Decentralization, Political Parties and Women's Representation: Evidence from Spain and Britain

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Abstract

This article explores the hitherto under-researched relationship between state architecture and women's political representation, specifically their descriptive or numerical presence. Using a qualitative comparative case study of gender quota reforms in Spain and Britain, we ask how party organizational dynamics mediate the relationship between formal institutions and representative outcomes in recently decentralized countries. We find that the impact of political decentralization on quota adoption and implementation is contingent upon a number of variables related to the party organization, particularly the internal distribution of authority between the central and the regional branches. We conclude that political parties need to be considered as complex and independent actors in analyses of the relationship between state architecture and women's politics.
Introduction

Political decentralization has been one of the most notable worldwide trends in recent decades, provoking new interest in the relationship between state architecture and women’s political representation. Although this relationship has not been extensively researched, recent studies suggest that processes of federalization and decentralization present a “mixed picture” for women’s representation, highlighting variations in levels of women’s numerical representation both within and across federations and decentralized countries (Chappell 2002; Vickers 2011; Ortbals et al. 2012). As several scholars have noted, further research is needed to tease out whether there is a causal relationship between particular forms of state architecture and women’s political presence, or whether other variables are equally or more important in driving representative outcomes (Ortbals et al. 2012, 23; see also Gray 2006, 38).

This article aims to contribute to this emerging literature by asking how party organizational dynamics mediate the relationship between formal institutions and representative outcomes in recently decentralized countries. Specifically, we examine how political parties adapt to decentralizing pressures and how this relationship affects party behavior in adopting and implementing candidate gender quotas, the most visible and direct mechanisms used to increase women’s political presence. While political decentralization can open up new possibilities for women candidates to be selected and elected, parties are the main vehicles for delivering women’s numerical presence in government, state-wide and regional legislatures. The organizational structure of a party also influences its capacity to adopt quotas, and provides the route through which candidate gender quotas are implemented (Caul Kittilson 2006; Threlfall 2007; Murray 2010). Thus, any analysis of the implications of decentralizing reforms for women’s representation needs to address the internal dynamics of political parties, particularly the core issue of candidate selection. Candidate selection is the main activity of most parties, and is, therefore, a useful lens through which to evaluate changes in the internal balance of power within parties following decentralizing reforms (Bradbury 2009).

In evaluating this relationship, we concentrate on “state-wide” parties – that is, integrated parties which compete in all elections in a country and which exercise a crucial linkage function between levels of government (Fabre 2011, 345). This permits us to explore the effects of decentralizing reforms on multi-level party organizational dynamics, as state-wide parties face unique pressures between maintaining party unity and cohesion and devolving power to regional elites (Deschouwer 2003). Accordingly, we exclude regionalist parties which contest elections in just one or few regions, as they do not face the challenge of maintaining a coherent organization across a multi-level polity. We also focus on parties that have played a key role in initiating decentralizing reforms, as this enables us to investigate how political parties intervene independently in the decentralization process (Hopkin 2009, 180). Finally, we examine parties which have voluntarily adopted candidate gender quotas, allowing us to explore the interaction between decentralizing reforms, party organizational dynamics, and representative outcomes, as well as processes of quota “contagion” across the political system.

Taking these criteria into account, our empirical analysis centers on two Western European state-wide parties which have been key proponents of
devolution reforms and which have taken leading roles in promoting women’s representation in their respective countries: the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party/Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and the British Labour Party. Both parties operate within large, multi-national parliamentary democracies where the electoral and legislative arenas are party-determined and which have relatively recently undergone significant devolution of power to regional institutions. The empowerment of regional institutions has created new political arenas and patterns of party competition in both countries, enabling us to more clearly explore the impact of changing institutional structures than we would be able to in well-established federations. As such, these countries are good cases for investigating and comparing how quota reforms interact with processes of political decentralization and party organizational change.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The first section outlines our theoretical expectations regarding the relationship between political decentralization, party organizational dynamics and representative outcomes. The next section assesses these expectations against the cases of the Spanish and the British state-wide parties, evaluating how the adoption and implementation of gender quotas is mediated by the party organization in a context of decentralizing state structures. The final section highlights the main findings and sets an agenda for further comparative studies.

