

Bringing Government Back to the People?
The Impact of Political Decentralization on Voter Engagement in Western Europe

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Abstract:

This paper examines how political decentralization affects levels of voter engagement. Political actors have often justified processes of political decentralization as means to “bring government back to the people.” While these claims are consistent with scholarly theories on voter turnout, aggregate-level analysis does not reveal the expected net shifts in voter attitudes and behavior in decentralized countries of Western Europe. Rather than signaling the relative unimportance of constitutional reform for voter engagement, this study finds that decentralization differentially affects members of the electorate. Using survey data to examine pre- and post-decentralization voter participation in Scotland, I determine that partisans of the regionalist, Scottish National Party are more receptive to the effects of this institutional change than affiliates of the national, mainstream parties. This paper suggests, therefore, that institutions do not necessarily have an independent effect on voter behavior; their impact is mediated by the individual-level characteristics of those voters.

Over the past thirty years, waves of political decentralization have swept across countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe. While scholars have emphasized the impact of these reforms on economic efficiency (Tiebout 1956; Weingast 1995; Oates 1999), policy credibility (Bednar et al. 2001) and even ethnic cohesion (Zariski 1989), political elites in these nations have instead stressed the degree to which decentralization brings government back to the people. The message spun to the electorate is “greater voter access and political efficacy” rather than “less policy inefficiency.” These effects are not mutually exclusive, but few scholars – whether studying decentralization or voter engagement – have investigated whether this set of voter-oriented electoral promises is ever achieved. Does political decentralization actually lead to greater voter engagement? Specifically, do voters experience higher levels of political efficacy and trust in government and turn out in higher rates to subnational elections after the implementation of decentralization? Conversely, do turnout rates to national elections drop after the transfer of significant powers to subnational levels of government? And can this institutional change account for cross-national differences in voter engagement?

When these questions are asked in the context of Western European countries, unexpected answers emerge. Aggregate analyses of survey and electoral data reveal that most countries, regardless of their governmental organization, have experienced a general decline in their levels of voter engagement from 1970 to 1999. A closer examination of the timing of these shifts in voter attitudes and behavior does offer some support for the original decentralization hypotheses. Yet even in these cases, the effects of constitutional reform are more muted than expected.

Rather than signaling the relative unimportance of political decentralization for voter engagement, these findings suggest that a more nuanced process is at work. Trading aggregate-

level analysis for an examination of individual-level data, I find that the decentralizing reforms differentially affect members of the electorate. Specifically, decentralization more strongly alters the attitudes and behavior of partisans of ethnoterritorial or regionalist parties than those of affiliates of national, mainstream parties. Consistent with the claim that decentralization is a form of appeasement to regionalist political parties (Heller 2002; Meguid forthcoming), the creation of powerful subnational governing structures increases subnational turnout and satisfaction levels and decreases the national turnout levels of supporters of the reforms, leaving those not politically mobilized around this constitutional change relatively unaffected. Structural factors, thus, are not ineffective. Rather, this study finds that their impact is mediated by the characteristics of voters.

The paper is organized into three sections. I begin by examining the theoretical underpinnings of the commonplace claim that decentralization should increase voter engagement. Once these hypotheses have been derived, I briefly analyze the trends in voter efficacy, political interest and turnout across 13 centralized and decentralized Western European countries from 1970 to 1999. I complement this aggregate-level analysis with an in-depth, examination of individual-level voter engagement rates and their causes in the newly decentralized nation of Scotland. I conclude with implications of these aggregate and individual level findings for other decentralized countries around the globe.

Theoretical Background: Predicted Effects of Political Decentralization on Voter Engagement

The Government are determined that the people of Scotland should have a greater say over their own affairs. With their agreement we will change the way Scotland is governed by legislating to create a Scottish parliament with devolved powers within the UK. – British Labour Party’s 1997 White Paper on Scottish Devolution¹

In an attempt to win popular support for decentralization reforms, political actors from across Western Europe and around the globe often reach for one appeal: they claim that the transfer of political and legislative powers to a directly elected subnational level of government, i.e., political decentralization, brings government back to the people. These actors imply that having politicians close at hand increases the voters’ access to them. As suggested by the British Labour government’s White Paper quoted above, greater access is thought to translate into greater voter influence over the policy-making process. But the politician’s logic does not end there. It seems only reasonable to think that the more efficacious a voter is, the more satisfied he will be with the political system. Decentralization, therefore, is presented as a means to increase both the efficacy and satisfaction of a voter.

This message touted by politicians is deliberately designed to drum up voter support for a given constitutional reform and its political party sponsor. Closer analysis shows, however, that it is not inconsistent with the conclusions of scholarly work on voter engagement. While there is no existing research that examines the voter-engagement effects of decentralization per se, hypotheses consistent with the politicians’ expectations emerge if we view political decentralization in terms of the structural changes that it produces. Following the existing literature on decentralization (see O’Neill 2003, 2005; Rodden 2006), political decentralization is defined as the reallocation of political and legislative powers over a set of policy areas from the

¹ “Scotland’s Parliament,” cited in Paterson 1998: 287.

central government at the national level to directly elected subnational assemblies.² The most critical structural changes brought about by political decentralization include a decrease in the perceived distance of voters to politicians and policy-making apparatus and an increase in the importance of the subnational government.

Increasing the Proximity of the Government to the Governed

Consistent with the claims of the vote-seeking politicians, researchers of voter turnout have drawn a connection between efficacy, political interest and rates of voter participation. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) and Teixeira (1992), among others, have argued that efficacious people – those who “sense that (their) political activities can influence what the government actually does” (Finkel quoted in Rosenstone and Hansen 1993: 15) – are more likely to vote than non-efficacious individuals.³ Similarly, Teixeira (1992) and Abramson (1983) have found, in the American case, that voters with higher levels of interest in politics and those who trust the government to do what is right are more likely to participate in elections.

While the mechanism linking these attitudes to voter participation may be rather obvious, how does decentralization affect voter attitudes? As mentioned earlier, decentralization brings political powers geographically closer to the electorate. The creation of subnational governments means that more people live in close proximity to legislatures and political representatives; this attribute is no longer limited to those who reside in the capital city. By itself, this geographic closeness serves to increase perceptions of access to policy-makers. In addition, the multiplication of the number of elected officials reduces the ratio of citizens to

² Triesman (2002: 11) refers to this as electoral decentralization.

³ Finkel drew a distinction between external and internal efficacy, with the latter referring to “a sense of personal competence in one’s ability to understand politics and participate in politics.” Finkel quoted in Rosenstone and Hansen 1993: 15.

representatives, again increasing the elector's potential access to such officials and feelings of efficacy, particularly to the new subnational government.

Similar arguments about proximity can be made with regard to political interest and trust. Decentralization ensures that politics no longer happens elsewhere. As a result, local media are more likely to cover political issues, increasing the possibility that voters will be exposed to and will become interested in politics. Likewise, with politicians closer and therefore, more visible, faith and trust in government should rise. These structural changes should specifically affect trust in the proximal, or subnational government.⁴ Voters can be confident that improprieties will not go unnoticed, the logic being that such schemes would be occurring in one's own backyard.⁵ Thus, rational politicians should reduce their improper behavior, and government should become more trustworthy.

With efficacy, political trust and interest in politics on the rise, decentralization, therefore, is expected to cause an increase in voter participation rates. Based on the proximity argument, turnout rates in subnational elections should be high. If pushed, this logic implies that, for voters in districts far from the site of the national legislature, rates of voter participation should be higher in subnational elections than in national elections.

Increasing the Importance of Subnational Elections (and Decreasing That of National Elections)

Increasing voter proximity to the government is not the only means by which decentralization is expected to influence voter engagement. It has long been argued by scholars

⁴ However, with a larger percentage of political and economic competencies becoming "local," one might expect that faith in "government in general" should also increase.

