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**Making the economic case for independence: The Scottish National Party's electoral strategy in post-devolution Scotland.**

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## **Making the economic case for independence: The Scottish National Party's electoral strategy in post-devolution Scotland.**

### **Abstract**

This article examines the strategic behaviour of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in regional elections from 1999 to 2016. It builds on recent work that has theorised the kind of strategic tools regionalist parties have at their disposal in electoral competition, and the factors expected to determine the strategic choices these parties make. An in-depth case study of the SNP describes when and explores why the party makes strategic choices in an effort to bolster its electoral support in post-devolution Scotland. The analysis finds i) that the SNP has consistently sought to 'frame' the issue of independence in economic terms, by advancing an economic case for separating Scotland from the UK; and ii) that this strategic approach is the result of competing constraints internal and external to the party. These findings suggest that the strategic behaviour of regionalist parties in electoral competition is more sophisticated than expected by extant theoretical accounts.

**Keywords:** Regionalist parties; elections; strategy; Scottish National Party

### **Introduction**

In many plurinational states in Western Europe, regionalist parties have experienced new levels of electoral success in recent years, often leading to new challenges to the stability and integrity of the extant political order. In Scotland and Catalonia, pro-independence parties in regional governments have held referendums on independence, whilst other regionalist parties bolstered by growing popular support are also demanding territorial re-structuring in places like the Basque Country, Flanders, South Tyrol, Veneto, Sardinia and Corsica.

This article provides new insights into the participation of regionalist parties in electoral politics by examining the strategic choices they make in an attempt to win votes. It is already well established in the academic literature that regionalist parties engage in strategic behaviour in pursuit of such a goal (Elias, 2009; Hepburn, 2009a,b; Alonso, 2012; Zuber, 2012). They have been shown to diversify their programmes beyond their core business of the territorial re-structuring, and shift their positions on and emphasis of territorial and other policy goals in an attempt to win more votes. However, it is only very recently that scholars have drawn systematically on a broader party competition literature to theorise what kinds of strategic choices are available to regionalist parties, and explore the factors explaining when and why some strategies are chosen over others (Elias *et al.*, 2015; Alonso *et al.*, 2015; Massetti and Schakel, 2015).

The article builds on and advances this recent work by examining the strategic behaviour of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in regional elections between 1999 and 2016. The SNP has often featured in scholarly work as an example of successful mobilisation in defence of a set of distinctive territorial interests within the state (Hepburn, 2009b: 595). As noted above, the party's challenge to the integrity of the UK has been significantly advanced in recent years, on the back of strong electoral performances in regional and state-wide elections and a referendum on independence in 2014. The SNP thus constitutes a paradigmatic case for exploring how, when and why regionalist parties make strategic choices in electoral competition. This has already been the subject of some scholarly analysis, as part of accounts of the party's evolution over time (Lynch, 2009; Lynch, 2013), its spectacular electoral growth in recent years (Johns and Mitchell, 2016) and its attitude towards European integration (Lynch, 1996; Hepburn, 2010). This article advances this work by undertaking an in-depth qualitative case study of the SNP's strategic behaviour in regional

elections, according to the analytical framework proposed by Elias *et al.* (2015). Doing so provides a more in-depth and theoretically informed account of the SNP's strategic behaviour than is provided by extant studies, and as such provides a more rigorous analysis of the party's strategic behaviour in post-devolution Scotland.

The case study provides two important new insights into the strategic behaviour of the SNP in regional elections. Firstly, there is no evidence of the SNP behaving like a 'niche' party focused exclusively on the issue of Scottish independence. On the contrary, a two-dimensional strategy predominates in the post-devolution period with constitutional issues discussed alongside economic ones. There is also evidence, however, that these two dimensions are linked through a discourse that consistently makes an economic case for separating Scotland from the UK, whilst on occasion the SNP even gives economic arguments precedence over territorial ones. These latter findings are theoretically significant because they indicate that regionalist parties can use the strategic tools at their disposal in more flexible ways than are anticipated by Elias *et al.* (2015).

Secondly, the case study provides evidence of two sets of constraints on the SNP's strategic behaviour in regional elections: internal constraints relating to party identity and organisational structures; and external constraints relating to the status of a party in or out of government, and the issue structure of the political space. These findings are consistent with other work that has examined the determinants of regionalist parties' strategic behaviour (see Rovny, 2015). But the case study also adds important nuance to our understanding of the precise ways in which these constraints operate in practice. The SNP's experience shows that the impact of different constraints varies over time, that different constraints can generate competing strategic pressures on regionalist parties, and that some are more important drivers of strategic choice than others. These findings constitute a significant advance on extant explanations of when and why regionalist parties choose particular electoral strategies over others.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. The next section reviews the academic literature that has examined regionalist parties as strategic actors in electoral competition. It then outlines the theoretical framework for analysing regionalist parties' strategic behaviour in electoral competition proposed by Elias *et al.* (2015), and presents hypotheses about the factors expected to determine these parties' strategic choices. The third section maps out and analyses the strategic choices made by the SNP in elections to the Scottish Parliament from 1999 to 2016. The article concludes by outlining the significance of the case study findings for theorising the strategic behaviour of regionalist parties in electoral competition.