Decentralization, political parties and women’s representation

Research on women’s political presence has increasingly focused on the internal dynamics of political parties as a crucial area in need of further investigation. While systemic variables like electoral systems structure the overall context of recruitment, parties are the main “gatekeepers” to elected office in most countries – particularly in parliamentary democracies – and, as such, play a central role in shaping women’s representation. Yet, although there is a rapidly growing literature on women and politics more broadly – and gender quotas in particular – few studies look directly at the role of political parties. As several scholars have noted, party quotas “that are followed, are a huge advantage” to women’s political presence, but the intra-party mechanisms that explain how quotas are effectively adopted and implemented in practice remain largely unexplored (Matland and Montgomery 2003, 32, emphasis in original; see also Threlfall 2007).

Those studies that do address this relationship emphasize the role of party characteristics, such as ideology, the degree of institutionalization, and centralization in shaping patterns of women’s representation. In particular, although the relationship between party (de)centralization and women’s representation remains a contested issue, comparative and case study evidence suggests that centralized control over candidate selection is a necessary condition for the successful adoption and implementation of gender quotas. While a decentralized party structure may lead to gains for women at the grassroots level, a centralized structure gives elites more power to implement and enforce gender equality reforms – when they are willing to do so (Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Caul Kittilson 2006; Murray 2010).

Yet, in much of this work, the institutional context is taken as a given, with little attention paid to the potential impact of institutional change on party
dynamics. Moreover, these studies have mainly focused on state-wide elections, neglecting the multi-level setting in which parties increasingly operate (for an exception see Davidson-Schmich 2006). This largely static view of party politics as something that takes place at the “national” level is unable to capture the complexities of multi-level party dynamics, as well as the different factors that explain party organizational change. In seeking to fill this gap, we ask how political decentralization might impact on state-wide parties’ organization, and how this, in turn, might affect party behavior in adopting and implementing candidate gender quotas. To assess the distribution of authority within state-wide parties, we apply Elazar’s (1987) distinction of the distribution of powers in federal systems – “shared-rule” and “self-rule” – to an analysis of multi-level party organization, namely the organizational linkages established between central and regional party levels (see Fabre and Méndez-Lago 2009; Thorlakson 2011). “Shared-rule” addresses the degree of regional party influence in central party decision making. “Self-rule” accounts for the degree of autonomy accorded to regional party branches in the management of regional party affairs, including candidate selection decisions.

Work in the field of comparative federalism suggests that parties in multi-level polities will “mimic” the structure of the state, adapting their organization to the distribution of power and competences across levels of government (Riker 1975; Chhibber and Kollman 2004; Filippov et al. 2004). The “authority migration” from the central to the regional levels of the state should lead parties to decentralize their own internal structures. Regional party system dynamics generally push state-wide parties to transfer power to their regional branches (self-rule) – including control over candidate selection – to compete more effectively in regional elections (van Biezen and Hopkin 2006; Bradbury 2009). This is particularly the case when state-wide and regional electoral arenas are disconnected in terms of the effect of state-wide considerations on regional elections and the impact of regional elections on central government (Deschouwer 2003, 223). However, state-wide parties might still seek to restrict the involvement of regional branches in central decision-making (shared-rule), with a view to more easily imposing party unity and cohesion (Fabre 2008, 311-312).

We might expect, then, that political decentralization would result in weaker party shared-rule and stronger self-rule, potentially inhibiting the adoption and implementation of gender quotas. On the one hand, the less coordinated party decision-making is, the more fragmented policy outcomes are, likely constraining quota adoption. This relates to the extent to which regional branches have participated in the decision-making process involved in the adoption of party quotas (shared-rule). If the party’s central organs or conference include a significant number of regional representatives, then, as Threlfall puts it (2007, 1085), “policy from above is also policy from below.” Conversely, if regional representatives are absent or excluded, quota reforms might raise suspicions of illegitimate party centralism. To put it differently, we expect that the higher the degree of shared-rule, the smoother quota adoption will be.