⁵ This claim, of course, ignores the possibility that importing scandals into one's backyard will sour voters' opinions of government more than when such problems were out of sight and, thus, out of mind. In another paper, I will explicitly examine how variation in the perceived competence of subnational governments over time affects levels of voter engagement. One can imagine that even if decentralization brings an incompetent government "closer to

of voter turnout that participation rates also vary by the importance of the election. While this concept has been accorded many meanings,⁶ one common interpretation focuses on the degree of policy-making power of the body to be elected. Elections to councils with few political and legislative competencies are thus perceived to be less critical than elections to councils or parliaments with significant powers. Voters are expected to turn out in lower rates to these “second-order” elections than to the “first-order” ones.⁷

Comparisons of national level elections with both European Parliamentary elections and local elections confirm the validity of these claims (Eijk et al. 1996; Blais 2000; Achen and Sinnott n.d.). But, what are the implications of these hypotheses for a country undergoing decentralization? The transfer of political and legislative competencies to subnational units increases the relative importance of those governing institutions. If there exists a positive relationship between the importance of a level of government and participation rate to its elections, turnout to subnational or regional elections should increase relative to other levels. Where subnational governments have more power than local levels, participation rates in the subnational elections should increase relative to past levels of local election turnout. Consistent with this claim is the expectation that turnout levels in national elections should decrease after decentralization. Indeed, in those cases in which the national government has been stripped of many of its powers and those powers have been transferred to the subnational level, one would even expect to see turnout rates to subnational elections surpass those to national ones.

Whether one considers the impact of decentralization in terms of how it alters a voter’s proximity to the government – and thus, levels of efficacy, trust in government and political

the people” and trust declines as a result, we might still expect to see an increase in the political efficacy of these more proximal individuals.

⁶ Blais (2000) and Gray and Caul (2000) used this term to indicate the closeness of the electoral race.

interest – or how it increases the salience of subnational elections, the expected effects on voter engagement corroborate the original claim made by vote-seeking politicians: decentralization should contribute to higher levels of voter engagement, specifically at the subnational level. Voter participation in subnational elections should be higher than participation in less important elections; these are typically local-level elections. And while not discussed by the decentralizing politicians, participation rates in elections to the now-weakened national governments should also decline.

Decentralization in Western Europe: Assessing the Trends in Voter Attitudes and Behavior

The proliferation in the number of decentralized countries over the past thirty years provides the impetus as well as the data for testing these relationships between political decentralization and voter engagement.⁸ In Western Europe alone, five countries - Spain, Belgium, Italy, France and the United Kingdom – have decentralized legislative power and created subnational levels of government during this time.⁹ Several other countries in the region already have federal systems of government.¹⁰ Thus, whether and how decentralization affects voter engagement attitudes and behavior has wide-reaching implications for the democratic health and political stability of this region, let alone others.

⁷ These terms were coined by Reif and Schmidt (Reif 1984). The categories were originally conceived to differentiate between national-level elections and those to the European Parliament.

⁸ For this examination of voter engagement, I am restricting my sample to those countries which have established subnational levels of government with political and legislative powers. It is less clear how the decentralization of financial powers alone (i.e., fiscal decentralization) affects voter engagement.

⁹ The degree of political decentralization, not to mention fiscal decentralization, varies across these cases. However, as will be discussed later, further differentiation of these cases by degree of decentralization does not help explain the observed trends in voter engagement.

¹⁰ Those countries already possessing federal systems of government are Austria, Finland, Germany and Switzerland. When combined with the five decentralizing countries, this brings the total number of decentralized states to nine (Harmel and Janda 1982).

Attitudinal Effects of Political Decentralization

What does the aggregate data reveal about the engagement levels of decentralized states in Western Europe? If our hypotheses are correct, decentralization should lead to an increase in attitudinal measures of voter engagement, starting with the first set of elections for the new subnational bodies.¹¹ However, such a clear, positive relationship between decentralization and voter attitudes does not emerge from the available data.¹² According to the Eurobarometer surveys, the perceived efficacy of respondents in nine Western European countries generally declined from 1973 to 1982, the period for which this data is available.¹³ This trend was observed across centralized and decentralized countries alike.¹⁴ More damning for the aforementioned decentralization hypotheses, the level of efficacy in Italy – the only country which underwent decentralizing reforms during this time period – fell after the strengthening of its regional governmental system in 1976.¹⁵ It dropped from its 1976 level of 49.1% to its decade-low level of 43.7% in 1982.¹⁶ However, this lack of comparable data from other decentralizing countries and the very general nature of the Eurobarometer efficacy question limits the conclusiveness of this finding about the non-effects of decentralization.

A clearer test of the decentralization hypotheses comes from an examination of changes in levels of political interest – a variable which is expected to be affected by these constitutional reforms at any and every governmental level. In Table 1, I present the percentages of

¹¹ The paucity of consistent cross-national and time-series survey data on attitudinal aspects of voter engagement limits our test to trends in voter efficacy and political interest.

¹² Because of the lack of consistent cross-national and time-series survey data on political trust, I cannot test the effect of decentralization on this third attitudinal indicator of engagement. Shifts in this variable will be analyzed in the Scottish case study, however.

¹³ This conclusion is based on analysis of the percentage of Eurobarometer survey respondents who answered “yes, I can” to the following question: “Do you think that if things are not going well in [your country name here] people like yourself can help bring a change for the better, or not?” Neither this question nor a comparable one was asked after 1982 (Schmitt and Scholz 2000).

¹⁴ The only exceptions to this downward trend were respondents in Luxembourg and the Great Britain, where the percentage of efficacious individuals increased by 2.7 and 2.2 percentage points, respectively.

Eurobarometer survey respondents in thirteen countries who claimed to be interested “a great deal” or “to some extent” in politics.¹⁷ This data is shown for 1983, the first year the question was asked, and 1994, the last year in the series, along with the percentage change experienced between these two years.

What relationships, if any, emerge from this information? First, there appears to be no clear pattern to the change in political interest across this set of Western European countries; in nine countries, political interest increases over the course of the decade, whereas in four countries, enthusiasm for politics declines. As with the abbreviated data series on efficacy, the unitary versus federal status of the country does not seem to make a clear difference in the absolute levels of political interest or how that interest changes over time.¹⁸

[Table 1 about here]

The conclusions change, however, when we consider the levels of this variable before and after the implementation of decentralization. Chart 1 portrays the trajectory of political interest in Belgium and France – the two countries that held their inaugural regional elections between 1983 and 1994. In both cases, interest in politics increased following the inaugural elections of the regional government. After the 1989 elections in the region of Brussels, the Belgian level of political interest rose from 36.6% to 37.2%. In France, the rise was more dramatic, with the percentage of people interested in politics increasing from 44.6% before the 1986 regional elections to 49.3% afterwards.¹⁹ While political interest levels in both countries would later decline, this boost following the decentralization reforms suggests that the structural

¹⁵ Putnam (1993: 39) argues that “regional institutional autonomy and identity...flowered” in 1976.

¹⁶ Own calculations, Schmitt and Scholz 2000.

¹⁷ The question was “To what extent would you say you are interested in politics?” Schmitt and Scholz 2000.

factors might have been at play. Bringing the government back to the people could account for this increase in their interest in the political process.

[Chart 1 about here]

Behavioral Effects of Political Decentralization

This examination of changes in voter attitudes has yielded inconsistent support for the purported relationship between decentralization and voter engagement. Given these muted attitudinal effects, does political decentralization affect a country's turnout levels? Do voters turn out in higher levels for elections to the newly empowered subnational governments than for elections to the less important local levels? And does turnout to national elections decline after the creation or strengthening of subnational governments?

The paucity of time series data on local election turnout rates again renders analysis difficult. However, while a lack of information prevents a systematic and rigorous comparison of Italian and Spanish local and regional participation rates, the data from the other three decentralizing countries reveal surprising results.²⁰ In these Western European countries, voter participation in local elections was *higher*, not lower, than that in regional elections. As Tables 2A-D reveal,²¹ turnout in the elections for the new regional governments was lower than provincial turnout in Belgium, municipal election turnout in France and local election turnout in

¹⁸ That said, two of the three countries with the largest gains in political interest during this period were countries which had previously decentralized. It is unclear, however, how this constant increase can be attributed to decentralization.