### **Theorising the electoral strategies of regionalist parties**

A central feature of democratic political systems is competitive elections, where political parties campaign for support from voters in order to gain political power or influence public policy (Müller and Strøm, 1999). Vote-seeking political parties must develop electoral strategies that make them as attractive and distinctive as possible to voters (Meguid, 2008: 14), and this involves making decisions about what issues to talk about in election campaigns, and how to talk about them. A starting point for such strategic decision-making is often a party's ideological principles, which reflect the social cleavage within which it is rooted. Parties thus construct their electoral programmes in ways that are informed by, and consistent with, their core ideological commitments (Bara and Weale, 2006: 3). For regionalist parties that have mobilised around the centre-periphery cleavage, a principle goal is the political re-organisation of the state power structure in order to secure some kind of self-government, based on identities and interests that are distinctive to a specific territorial community within a state's boundary (De Winter, 1998: 209; Massetti and Schakel, 2013: 801). Territorial re-structuring, therefore, is a central issue for regionalist

parties that contest elections, even though the exact nature of territorial demands varies widely (Hepburn, 2009a: 482).

However, there is substantial evidence that regionalist parties in electoral competition rarely confine themselves to their core territorial business. Some parties have never been single-issue parties, and have always campaigned for a wider range of ideological goals alongside that of self-determination (Hepburn, 2009a: 478-479). In other cases, and in order to place sufficient electoral pressure on state-wide parties to undertake territorial reforms, regionalist parties often choose (or are forced to) broaden their electoral appeal to compete with more established parties for votes (De Winter 1998: 209; Elias, 2009; Alonso 2012: 24, 29). This usually requires regionalist parties to talk about issue dimensions other than territorial re-structuring. Furthermore, in contexts where decentralization processes have created a regional tier of elected government, there are new opportunities for regionalist parties to enter government and administer the powers and resources allocated to 'their' region for its wellbeing and in its exclusive interest (Massetti and Schakel, 2013: 801). Being in regional government provides regionalist parties with an opportunity to implement their vision of the kind of society they would like for the territory, and incentivises electoral strategies that discuss substantive regional policy issues.

In pursuit of votes, therefore, regionalist parties may, and indeed have, focused on a range of issues alongside their primary territorial goal. There is a particularly strong pressure on these parties to address the economic issues that constitute the left-right divide, where what is contested is the role of the state in managing the economy. This is the most important dimension of competition in contemporary democracies (Wagner, 2012), and is the social cleavage in which mainstream state-wide parties are rooted (Meguid, 2008: 2; Elias *et al.* 2015). As a result, regionalist parties often have to compete for votes on at least two issue dimensions: the territorial one which defines the core purpose of these parties, and the economic one which is a priority for competitor parties in the electoral arena.

In practice, regionalist parties may well contest elections on a much broader range of issues (see, for example, Van Atta, 2003). However, focusing on these two key dimensions of electoral conflict is heuristically useful for starting to theorise these parties' strategic behaviour in electoral competition. In such two-dimensional contexts, what strategies do regionalist parties have at their disposal, and under what circumstances are different strategies deployed? Recent work by Elias *et al.* (2015) has begun to address these questions. The authors draw on developments in the party competition literature to argue that in contexts where party competition takes place along more than one issue dimension, political parties (including regionalist parties) have a strategic toolbox at their disposition consisting of issue positioning, selective issue emphasis, and issue framing. Whilst the first tool expects parties to compete against each other by adopting different positions on a given issue, the second expects parties to prioritise issues that they own (and therefore are more favourable to them) and downplay those that are least advantageous to them. The third tool, issue framing, expects parties to frame a new issue in terms of the ideological dimension that is most important to them or which they can lay the strongest claim to 'own'.

Combining these three strategic tools in different ways gives rise to four possible strategies at regionalist parties' disposition at election time<sup>1</sup>: a *uni-dimensional strategy*, where parties selectively emphasize and position on their core territorial dimension, and ignore the economic dimension which is less important (and therefore secondary) to them; a *blurring strategy*, where parties adopt vague, contradictory or ambiguous positions on the secondary economic dimension; a *subsuming strategy* whereby parties will frame economic issues in core territorial terms; and a *two-dimensional strategy* where parties position themselves on and give emphasis to both territorial and economic dimensions simultaneously (Elias *et al.*, 2015: 844-6). Preliminary empirical investigation of how regionalist parties employ these

strategic tools in practice point to the prevalence of two-dimensional strategies whereby "regionalist parties strategize along the [territorial and economic] dimensions simultaneously (Alonso *et al.*, 2015: 852), blurring strategies whereby regionalist parties adopt contradictory positions especially on the economic dimension (Alonso *et al.*, 2015: 858), and subsuming strategies whereby regionalist parties interpret left-right politics through the prism of their territorial goals (Massetti and Schakel, 2015: 867).

These studies, along with other work that has examined regionalist parties' strategic behaviour, also provide preliminary explanations for when and why regionalist parties opt for particular strategies. Such choices are expected to be shaped by factors internal and external to the parties themselves. With regard to the former, a first consideration derives from the historical, social, political and economic contexts of party systems (Rovny, 2015: 917). The deep-rootedness of regionalist parties in the centre-periphery cleavage, for example, exerts a strong influence on these parties' values and ideas, providing an enduring touchstone of identification for party members and voters. Other work has shown that this ideological legacy acts to constrain a regionalist party's strategic flexibility on territorial issues, since core voters may well punish their party electorally for moving too far away from, or giving insufficient attention to, its core business (Alonso, 2012: 19; Elias, 2009; Elias and Mees, 2017). In a similar way, the historical context of left-right politics may determine the exact nature of economic demands articulated. Massetti and Schakel (2015), for example, find that regionalist parties' position on the economic dimension will depend on the relative poverty or wealth of the region within which they mobilise: whilst regionalist parties in relatively rich regions tend to develop a rightist ideology, those mobilising in relatively poor regions are more likely to adopt a leftist ideology.