On the other hand, increases in the level of autonomy of regional party branches might impair the ability of the party to work cohesively in implementing and enforcing policy, including quota reforms. As already highlighted, the implementation of gender quotas is more effective the more centralized the
candidate selection process is, meaning that the degree of self-rule is low, or at least moderate. A centralized structure allows a party to act decisively in promoting women’s representation, giving central elites the power to persuade local and regional branches to implement and enforce quota policies. In other words, we expect that the lower the degree of self-rule, the more effective quota implementation will be.

However, party politics scholars remind us that there are other important factors at play which can inhibit the effects of decentralizing reforms on party organizational dynamics. Organizational change is costly and has the potential to undermine the control of the central leadership, limiting incentives for party decision-making to be devolved downwards (Fabre 2008, 310-312). Furthermore, parties are complex organizations which have a tendency towards organizational inertia (Panebianco 1988). This means that party responses to institutional reforms are filtered by ideological and organizational party traditions (Hopkin and Bradbury 2006, 136) or even path-determined by past commitments and historical legacies (Kenny and Mackay 2011a, 284). In the following section, we assess these expectations against the cases of the PSOE and the Labour Party and evaluate how party organizational dynamics mediate the relationship between formal institutions and representative outcomes.

Decentralization, intra-party dynamics, and gender quotas in Spain and Britain

As previously highlighted, the PSOE and the British Labour Party are good cases for exploring how quota reforms interact with processes of political decentralization and party organizational change. Both parties present candidates for state-wide and regional elections, show tight organizational linkages between party levels, and have taken leading roles in promoting women’s representation. While all state-wide parties in decentralized countries face similar tensions between party cohesion and demands for regional autonomy, these contradictions are especially visible in Spain and Britain, where decentralizing reforms were a response to the growth of ethnoregionalist movements (van Biezen and Hopkin 2006, 15). This was particularly the case for the PSOE and the Labour Party, which played a key role in initiating decentralizing reforms in their respective countries and have traditionally maintained a strong presence in regions with a distinct national identity.

Both Spain and Britain have relatively similar decentralized structures, though they differ in the degree of asymmetry between regions, the timing of the transition from a centralized to a decentralized state, and the level of interconnectedness between state-wide and regional elections. While both countries have different electoral systems at the state-wide level (proportional representation with the D’Hondt formula in Spain and single member plurality in Britain), they produce similar degrees of disproportionality that favor large parties (Lijphart 1994). For regional elections, PR electoral systems are used in both countries (party lists in Spain and a mixed member voting system in Scotland and Wales). These similarities allow us to control for a number of factors, including regime type, the features of the political system, and the structure of multi-level decision making, which provides a useful foundation for
examining how political parties mediate the relationship between political decentralization and representative outcomes.

The PSOE

In Spain, democratization and decentralization were concurrent processes in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The unitary state gave way to a multi-level polity divided into 17 regions, each with legislative and executive capacity. While initially some regions accessed higher levels of autonomy, incremental transfers of competences over time have transformed Spain from an asymmetric decentralized system into a largely symmetric “quasi-federation” (Aja 2003). Thus, we would expect that the co-operative aspects of the Spanish state might encourage some central control in the PSOE, but that the party’s regional branches would be largely autonomous to reflect the important competences of the regions.

However, while devolution has clearly shaped Spanish state-wide parties’ electoral and governing strategies, party decentralization has remained to a great extent isolated from the broader process of institutional change (Fabre and Méndez-Lago 2009). The PSOE emerged from the transition formally as a federal party with a special arrangement in Catalonia. Yet, despite being an important actor in the promotion and implementation of decentralizing reforms, a centralized approach was applied to the party organization. Regional party branches have made moderate gains in the definition of electoral strategies and regional party platforms in past decades, but centralization of party decision-making prevails. Apart from Catalonia, the regional party branches are treated in more or less the same way, even in regions with higher levels of autonomy or strong regionalist parties (Fabre 2008, 324).

