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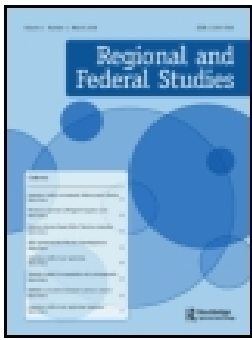
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# Brexit as a critical juncture in the politics of UK devolution: a comparative analysis of the effects of Brexit on parties' territorial strategies

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## ABSTRACT



In this paper, we theorize the 2016 Brexit referendum as a critical juncture in UK politics and analyse its effects on devolution using the concept of regional authority. We argue that Brexit raised the option of re-balancing the self-rule and shared rule dimensions of regional authority present in UK devolution. We generate hypotheses regarding parties' territorial strategies and test them against a content analysis of 2015 and 2017 UK general election manifestos. We demonstrate that proposals dealing with shared rule grew between 2015 and 2017, within the context of consistency in parties' overall territorial positioning. The governing Conservatives also offered more proposals on shared rule but not ones that increased devolved influence. Overall, they moved from favouring an increase in regional authority in 2015 to the cusp of maintaining existing regional authority and somewhat reducing it in 2017. This helps to explain why post-Brexit UK government policy in practice maintained a primary focus on self-rule within a general approach of limiting the further growth of regional authority.

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**KEYWORDS** Devolution; regional authority; parties; Brexit

## Introduction

It is to be expected that the UK's departure from the European Union would raise questions about the development of UK devolution. EU membership had provided the higher-level frameworks within which devolved policy competences in areas such as environment and agriculture were situated, and the

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case for Brexit was accompanied by a rhetorical emphasis on the UK 'taking back control'. Previous research on the implications of Brexit for devolution across the UK has focused on constitutional and normative debates, highlighting the potential for the UK state post-Brexit to become recentralised or, conversely, to further devolve power, or, indeed, to break up (Keating 2021; McHarg and Mitchell 2017; Teague 2019). This article seeks to develop an approach to the empirical investigation of these debates by measuring and analysing how parties' territorial strategies evolved in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum.

We ask: how did parties across the UK differ in their territorial strategies between the 2015 and 2017 general elections? Our decision to explore parties' territorial strategies is driven by an extensive literature establishing the centrality of political parties to the historical unfolding of British devolution policy (Mitchell 2014; Mabry et al. 2013; Wilford 2001; Wyn Jones and Scully 2012). In addressing this question, the article presents a conceptual and theoretical framework that is intended to be of lasting significance for the study of party territorial strategy and Brexit. In comparing the elections held immediately before and after the 2016 Brexit referendum, we develop rigorously supported and methodologically replicable insights into the patterns of change and continuity in parties' territorial strategies that characterized their initial adaptation to the 'Leave' result.

We begin by discussing why it is useful to conceptualize Brexit as a critical juncture in the evolution of UK territorial politics. We then discuss the role played by political parties and the options most likely to be open to them in developing strategies in such a context. We outline why devolution in the UK should be considered in terms of the concept of regional authority and its sub-dimensions: self-rule and shared rule. Building on these foundations, we present a theoretical argument that the critical juncture of Brexit favoured an increased emphasis in parties' territorial strategies on shared rule powers for devolved institutions. We then introduce our approach to the comparative study of party territorial strategy. This section culminates in two hypotheses regarding the saliency of self-rule versus shared rule policy proposals (we hypothesize an increase in shared rule proposals post-Brexit) and party positioning on regional authority (we hypothesize continuity in party positioning on whether regional authority should increase or decrease, relative to the *status quo*).

We then outline the methodology and data collection protocols that we employ, which build on and adapts previous manifesto analyses in the study of parties' territorial strategies. Our analysis tests our two hypotheses, providing substantial support for both, and discusses the substantive nature and drivers of the continuities and differences that we observe. In the concluding section, we reflect on the implications and limitations of our study.

## Conceptualizing Brexit as a critical juncture and the study of devolution

Historical institutionalist theory characterizes institutional development as being marked by 'long periods of path-dependent institutional stability and reproduction that are punctuated occasionally by brief phases of flux' (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 341). These phases of flux, or critical junctures, are conceptualized as the products of temporally compressed periods of political, economic, and social upheaval. They constitute 'moments of openness for radical institutional change, in which a relatively broad range of options are available and can be plausibly adopted' (Capoccia 2016, 101). The choices made during critical junctures can subsequently shape future path-dependent dynamics. Due to the historical interweaving of the UK's territorial governance regime and EU membership (see: McEwen 2020), we argue that Brexit represented a critical juncture for devolution in the UK. Leaving the EU posed a tricky set of questions about the level of government at which returning powers should reside and about how to deal with the removal of EU-level rules that constrained territorial policy divergence in the UK. While developments in European integration had previously represented change within a relatively stable multi-level governance equilibrium, Brexit represented a dramatic institutional rupture taking place within a narrow time horizon. This combination of highly consequential, technically necessary, and temporally compressed institutional change endowed Brexit with the ingredients to create a critical juncture in British territorial politics.