A second internal constraint on regionalist parties' strategic choices is expected to be the organizational characteristics of regionalist parties, and the extent to which these enable or constrain strategic decision-making (Rovny, 2015: 916). It is well documented that political parties are composed of different coalitions of actors with divergent goals, and who compete for control of party decision-making (Mair, 1994); organisational structures are thus crucial in determining how effectively different groups can push their own goals and strategies for achieving them (Kitschelt, 1994: 207). There is already some evidence that internal organisational structures matter for regionalist parties' strategic choices. In their study of the party politics of territorial reforms in Europe, for example, Toubreau and Massetti (2012: 307) find power relations within political parties to be a crucial mediating factor shaping "how structure and ideology determine the strategy that is adopted". Similarly, Elias and Mees (2017) argue that the balance of power between competing groups within Catalan and Basque nationalist parties has been a crucial determinant of whether these parties pursued accommodationist or secessionist territorial goals.

In contrast, external constraints on regionalist parties' strategic choices are expected to derive from specific features of the political system within which regionalist parties operate. One consideration is whether or not a regionalist party is in government or not (Elias and Tronconi, 2011b; Rovny, 2015: 916). As noted above, regionalist parties aspiring to enter public office have sought to broaden their electoral appeal by adopting positions on, and giving salience to, a broader range of policy issues. But being in government has also been shown to be a risky undertaking, since voters may object to regionalist parties' changed political priorities, their coalition partners, and their record of policy delivery (Elias and Tronconi, 2011b). Regionalist parties that have lost electoral support after a period in government have often modified their strategic behaviour, with many re-focusing on core territorial issues in an attempt to re-connect with voters (see, for example, Elias, 2009; Elias and Mees, 2017).

Furthermore, political parties may be strategically constrained by the issue structure of the

political space they compete it (Rovny, 2015: 316). This is because, whilst political parties attempt to shape and alter the issues being contested in an electoral space through their own strategic choices, it is also the case that they operate in contexts where "public opinion polls show voters to already have certain preferences, where public discourses and party ideologies are already linking positions on issues in particular ways, and where some issues are perceived to be more important than others" (Elias *et al.*, 2015: 842). Thus, regionalist parties' strategic choices are likely to be informed by public opinion on territorial and economic issues, as well as the number, type (e.g. state-wide parties, other regionalist parties) and strategic behaviour of the parties competing with them for votes. For example, there is plenty of evidence to show that state-wide parties have responded to the electoral threat posed by regionalist parties by incorporating a stronger 'territorial' dimension into their own political programmes (Meguid, 2008; Basile, 2013; Alonso, 2012; Massetti and Toubeau, 2013). In such a situation, the challenge for a regionalist party is how to appear distinctive in voters' eyes, and many have shifted their own territorial and economic strategies in response (Elias, 2009; Hepburn, 2009b; Elias and Mees, 2017).

Finally, processes of decentralization that lead to the creation and/or subsequent empowerment of regional institutions are expected to transform the context within which regionalist parties operate, and therefore the strategic incentives that they face (Toubeau, 2011: 429-430; Petersohn *et al.*, 2014). For example, such processes make it considerably easier for regionalist parties to enter government and develop a track-record in policy handling and delivery (Elias and Tronconi, 2011b; Meguid, 2008: 27). Decentralization has also been shown to alter the issue structure of the political space, as all political parties adapt their electoral strategies to take advantage of new institutional opportunities at the regional level to achieve their policy goals (Elias and Tronconi, 2011a).

In order to test these expectations about how and why regionalist parties behave strategically in electoral competition, the rest of the article presents an in-depth case study of the SNP's approach to regional elections between 1999 and 2016. Given the nature and scope of regionalist parties' demands for territorial re-organization, this is the 'core-level' for this party family (Deschouwer, 2003), and therefore an appropriate arena on which to focus the empirical investigation. The party's strategic choices were identified through a close qualitative reading of party manifestos, campaign speeches and press coverage of election campaigns. This process yielded data on the SNP's preferences on the economic and territorial issue dimensions (issue position), the degree of attention given to these issue dimensions (issue salience), and the way in which these issues were talked about (issue framing). The information enabled a preliminary mapping of the different strategies used by the SNP in regional elections. This initial analysis was followed by semi-structured interviews with SNP elected representatives and party officials; these first-hand accounts of the party's approach to elections in post-devolution Scotland were crucial in refining and clarifying preliminary judgments about the SNP's strategic behaviour derived from analysis of the textual data.<sup>ii</sup> Interview data also provided key insights into the second aspect of the analysis, namely the determinants of the SNP's strategic choices. Information gathered through interviews was triangulated with public opinion data and secondary analyses of the party's electoral behaviour. Taken together, these sources provide the basis for mapping and explaining the SNP's electoral strategy in regional elections in the next section.

### **The strategic behaviour of the SNP in regional elections**

Prior to the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, scholars have identified two distinct phases in the SNP's strategic approach to British general elections. From its establishment in 1934 until the 1960s, the party employed a uni-dimensional strategy that focused exclusively on the establishment of an independent Scottish sovereign state (Lynch, 2013). Economic issues were deliberately eschewed in order to present the party as one that could transcend

class divisions in order to put the Scottish nation first (Lynch, 2009: 623-624). This strategy was re-thought during the 1960s and 1970s, when the SNP's core territorial agenda was complemented by an explicit left-wing position on economic issues. This economic discourse denounced Scotland's economic decline and mass unemployment as a result of the damaging policies of successive UK governments (Mitchell, 1996: 221–243). Moreover, territorial and economic issue dimensions were explicitly linked together: constitutional change was justified on the grounds that it would provide Scotland with the policy tools to become a more just society (Wilson, 2009: 25-6). This subsuming strategy - whereby independence was presented as being necessary in order to get control of Scotland's economic resources and tackle the country's under-development - would continue to characterise the party's strategic approach during the 1980s and 1990s. Thus the SNP's new commitment to 'independence in Europe' was accompanied by a re-statement of the party's social democratic principles; the territorial and economic dimensions were linked (as in the 1970s) through the framing of constitutional change in terms of the economic dividends that it would bring to Scotland (Hepburn, 2010: 76; Lynch, 2013: 176-223).

The creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 provided a new institutional context for the SNP's strategic behaviour. The remainder of this section examines the SNP's strategic approach to regional elections in Scotland from 1999 to 2016. The discussion is structured according to distinct phases in the party's strategic approach; the key features of this approach are outlined and evidenced, before the factors informing these strategic choices are evaluated. To support this analysis, Table 1 below summarises key information relating to Scottish regional elections during this period.

**Table 1 Summary of regional elections in Scotland 1999-2016**

<b>Date of election</b>	<b>Result - no of seats won<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Government formation</b>
1999	Labour - 56 SNP - 35 Conservatives - 18 Liberal Democrats - 17 Others - 3	Labour and Liberal Democrat coalition
2003	Labour - 50 SNP - 27 Conservatives - 18 Liberal Democrats - 17 Others - 17	Labour and Liberal Democrat coalition
2007	Labour - 46 SNP - 47 Conservatives - 17 Liberal Democrats - 16 Others - 3	SNP minority government
2011	Labour - 37 SNP - 69 Conservatives - 15 Liberal Democrats - 5 Others - 3	SNP majority government
2016	Labour - 24 SNP - 63 Conservatives - 31 Liberal Democrats - 5 Others - 6	SNP majority government

**Source:** Scottish Parliament ([www.parliament.scot](http://www.parliament.scot))

<sup>1</sup> Elections to the Scottish Parliament are held using the Alternative Member System. Each voter casts



two votes, one for a constituency (where representative selected using the First Past the Post system) and a second for a regional list (where representatives selected using a proportional system).

### ***1999: The SNP as a party of regional government in post-devolution Scotland***

In contrast to the strategic approach taken to British general elections prior to 1999, the SNP went into the first election to the Scottish Parliament with a clear shift in strategic direction. Significantly, the party downplayed its core territorial policy: Scottish independence featured last on the party's 10-point policy pledge card (BBC, 1999a). Instead, the territorial dimension was framed in valence terms, where what was contested was not specific constitutional goals but rather which political party could best understand and defend Scotland's interests. The SNP thus repeatedly denounced Labour (the largest state-wide party in Scotland and the SNP's main electoral rival) as "London Labour" (Alex Salmond, SNP Leader, quoted in BBC, 1999b), and presented the election as a choice between "a Scottish party which decides its policies in Scotland, and a Labour party which has its strings pulled by Blairite control freaks" (Nicola Sturgeon, SNP candidate for the Scottish Parliament, quoted in *The Herald*, 1999). At the same time, the SNP sought to present itself as a potential party of regional government that offered a "positive policy programme" (Interview, SNP policy advisor, 3 December 2012) that could "make Scotland a better place to live in" (SNP, 1999: 4). Focusing attention on the economic dimension was key to achieving this, since "the Scottish Parliament offers us the chance to begin the process of governing Scotland well and delivering the best policies for long-term sustainable growth" (Alex Salmond, SNP leader, quoted in *The Herald*, 1999b). The party's chosen strategy on economic issues was to position itself to the left of Labour, by emphasising its commitment to re-invest in Scotland's public services after years of neglect and under-spending. A key policy commitment, in this respect, was "a penny for Scotland", whereby the SNP pledged not to implement a one penny cut in the basic rate of income tax announced by the UK government some months previously (SNP, 1999: 2). The party's approach on the economy was strongly contrasted to Labour's ideological approach to public finances in central government: "New Labour has taken on Tory principles. Tax cuts, rather than public services, are New Labour's priority" (SNP, 1999: 2).

This shift of strategic direction reflected, first and foremost, the fundamental change in the SNP's operating environment as a result of the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. The establishment of a regional tier of government in Scotland transformed the party's strategic calculations: devolution "changed the whole character of elections in Scotland" (Interview, SNP MSP, 6 December 2012). More specifically, the SNP sought to take advantage of new opportunities to achieve its territorial and economic policy goals. One SNP Government Minister, for example, argued that "there was a different set of reasons why people might want to vote SNP", not least because "they could see that a vote for the SNP could mean getting the party into [regional] government" (Interview, SNP minister in the Scottish Government, 6 December 2012). The strategic decision taken in 1999, to de-emphasise the issue of independence and focus on concrete devolved policies, was thus motivated by a desire to take advantage of new devolved opportunity structures and present the SNP as a potential party of regional government (Interview, SNP policy advisor, 3 December 2012; *The Herald*, 1999a).

Such a strategic approach was consistent with the gradualist strategy espoused by the SNP leader, Alex Salmond, since the 1990s of building the case for independence slowly and pragmatically (Lynch, 2013: 191). Being a party of regional government in Scotland would thus allow the SNP to start "working in Scotland, for the benefit of Scotland and with Scottish priorities at the heart of its concerns" (SNP, 1999: 1). Although such an approach did not have unanimous support within the SNP, Salmond's *de facto* dominance of a party organisation that on paper gave activists a considerable degree of control over decision-

making, enabled him to dictate his party's strategic priorities in the run-up to the 1999 Scottish election (Interview, former SNP MSP, 12 December 2012; see also Mitchell *et al.*, 2011: 34-6). In the earliest years of devolution, therefore, SNP electoral strategy was the result of a dominant party leadership committed to taking full advantage of new political opportunities arising from the territorial re-structuring of the British state.