Political decentralization opened up new possibilities for women to be selected and elected, but women’s representation oscillated between 5% and 6% in the three first Spanish state-wide elections (see Table 1). The first regional elections yielded similar results – an average of 5.6% (see Table 2). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, women’s representation was an issue of very low priority for Spanish political parties, including the PSOE, who were dominated by “strongly motivated male gatekeepers” (Threlfall 2007, 1079). Despite this background, the PSOE eventually pioneered the adoption of party quotas, accommodating feminist demands for increased political representation.

In 1988, the PSOE passed a 25% gender quota in party offices and electoral lists, after a period of strategic lobbying by the party’s women’s section integrated in the central party executive board. As party feminists were progressively empowered in this organ, they managed to gradually enlarge quota provisions until reaching in 1997 a gender-neutral formulation of parity – in which either sex is entitled to neither less than 40% nor more than 60% in party offices or candidatures – with the support of the central party leadership. This reform took place amidst an acute internal party crisis – including corruption scandals, declining electoral support, and electoral defeat at the state-wide level in 1996 – which facilitated internal party democratization (Threlfall 2005).

Nonetheless, PSOE’s strong levels of shared-rule help explain how quotas managed to be adopted in a party whose membership remained over
80% male until the early 1990s (Verge 2006, 170). The participation of regional branches in central decision-making was initially quite limited, largely due to the party’s focus on central cohesion and unity of message after winning power in 1982, and to the lack of strong regional leaders at the onset of democratization. Post-transition, however, as regional leaders have consolidated their electoral bases and exerted more influence within the party, territorial interests have been further integrated into central decision-making processes. This is coherent with the fact that state-wide and regional tiers of government are interconnected electoral arenas, that is, the outcomes of regional elections often depend on the state-wide context and regional elections influence state-wide politics (Fabre 2008, 311).

Although the approval of the first quota in 1988 was highly controversial and required explicit support by central party leaders, the entire party structure replicated the measure once it was approved at the party conference. This successful outcome can be explained by a number of organizational factors. First, delegates at the party conference represent the constituencies (provinces) of the regions they belong to. Territorial inclusiveness is also applied to the composition of the highest party organs in the quasi-consensual negotiations which take place during party conferences. Thus, the adoption of the 25% quota was a decision perceived to be reached democratically with consensus between regional and central party actors. So, moderate shared-rule ensured that it was smoothly incorporated into regional party rules, avoiding the appearance of imposed central intervention. Second, regional party conferences are celebrated right after the central one has been held, guaranteeing that the principles assumed at the central level are subsequently adopted by the whole party organization. Indeed, regional party statutes require approval by central party organs (Fabre 2011, 356). The same organizational dynamics applied in subsequent quota reform processes.

Turning to quota implementation, the most relevant dimension of party organization is self-rule – that is, the degree of autonomy of the regional party branches in selecting candidates for office. In the case of the PSOE, candidate selection takes place at the provincial level in coordination with the regional branches, but party candidate lists must be ratified by the central organs, which hold veto power. Thus the party’s formal claims of internal federalism do not hold in practice. The centralization of candidate selection in the PSOE can be attributed in large part to the historical conditions of the party’s formation. The party’s regional organization was developed from the centre in the late 1970s before regional interests could fully develop. In addition, its organizational weakness at the onset of the Spanish transition process pushed the PSOE leadership to keep tight control of the candidate selection process in order to grant stability and cohesion to the parliamentary group at both the state-wide level and the recently created regional tier of government. The proportional electoral system coupled with closed party lists also helped the central party to retain power over candidate selection (see Hopkin 2009).