An important choice in theorizing critical junctures is the extent to which we conceptualize actors as having the opportunity to exert a meaningful influence over institutional change. While acknowledging the plural nature of influences on institutional development, we choose to focus on political parties as influential actors which 'operate with a significant margin of manoeuvre and have increased possibilities for influencing institutional formation' (Capoccia 2016, 101). During a critical juncture, such actors are faced with both *hypothetically possible* and *historically plausible* options (Capoccia 2016, 89-95). An emphasis on hypothetically possible options sees critical junctures as offering a *tabula rasa* for institutional reform. Historically plausible choices, on the other hand, are options favoured by pre-juncture path dependencies and existing, if latent, policy alternatives. Political parties operate in a context of electoral competition with many issues and policy options in play, restricting the viability of proposing and communicating entirely novel reform proposals. The 'snap' 2017 UK general election further restricted parties' capacities for thinking through hypothetically possible territorial arrangements by limiting time for policy development. We therefore contend that the critical juncture created by Brexit created a context that favoured political parties adopting historically plausible rather

than hypothetically possible policy options in adapting their territorial strategies.

To make sense of historically plausible reform options for UK devolution, we employ a well-established analytical concept from the comparative literature: regional authority. A focus on regional authority, as opposed to political decentralization, ensures an appreciation of the two-dimensional nature of the territorial distribution of state power. This approach separates ‘self-rule’, which refers to the powers that give a sub-state unit the capability to autonomously self-govern; from ‘shared rule’, which refers to the powers that give a sub-state unit the capability to share in governing the state as a whole (Elazar 1987; Hooghe et al. 2016).

Broschek (2011, 2012, 2015), and Benz and Broschek (2013) apply historical institutionalist theory to evolving patterns of territorial authority across states; and specifically identify choices over self-rule and shared rule as key to defining path dependent processes over time. Broschek (2015) argues that states with significant territorial decentralization generally initially emphasize either self-rule or shared rule in their institutional arrangements, a choice which is then built upon. Nevertheless, he also observed several cases where pathways of reform subsequently developed which sought to rebalance self-rule and shared rule. For instance, Broschek identifies Australia and Canada as federal states initially strong in self-rule where a subsequent reform pathway focused on strengthening shared rule, while Germany and Switzerland are cases where the opposite occurred.

Table 1 presents an analysis of regional authority within the UK in 2015, based on data from Shair-Rosenfield et al. (2021), which adopts Hooghe et al.’s (2016) approach to measuring regional authority. It draws on the country-level version of these data and shows the population-weighted average of 2015 scores across devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland as well as England’s combined authorities. It demonstrates that regional authority within the UK in 2015 was characterized by a significantly stronger focus on self-rule than shared rule. We recognize criticism that the Hooghe et al. approach struggles to capture some aspects of change over time in regional authority within individual states (McEwen

**Table 1.** Extent of regional authority across Hooghe et al.’s (2016) categories in the United Kingdom in 2015.

Self-Rule Dimension	UK (2015)	Max	Shared Rule Dimension	UK (2015)	Max
Institutional Depth	1.7	3	Law-making	0.3	2
Policy Autonomy	1.4	4	Executive Control	0.2	2
Fiscal Autonomy	0.7	4	Fiscal Control	0.0	2
Borrowing Autonomy	0.8	3	Borrowing Control	0.0	2
Representation	2.9	4	Constitutional Reform	0.6	4
<b>Self-Rule Score</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>Shared Rule Score</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>12</b>

Source: Hooghe et al. (2016) and Shair-Rosenfield et al. (2021).

2016). Nevertheless, the ability of this approach to characterize relative degrees of self-rule and shared rule within a state is a key advantage, and in the UK case the analysis that self-rule has been preferred over shared rule is unquestioned.

The paucity of shared rule arrangements in the UK's regional authority structure has consistently perturbed constitutional experts and academics, as well as some political actors. The reports of the Calman (2009) and Smith (2014) Commissions in Scotland and the Silk Commission in Wales (Silk 2014) all note the relative meagreness of the joint ministerial committee as a mechanism for multilateral intergovernmental relations. McEwen and Petersohn (2015) highlight the increasing complexity of devolution following the 2012 Scotland Act and the problems caused by a lack of shared rule mechanisms to manage executive and fiscal interdependence effectively. Sandford and Gormley-Heenan (2020) contend that the coexistence of Scottish claims of sovereignty arising from self-rule and the UK Government's insistence on the UK Parliament's sovereignty have led to ambiguous understandings of where state power lies. They sum this up as 'Schrodinger's devolution', which threatens the constitutional stability of the UK, and they argue for more shared rule mechanisms to re-stabilize the devolution settlements.

This review reveals that prior to Brexit there was a persistent path dependent UK government policy choice of developing devolution with a primary focus on granting self-rule. In reaction to this, there was advocacy for a regional authority reform pathway balancing self-rule with more shared rule. It is important to note, however, that the case for more shared rule was connected to a variety of competing normative and political visions. Some argued for more shared rule as a component of federal arrangements that could stabilize the UK (see, for example: Hazell 2000). A federal UK was Liberal Democrat party policy well before the Brexit referendum, and Carwyn Jones (Welsh First Minister 2009–2018) and Gordon Brown (former UK Prime Minister) both argued for it in their cases for a UK-wide constitutional convention following the 2014 Scottish independence referendum.

Conversely, shared rule could be seen as laying the ground for nationalist designs of post-UK relationships once independence had been achieved, which assumed some continued shared confederal relationships. For instance, the SNP's plan for independence in 2014 included a policy of retaining the UK pound, as well as membership of common regulatory frameworks covering telecommunications and energy, with the aim being for an independent Scotland to have a share in the setting of currency and regulatory policy (Hepburn 2015). Plaid Cymru, in internal debates had long assumed confederal models of post-UK relationships based on shared rule arrangements.