¹⁹ This first number was recorded in 1983, the second in 1988. Own calculations, Schmitt and Scholz 2000.

²⁰ What little local election information I have found for each country confirms the lack of consistent trends across the region. In the late 1990s, local election turnout in Italy was higher than regional election turnout, yet, in Spain, the opposite was true.

²¹ The time intervals in these tables were chosen to highlight participation rates in local and national elections before and after the inaugural election of the new regional governments.

Wales and Scotland.²² A noticeable exception to this finding is the relationship between turnout in departmental and regional elections in France.²³ Yet, in general, the “second-order” hypothesis does not seem to hold: voter turnout in subnational elections was lower than turnout in less important local elections.

[Tables 2A-F about here]

While this hypothesis involves a comparison of turnout rates across levels of elections, a second behavioral implication of decentralization suggests effects for turnout over time. With the transfer of significant policy competencies to subnational governments, does subsequent turnout to elections of the weakened national government decline? The data in the tables provide evidence in favor of this claim: national participation rates have fallen in almost all countries since their implementation of decentralization. Indeed, in Belgium and France, turnout rates in the national elections have even dropped to levels lower than those seen in some of the subnational elections.

These trends seem to confirm the power of these constitutional reforms, but a closer examination, once again, weakens the force of these findings. First, decentralization should only lead to regional participation rates exceeding national levels in countries where substantial political and economic powers have been invested in the subnational governments. Whereas it could be argued that this is the case in Belgium, it is not true of the French decentralization process. France’s high subnational (or low national) turnout rates cannot be explained by the institutional changes associated with decentralization.

²² The French governmental system is divided into four levels, here listed in decreasing order of size and, arguably, of importance: national, regional, departmental and communal. This latter level is governed by municipal councils (conseils municipaux) and thus, turnout in those elections is referred to as municipal election turnout.

²³ Departments are smaller territorial units than regions. The former are governed by general councils (conseils généraux), and the latter are governed by regional councils (conseils régionaux).

Second, it is not clear that the decline in national level participation in the five decentralizing countries is a direct result of decentralization. Wattenberg (2000: 72) has shown that almost every country in Western Europe has experienced a fall in turnout rates in national legislative elections since World War II; one arrives at similar conclusions when limiting the analysis to the last thirty years. Thus, declining turnout does not serve to distinguish decentralizing from already decentralized or even unitary states. In fact, the only Western European country which experienced no change or an increase in national-level participation between 1970 and 2002 was Spain, a country which underwent decentralization during this period!

Having examined various measures of voter engagement across centralized and decentralized countries over the past thirty years, we are left with what conclusions? In general, attitudinal and turnout trends in decentralizing countries resemble those in their more constitutionally static Western European counterparts. In contrast to the original predictions, decentralization has not caused overall increases in efficacy levels and interest in politics or high levels of voter turnout in the subnational level elections. That said, the story becomes more complicated when we consider the levels of these variables before and after the implementation of decentralization reforms. For example, political interest increased and national turnout rates decreased, as hypothesized, following the inaugural election of the regional parliaments.²⁴ We, thus, cannot say that decentralization has no impact on voter engagement; we can only conclude that its influence is weaker, often much weaker, than expected.

²⁴ Moreover, due to the lack of aggregate level time-series data, it remains unclear whether efficacy levels changed relative to the creation of subnational governments in Spain, Belgium, France and the United Kingdom.

Accounting for Muffled Effects: Explaining the Impact of Decentralization on Voter Engagement

While one goal of this analysis is to assess the degree to which typical claims about decentralization are realized, a second related goal is to explain its observed effects on voter engagement. Why are the relationships between the variables either absent or not as strong as expected?

Generally findings which run counter to theoretical expectations suggest a series of possible explanations. The first is the presence of measurement error. In this analysis, I adopted the approach commonly used in studies of voter turnout; I employed aggregate measures of attitudinal variables and voter behavior. However, there is reason to doubt the appropriateness of this technique for understanding the effects of decentralization. In countries where only a few regions receive substantial political and legislative powers, or where the process does not occur simultaneously in all regions, national level attitudinal figures do not accurately capture the true effects of decentralization reforms on specific populations; attitudinal and behavioral shifts in the affected regions are obscured by the stability of these variables in the other regions.²⁵ It is therefore possible that these tools – tools used in similar analyses - are insufficient to measure the phenomenon.

A second standard explanation for unexpected results is the omission of important variables. Putting aside idiosyncratic reasons for why one country or one election did not yield the predicted outcome, there may be generalizable factors which can systematically account for variation over time. In the work on voter turnout, a common culprit for explaining muted change

²⁵ Uneven decentralization also alters the effectiveness of survey instruments to record attitudinal changes. As mentioned previously, the Eurobarometer measures the interest and efficacy of an individual towards “government.” In regions where subnational governments have obtained significant political and economic competencies, “government” may be interpreted as the more important subnational one. However, in non-devolved regions,

in participation is compulsory voting laws (Powell 1986; Jackman 1987). Indeed, this seems to be the main cause of the relatively high and steady turnout rates observed in Belgium across local, regional and national elections. Other institutional changes which often accompany decentralization could also have been a factor in the declining voter turnout. Research by Powell (1986) and Jackman (1987) suggests that plurality rules and bicameral legislatures depress levels of voter engagement.²⁶ In this case, however, these institutions are not to blame; none of the five decentralizing Western European countries adopted them for its subnational governments.

The Partisanship Explanation

The reason for the systematically muted effect of decentralization lies, I argue, in a different set of intervening and omitted variables. It has been assumed by institutional theories of voter turnout that structural changes to the electoral environment equally affect all participants. According to this logic, the empowerment of regional governments should cause all voters to recognize the importance of the subnational elections. However, individual-level research on voter engagement has concluded that the characteristics of voters alter their attitudes and behavior. For example, age, gender and educational level have long been considered good predictors of voter turnout, regardless of the institutional environment in which the individuals are located (e.g., Powell 1986; Blais 2000).

While these specific traits appear unrelated to the issue of constitutional reform, there are theoretical reasons to suspect that the impact of these decentralizing reforms on voter

“government” still refers to national government. Confusion over the meaning of such a survey question in asymmetrically devolved countries further compounds the problem of measurement error.

²⁶ The logic of their argument is that the high electoral disproportionality (Jackman 1987) and low overall electoral competitiveness of districts (Powell 1986; Jackman 1987) associated with plurality rules reduce incentives for parties to mobilize voters and for rational voters, especially supporters of minor parties, to vote. Bicameralism, Jackman (1987) notes, reduces the direct influence of members of the lower house on the resulting legislation, and

engagement is influenced by another individual-level characteristic: voter partisanship. By partisanship, I am not merely referring to whether the voter is or is not attached to a party, as is done in most individual-level studies of voter turnout. Rather, I am concerned with the *identity* of that affiliated party. Specifically, I argue that voters who identify with a regionalist or ethnoterritorial party should be more receptive to the attitudinal and behavioral changes caused by decentralization than those who support mainstream national parties.

The relationship between regionalist party attachment and increased voter engagement under decentralization is not just wild speculation. Rather, it follows from the finding that most Western European countries adopted these reforms to appease regionalist parties (Meguid forthcoming). In Spain, Belgium, France, the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, Italy, regional-level parties or pressure groups campaigned for the transfer of political, legislative and even financial competencies to the subnational level. To quell the publicity and electoral threat posed by these ethnoterritorial and regional actors, mainstream parties often reluctantly agreed to the creation of empowered subnational governments. The partisans of the mainstream parties, therefore, are not necessarily natural advocates of decentralization. In general, the strongest proponents of the reforms, and thus, those individuals who should be most receptive to the attitudinal and behavioral changes which accompanied them, are those who identify with the regionalist parties.

My finding of the muted effect of decentralization on aggregate measures of voter engagement across the five decentralizing countries would be consistent with this hypothesis. With only a portion of the electorate reacting to the increased importance of the subnational

thus, reduces the voter's probability of influencing government and legislation with his or her vote in an election for that lower house.

elections relative to the national-level ones,²⁷ it is no surprise that overall rates of efficacy, interest in politics and turnout in subnational elections have not been much higher. Bringing government back to only *some* of the people is not as effective as to all of them.