### **2003-2011: Making the economic case for Scottish independence**

In contrast, by the 2003 Scottish election, the SNP's commitment to independence was re-instated as a core theme of the party's election campaign, although the party also stressed a more moderate position that would require a referendum to be held and won before radical constitutional change could proceed (SNP, 2003: 2).<sup>iii</sup> In other words, Scotland would become independent "only with your permission" (John Swinney, SNP Leader, in BBC, 2003a). At the same time, the SNP retained the economy as the central focus of its political programme since "a successful, competitive economy is the bedrock on which a prosperous and just nation will be built (SNP, 2003: 3). Crucially, however, the way in which the economy was talked about differed in two key respects.

Firstly, the SNP resurrected the subsuming strategy deployed consistently throughout the pre-devolution period, with a clear linkage made between independence and economic prosperity. Thus, for example, it was argued that increasing the powers of the Scottish Parliament was the only way to "allow us to create a more prosperous Scotland that can improve our economic performance and tackle poverty in Scotland" (John Swinney, SNP Leader, quoted in BBC, 2003b). Secondly, the SNP ceased to emphasise its position to the left of Labour in the Scottish political space as it had done in 1999, and instead talked about economic issues in valence terms that related to government performance and policy delivery. On the one hand, this saw sustained attacks on Labour's performance in Scottish government (with the Liberal Democrats) since 1999. The 2003 manifesto, for example, listed a whole range of policy shortcomings, and argued that these were underpinned by a fundamental failure to create the conditions for wealth creation and economic prosperity in Scotland (SNP, 2003). On the other hand, blame was also placed at the door of the UK government, since "London government regards the south east of England as the only powerhouse in the UK economy, with successive Chancellors regarding it as their only economic priority) (SNP, 2003: 3). Through sustained attacks on "Labour and London control" of the Scottish economy (Andrew Wilson, SNP Economics Spokesman, quoted in *The Scotsman*, 16 April 2003), the SNP consistently sought to assert its credibility as the only party that would always put Scotland first. Crucially, the SNP's decision to frame economic issues in this way allowed it to undertake a *de facto* rightward shift in economic policy, exemplified by a commitment to low tax and light-touch regulation (Interview with SNP MSPs, 6 and 7 December 2012).

Subsequent devolved electoral contests in 2007 and 2011 would see minimal changes to this general strategic approach. Independence subject to a referendum still featured as a key SNP policy commitment, with the party repeatedly emphasising its trust in the people of Scotland to decide on Scotland's future (SNP, 2007: 5; SNP, 2011: 5). It was also consistently framed as a way of achieving a more prosperous, just and peaceful society. In 2007, the SNP advanced this argument as "a government in waiting" (Interview, senior SNP official, 5 December 2012); by 2011, and after four years as a minority government in Scotland, the party sought to appeal to voters on the basis of its achievements in office as well as its future policy goals (SNP, 2011: 3). The latter argument made much of the party's past and future management of "a period of unprecedented Westminster cuts" (SNP, 2011: 8) in the wake of the economic crisis, with the SNP presenting itself as Scotland's best defence against the UK government's austerity programme. As in previous years, constitutional change was again justified as a means to achieve economic growth. SNP leader, Alex

Salmond, thus argued that "the referendum we wish to have is first and foremost a jobs referendum. The Independence I seek is the independence to create jobs" (Salmond, 2010).

The strategic shift from downplaying the independence issue, to making a clear economic case for it, can be explained in part by the SNP's experience of the 1999 election campaign. In particular, the issue structure of the political space in that election - as a result of what rival parties chose to campaign on - proved to be highly damaging to the SNP's credibility. Thus, for example, state-wide parties attacked the SNP's silence on independence as evidence that the party was trying to bring this about "by the back door" (Interview, SNP MSP, 28 November 2012). This allowed Labour and the Conservatives to present the issue of independence - and by association the SNP - in consistently negative terms, as a danger to the unity of the UK (Jones, 1999). They also attacked the SNP's left-wing economic policies, presenting it as a tax raising party that was unfit to govern Scotland (Interview, SNP policy advisor, 3 December 2012). In both these ways, state-wide parties were highly effective in undermining the SNP's credibility as a potential party of regional government (ibid).

There were also strong internal pressures for strategic change after the 1999 election. The SNP leadership faced sustained criticism from party members for having apparently "gone soft" on independence and, in doing so, abandoning the party's core values (Interview, SNP MSP, 28 November 2012; interview, former SNP MSP, 12 December 2012; see also Lynch, 2013: 239). These internal tensions continued during the first term of the Scottish Parliament, and informed the decision to re-emphasise Scottish independence from 2003 onwards (ibid.). Fundamentalists within the SNP were thus successful in asserting core party values, and forcing a change in party strategy to reflect this.

At the same time, however, several interviewees noted that the toxicity of the independence issue in Scottish voters' eyes (as evidenced by consistently low levels of popular support for separating Scotland from the UK) also demanded a change in the way in which the SNP talked to the electorate about constitutional change. On the one hand, making independence subject to a separate referendum not only sought to placate party activists, but also to reassure people that voting for the SNP wouldn't lead to the break-up of the UK (The Sunday Herald, 6 April 2003). On the other hand, the SNP had to tackle the problem whereby in the past "talking about independence missed out on the issues that people were most concerned about" (interview, SNP special advisor to the Scottish Government, 5 December 2012). Framing independence in economic terms sought to change this, by offering a more relevant narrative about the kind of country that Scotland could become.