Such variation in underlying motives is not surprising. Political parties in the UK have consistently differed over the fundamental aims of territorial strategy under the influence of party ideology and histories, the dynamics

of state change, and party competition (Hopkin and Bradbury 2006; Swenden and Maddens 2009; Convery and Lundberg 2017). In this context it is to be expected that, just as parties differed in how they saw the ultimate end point of self-rule, they had multiple competing reform agendas on the purpose of shared rule. Equally, within parties where shared rule was largely ignored before Brexit, this often reflected a wider sense of ambiguity about devolution. Notably, within the Conservative Party, an interest in promoting UK federalism was a concern of lone voices only, for example David Melding in Wales (Melding 2013). The unionist parties in Northern Ireland also held unclear positions on any new modernist construction of the UK; seeking influence over UK central government primarily in support of an overriding concern to defend the Union.

Despite the existence of shared rule reform ideas prior to Brexit, it is important not to over-state their political prominence. Detailed thinking about shared rule reforms remained relatively under-developed in most parties. Defending and developing self-rule remained the core aim of the devolved administrations, and the granting of self-rule without granting shared rule so as to sustain Unionist assumptions of UK Parliamentary sovereignty and central government autonomy in its own state-wide responsibilities remained key to constitutional thinking at the centre (Bradbury 2006; Bradbury 2021). Overall, then, enhanced shared rule to balance self-rule had not emerged by the time of Brexit as an approach consistently engaged with by the parties and influential in government.

However, we argue that an increased emphasis on shared rule within the UK's regional authority arrangements did constitute the most historically plausible latent pathway of institutional reform available for reconsideration in the context of the critical juncture created by Brexit. This is due to a combination of an underlying imbalance towards self-rule within the UK's pre-Brexit regional authority dispensation, pre-existing political and intellectual pressure to engage with shared rule more seriously, and likely perceptions of a deficit in the UK's shared rule structures engendered by leaving the EU.

### **Hypothesizing the impact of Brexit on parties' territorial strategies**

Conceptual and methodological frameworks for analysing and comparing parties' territorial strategies have been the subject of sustained scholarly attention (Toubeau and Wagner 2015). Our approach is influenced by Basile (2016, 2019), who identifies three distinct aspects of parties' territorial strategies: issue saliency, issue positioning, and policy framing. In this article, we focus on the saliency and positioning aspects of UK parties' territorial strategies. We consider that saliency captures the proportion of a party's policy programme dedicated to different types of territorial policy proposal while



positioning relates to the substantive nature of parties' preferences in terms of supporting relatively more or less regional authority (Elias et al. 2021).

In studying saliency, we assess the overall distribution of parties' territorial policy proposals across each of Hooghe et al.'s (2016) five sub-dimensions of self-rule and five sub-dimensions of shared rule. This approach allows us to both describe the relative saliency of self-rule and shared rule policy proposals within a party's territorial strategy and to unpack the sub-dimensions to which they pertain. In studying positioning, we focus on the implications of parties' territorial policy proposals for regional authority, analysing whether their positioning favours more or less regional authority, relative to the *status quo*.

Based on our conception of Brexit as a critical juncture and discussion in the last section of the options most likely to influence parties' territorial strategies, we can now outline two testable hypotheses. Our first hypothesis relates to saliency. As we argued in the previous section, the post-Brexit context was favourable to greater engagement with shared rule policy proposals as parties sought historically plausible institutional reform pathways in adapting their territorial strategies. Formally, we state that:

H1: Parties' territorial strategies were characterised by an increase (in 2017 relative to 2015) in the saliency of the shared rule dimension of regional authority.

Secondly, we recognize that antecedent conditions not only define historically plausible alternative policy options: they also determine the continuing significance of policy choices hitherto made on the territorial dimension by parties. Consequently, we would not expect parties to change their overall policy positioning on regional authority, even as they engage with new dimensions of the policy area. Party positions on territorial policy are deeply rooted and reflect a balance of ideological and pragmatic considerations (Toubeau and Wagner 2015), making substantial directional change difficult. Formally, we hypothesize that:

H2: Parties' territorial strategies were characterised by continuity (from 2015 to 2017) in positioning regarding the extent to which they favour more or less regional authority, relative to the *status quo*.

## Data and methods

We present an over-time/across-election comparison of all regionally and nationally represented parties' territorial strategies in the 2015 and 2017 UK general elections.<sup>1</sup> In order to perform such a comparison, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of text from party manifestos in each election. We collected all available<sup>2</sup> 2015 and 2017 manifestos of parties represented in the UK Parliament, Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales, and Northern Ireland Assembly at the time of the 2017 UK General Election. We include the manifestos of regional and state-wide components of the Labour Party, the Conservative Party, the Liberal Democrats, and UKIP, and

analyse them as separate party units. This collection process created a text dataset of 44 manifestos from a total of 23 parties.

The key advantage of manifestos as an evidence base is their production by all significant UK parties at election time, which facilitates across-party and over-time comparison (Laver and Garry 2000; Volkens 2001). While published party policy documents would offer greater depth, the ebb and flow of Brexit negotiations has meant that documents released weeks, months, or years apart are not easily comparable. Expert surveys may offer greater coverage of both parties and issues (Volkens 2007), but they create difficulties of recalling and differentiating multiple policy positions over time.

While manifesto analysis is a well-established approach to studying party policy competition, its validity has been widely questioned, most notably concerning the methodology adopted by the Comparative Manifestos Project (Mikhaylov, Laver, and Benoit 2012). It is questionable whether the text contained within manifestos represents the genuine policy preferences of political parties, given the strategic communicative aspect of these documents as a part of election campaigning (Volkens 2001). Manifesto analysis relies on what the parties choose to present, and parties may have systematic incentives to 'blur' or not reveal certain policy positions (Rovny 2012).

