recent devolutionary reforms.

Pressures for internal organisational changes are more likely to take place where subnational party elites gain some form of independent control of zones of uncertainty in the electoral arena. This may have nothing at all to do with ethnoregionalist pressures. One example of a strong decentralising impulse is the situation in the Italian Christian Democrat party (DC) before its electoral collapse in 1992-4. Here, ethnoregionalist claims were mostly absent (and when they emerged they had catastrophic consequences for the party), but many local elites had a great deal of (mostly informal) independence from central control. This independence had its roots in the historical weakness of the central state apparatus and its need to distribute favours to local notables in order to

secure their adhesion (Tarrow 1977). This meant that in areas such as the South and islands clientelistic tradition was strong, encouraging the parties of the post-war period to simply coopt local elites in these areas, rather than building autonomous party organisations. This was described as the ‘Southern system’, in which ‘all parties are organised in the South and Islands on the basis of personal *clientele* (the politicians are local bosses using their parties as their own exclusive electoral machines)’ (Allum 1973: 66). These clienteles amounted to ‘packages of votes’ which local notables could control, and in theory, transfer from one party to the other in search of the best deal.

Such clientelistic networks still exist in western democracies (including the US, where it comes under the name of ‘pork barrel’ politics), although the modernisation process has tended to undermine its traditionally personalistic nature. In the Italian case, growing state intervention in the economy changed the nature of clientelistic practices, and the ‘old’ clientelism was replaced by the ‘new’ clientelism based on party organisation, described by Tarrow as ‘the judicious manipulation of blocs of votes through the allocation of economic development projects from the state’ (1967: 331). This brought a greater centralisation of power inside the DC because of the heavy role of central state spending which depended on ministerial decisions. However it is easy to imagine how decentralising reforms, which provide the subnational tiers of administration with greater financial autonomy, could enhance the ability of subnational party elites to control their own ‘packages of votes’ (as appears to have happened in Spain since the 1980s). In such circumstances, where local and regional leaderships can claim responsibility for lavish public spending projects, it is the national party leadership which becomes dependent on the subnational party elites for its electoral needs, creating strong pressures for formal organisational recognition of this particular internal power map.

Subnational elites can also apply pressure on national leaderships in other ways. One is the simple presence of popular or even charismatic subnational political figures with personal followings (independently of clientelistic types of mobilisation) who have a much greater ability to mobilise support than any simple ‘delegate’ of the central party leadership. Here the consequences are similar to those described above: national leaderships have little option but to negotiate with such subnational leaders, since the

latter may be capable of winning any conflict with the central authority (a good example of this is the inability of Labour's official candidate to defeat dissident Ken Livingstone in the recent London mayoral election). Subnational leaders may simply use their bargaining power to gain advantages for themselves, or, more threateningly to central leaderships, they can rally support amongst other subnational elites for an internal redistribution of organisational power.

A further scenario is the emergence of an ethnoregionalist rival to the nationwide party in particular areas. Here subnational party elites will be in a relatively weak position, probably losing votes to the ethnoregionalist contender. However, national party leaderships still have a strong incentive to enhance the subnational elites' powers in order to contest this electoral threat. Likely ways of doing this include allowing subnational party organisations to adopt differentiated party programmes, discourses and campaigning strategies in an attempt to develop an ethnoregionalist 'face', and possibly also greater autonomy in candidate selection. However, such concessions may only be made to subnational elites in at-risk regions, leading to asymmetric forms of internal party organisation and chains of authority.

The evolution of all of these scenarios will be strongly conditioned by the parties' institutional inertia. Especially in 'old' parties where particular structures and rules may have been in place for a very long time, change may encounter serious obstacles. Internal reforms are likely to be path-dependent; breaking from long standing standard operating procedures may only be possible in the event of organisational 'catastrophies', such as large scale electoral losses, the discrediting of the party elite as a result of scandals, and significant policy failures (possibly all at once). Here, Panebianco's notion of the party 'genetic model' is helpful, as it allows us to map the consequences of party origins for their subsequent development. To this extent, decentralising reforms may be more likely in cases of parties which were founded by 'diffusion' – the independent emergence of regional party organisations which subsequently unify – than in those founded by 'penetration' – the establishment of a territorial organisation from a strong central authority (Panebianco 1988). In cases of diffusion, party organisational rules are much more likely to provide for subnational elites' influence over internal decision-making, whereas in cases of penetration, parties may be 'locked in' to a highly centralised form of

decision-making, which may be hopelessly obsolete when party politics becomes denationalised.