Testing the Partisanship Hypothesis: Examining Voter Engagement in Scotland

In the rest of the paper, I test this partisan hypothesis of engagement by examining the determinants of voter engagement before and after the implementation of decentralization. To avoid the ecological fallacy problem and conclusively establish that particular characteristics are associated with voters and non-voters, I employ individual-level data.

Because of the paucity of relevant questions on cross-national surveys, I must restrict my analysis to one country. For this paper, I focus on how voter attitudes and behavior change as a result of decentralization in one of the regions discussed above, Scotland. Not only is this a case in which pre- and post-decentralization data on voter attitudes and behavior is abundant, but Scotland also serves as a ideal, but not atypical, case for the testing of both the decentralization and partisanship hypotheses. Significant political, legislative and even financial competencies were devolved to the new Scottish Parliament, creating a powerful and proximal subnational government. The institutional form of the new government – a unicameral legislature elected via the Additional Member System which has proportional tendencies – is considered conducive to political turnout (Powell 1986; Jackman 1987).²⁸ Unlike in Belgium, there are no compulsory voting laws in Scotland to mask the independent effects of decentralization on voter

²⁷ Not only are regionalist party identifiers only part of the electorate, but they are, in most countries, a political minority. Therefore, the impact of their attitudinal changes on the overall levels of political efficacy, trust and interest in a country should only be minimal.

²⁸ The AMS system used in the Scottish Parliamentary elections is a mixed member proportional (MMP) system (Lundberg 2003). Thus, while it is less proportional than the simple PR systems examined by Powell (1986) and Jackman (1987), it should be associated with higher turnout than the highly disproportional plurality systems they examined.

participation. As is critical to the partisanship hypothesis, the main proponent of Scottish devolution was the regionalist Scottish National Party (SNP). Indeed, the British Labour Party and Labour governments only reluctantly supported decentralization when their electoral standing was threatened by the regionalist actor (Meguid forthcoming). Given these characteristics, Scotland emerges as a most-likely case; if decentralization does lead to increased levels of voter engagement, especially amongst regionalist partisans, it should occur in Scotland.

Typical Findings at the Aggregate Level

If we begin by considering aggregate levels of voter engagement in Scotland, we find data consistent with the mixed trends seen across the decentralizing countries of Western Europe; decentralization in Scotland did not produce bold changes in general voter behavior or attitudes. Turnout in the inaugural election to the Scottish Parliament was much lower than most politicians hoped and than the decentralization hypotheses predicted. At 58.9%, it was less than the average level of participation in elections to the less-powerful local Scottish councils held between 1995 and 2001.²⁹

That unexpected turnout level was paired, however, with an anticipated drop in Scottish participation in the first national parliamentary election following decentralization. Scottish turnout to the 2001 Westminster General Election was 58.2% as compared to 71.3% in 1997. While voter turnout to the 2001 General Election was markedly poor across all of the United Kingdom, the participation rate in Scotland was even lower and the size of the drop, even

²⁹ Scottish local elections were held on the same day as the first elections to the Scottish Parliament. Given that voters who turned out for the local elections also could very easily have cast a ballot, or turned out, for the Scottish subnational elections with little extra effort, the gap in the turnout rates for these two elections suggest that people were deliberately voting in the local, but not in the subnational elections. This outcome runs counter to the expectations of both the decentralization turnout model and the theory of “roll off,” whereby voters “vote for ‘prestige’ offices but not for lower offices on the same ballot and at the same election” (Burnham 1965: 9).

greater, than in the rest of the country.³⁰ And when compared with the albeit poor turnout level to the first subnational election, engagement in the first national level election post-decentralization was modestly lower.

The attitudinal evidence also is not conclusive. A comparison of British Election Study survey data from before and after the initiation of decentralization reveals that increasing the proximity of the government to the governed did not cause the anticipated jump in general political interest.³¹ In 1997, 27.1% of the Scottish respondents expressed “a good deal” or “quite a lot” of interest in politics as opposed to 26.8% in 2001.³² While political interest remained fairly stable, levels of voter efficacy did rise as expected – from 22.5% to 28.4% as Scotland decentralized.³³ The 1997 and 2001 BES survey questions do not allow for analyses of trends in general government trustworthiness or the perceived importance of subnational and national parliaments over time.

Partisanship Effects Present in Scottish Engagement at the Subnational Level

The mixed attitudinal and behavioral results suggest that the Scottish constitutional reform was not proving to be the powerful motivator that politicians had promised. Analysis of individual-level survey data does indicate that engaged individuals were still participating at higher rates than their apathetic countrymen. Thus, the failures of decentralization cannot be explained by wide-scale erosion of the connection between the perceived importance of

³⁰ The percentage decline of General Election voter turnout in Scotland was greater than in the UK: 18.4% drop as opposed to 16.8% in the UK as a whole.

³¹ The British Election Studies provide information on engagement levels towards politics and government broadly defined. In the next section, I trade the British Election Studies for the Scottish Social Attitudes surveys in order to capture engagement attitudes specific to the Scottish Parliament and the UK government. Unfortunately, the SSA surveys were not administered prior to 1999, and thus, could not be used to establish baseline engagement levels.

³² Own calculations, McCrone et al. 1999; Clarke et al. 2001.

³³ Questions on the trustworthiness of government – whether national or subnational – were not asked in both 1997 and 2001 British Election Studies.

elections, efficacy, trust and the propensity to vote.³⁴ Rather, the key to understanding why the expected shifts in voter engagement were so muted is to look at the quantity and identity of those voters influenced by decentralization. Because the decentralizing reforms were enacted swiftly in Scotland, not in a protracted and piecemeal process as in Belgium and Spanish, we should expect to see sharp changes in voter (in particular, partisan voter) behavior and, to some extent, attitudes following the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. The focus of my analysis, therefore, is on the levels of voter engagement in the first subnational and national elections after devolution.

Turning to the findings of the 1999 Scottish Social Attitudes survey conducted during and following the first elections to the Scottish Parliament, we find that our conclusions about the muted effect of decentralization change when partisanship is taken into consideration.³⁵ As shown in Table 3, only 56% of all respondents to the 1999 survey claimed that it matters “a great deal” or “a lot” which party wins in Scotland.³⁶ This figure was just slightly more than the proportion of people who care which party wins in elections to the relatively powerless local governments.³⁷ However, this perception about the importance of the subnational elections was not evenly shared across the electorate; voter attitudes differed by partisanship. SNP partisans

³⁴ Analysis of individual survey data from the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary Election Study confirms the existence of these relationships. For example, 81.8% of those who believe that who wins the Scottish Parliamentary elections matter quite a bit or more voted. Only 57.4% of those who discount the importance of these elections (“it matters not very much or not at all”) voted. Efficacy is similarly correlated with turnout. 76.8% of those who claimed that the Parliament will give them more say in Scottish government voted in the 1999 elections as opposed to 45.6% who said it would give them less say. This same relationship exists with other attitudinal predictors such as trust in government. Those who trust (all or most of the time) the Scottish Parliament to work in Scotland’s interest were also more likely to vote than their counterparts who trust it “only sometimes” or “almost never”; 74.6% in the first category voted in 1999 as opposed to 60.8% in the second category. The one exception to this trend is that those who are interested in politics were not more likely to vote in the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary elections than those not interested; 28.8% of those who have a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of interest in politics voted in 1999 as opposed to 34% who were “not very” or “not at all” interested in politics. Own calculations, Bromley et al. 2000.

³⁵ This survey is also known as the Scottish Parliamentary Election Study (1999).

³⁶ Own calculations, Bromley et al. 2000.

³⁷ 46% of respondents “cared a great deal” about the outcome of those local elections. Own calculations, Bromley et al. 2000.

were more likely than any other group of mainstream party identifiers to view Scottish Parliamentary elections as important. Conversely, 27.6% of those who professed no affiliation with any party claimed that it matters who wins the election to the new parliament.