Pelizzo's (2003) work is particularly important to our reasoning in using manifestos still as an evidence base. He draws attention to the implausibility of how manifesto data represented the left-right positions of political parties in several European states. Nevertheless, he argues that party manifesto data should be understood to 'indicate parties' *direction* at a particular time, that is *how (and how much) parties move to adjust to changing political conditions and to remain electorally competitive*' (Pelizzo 2003, 68, emphasis added). As we have outlined, it is precisely the evolution of parties' territorial strategies over time that we seek to analyse here, and hence we feel that the use of manifestos as a source of data is justified.

We now move to the coding protocol to which we subjected these manifestos, beginning with how we identified the relevant text to be analysed. We captured all text from the section of each manifesto devoted to devolution, and/or UK constitutional issues, where such a section was present. The rest of the manifesto was then parsed and any other sections or sentences that had *prima facie* bearing on regional authority were also captured. These texts were divided into a series of individual quasi-sentences, following the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) protocol (Werner, Lacewell, and Volkens 2011). From this list of quasi-sentences, we selected those where:

- (1) The quasi-sentence has a bearing on regional authority.
- (2) The quasi-sentence contains at least one proposition that has a discernible consequence for at least one of the 10 sub-dimensions of regional authority identified by Hooghe et al. (2016).

Our focus on consequential propositions builds on Basile's (2016, 6) 'concrete proposal' classification of manifesto quasi-sentences. Using only quasi-sentences containing such proposals reflects a desire to avoid being too credulous of vague promissory language or to muddy the waters by mixing policy frames with policy positions.

Our first task was to devise a coding scheme that would allow us to assess the extent to which the distribution of parties' territorial policy proposals in terms of self-rule versus shared rule changed between the 2015 and 2017 elections (i.e. to test hypothesis 1). Our selection process ensured that all quasi-sentences pertained to at least one of Hooghe et al.'s (2016) sub-dimensions. However, many of the quasi-sentences bore on several of these. This poses an issue that Protsyk and Garaz (2013, 300–301) identify as 'undercounting caused by a coding procedure that forces a coder to choose between more than one plausible variable for a statement' which can arise in using the CMP coding approach to explore a specific policy area (see also: Budge 2001). Such undercounting arises when significant aspects of a policy area are squeezed out of the analysis due to a focus on the predominant theme in a set of manifesto quasi-sentences. However, the attribution of a single code to each quasi-sentence is a key feature of the CMP methodology and content analysis more generally as it facilitates direct comparison based on a common unit of analysis.

We resolved this dilemma by using the following approach. Each quasi-sentence was initially coded to capture all aspects of territorial authority on which it bore, using the Hooghe et al. (2016) classification scheme. Specifically, for each of Hooghe et al.'s (2016) ten sub-dimensions, the quasi-sentence was coded dichotomously as either bearing on it or not. Based on this initial coding, each quasi-sentence was then given a unique code as bearing either exclusively on self-rule, exclusively on shared rule, or having a bearing on both self-rule and shared rule. This approach produces a single code for each quasi-sentence permitting a straightforward comparative analysis. We therefore use this classification scheme to examine hypothesis 1.

However, to unpack the implications of Brexit for UK parties' territorial strategy in our discussion, we rely on the underlying coding scheme capturing all relevant sub-dimensions of regional authority that each quasi-sentence bears on. This facilitates a deeper analysis of the aspects of regional authority covered by parties' proposals, and we employ it in this way in our discussion, bearing in mind that this comes at the expense of direct comparability (as some quasi-sentences bear on more sub-dimensions than others).

To explore hypothesis 2, we coded the positioning that each quasi-sentence encapsulates regarding regional authority. We did so on a 1–5 scale, where:

1 = Considerably Less Regional Authority (up to dissolution of the regional legislature in self-rule and purely unitary governance in shared rule)

2 = Somewhat Less Regional Authority

3 = Status Quo maintained

4 = Somewhat more Regional Authority

5 = Considerably Greater Regional Authority (up to full independence in self-rule and full federalism in shared rule)

Where a quasi-sentence bore on multiple aspects of territorial authority, we performed this coding for each aspect, and coded the position of the sentence according to the average of these scores. This approach results in a single score characterizing the position of each quasi-sentence.

In [Table 2](#), we present three examples of this coding approach in action. The first of these comes from Labour's UK manifesto in 2015. It is straightforward in that it pertains solely to Fiscal Autonomy (coded as '1' under 'Fiscal Autonomy' and blank on all other sub-dimensions). The quasi-sentence implies support for a moderate increase in fiscal autonomy and is thus coded as a '4' in terms of position. Because it bears solely on a self-rule dimension, it is coded as a 'self-rule' quasi-sentence. The second quasi-sentence in [Table 2](#) also comes from Labour's 2015 UK manifesto and, again, pertains to a single aspect of regional authority, in this case, an increase in shared law-making power. Again, this is coded as a '4' in terms of the position that it entails. Because it bears only on a shared rule dimension, it is coded as a 'shared rule' quasi-sentence. The third example from the Liberal Democrats' 2017 UK manifesto demonstrates how we dealt with quasi-sentences that bear on multiple sub-dimensions of regional authority. This quasi-sentence provided for a continuity of the status quo in terms of executive control (in promising to 'work with' devolved institutions) while promising an increase in self-rule in terms of policy scope. As such, it was coded as bearing on 'both' self-rule and shared rule. In terms of position, the quasi-sentence was coded as a '3' on shared rule executive control and as a '4' on self-rule policy scope. Averaging these scores, the quasi-sentence is scored as '3.5' on position.