Limited self-rule in candidate selection helps explain the successful implementation and effective enforcement of quotas in the PSOE. Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate a clear increase in the PSOE’s female representation in the Congress of Deputies and regional parliaments after the introduction of quotas. Up to the mid 1990s, however, regional party branches formally complied with quota provisions, but continued to place women candidates in unwinnable
positions on the party lists. These gendered practices initially limited the success of quota policies. Under the Spanish electoral system, seats are allocated through the D'Hondt method using closed party lists, so candidates need to be ranked sufficiently high in order to win seats. However, after the 1997 gender parity quota was introduced, the central party adopted further measures to ensure that the quota provisions were applied to the total number of seats in competition as well as to the party’s winnable seats. As a reinforcement measure, a representative of the Women’s Section sits in the state-wide electoral committee and holds veto power, so lists failing to comply with the quota provisions are amended (Verge 2006, 185). Following the introduction of these centralized enforcement measures, women’s presence in the PSOE’s parliamentary benches significantly increased and reached the parity threshold (see Tables 1 and 2).

The PSOE’s centralized structure also resulted in policy diffusion from the party to the institutional level in the early 2000s. Efforts by the PSOE and other leftist parties to introduce a statutory quota at the state-wide level were blocked by the governing party, the conservative Partido Popular (PP). However, the PSOE’s tight intra-party integration allowed it to circumvent this blockade, using its regional branches to incorporate “zipping” into regional electoral laws, in which men and women candidates alternate throughout party lists. Yet while political decentralization enabled the transference of party activism to the regional arena, the institutional configuration of the Spanish state provides the state-wide government the capacity to veto regional legislation. Indeed, the PP challenged these laws before the Constitutional Court and they were suspended. In spite of this, the PSOE’s strategy still gave the party some electoral pay-offs as it was able to present itself before the Spanish electorate as the party that championed equality. Once the PSOE returned to power in 2004, a statutory quota included in a broader Equality Law (2007) was finally approved, requiring parties to incorporate a minimum of 40% and a maximum of 60% of any sex into candidate lists for all elections. The PSOE government withdrew the unconstitutionality appeals that were pending on the regional quota laws, which allowed these reforms to be finally implemented.

There is also some evidence of a “contagion effect” across the Spanish party system, as almost all parties have followed the PSOE’s lead and adopted either quotas or informal targets for women’s representation. Even the PP assumed a vague recommendation in the late 1990s. Likewise, after the PSOE’s decision to voluntarily adopt zipping in several regions, as discussed above, the PP responded by presenting more balanced party lists to avoid being seen as a sexist organization, which produced a net rise of conservative women’s deputies in several regions. However, despite the implementation of the 2007 Equality Law, cross-party differences still exist. Although the PP’s tight organizational centralization has also allowed it to feminize its institutional representation by imposing the statutory gender quota on the regional level of the party, the party continues to fall short of gender parity at the state-wide level (see Table 1). Looking at the most recent state-wide elections held in 2011, while the PP obtained its best results ever and experienced a net increase of over 20% in its seat share, women’s representation only reached 37% due to the party’s failure to place women in winnable positions. Conversely, while the PSOE faced a disastrous electoral performance and lost 59 seats – its lowest seat share of the whole democratic period – its parliamentary bench still
included 38.2% women. The PSOE’s regional branches had used the 2008 election results as the benchmark for allocating winnable seats, even though polls predicted a severe defeat, and, as a result, many women incumbents risked losing their seats. Party feminists and incumbent women deputies lobbied the state-wide party electoral committee, which agreed to augment the number of women in winnable positions by readjusting the order of candidates in the lists (Verge 2012, 406). So, centralization facilitated increases in women’s representation in a party whose leadership was committed to it, a condition not found in the PP.