Strategic shift was also, however, a recognition of the changed political circumstances in Scotland between 1999 and 2003 (Interview, SNP policy advisor, 3 December 2012; interview, SNP minister in Scottish Government, 8 December 2012). There was a feeling, for example, that competing with Labour for the left-wing policy space in Scotland was no longer a vote winning strategy: "the SNP and Labour are very much fighting over the same voters, in the same streets in the same towns...there seems to be a consensus in terms of where most people in Scotland want to be in terms of the welfare state and social democracy" (SNP minister in Scottish Government, 6 December 2012). In such a context of ideological convergence among voters and parties, it made sense to abandon the strategy of explicit issue positioning on economic issues. Moreover, with the SNP less focused on "Labour, Labour, Labour" (Interview, SNP MSP, 4 December 2012), and with a right-wing Conservative party with little electoral appeal in Scotland, shifting the party's economic policies rightwards was a way of reaching out to new voters (former SNP MSP, 6 December 2012). Electoral opportunities derived from the electoral context in which the SNP was competing for votes were thus more important than the party's core economic principles in determining the party's strategic choices. Such a *de facto* change of position on economic

issues was deliberately de-emphasised since it sat uncomfortably with the party's long-standing social democratic values (ibid.; former SNP MSP, 12 December 2012; see also Cuthbert and Cuthbert, 2009). In this way, employing a blurring strategy on the economic dimension allowed the SNP to circumvent internal ideological tensions. Instead, framing discussion of the economy in valence terms was a more effective vote-winning strategy since four years of a Labour-led government in Scotland meant "there was a record on which [it] could be judged" (interview, SNP MSP, 10 December), and public opinion pointed to growing public dissatisfaction with its achievements (Curtice, 2006: 100-102).

This external political context continued to hold significant sway over the SNP's strategic choices in subsequent regional elections, specifically ensuring an approach consistent with that adopted in 2003. A key consideration was increasingly negative public opinion on the performance of the Labour-led regional government up until 2007 (see Johns *et al.*, 2010). This gave a strategy emphasising that "we are a government in waiting" (interview, SNP special advisor to the Scottish Government, 5 December 2012) clear resonance with Scottish voters. The SNP's entry into government after the 2007 regional election changed the focus of such valence arguments - from Labour's failings and onto the SNP's achievements - but not the general message about who can be trusted to govern in Scotland's interests. Positive evaluations of the SNP's performance in government ensured that this remained a key theme of the party's election narrative in 2011 (Interview, SNP MSP, 29 November 2012; interview, SNP minister in Scottish Government, 6 December 2012; see also Johns *et al.*, 2013). At the same time, levels of support for Scottish independence did not increase significantly during this period, whilst the economy was still "what people wanted us to talk about" (Interview, SNP special advisor to the Scottish Government, 5 December 2012; see also Park *et al.*, 2012). Framing independence in economic terms, therefore, continued to be driven by a desire to make the SNP's political project relevant to Scottish voters.

In contrast to the very early years of devolution, there was also little internal challenge to the SNP's general strategic approach. A programme of organisational reforms in 2004 shifted the balance of power within the party, away from hardline activists advocating "independence nothing less", and towards the leadership and ordinary members who espoused a more gradualist approach to constitutional change (Interview, Allen, 6 December 2011; 12 December; see also Johns and Mitchell, 2016: 185; Mitchell *et al.*, 2011: 40). This shift in power relations within the SNP had the effect of consolidating the general strategic approach of the SNP from 2004 onwards (Interview, SNP MSP, 29 November 2012).

### **2016: Contesting constitutional change after Scotland's independence referendum**

A referendum on Scottish independence held on 18 September 2014 saw the SNP present the most detailed arguments to date in favour of separating Scotland from the UK. Ultimately losing this referendum might well have been expected to relegate the constitutional issue down the SNP's political agenda. Launching the 2016 Scottish Parliament election, however, the SNP's new leader, Nicola Sturgeon, made clear her intention to continue "making the case, positively and powerfully – and in a realistic and relevant way" in favour of an independent Scotland (Sturgeon, 2016). The party's 2016 election manifesto also committed the party to holding another referendum "if there is clear and sustained evidence that independence has become the preferred option of a majority of the Scottish people" (SNP, 2016: 23). In practice, however, the SNP campaign sought to focus more on concrete policy issues linked to the more immediate task of governing Scotland, than on the territorial dimension. Consistent with previous devolved election campaigns, key themes included the SNP's record as a safe pair of hands in government, the linking of new institutional powers to a desire to "boost our economy, tackle inequality and build a fairer society", and a promise to "always stand up for Scotland" against London government and parties (SNP, 2016: 4, 5). The party under Nicola Sturgeon's leadership, therefore, sought to

approach the regional election with the same "team, record, vision" strategy that had proved so successful in previous contests (Torrance, 2016). However, the party's focus also shifted as the campaign progressed, with the SNP repeatedly having to defend and clarify its position on a second independence referendum instead of focusing on the bread and butter issues of governing Scotland (The Guardian, 1 May 2016).