We replicated this process across a total of 738 quasi-sentences for the 41 party manifestos where at least one qualifying quasi-sentence was found. For each manifesto, we calculated a variable that we label *overall position* which is the average position score of all quasi-sentences within that manifesto.

This coding process entailed a significant degree of coder judgement and expertise. A multi-coder reliability analysis was unfeasible given the project resources and the extent of expertise necessary to use this coding system. The coding process was both collaborative and iterative, with the final

**Table 2.** Three examples of the coding scheme used to classify quasi-sentences.

Manifesto	Quasi-sentence	Self-rule	Shared rule	Both	ID	P	PS	P	FA	P	BA	P	R	P	LM	P	EC	P	FC	P	BC	P	CR	P	Position
Lab (UK) 2015	Rates of income tax will be set in Scotland.	1							1	4															4
Lab (UK) 2015	Labour is committed to replacing the House of Lords with an elected Senate of the Nations and Regions, representing every part of the United Kingdom, and to improve the democratic legitimacy of the second chamber.		1												1	4									4
Lib Dems (UK) 2017	We will work with devolved parliaments and assemblies to allocate to them any powers repatriated as a result of Brexit in their areas of responsibility (...)			1			1	4									1	3							3.5

Note: Key: Self-rule = 1 if quasi-sentence bears only on self-rule dimensions; Shared Rule = 1 if quasi-sentence bears only on shared rule dimensions; Both = 1 if quasi-sentence bears on both self-rule and shared rule dimensions. For each of the following 1 = this sentence bears on this dimension of regional authority: ID = Institutional Depth; PS = Policy Scope; FA = Fiscal Autonomy; BA = Borrowing Autonomy; R = Representation; LM = Law-making power; EC = Executive Control; FC = Fiscal Control; BC = Borrowing Control; CR = Constitutional Reform. *P* = the position (relative to status quo) encapsulated in the quasi sentence. Position = overall position score.

codes representing the agreed position of the paper co-authors. This paper is accompanied by an online dataset capturing all selected quasi-sentences and their final codes, as well as a detailed set of coding notes explaining the reasoning behind the major coding decisions that were taken during this process and replication commands to reproduce the Tables and Figures that appear in the paper.<sup>3</sup> We view this dataset as a key part of this publication, primarily to maximize the transparency of our analysis but also because it can act as an evidence base for replication, contestation, and subsequent studies.

## Results and analysis

We begin our analysis by testing Hypothesis 1. Here our focus is on the distribution of topics addressed by parties' manifesto statements concerning self-rule versus shared rule dimensions of regional authority. Table 3 displays proportions of quasi-sentences coded as 'self-rule', 'shared rule', and 'both' in manifestos pertaining to the 2015 and 2017 elections. Our findings here reveal a profound change in the saliency aspect of UK parties' territorial strategies between 2015 and 2017.

Out of all quasi-sentences coded for the 2015 election, 83% dealt exclusively with self-rule, with this figure dropping to 54% in 2017. There was a 20% increase in quasi-sentences dealing exclusively with shared rule, while the combined figure addressing shared rule either exclusively or alongside self-rule jumped from 17% in 2015 to 46% in 2017. These findings provide strong support for hypothesis 1. This is re-enforced by the data presented in Table 4, which highlights how widespread the trend towards an increased saliency for shared rule was across all parties. For all parties for which 2015 and 2017 manifesto data was available for comparison, Table 4 shows that there was a greater proportion of quasi-sentences addressing shared rule in 2017 than in 2015. This provides compelling evidence that the logic underlying hypothesis 1 is sound – it appears that Brexit elevated the status of shared rule in the territorial strategies of all major UK parties.

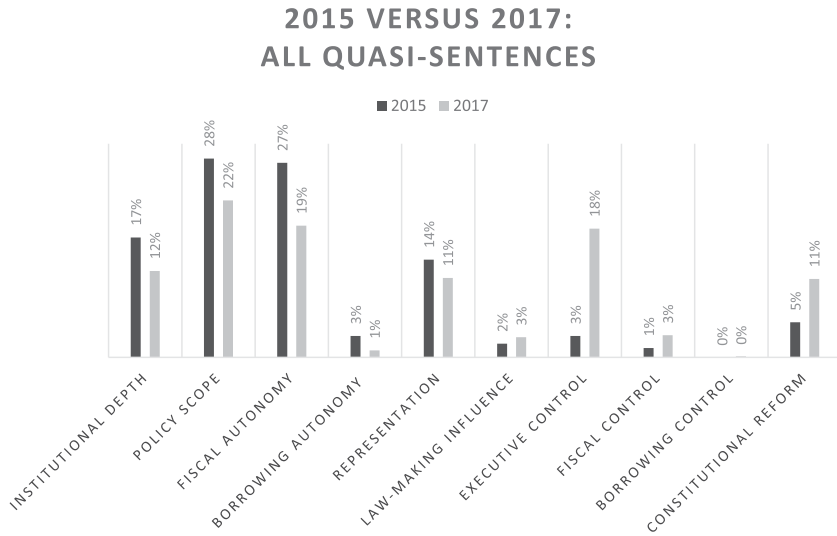
**Table 3.** Proportions of quasi sentences coded as self-rule, shared rule, and both in 2015 versus 2017 manifestos.