[Table 3 about here]

Similar partisanship differences emerge when examining attitudinal measures associated with increasing the proximity of the government to the governed: those of trust in government, efficacy and political interest. 81.0% of those surveyed trust that the Scottish Parliament will work in Scotland's interest at least most of the time.³⁸ Yet, as seen in the above table, SNP partisans were more trusting of the regional government than those affiliated with other parties. Likewise, while 64.2% of survey respondents indicated that the creation of the regional parliament would give them more say in government, the level was even higher among SNP supporters. With both attitudinal variables, those voters lacking ties to parties appeared least or less impressed with the new regional institution than their partisan counterparts.

There was one exception to this general finding. While levels of political interest did vary by voter partisanship, it was the Liberal Democratic supporters, not those of the SNP, who maintained the highest level of interest in politics in general.³⁹ 31.4% of Liberal Democrat identifiers, 27.1% of Tory affiliates, 23.2% of SNP partisans and 22.4% of Labourites expressed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of political interest in 1999. As was the case with most of the other variables, the lowest level of interest in politics was held by the non-partisans; only 5.4% of them were enthusiastic.

³⁸ That is significantly higher than the paltry 31.9% who trust the UK government to look out for Scotland's interests. Own calculations, Bromley et al. 2000.

³⁹ This question asked about the respondent's general interest in politics. There were no questions in the 1999 Scottish Social Attitudes survey specifically enquiring about a person's level of interest in subnational, or Scottish politics.

On the whole, these figures suggest that SNP voters were more receptive to the attitudinal shifts linked to decentralization. It is not surprising, therefore, that SNP partisans were more likely than most party supporters to turnout for the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary election. As shown in Table 4, close to eighty percent of regionalist party identifiers participated in the election as opposed to just over three-quarters of Conservative and just over seventy percent of Labour partisans. In analyses not shown, similar, if not more pronounced, differences emerge when examining turnout in the 1999 election by vote in the 1997 General Election. Table 4 reveals that only the Liberal Democratic partisans participated at higher rates than the Scottish Nationals. Consistent with the results of other turnout studies (e.g. Powell 1986; Blais 2000), those individuals without any partisan ties were much less likely to vote.

[Table 4 about here]

The importance of this differential rate of turnout should not be underestimated. Indeed, it signifies a break from past levels of SNP turnout. Whereas partisans of the regionalist party participated at an above average rate in the 1999 election, survey results reveal a below average turnout level for the Scottish nationalists in the pre-decentralization 1997 General Election;⁴⁰ according to the 1999 Scottish Social Attitudes survey, 79.8% of SNP partisans recalled voting as opposed to 82.6% of all Scots interviewed.⁴¹ Moreover, this increase in voter participation between 1997 and 1999 was not observed for any other partisan group. The percentage of Labour self-identifiers and Conservative partisans who turned out in 1999 was down 15.2 and 11.5 percentage points, respectively, from the 1997 levels. While, as noted in Table 4, Liberal

⁴⁰ Own calculations, McCrone et al. 1999.

⁴¹ While it is known that the accuracy of recalled voting behavior responses decreases as the time between the survey and the election in question increases (see Weir 1975), analyses of SNP partisan turnout rates from the 1997 Scottish Election Study reveal similar findings. In that survey, 77.9% of SNP partisans reported having voted as opposed to 80.7% of all Scots interviewed.

Democratic participation in the 1999 Scottish election was higher than SNP partisan turnout, that level also represented a *decline* from the Liberal Democrats' 1997 rate of 88.4%.⁴²

Perhaps more importantly for assessing the effect of decentralization, SNP partisans were more likely than the average survey respondent to have turned out for the Scottish Parliamentary elections, but *not* to have participated in the weaker local council elections. Recall that the decentralization hypotheses predicted that these constitutional reforms would result in subnational turnout rates which surpassed those to the less important local government elections. Observed aggregate turnout rates discussed earlier reveal that this did not happen, but there were some voters who followed the pattern anticipated by the decentralization theory of engagement. 3.9% of SNP identifiers as opposed to 2.9% of survey respondents in general participated in the Scottish Parliamentary elections, but did not vote in the local council elections. The SNP partisans' level of differential turnout exceeded all other partisan groups except for the Liberal Democrats who had 5.2% of their identifiers following this pattern.

While the number of survey respondents following this pattern is admittedly small, the fact that SNP (and Liberal Democratic) identifiers stand out from the rest reinforces my conclusions about the mediating role of partisanship on the effects of decentralization. The force of these findings is even greater when one considers that the local elections under discussion

⁴² This finding suggests that the differential participation rate observed among SNP partisans cannot be explained as part of a larger phenomenon of institutionally induced strategic turnout, an alternative explanation whereby the supporters of smaller parties regularly disadvantaged by the plurality system used in the national UK elections have incentives to turn out in greater proportions to the electorally more permissive subnational elections. If the difference between the permissiveness of Westminster's plurality elections and the Scottish Parliament's AMS elections was driving the increased turnout rate of the SNP partisans, we would also expect it to affect supporters of all other small parties, including the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. As just discussed and as will be seen in the regression results displayed in Table 7 for models of turnout in 1999, but not in the 2001 General Election, this was not the case for the Liberal Democrats. In turnout analyses not shown here, the effect of Green Party identification is similarly statistically significant when added to either model in Table 7. Moreover, an analysis of Green Party turnout rates for previous elections reveals that Green partisans participated in lower rates in the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary election than the 1997 Westminster election, a finding that runs counter to the predictions of this alternative strategic theory of turnout. Own calculations, Bromley et al. 2000; National Centre for Social Research 2004. Results available from author upon request.

were held on the same day as the first Scottish Parliamentary elections. Any difference in the turnout rates between these two elections therefore cannot be explained by a respondent's inability to get to the polls; if he or she voted in one election, then he or she could have - without additional transportation cost - voted in the second.

Other possible explanations for turnout gaps likewise prove inconsistent with our findings. Studies (e.g., Paterson et al. 2001: 70) show that the introduction of the AMS electoral system for the Scottish Parliamentary elections and the use of multiple paper ballots for the concurrent local and Scottish Parliamentary elections caused considerable confusion among the electorate. Yet, while confusion could have increased the number of invalid ballots, thereby reducing the turnout rate, it is more likely that confused voters would have failed to cast ballots for the Scottish Parliament elected under a new voting system than for the old local councils elected under familiar electoral rules.

Similarly, voter fatigue, a factor highlighted in the US literature on differential turnout rates, is unable to account for the observed Scottish trends. While it is plausible that Scottish voters forwent casting ballots for the less important local offices during the concurrent regional-local elections because they were overwhelmed and tired, as the literature on "roll off" (e.g., Burnham 1965) would suggest, this factor should have had a more even effect across partisan groups. The fact that SNP partisans were more likely than most respondents to cast a ballot for the regional elections and not for the concurrent local elections seems indicative of a conscious decision – a decision consistent with the differences in power and importance of the two levels of government for the "Scottish" identifiers. While more research is needed into the reasons behind this voting gap, the findings appear to reinforce my partisanship hypothesis.

Partisanship Effects Present in Engagement at the UK Level

As the Introduction implied, the emphasis of decentralization-peddling politicians has been largely on its effects on attitudes and behaviors at the subnational level. Recall, however, that decentralization also has implications for subsequent engagement levels at the national level. To what extent did Scottish voters exhibit the predicted declines in trust in and perceived importance of the UK Westminster government after the establishment of devolution? Did they turn out in fewer numbers to the 2001 election of the newly weakened UK government than to previous General Elections? Or were these trends similarly shaped by the partisanship of the Scottish voters? To answer these questions, I examine the data from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSA) of 2001.⁴³

Attitudes of Scottish respondents seem to confirm the expectations of the undifferentiated decentralization hypotheses. In the SSA survey administered just after the first national election post-decentralization, less than half of the respondents (46.2%) stated that it matters “a great deal” or “quite a lot” who won the General Election. More strikingly, a mere 22.3% “trust the UK government to work in Scotland’s best long term interests” at least most of the time. The survey contained no questions on voter efficacy towards the UK government.