Cross-party differences are smaller at the regional level where the implementation of quotas is eased by the larger mean magnitude of electoral districts. This makes the distribution of winnable positions less problematic, especially within parties which have not adopted quotas. As Table 2 shows, parity was achieved in the 2007 and 2011 regional elections (43% and 42%, respectively), a threshold that was even attained by the PP in 2011. No clear pattern prevails for non state-wide parties although many of them had traditionally failed to reach parity in their parliamentary delegations until the 2007 Equality Law was passed.

(The insertions of Table 1 and Table 2 are requested here.)

The Labour Party

In the British case, devolution is more recent, gaining momentum in the 1990s in the context of a long-established democracy. The devolution settlement is asymmetric, with the National Assembly for Wales enjoying weaker legislative powers than the Scottish Parliament. Thus, we would expect that the Labour Party would be quite decentralized, with the Scottish party branch enjoying more autonomy than the Welsh branch. Yet, while the British state-wide parties have adapted their organizations to the decentralized context of government and electoral competition, the case of the Labour Party again demonstrates that there is no perfect correlation between changes in state architecture and in party organization. Labour was a key proponent of the devolution reforms, largely as a response to the electoral threat posed by regionalist parties in Scotland and Wales, but neither the expected decentralization nor the expected asymmetry in the party’s organization has occurred.

The key party organizational issue raised by devolution was the selection of new party elites in Scotland and Wales. Labour approached this issue against a background of candidate selection reform at the state-wide level, including campaigns for party quotas. Women’s activists aligned with the party’s left had put women’s representation on the agenda from the 1980s, linking arguments for gender-balanced representation to the party’s wider modernization program (see Lovenduski 2005). This culminated in the adoption of all-women shortlists (AWS) in half of all winnable seats by the party conference in 1993, resulting in a dramatic increase in the number of Labour women MPs in the 1997 state-wide election (see Table 3).
After the campaign for quotas stalled at the state-wide level due to legal challenges, the focus shifted to the newly devolved institutions, where the lack of incumbents and the introduction of a new, more proportional electoral system opened up further possibilities for candidate selection reform. Whereas the devolution debate in Wales was largely top-down, in Scotland, women activists working outside and inside parties – in particular Labour – successfully introduced a gendered perspective to these reform debates. In 1997, Labour’s National Executive Committee (NEC) – in which women were equally represented as a result of internal party quotas – established a Women’s Representation Taskforce which proposed that the party adopt a quota measure called “twinning” for the devolved elections. Realizing that most of Labour’s seats would come through first-past-the-post constituencies rather than the regional lists, twinning required that all constituencies be paired on the basis of geographical proximity and winnability, with each pair having to select one male and one female candidate. Twinning was endorsed by the Labour Party Conference in 1997 with the support of the central leadership, who hoped that gender balance would reinforce the party’s “modern” image and break the hold of unrepresentative, predominantly male, constituency activists over the selection process.

The adoption of this proposal by the party’s regional branches was more difficult, due in part to Labour’s lower levels of shared-rule. Labour has been in power at Westminster from 1997 until 2010, and has governed Scotland and Wales alone, or in coalition, since 1999 (but lost power to the Scottish National Party in 2007). Thus, in responding to decentralizing pressures, the party has tried to maintain a high level of party cohesion and minimize policy divergence, limiting the input of its Scottish and Welsh branches in central decision-making. Decisional power is concentrated around state-wide party organs with no formal regional representation (Fabre 2011, 353). This is also coherent with the increasing disconnect between state-wide and regional electoral arenas, in which the results of regional elections have minimal impact on state-wide politics. As a result, the twinning proposal initially caused little controversy, given that the lack of regional representation at the state-wide party conference meant that most delegates were from English constituencies. However, while the proposal was subsequently adopted by the Scottish regional branch, it met with significant resistance in Wales. After a concerted effort by the central party to impose its will, the policy was finally adopted at the 1998 Welsh regional party conference by a narrow margin, despite opposition from traditionalists and many trade unions (Russell et al. 2002). Thus, low shared-rule meant that Labour’s central-level decision to adopt quotas for devolved elections lead to conflicts and intra-party power struggles across levels.