Quasi-sentence code	2015% (number of quasi-sentences)	2017% (number of quasi-sentences)	% Difference (2017–2015)
Self-Rule	83% (326/391)	54% (186/347)	–29%
Shared Rule	11% (43/391)	31% (107/347)	+20%
Both	6% (21/391)	15% (49/347)	+9%

**Table 4.** Proportions of quasi sentences coded as ‘shared rule’ or both’ in 2015 versus 2017 manifestos.

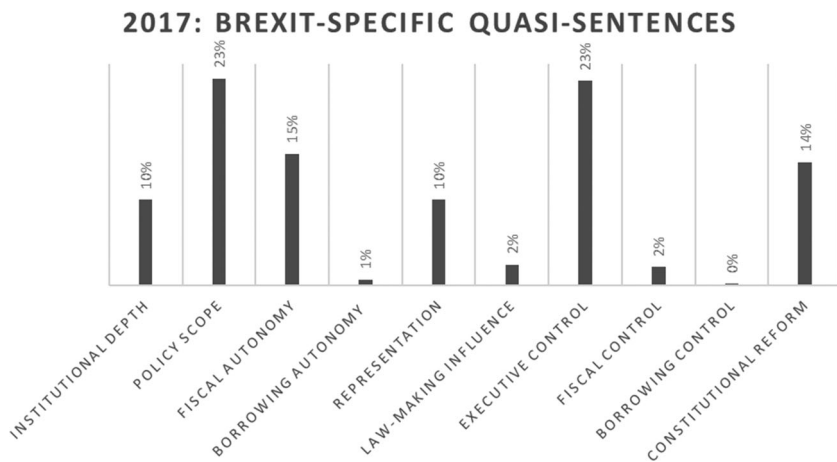
Party	2015 % (number of quasi-sentences)	2017 % (number of quasi-sentences)	% Increase
Conservatives (UK)	9% (3/33)	42% (11/26)	33%
Conservatives (Wales)	9% (3/35)	41% (7/17)	32%
Conservatives (Scotland)	11% (4/37)	38% (8/21)	27%
Labour (UK)	21% (6/28)	44% (8/18)	23%
Labour (Wales)	18% (6/34)	42% (10/24)	24%
Labour (Scotland)	17% (4/24)	38% (5/13)	21%
Liberal Democrats (UK)	12% (4/34)	33% (9/28)	21%
Liberal Democrats (Wales)	13% (3/23)	28% (6/21)	15%
UK Independence Party (UK)	0% (0/4)	50% (1/2)	50%
Scottish Greens	0% (0/7)	50% (3/6)	50%
Scottish National Party	16% (3/19)	55% (11/20)	39%
Plaid Cymru	20% (6/30)	74% (7/11)	54%
Alliance Party	20% (3/15)	45% (10/22)	25%
Ulster Unionist Party	0% (0/4)	57% (4/7)	57%
Democratic Unionist Party	50% (7/14)	69% (9/13)	19%
Social Democratic & Labour Party	27% (4/15)	75% (15/20)	48%
Sinn Féin	16% (3/19)	53% (8/15)	37%
Traditional Unionist Voice	0% (0/4)	33% (4/12)	33%

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the 2015 and 2017 codes for all quasi-sentences across Hooghe et al.’s (2016) 10 sub-dimensions of regional authority. The analysis displayed here incorporates multiple coding in some quasi-sentences, and we believe that this best represents the distribution of proposals in party manifestos in each election across our coding scheme. The percentages in Figure 1 refer to the proportion of coding decisions for all quasi-sentences in the 2015 and 2017 manifestos, respectively. This more detailed breakdown allows us to unpick some of the substantive drivers of the change in saliency element of territorial party strategy. Looking at Figure 1, we can see that the primary drivers of the shift toward shared rule described in Tables 3 and 4 are substantial increases in quasi-sentences relating to shared executive control and constitutional reform.



**Figure 1.** Proportion of codes for Quasi-sentences across 2015 and 2017 manifestos.

Figure 2 presents the distribution of quasi-sentences codes from the 2017 election that explicitly mentioned Brexit across Hooghe et al.’s (2016) 10 sub-dimensions of regional authority. Again, we can see that, in terms of advancing shared rule, a desire for more of a role in state executive control and constitutional reform are predominant. Indeed, the process of Brexit is to the forefront in the increase in proposals pertaining to executive control, with a pronounced focus on the exercise of regional authority on the UK government’s negotiations. The extent to which such sentiments were widely shared



**Figure 2.** Proportion of codes for Brexit-specific Quasi-sentences across 2017 manifestos.



is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that they made bedfellows of two parties which usually hold very different views when it comes to territorial politics. The DUP's 2017 manifesto stated that 'Northern Ireland's voice needs to be heard loudly and clearly' in the negotiations, while the SNP promised that a vote for them 'will be a vote to make sure that Scotland's interests are not side-lined in the Brexit negotiations.'

The two key matters of Brexit-induced internal reconfiguration mentioned in these quasi-sentences are allocating powers repatriated because of Brexit that bear on devolved policy areas and replacing EU funding. Of course, these issues relate to self-rule aspects of regional authority in the UK, most notably policy scope and fiscal autonomy (which are the two largest self-rule categories that arise in Brexit-specific quasi-sentences in 2017), but our evidence highlights parties' preferences for stronger shared rule arrangements through which such issues of self-rule should be determined. A striking example of this dynamic is Plaid Cymru's 2017 statement that 'Wales must have an equal say when decisions are made which have major implications for devolved functions.' However, many of these quasi-sentences also include a wider perspective on the nature and meaning of Brexit for regional authority in the UK. These perspectives range very widely indeed, a point on which we elaborate below.