While these statistics suggest that Scots in general were more receptive to the proximity and second-order election effects of the erosion of national power than to the similar effects associated with increasing subnational power, further examination of these attitudes reveals that engagement at the national level was influenced by partisanship. As shown in Table 5, SNP partisans were less likely than the average respondent or any other party’s identifiers to believe that it matters who wins the elections to UK Parliament. The effect of regionalist party identification is also clear when examining respondents’ levels of trust in the UK government.

Even though overall trust levels were already very low, SNP partisans were even less convinced than other partisans that the national government would protect Scottish interests.⁴⁴ Indeed, with only 10.7% trusting the UK government at least most of the time, SNP partisans were less trusting than even nonpartisans!

[Table 5 about here]

Partisan effects were also apparent in respondents' levels of political interest. However, the relationship is not as predicted by the partisanship hypothesis. Just as SNP partisans did not have the highest levels of interest in politics in 1999, regionalist party identifiers also were not the most politically interested partisans when surveyed three years later in the context of a General Election. Only 27.1% of SNP partisans expressed interest in politics in general, a percentage slightly higher than the average across all respondents, but lower than the percentage of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. The SNP identifiers' low ranking would be expected by the decentralization theory if the survey question asked about interest in UK politics rather than interest in politics in general.⁴⁵ It is possible that respondents were primed by the UK General Election context to respond in terms of national level politics. More data is needed, however, to make this connection.

In general, therefore, survey analysis reveals that the attitudes of SNP partisans were consistent with the expectations of decentralization theory. Voter turnout rates mirrored these partisan differences in attitudes. Consistent with the partisan hypothesis, partisans of the Scottish regionalist party also were less likely than any other set of party identifiers to turn out for the 2001 national legislative election. As shown in Table 6, 70.2% of SNP identifiers

⁴³ National Centre for Social Research 2004.

⁴⁴ It is interesting, but not surprising, that partisans of those parties typically dominating the national legislative arena were more likely to trust the national government. Even among them, however, trust levels were very low.

⁴⁵ There was no question in the 2001 survey asking specifically about levels of interest in UK politics.

participated in the first UK Westminster election post-decentralization as opposed to over three-quarters of Conservative and Labour partisans and over 83% of Liberal Democrat identifiers.⁴⁶

[Table 6 about here]

Perhaps more importantly, this low participation rate of SNP identifiers represents a drop from their previous national election turnout rate pre-decentralization. Recalled turnout data from the 2001 SSA respondents indicates that the SNP partisan participation level was 85.4% in the 1997 General Election. While the participation rates of all partisan groups were lower in 2001 than in 1997 - as is consistent with trends over time across most advanced industrial democracies – the drop among SNP identifiers was significantly larger. According to the SSA 2001 survey, average turnout in Scotland fell 9.8% between these two General Elections, while that of SNP partisans fell 15.2%. A logit analysis of the likelihood of turning out to the 1997 General Election, but not to the 2001 General Election using the 2001 SSA data demonstrates that this relationship is statistically significant and robust to the inclusion of standard socio-demographic characteristics and even the aforementioned attitudinal effects associated with turning out (i.e., importance of UK elections and trust in UK government).⁴⁷ Thus, even though SNP partisanship is associated with low turnout in national elections relative to other partisanship in general, decentralization further lowered their incentives to turnout.

Combining the Results: SNPers Turn-Out for Scottish Elections, but Stay Home for the British

Faced with national level trends in voter engagement across Western Europe that did not conform to the literature's expectations, this paper has turned to individual-level data, and specifically the Scottish case, to explore the effects of decentralization on individuals' attitudes

⁴⁶ A consistent finding of low relative SNP turnout emerges from the Scottish sample of the 2001 British Election Study. Clarke et al. 2001.

and behavior. The analysis has revealed that partisanship was influencing voter attitudes and participation rates in both the first subnational and first post-devolution national elections in Scotland. SNP partisans are more likely than others to be engaged at the new subnational level and less likely than others at the national level, post-decentralization. In terms of their behavior, SNP identifiers turned out at higher rates than average for the Scottish Parliamentary election and at lower rates than average for the 2001 UK Westminster elections. And consistent with the decentralization hypotheses, SNP partisans were more likely than the average respondent to turn out at higher rates to the subnational than the local elections, and at lower rates to national elections post-decentralization than pre-decentralization.

The findings of analyses from the 1999 and 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes surveys make great strides towards substantiating the partisan hypothesis. What has not been established with data from these two separate surveys, however, is whether any SNP party identifier is following both patterns. If turnout is increasing at the subnational level relative to other non-national elections and decreasing at the national level over time, who are the voters who turned out for the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary elections, but stayed home for the 2001 General Election?

In the absence of panel data, I again examine the recalled turnout data of respondents to the 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes survey. Not surprisingly given the previous analyses, the answer to this question is SNP partisans. Although partisans following this pattern of behavior were far from majorities in any party, SNP identifiers (at 16%) were significantly more likely than partisans of any other party, including those of no party (10%), to turn out for the election to the first Scottish Parliament, but stay home for the subsequent UK Parliamentary election. The percentage of Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative partisans turning out in 1999, but not in 2001 were 8.6%, 9.2% and 9.3%, respectively. While there is no established trend as to how

⁴⁷ Analysis available from the author upon request.

much voter attrition is expected between subnational and national elections simply as a function of declining turnout over time, the drop-off rates of these other three sets of partisans are in-line with the average decline in Westminster Parliamentary Election turnout in Scotland between 1997 and 2001 discussed in the previous section. This consistency suggests that the SNP partisans were the only ones reacting systematically to devolution's weakening of the national and strengthening of the subnational government.⁴⁸

Moving from examination of cross-tabulated data to the results of a logistic regression model, we find that the purported relationship between partisanship and voter turnout is robust. In Table 7, I present two models of differential voter turnout. The dependent variable is coded 1 when a respondent turns out for the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary elections, but not for the 2001 Westminster Parliamentary Election, and 0 otherwise. Controlling for the standard set of sociological variables used in turnout studies,⁴⁹ I find, in Model I, that affiliation with the SNP strongly and significantly increases the likelihood of this pattern of differential turnout.⁵⁰ Confirming my hypothesis, affiliation with the SNP is the only type of partisanship that has a statistically significant effect. Moreover, additional regression analyses demonstrate that SNP identification does not play this positive role with regard to any of the three other combinations of differential turnout between 1999 and 2001; regionalist partisanship emerges as a negative and

⁴⁸ Further confirmation of the direction of this effect on turnout, SNP partisans were less likely than other partisans to turn out for the 2001 General Election and not for the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary election.

⁴⁹ In individual-level studies of turnout, these controls are typically age, gender, education and socioeconomic class (e.g., Powell 1986). In the British and Scottish cases, that list has been lengthened to include religion and housing ownership (Paterson et al. 2001: 55). To control for the curvilinear relationship between age and turnout, I have also included age². The results of the partisan and attitudinal variables are robust to the exclusion of age².

⁵⁰ The positive and statistically significant effect of SNP partisanship in turnout Models I and II is robust to the inclusion of variables measuring national identity (i.e., the degree to which a respondent is Scottish and British) and a yes vote in the 1997 Referendum for a Scottish Parliament. This suggests that SNP partisanship is not merely a proxy for "Scottishness" or support for the Scottish Parliament. A further investigation of the meaning of SNP partisanship is a subject for another paper.

statistically insignificant predictor, *ceteris paribus*, of 1). turnout in 2001, but not in 1999; 2). turnout in both 1999 and 2001; and 3). absenteeism in both 1999 and 2001.⁵¹

[Table 7 about here]

To test the robustness of the finding that SNP partisanship increases the likelihood of turning out in 1999, but not in 2001, I ran a second model which includes attitudinal measures associated with voter turnout. These variables are the importance of the UK government, trust in the Scottish Parliament, say in Scottish government and political interest. Based on the second-order elections and proximity arguments, the transfer of significant policy competencies to the Scottish parliament should lead to a decrease in the importance of the UK government. Similarly, decentralization is expected to lead to an increase in the perceived voter efficacy towards and trust in the subnational government and increased political interest in general. Therefore, the expected effects of these attitudinal variables on the likelihood of turning out for the subnational, but not the national elections should be negative for the first variable and positive for the next three.