The fact of having held, and lost, a referendum on Scottish independence, thus had little discernible impact on the SNP's electoral strategy going into the 2016 regional election. For rival parties, however, the referendum and the SNP's strategic response to it, provided an opportunity to re-frame the terms of electoral debate. In particular, the SNP's vague manifesto commitment to a second referendum was seized upon by state-wide parties as an opportunity to shift the focus of the election campaign away from valence issues to do with the governance of Scotland, and onto the more divisive issue of further constitutional change. The Scottish Conservatives in particular focused their campaign on "saying no to a second referendum" (Scottish Conservatives, 2016: 6). As in 1999, therefore, state-wide parties sought to undermine the SNP's electoral strategy by forcing territorial issues back onto the electoral agenda, specifically by making this an election about Scottish independence rather than socio-economic transformation.

### **Discussion**

The empirical analysis gives rise to two key observations about the strategic behavior of the SNP in devolved elections from 1999 to 2016. Firstly, the SNP does not make full use of the strategic repertoire as conceptualised by Elias *et al.* (2015). The party eschewed a uni-dimensional strategy characterized by exclusive positioning on, and emphasis of, the core territorial strategy. This was a feature of the party's approach to UK general elections in its earliest years of existence. From the 1960s onwards, however, the SNP sought to compete for votes on both territorial and economic dimensions simultaneously, and it has continued to do so in regional elections since 1999. In doing so, the SNP has also consistently linked these two dimensions together (as part of a subsuming strategy), whilst also blurring its position on the economic dimension from 2003 onwards.

Secondly, the case study provides evidence that the precise ways in which the SNP has strategized along these two dimensions goes beyond what is anticipated by Elias *et al.* (2015). In particular, the strategic tools of selective issue emphasis and issue framing are used more flexibly, giving rise to a broader range of strategic choices in electoral competition. For example, on two occasions (in 1999 and 2016) the SNP sought to shift emphasis away from its core territorial goal and onto economic issues; this goes against the theoretical expectation that because territorial grievances are the *raison d'être* of regionalist parties, they will always feature prominently on their political agendas (Elias *et al.*, 2015: 844; see also Alonso, 2012: 19-24). Flexibility is also evident in the SNP's use of issue framing. Rather than framing economic issues in terms of the territorial issues that are assumed to be the most important to regionalist parties, the SNP consistently reverses this logic: the case for independence is made in explicitly economic terms, with constitutional change understood to be a means of achieving the economic growth necessary for building a better Scotland.

In explaining these more sophisticated patterns of strategic behaviour, the empirical analysis provides clear evidence of the internal and external constraints on the SNP's strategic behaviour in regional elections. These effects are neither uniform or isolated. Different factors shape the party's strategic decision-making to different degrees, and their relative importance shifts considerably over time. Different factors also interact with each other in different ways, often placing competing strategic pressures on the SNP; the case study

demonstrates how strategic tools at the party's disposal are used to circumvent such dilemmas.

An initial key determinant of the SNP's strategic decision-making was the change to the territorial structure of the British state. Devolution and the creation of the Scottish parliament fundamentally transformed the SNP's operating environment, and the new institutional opportunity structure created different strategic incentives to which the SNP sought to respond. The party's immediate response in 1999 was to down-play its core territorial agenda and position itself as a party of regional government. But devolution also engendered a more gradual process of strategic re-orientation. This required the SNP and its supporters to reconcile the party's long-term territorial goals to the pragmatic realities of post-devolution Scottish politics, and adjust to shifts in voter preferences and dynamics of party competition from 1999 onwards.

An important internal constraint on this process was the SNP's identity and ideological legacy. As expected, the historical context of centre-periphery tensions has fundamentally shaped how the party has conceptualised and articulated its territorial and economic grievances against the British state. Party identity, therefore, has been an enduring constraint on the party's strategic behaviour, and has often served to limit *what* issues the SNP can talk about in regional elections and *how* it does so. This is clearest to see in relation to the party's core territorial commitments, where attempts to shift the emphasis away from the issue of independence were frustrated by internal opposition. A more complex picture emerges, however, when one considers the SNP's blurring of its left-right position from 2003 onwards. One implication is that party identity may be less of a constraint when it comes to the economic dimension, because economic issues are of secondary importance for regionalist parties and consequently allow for more strategic flexibility (Elias et al., 2015; see also Alonso 2012: 19). The case study presented here suggests a different interpretation. Whilst the economy is central to the SNP's political project, the de-emphasis of the party's social democratic values is better understood as a strategic response by a strong party leadership to a political context where voters want parties that they can trust to deliver economic growth and prosperity.

This observation is important because it points to other internal and external determinants of strategic behaviour in the SNP's case, and which have mitigated and constrained the influence of party identity. Internal organisational structures, for example, shaped the extent to which core ideological values served as a constraint on strategic decision-making. Between 1999 and 2003, party activists unhappy with the alleged 'dumbing down' of the commitment to Scottish independence took advantage of their strong hold on internal decision-making processes to push for a re-emphasis of this core territorial goal from 2003 onwards. However, subsequent organisational reforms shifted power relations away from party activists to the party leadership, increasing the flexibility of the latter to determine electoral strategy in response to external incentives and constraints.

As internal contestation of electoral strategy declined, external determinants of electoral strategy became increasingly important over time. From 2003 onwards, decisions about the degree of emphasis given to different issues (economic vs. territorial), and the way in which these issues are framed (clear issue positions vs. as valence issues), were underpinned by perceptions of the preferences of voters and the behaviour of other parties in the political space. For example, the decision to make Scotland's independence subject to a referendum, and the clear economic case made for independence, reflected the reality that radical constitutional change simply was not the priority for Scottish voters. Similarly, the framing of territorial and economic issues in valence terms sought to take advantage of rival parties' reputational deficits as parties that could govern effectively in Scotland's interests. Contrary to what was expected, therefore, the SNP's entry into government in 2007 had little impact

on the party's electoral strategy since positive evaluations of its performance in government allowed it to sustain a narrative about effective policy delivery in Scotland's interests.