Public Office: Executive and Legislative Action

The third arena I would like to examine is that of public office, and in particular the executive and legislative institutions of the state. Parties' activity in public office involves them in various dilemmas relating to the internal balance between national and subnational party leadership. These dilemmas will be further complicated by the existence of institutions of multilevel governance, for instance a regional level of government and administration with significant powers, or the need to establish such a level of government. In situations where voting patterns have become denationalised, a subnational institutional level is almost certain to be either already present or in the process of being created.

Irrespective of whether a party has governing responsibilities at any institutional level, the territorial question emerges as soon as representatives are elected to the national parliament and parliamentary groups are to be constituted and governed. The first dilemma is whether the party representatives should constitute a single group; although this will be conditioned to some extent by parliamentary regulations, it is a choice which reflects the territorial balance of power within the party. The formation of territorial parliamentary 'subgroups' does not necessarily imply a threat to the cohesion of the parliamentary party as a whole; for instance in the Spanish transition period the Spanish Socialists (PSOE) and their affiliates the Catalan (PSC) and Basque (PSE) Socialists had separate parliamentary groups but maintained a solid parliamentary discipline. Similarly, internal conflicts between subnational and national elites can damage parliamentary discipline whether or not separate groups are constituted. Here the form of governance of the parliamentary group becomes important: the clarity of chains of command, the formal autonomy of the parliamentary party vis-à-vis the extraparliamentary party (including if appropriate representatives in the government) and the openness of decision-making on parliamentary strategy will affect the cohesion between subnational and national

leadership. Of course, the greater the subnational autonomy over candidate selection and campaigning strategy, the greater the risks to parliamentary cohesion at national level, if the appropriate mode of governance of the parliamentary group is not adopted.

A similar problem arises at the subnational level of government. Here of course there is not so much of an issue of parliamentary group cohesion, although where subnational elites have substantial clientelistic resources further fragmentation on territorial grounds can take place even at this regional level. The principal issue is one of coordinating parliamentary and executive action at regional/subnational level with parliamentary and executive action at the national level. In one sense, the question of coordination should not apply; where regional levels of government have been given independent powers, it is precisely to remove these same powers from the central government. In practice, however, it is broadly expected amongst western publics (with some exceptions, most notably the US) that parties should follow coherent policies at different institutional levels, or at the very least should not be on a collision course. The potential for regional-central conflict over policy divergence, and in particular over central-regional distributional issues, is ever present. Subnational elites will naturally press for the maximum share of distributive benefits for their regions, and over issues of decentralisation vs. centralisation, subnational elites will naturally be inclined to press central government to release further powers to the regions. The level of internal party conflict this provokes will depend on the extent to which subnational elites motivate regional sentiment, even ethnoregionalist sentiment, to achieve their objectives.

An area of great sensitivity in this context is the complementarity or otherwise of parliamentary strategy, in particular regarding the formation of governing coalitions. Quite frequently in western Europe parties have been faced with uncomfortable situations in which they collaborate in governing coalitions with other parties at one level, and oppose the same parties at another. Establishing consistent rules for coalition formation within the national level party may be difficult if some subnational elites are expected to forego opportunities to govern at regional level for the sake of a party line they may not fully support. The potential for internal splits over such issues is considerable, and one of the key issues in the dilemma of national versus subnational control is that of coalition strategy.

Conclusions

This paper has set out to trace a theoretical framework to organise research on the consequences for internal party dynamics of the ‘denationalisation’ of electoral politics. Rather than hypothesising particular directions of change, the aim has been to identify the organisational arenas in which internal party conflict is likely to take place, and to suggest how such conflict should be analysed. Emphasis has been placed on the extent to which internal party dynamics may produce outcomes which cannot easily be predicted if the organisational dimension of party behaviour is not taken into consideration. The paper also therefore constitutes an appeal for due attention to be paid to the internal life of political parties in our analyses of territorial changes in western democracies.

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Notes

¹ Understood as a process by which electoral politics becomes less and less a national arena for party competition. It is essentially the opposite of the process of ‘nationalisation’ of electoral politics analysed by Caramani 1996.