The results of the logit regression are presented as Model II in Table 7. Only one of the four attitudinal variables had a significant, independent effect on voter turnout. Consistent with the second-order election effect of decentralization, those voters who believe that it matters who wins the UK General elections were less likely to have turned out in 1999, but not in 2001. Trust in the Scottish Parliament, perceptions of personal efficacy towards the Scottish Parliament and interest in politics – implications of the proximity effect of decentralization - did not play significant roles in determining the devolution-inspired pattern of differential voter turnout.⁵²

⁵¹ Identical findings obtain when the four turnout options are combined into one dependent variable and analyzed in a MNL model with the same set of control variables.

⁵² The statistical insignificance of these variables did not change when the partisanship variables were excluded from the model.

While this regression analysis offers limited support for the independent role of attitudinal variables for this pattern of voter participation, it confirms the lasting power of partisanship. In Model II, SNP affiliation remained a statistically significant predictor of voter turnout despite the addition of these four factors.⁵³ This finding is particularly noteworthy as one might have expected the attitudinal measures, especially the beliefs about the (un)importance of the UK Parliament, to account for turnout in general or for differences in regionalist and mainstream party support behavior.⁵⁴ The robustness of this partisanship variable lends further support to the claim that those who identify with the political proponents of decentralization are more likely to demonstrate the behavioral effects of decentralization than partisans of other parties. Thus, despite the fact that all members of the Scottish electorate are faced with the same objective constitutional reforms, decentralization brings the government back to *some* people more than to others.

Conclusion: How Individual Characteristics Mediate the Effects of Structural Change

Politicians have commonly tried to attract support for decentralization policies by promising that the reforms would “bring government back to the people.” Indeed, there are theoretical justifications for this claim. The literature on voter turnout has found a strong connection between the competencies of the government, accessibility of political representatives and levels of voter engagement. Based on this research, decentralization should lead to an increase in a voter’s efficacy, interest in politics and trust in government. When these

⁵³ The results of the SNP partisanship variable in regressions of the other three combinations of differential turnout are robust to the inclusion of the four attitudinal factors.

⁵⁴ In their own work analyzing the effect of SNP voting on turnout in 1999, Paterson et al. (2001: 55-6) similarly concluded “We may have expected these (attitudinal) measures to explain some of the difference between the turnout of Labour and SNP supporters, perhaps expecting that SNP supporters were more likely to consider the parliament important. However, the inclusion of these variables does not change the finding that those who had voted SNP in 1997 were more likely to turn out and vote in 1999 than those who had voted Labour.”

predictions are disaggregated by level of government, engagement attitudes and voter turnout should strengthen at the subnational level relative to pre-decentralization subnational or local levels and should diminish at the national level relative to pre-decentralization national levels.

While the paucity of consistent cross-national time series electoral and survey data limits our ability to test all these hypotheses across the full set of Western European countries, aggregate measures of the variables that are available do not yield the expected results. Voter engagement levels, as measured by efficacy and interest in politics, do not vary as expected across centralized and decentralized countries and do not consistently increase after the implementation of decentralization in the five decentralizing Western European countries. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the high subnational rates of voter turnout predicted by the decentralization hypotheses do not materialize.

However, if we trade this aggregate analysis of voter engagement for an individual-level one, we find that politicians were not offering empty promises to their electorates. Examination of Scottish voter turnout in the first regional election and first national election post-decentralization reveals, rather, that voters were differentially affected by the decentralization reforms. Consistent with the finding that regional parliaments are often created to appease electorally-threatening regionalist parties, SNP partisans were more receptive than others to the attitudinal and behavioral changes sparked by decentralization. Analysis showed that affiliates of the regionalist party did experience, on average, higher levels of efficacy and trust towards the Scottish Parliament, and perceived its elections to be more important than partisans of national, mainstream parties. As a result, these advocates of decentralization were more likely than the others to participate in the regional elections - a fact which was not true in elections prior to decentralization. Similarly, after the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, SNP identifiers

were less likely to trust the UK government and perceive it to be important, and less likely to turn out to its election in 2001 than other partisan groups. Bringing these two separate analyses together, a logistic analysis of voter turnout finds SNP partisanship to be a strong, positive and robust determinant of the turnout pattern predicted by decentralization – turnout in the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary, but not in the 2001 UK Westminster elections; this pattern was not found among partisans of any other party.

Data availability issues caused this individual-level analysis to be limited to a single case of decentralization. But these findings have implications which extend beyond this nation and even the countries of Western Europe. First, this study suggests that the unexpected drops in voter engagement witnessed in other decentralizing countries may, in fact, be artifacts of the aggregate-level data. Further research is necessary, but it would not be surprising to find that partisans of regionalist parties in Wales, Belgium, France, Spain, Italy and other decentralizing countries around the world have higher rates of efficacy, political interest, trust in government and electoral participation than affiliates of the mainstream parties.

Second, the conclusions of this research challenge a fundamental assumption made by most institutional theories of behavior, be they concerned with voter turnout, voting, joining a group or participating in a protest. That literature assumes that institutions equally affect all individuals in a society. While structural transformations may objectively alter the incentives for every participant in a given system, the impact of these changes on an individual's behavior is mediated by his or her personal characteristics and experiences. As confirmed by this study, institutional explanations alone do not accurately depict reality; the whole story may only emerge when individual-level characteristics are also taken into consideration.

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Web-based Election Resources:

France. <http://www.sofres.com/etudes/pol/abstention.html>

Belgium. <http://www.vub.ac.be/POLI/elections/Browser.html>

Germany. <http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/wahlen/index.htm>

Scotland. <http://www.alba.org.uk>

Spain. <http://www.sispain.org/english/politics/election/index.html>

United Kingdom. <http://www.politics.plymouth.ac.uk/politics/lgecentre/results.htm>

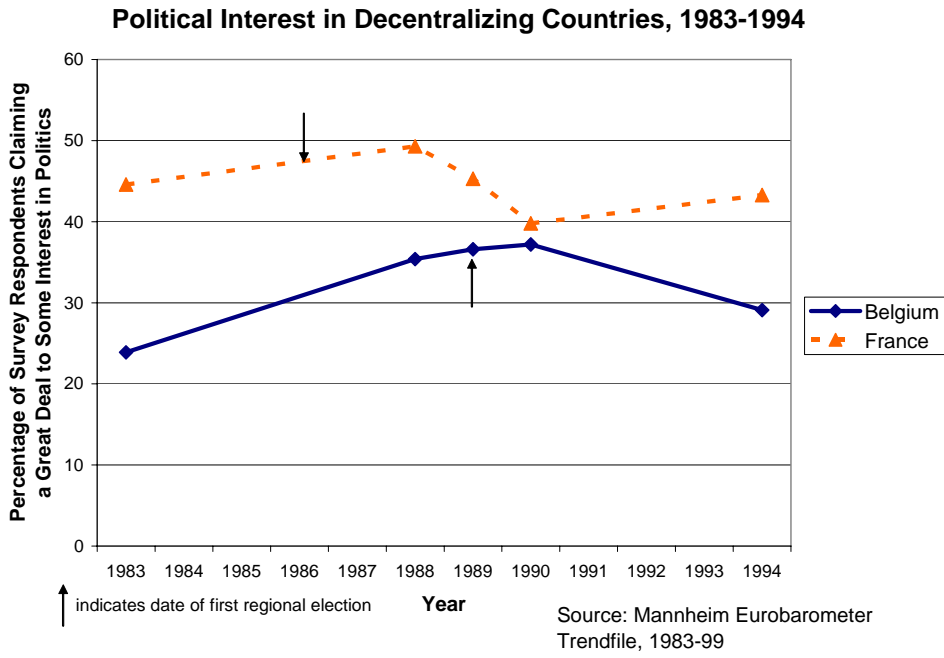
Wales. <http://www.wales.gov.uk>

Table 1: Change in Levels of Political Interest in Western European Countries, 1983-1994
(in %)