Finally, the strategic choices of other political parties also served as a constraint on the SNP, especially when it sought to shift attention away from the issue of independence and onto the day-to-day business of governing Scotland. In this respect, and in spite of the SNP's best efforts, the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence did little to remove this highly contentious issue from the Scottish political agenda. The key strategic challenge for the SNP thus remains that of balancing its long-term commitment to separating Scotland from the UK, with the need to build support for independence gradually as a party of regional government that can deliver on its electoral promises.

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to advance understandings of the ways in which regionalist parties compete in elections, taking as its starting point the theoretical framework presented by Elias *et al.* (2015). This work is important because it is the first effort to draw systematically on the party competition literature to think through what kinds of strategies are available to regionalist parties in party competition. Others have employed quantitative methods to explore these strategies empirically, and build preliminary hypotheses to explain strategic choices (Alonso *et al.*, 2015; Massetti and Schakel, 2015). But these studies also acknowledge the need for more in-depth studies to "investigate the contours of [different strategies], exploring and discussing the empirical grey areas between them" (Massetti and Schakel, 2015: 874).

This article takes up this challenge through a qualitative case study of the SNP. The analytical added value of an in-depth understanding of a single case means that the empirical scope of the study is limited in important ways. Thus the focus is on strategic behaviour during elections, to the exclusion of the 'inter-electoral phase' also considered by Elias *et al.* (2015: 841) and others (Field and Hamann, 2015). The case study also confines itself to examining regional elections, as this is the core level for this party family; consequently it can say nothing about how regionalist parties' strategic behaviour may vary across different territorial levels (see Massetti and Schakel, 2015; Hamann and Field, 2015). This is a necessary avenue of future research if the multi-level nature of regionalist parties' strategic decision-making is to be fully understood. Finally, the SNP also constitutes a paradigmatic case of electoral success, and future work should also examine how regionalist parties' strategic choices can contribute to electoral decline.

The article nevertheless offers several key insights into how regionalist parties strategise during elections, and provides a framework for approaching the further areas of research identified above. Firstly, the empirical findings add to a growing body of evidence that regionalist parties rarely position themselves in electoral competition as 'niche' actors exclusively focused on their territorial goal of state re-structuring. But the flexible way in which the SNP talks about, and links, territorial and economic issues also challenges extant theoretical expectations about which issues matter most for regionalist parties. The origin of regionalist parties in the centre-periphery cleavage leads Elias *et al.* (2015) to assume that territorial issues constitute these parties' core business; these are expected to always be emphasised in electoral strategies and other issue dimensions are expected to be secondary to, and framed in, territorial terms (see also Basile, 2012; Alonso, 2012). The SNP's experience points to a different logic at work: in an attempt to make progress towards independence, the party had to find an alternative, more relevant, way of making the case for constitutional change. This suggests that, in certain circumstances, regionalist parties may be incentivised to prioritise economic arguments over territorial ones, and frame territorial demands in terms of the economic benefits that can be achieved, if they are to

appeal to voters beyond their core support base. Whether or not other regionalist parties 'subsume' the territorial dimension into the economic one in this way, can only be verified through a broader and more systematic analysis of 'issue framing' in electoral competition.

Secondly, the explanation for this alternative strategic logic arguably lies in the internal and external determinants of regionalist parties' strategic choices. The case study presented here evidences the strong constraint on electoral strategy posed by the SNP's identity as a party committed to the core goal of Scottish independence. But it also highlights the strong pull of dynamics of party competition in the opposite direction, whereby the shifting issue structure of the electoral space shapes how and to what extent regionalist parties can talk about different issues. For the SNP in post-devolution Scotland, an election strategy that made a clear economic case for independence made sense in a context where voters cared more about economic issues than constitutional ones, and parties' capacity to deliver on manifesto promises rather than their specific left-right policy positions. This tension that regionalist parties face between internal and external constraints on strategic behaviour has been noted in other work (see Elias, 2009; Hepburn, 2009; Elias and Mees, 2017). But the analysis presented here goes beyond these studies in explaining the specific implications of these strategic pressures for the strategic choices made by regionalist parties. Moreover, analysis of the SNP points to intra-party power relations as a crucial mediating variable affecting whether and how electoral strategies change in response to external systemic or political pressures. To date, scholars of territorial politics have paid limited attention to the internal life of regionalist parties. Exploring its impact on these actors' strategic preferences is an obvious area where future scholarly effort should be directed, with a particular need for more systematic data collection and analysis of organizational variables.

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<sup>i</sup> The theoretical framework as developed by Elias *et al.* (2015) encompasses state-wide parties as well as regionalist parties; the strategies as summarised here only consider how they are expected to operate for the latter.

<sup>ii</sup> A total of nine interviews were conducted in November and December 2012. Where this material is referred to in the text, the date on which the interview was conducted and the individual's general role within the party is referenced, in order to retain the anonymity of the interviewee.

<sup>iii</sup> This had also been a policy commitment in the 1999 election manifesto, although it received little attention given the strategy of downplaying independence as an election issue. Prior to the creation of the Scottish Parliament, the SNP's policy had been that negotiations on Scottish independence

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would begin automatically upon the SNP securing a majority of Scottish MPs in the House of Commons.