Hypothesis 2 relates to the positional aspect of parties' territorial strategies and encapsulates an expectation of continuity from 2015 to 2017. Here our focus moves to party positioning. [Table 5](#) presents the overall position score for each manifesto that we analysed, comparing parties' 2015 score to their 2017 score, and providing a measure of the change that took place between the two elections. For this measure, negative numbers indicate that the 2017 manifesto favoured less regional authority relative to 2015, with positive numbers indicating the opposite. The parties in [Table 5](#) are ordered according to the absolute size of the change between 2015 and 2017.

The most straightforward way to test hypothesis 2 is to assess the extent to which parties' positions in 2015 correlate to their positions in 2017. We report a strong pairwise correlation coefficient of .82 between parties' 2015 and 2017 overall position scores, which is statistically significant with 99% confidence. Furthermore, no party's overall position score changes by 1 point or more on our 5-point scale. This provides broad confirmation for hypothesis 2.

In practice, the consistent policy position for most of the parties that we analysed in both 2015 and 2017 was to favour more regional authority, and in 2017 this was reflected in a desire for greater shared rule as well as greater self-rule for devolved institutions. It should be noted, however, that support for more shared rule within a general pattern of support for greater regional authority meant substantively different things for different parties. Nationalist parties such as Sinn Fein and the SNP emphasized the

**Table 5.** Overall position scores for party manifestos in 2015 and 2017.

Party	2015 Overall Position Score	2017 Overall Position Score	Change (2017–2015)
Conservatives (Wales)	3.7	2.8	−0.9
Conservatives (Scotland)	3.6	2.8	−0.8
Conservatives (UK)	3.6	2.9	−0.7
Labour (Scotland)	3.8	3.4	−0.4
Ulster Unionist Party	3.8	3.4	−0.3
Democratic Unionist Party	3.5	3.8	0.3
Social Democratic & Labour Party	4.3	4.0	−0.3
Scottish National Party	4.3	4.1	−0.2
Traditional Unionist Voice	2.3	2.1	−0.2
Labour (UK)	3.6	3.4	−0.2
Scottish Greens	4.0	4.2	0.2
Sinn Féin	4.3	4.5	0.2
UK Independence Party (UK)	3.6	3.5	−0.1
Alliance Party	3.4	3.5	0.1
Labour (Wales)	3.6	3.5	−0.1
Liberal Democrats (Wales)	3.8	3.7	−0.1
Plaid Cymru	3.9	3.8	−0.1
Liberal Democrats (UK)	3.7	3.7	0.0
Liberal Democrats (Scotland)	Manifesto not available	3.8	
UK Independence Party (Wales)	Manifesto not available	3.5	
Greens (England and Wales)	3.7	No relevant quasi-sentences	
Greens (Northern Ireland)	No relevant quasi-sentences	3.6	
People Before Profit (NI)	Manifesto not available	3.9	

changed nature of the territorial governance structure of the UK implied by Brexit. They argued that a referendum on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and Scotland respectively was required, a stance echoed by the Scottish Greens. Similarly, the SNP's significant increase in support for shared rule arrangements reflected a greater desire for influence over decisions that affected devolved power while still in the UK after Brexit. Softer nationalist parties such as Plaid Cymru and the SDLP also emphasized the disruptive nature of Brexit for UK territorial governance, although their proposals for enhanced regional authority in the domains of shared and self-rule fell short of advocating independence.

Meanwhile, the Labour Party (UK, Welsh, and Scottish) and Liberal Democrats (UK, Welsh, and Scottish) were less explicit in linking Brexit to their plans for a constitutional convention that would consider federalism as a wider reform option. The Scottish Labour Party also represented an interesting anomaly, as their manifesto represented a slightly larger deviation in overall score than either Welsh Labour or the UK Labour Party. This is due to its relatively greater emphasis on opposing a second referendum on Scottish independence, which drew out more quasi-sentences defending the *status quo*.

However, the most substantively significant positional shift for the future evolution of UK territorial policy related to the Conservatives because they

formed UK governments following elections in 2017 and 2019, and therefore have largely controlled devolution policy in the immediate aftermath of Brexit. The Conservatives 2017 territorial strategy deviated from the overall trend of continuity of position with 2015. The UK, Welsh, and Scottish Conservative Party manifestos were the only three manifestos where the 2017 position represented a change of more than 0.5 on our overall position scale. Indeed, if these three parties are removed from the analysis, the pairwise correlation coefficient between parties' 2015 and 2017 overall positions increases to .93 (remaining significant with 99% confidence).

All Conservative parties' 2017 manifestos adopted a series of positions on self-rule in terms of the repatriation of powers and the reallocation of regional EU funding that entailed support for somewhat less regional authority. While these manifestos rhetorically framed Brexit largely as an opportunity for enhanced powers for devolved institutions, they cautioned that the usage of repatriated powers should not disrupt the UK's internal market. It was strongly implied that the UK government will decide how this balance will be achieved. Regarding regional structural funding, the UK prosperity fund proposed in the 2017 Conservative Party manifestos was envisioned to be controlled by the UK government, albeit allowing for consultation with devolved administrations alongside local authorities, businesses, and public bodies.

While the Conservatives did devote a larger portion of proposals to shared regional authority in their 2017 manifesto than in 2015, they were cautious about adopting positions that would empower regional administrations. They spoke of 'working with' these administrations, rather than seeking to introduce a stronger voice or formal consent mechanism in their roles in UK level decision-making. In the aggregate, these adaptations of party territorial strategy combined, according to our system of coding and analysis, to move the Conservative party to a policy position that was on the cusp between sustaining the status quo and being in favour of somewhat less regional authority.