Country	Organization of government	1983	1994	Percentage Change
Belgium	Decentralizing	23.9	29.1	+5.2
Denmark	Centralized	57.6	72	+14.4
France	Decentralizing	44.6	43.3	-1.3
Germany (West)	Decentralized	52.7	42.2	-10.5
Greece	Centralized	44.5	40.6	-3.9
Ireland	Centralized	35.5	41.5	+6
Italy	Decentralized*	21.2	38.5	+17.3
Luxembourg	Centralized	47.8	54	+6.2
Netherlands	Centralized	50.7	51.1	+0.4
Norway	Centralized	69.5 (in 1990)	64.2	-5.3
Portugal	Centralized	7.4 (in 1988)	28.3	+20.9
Spain	Decentralized*	31.5 (in 1988)	38.6	+7.1
UK (Great Britain)	Centralized*	50.9	55.3	+4.4

* signifies the countries which underwent decentralization before 1983 or will implement such reforms after 1994. The countries adopting decentralizing reforms during this period are indicated with shading. Source: Mannheim Eurobarometer Trendfile, 1970-99.

Chart 1:



Tables 2A-F: Average Voter Turnout in Local, Regional and National-Level Elections⁵⁵

	Provincial	Regional	National
1970s	*	NA	93.0
1980s	93.6	NA	94.1
1990-94	92.9	81.9	92.9
1995-2000	92.2	91.5	91.2

* denotes missing data

	Municipal	Departmental	Regional	National
1970s	77.1	61.5	NA	76.5
1980-85	78.4	67.6	NA	74.7
1986-2001	69.8	60.0	68.2	67.7

	Regional	National
1970-75	*	93.3
1976-89	*	90.4
1990-1994	*	86.8
1995-2001	75.2	82.2

* denotes missing data

	Regional	National
1970s	NA	72.5
1980s	65	73.4
1990-95	68.3	77
1996-1999	67.8	73.4

⁵⁵ The data is aggregated at the national level in the cases of Belgium and France, and at the regional level in Scotland and Wales. This decision reflects the common statistical reporting practices of the involved governments; in countries where decentralization is unevenly applied, such as in the United Kingdom, it would be meaningless to aggregate regional participation rates at the national level. General sources for the information in these tables include Caramani 2000; European Union 1999; and various country-specific web-based electoral resources.

⁵⁶ In Belgium, regional reforms occurred in stages. In 1989, Brussels held its first set of regional elections. But, it was not until 1995 that the parliaments in the other regions of Flanders and Wallonia were elected (Hooghe 1991: 106).

⁵⁷ Spain underwent a protracted decentralization process. Only three regions – Galicia, Catalonia and the Basque Country - were granted a degree of autonomy in 1978, with their first elections taking place in 1980. “Second rank regions” received political and legislative powers within the next five years (Elazar 1994: 228).

	Local	Regional	National
1970s	48.6	NA	76.2
1980s	44.8	NA	73.9
1990-95	44.3	NA	75.5
1996-2001	59.4	58.9	64.8

	Local	Regional	National
1970s	*	NA	77.6
1980s	52.1	NA	78.1
1990-95	44.6	NA	79.7
1996-2001	49.7	46.2	67.5

* denotes missing data

⁵⁸ Unlike in the other countries, decentralization was not granted to all regions within the United Kingdom. Scotland was given a parliament with legislative and limited financial powers. Wales received an assembly with a more limited set of legislative competencies and no financial ones. The first set of elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly took place in 1999.

Table 3: Attitudinal Measures of Subnational-Level Engagement by Partisanship
(as percentage of partisans)

	Importance of Scottish Parliament (great deal/quite a lot)	Trust in Scottish Parliament (just about always/most of the time)	Say in Scottish Government – Efficacy (more say than before)	General Political Interest (great deal/quite a lot)
SNP	63.5 %	89.6 %	74.5 %	23.2%
Labour	59.3 %	82.2 %	66.2 %	22.4%
Liberal Democrat	53.4%	83.3%	69.9%	31.4%
Conservative	52.5 %	69.8 %	44.8 %	27.1%
No partisanship	27.6 %	69.0 %	52.8 %	5.4%
Average across all respondents	56.0%	81.0%	64.2%	23.7%

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes, 1999

Table 4: Voter Turnout in 1999 Scottish Parliamentary Election by Partisanship
(as percentage of partisans)

	Liberal Democrat	SNP	Conservative	Labour	No Partisanship	Overall Turnout
Voted	81.1%	79.2%	76.5%	70.9%	35.5%	72.5%
Abstained	18.9%	20.8%	23.5%	29.1%	64.5%	27.5%

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes, 1999

Table 5: Attitudinal Measures of National-Level Engagement by Partisanship
(as percentage of partisans)

	Importance of Who Wins the UK Westminster Parliament (great deal/quite a lot)	Trust in UK Parliament (just about always/most of the time)	General Political Interest (great deal/quite a lot)
SNP	35.0 %	10.7 %	27.1%
Labour	56.2 %	28.9 %	26.1%
Liberal Democrat	47.9 %	21.6 %	32.8%
Conservative	54.4 %	28.1 %	32.3%
No partisanship	20.1 %	13.1 %	8.6%
Average across all respondents	46.2 %	22.3 %	26.2%

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes, 2001

Table 6: Voter Turnout in 2001 UK Westminster Parliamentary Election by Partisanship
(as percentage of partisans)

	Liberal Democrat	SNP	Conservative	Labour	No Partisanship	Overall Turnout
Voted	83.1%	70.2%	75.5%	75.4%	12.6%	68.3%
Abstained	17.0%	29.8%	24.5%	24.6%	87.4%	31.7%

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes, 2001. Columns may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Table 7: Logistic Regression Models of Differential Voter Turnout: Likelihood of Turning Out in the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary Elections But Not in the 2001 Westminster Elections.

Variables	Model I		Model II	
	Coefficients	Std. Errors	Coefficients	Std. Errors
Partisanship (Labour)				
None	0.114	0.291	0.155	0.310
Conservative	0.493	0.314	0.456	0.329
Liberal Democrat	0.212	0.314	0.252	0.317
SNP	0.733***	0.221	0.773***	0.228
Attitudinal Factors				
Matters who wins UK General Election			-0.323*	0.190
Trusts Scottish Parl. Influence over Scottish Government			-0.063	0.194
Political Interest			-0.101	0.193
			0.263	0.212
Controls				
Age in years	0.057*	0.029	0.049	0.031
Age ²	-0.001*	0.000	-0.001*	0.000
Gender (Male)	0.563**	0.185	0.475*	0.195
Social Class (Salaried)				
Routine Non-manual	0.481*	0.252	0.473*	0.264
Petty Bourgeoisie	-0.479	0.504	-0.498	0.514
Manual Foreman	0.293	0.364	0.327	0.371
Working Class	0.133	0.237	0.187	0.249
Education Level (Degree)				
Higher education below Degree level	0.037	0.319	-0.043	0.330
A level	-0.266	0.365	-0.383	0.376
O level/CSE	-0.048	0.305	-0.052	0.317
None	0.188	0.320	0.232	0.335
Religion (Protestant)				
Roman Catholic	0.462	0.285	0.322	0.305
Other	0.758**	0.276	0.806**	0.283
None	0.320	0.225	0.353	0.232
Housing Tenure (owners)				
Rents: Local Authority	0.487*	0.211	0.463*	0.220
Rents: Other	-0.000	0.293	0.071	0.299
Constant	-4.247***	0.776	-3.853***	0.820
N	1605		1511	
Pseudo-R ²	0.0461		0.0549	
Log Likelihood	-492.6		-459.1	
χ^2	47.6***		53.4***	

*** p \leq .001 ** p \leq .01 * p \leq .1 in two-tailed tests. The reference category for each type of variable is shown in parentheses.
Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2001