## Conclusion

The fractured nature of the referendum vote across the nations that make up the UK, with Remain majorities in both Scotland and Northern Ireland, provided an early indication of the relevance of Brexit for UK territorial politics. Party contestation over the Article 50 negotiations on the UK's withdrawal from the EU was apparent in the fact that the UK Conservative Government, and its Welsh Labour and Scottish SNP counterparts in the devolved parliaments, held very different views of how closely aligned a post-Brexit UK should be to the EU. The Northern Irish Executive collapsed during the Article 50 negotiation period amid disputes over how the post-Brexit border between the UK and the Republic of Ireland would be managed.

Further territorial policy tensions were seen in the rhetorical battle surrounding the UK government's proposals for the management of the UK's internal market following the transition period, which were characterized by the Conservatives as a 'power surge' and by the SNP as a 'power grab'. Because of the fast-moving, often disjointed nature of the Brexit process, which is beleaguered by claims of motivated reasoning and overblown rhetoric on all sides, it behoves political scientists to assess the effects of Brexit in a theoretically informed and empirically rigorous manner.

With this in mind, we contend that this article makes three contributions to our understanding of how Brexit reshaped parties' territorial strategies in the UK. First, we develop an original framework for analysis by theorizing Brexit as a critical juncture for parties' territorial strategies. This approach provides both a language for uncovering the implications of Brexit for the contestation of territorial politics in the UK and a set of concrete expectations for the nature of these implications in the early stages of the Brexit process.

The second contribution of the article has been to reconceptualise the study of territorial party strategy in the UK in terms of the multi-dimensional concept of regional authority, and to map out a replicable applied methodology for its study. In addressing our research question, we developed a manifesto coding protocol that allows for parties' territorial strategies to be analysed in terms of self-rule, shared rule and their component dimensions according to Hooghe et al's (2016) approach to measuring regional authority. We believe this methodological approach will be useful in mapping the ongoing evolution of party territorial strategies post-Brexit. It is also of significant potential value to researchers beyond the UK as a technique for analysing party territorial strategy in a manner that aligns with the nuances of regional authority structures.

Of course, there are limitations to our approach. Our comparative focus meant that a detailed investigation into individual parties was not pursued, and complimentary methodological approaches will be necessary to flesh out the picture that we paint in this article, most notably regarding how parties have framed their territorial strategies following Brexit. Our use of manifestos as the sole source of party territorial strategy will need to be supplemented by other sources to develop more historically detailed, party-specific understandings. We hope, however, that the research presented here will provide encouragement to scholars engaging in such research.

Our final, and most significant, contribution is empirical. We find strong evidence for two hypotheses. First, we present what we feel is compelling evidence that Brexit initially affected UK parties' territorial strategies by increasing the extent to which they produced policy proposals pertaining to shared rule. Secondly, we demonstrate that parties' positions in 2017 were broadly consistent with their previous stances on regional authority. In other words, post-Brexit, political parties across the UK raised a wider range of

proposals on how devolution should develop, with many parties calling for a bigger say for the devolved institutions in how the UK state as a whole is governed; nevertheless, they largely stayed true to their previous positions on regional authority.

However, the results regarding the UK Conservative Party are of particular interest for those concerned with the wider course of UK territorial politics post-Brexit. The UK Conservative Party (along with its Scottish and Welsh counterparts) in 2017 were notable for a small, but significant move away from policies in 2015 that sought to increase regional authority through greater self-rule, and for not engaging with regional authority-enhancing reform pathways around shared rule. While this shift is subtle, it does distinguish the Conservatives from the wider trend of continuity of overall positioning on regional authority post-Brexit.

Of course, these findings should be treated cautiously. Our analysis encompasses only the early stages of Brexit as a critical juncture; its implications are likely to unfold over many years. More generally, readers who peruse the dataset and coding notes that accompany this article are likely to be struck by the vague and cautious nature of many of the proposals for reforms in the shared rule aspect of regional authority (although there are exceptions, such as the SDLP's ideas about shared rule arrangements in Northern Ireland post-Brexit). Furthermore, the substance of a large proportion of shared rule policy proposals in 2017 is limited to a desire for more shared rule over executive government (with many of these proposals specifically relating to the process of negotiating with the EU) and future constitutional reform. The most important note of caution about the article's findings stem from the political reality that government bureaucracies will still have a strong say over the path that devolution takes. At the UK-level, other things being equal, one can expect strong continuity in the preference for sustained centre autonomy.

Nevertheless, the framework of analysis and conceptual and methodological approach employed here has potentially wide applicability in the comparative analysis of party territorial strategy following Brexit. The substantive results remain important for understanding early patterns of change and continuity in parties' territorial strategies. These elements can form the basis for further investigation as we assess the subsequent progress of party contestation of territorial strategy across the UK and try and understand how Brexit might re-shape devolution.

## Notes

1. We note here that the regional branches of state-wide party have produced their own manifestos for UK general elections from the earliest stages of devolution, and that these manifestos usually contain at least some points of differentiation (often expressed as an increased regional emphasis) compared to UK-wide party manifestos.

2. There were two parties for which 2015 manifestos were not available either online or following direct contact with the parties. These cases were: The Scottish Liberal Democrats (2015 manifesto was unavailable) and People Before Profit Northern Ireland (the party did not produce a manifesto for the 2015 general election).
3. <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/ANTA5R>.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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