Further controversies arose during the candidate selection process. Labour has a long tradition of decentralized constituency-based selection; however, the process became increasingly centralized in the late 1980s and 1990s due to party modernization reforms. The decentralizing pressures arising from devolution, then, ran against Labour’s “organizational traditions and routines” (Hopkin 2009, 185), raising tensions over the internal balance of power within the party. Yet, rather than devolving selection procedures for the 1999 regional elections, the central leadership focused instead on attracting a wider pool of applicants to ensure that seats in the devolved institutions would not simply go to the “usual suspects”. A number of centrally-enforced policies
were implemented to achieve this goal, including the twinning scheme and a pre-selection procedure which established a central panel of approved constituency and list candidates.

As a result of the party’s low degree of self-rule, once the center was persuaded to support quotas, the party was able to enforce these reforms in both Scotland and a recalcitrant Wales (Kenny and Mackay 2011a, 283). However, this centralized approach also proved to be controversial. In Scotland, party officials were accused of implementing an ideological test of the New Labour credentials of prospective candidates, while in Wales, there were concerns that political patronage and Old Labour-style fixing politics were being used to circumvent candidate selection reforms. The twinning scheme also generated controversy, particularly in Wales, with accusations that some candidates were “twinned out” of the selection process through central party intervention (see Russell et al. 2002). Nevertheless, the results of the 1999 elections were unprecedented: ultimately, women comprised 37.2% of the new Scottish Parliament and 40% of the new National Assembly for Wales (see Table 4).

The twinning decision was a “watershed moment” that reinforced Labour’s commitment to gender-balanced representation (Lovenduski 2005, 123). While the threat of legal challenges had left the party reluctant to take further action at the state-wide level, the resulting drop in the number of women MPs in 2001 led to renewed calls for the reinstatement of AWS. Following sustained pressure by equality advocates and women MPs, the Labour government introduced the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002, which allowed all British parties to adopt gender quotas, but did not require them to do so. Only the Labour Party took up these new legislative opportunities, implementing AWS in half of all retirement seats for the 2005 state-wide election. The centralized enforcement of quotas again met with some controversy, most notably in Wales (see Cutts et al. 2008), but, ultimately, the use of AWS boosted the number of Labour’s women MPs (see Table 3). Notwithstanding a difficult political climate, AWS remained central to Labour’s candidate selection strategy in the 2010 election, though it was more aware this time of the need to manage central-local relations (Campbell and Childs 2010, 768). As a result, despite losing seats, Labour was able to finally break the 30% threshold of women MPs (see Table 3).

Whereas there is some evidence of quota reforms diffusing across party levels, the contagion of quota reforms across parties has been limited, in contrast to the Spanish case. While all state-wide parties committed to increasing women’s representation in the 2010 election, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats did not meet their own informal numerical targets. Although Conservative leader David Cameron had publicly pledged to address the underrepresentation of women in his parliamentary bench, a decentralized selection process and lack of will to address central-local tensions made this commitment difficult to achieve and resulted only in a small increase in the number of Conservative women MPs (see Childs and Webb 2012). As Table 3 demonstrates, the House of Commons continues to fall well short of gender parity, due to the limited opportunities provided by the single member plurality electoral system as well as the failure of the other major state-wide parties in selecting women for winnable seats.
At the regional level, there is some evidence of a (limited) contagion effect in 1999. Although Labour was the only party to implement strong gender quotas, its main electoral rival in Scotland, the Scottish National Party, implemented informal measures to encourage women to stand for election; similarly, in Wales, its main electoral rival, Plaid Cymru, implemented a “gender template” on the regional lists, whereby the first and third places on its regional party lists were allocated to women. Post 1999, however, women’s representation has been pursued more vigorously in Wales than in Scotland (see Table 4). The issue of women’s representation has not retained high salience for Scottish parties, due in part to the complacency engendered by the high levels achieved and the decreasing importance of candidate selection after the first elections when the party had to fill all positions (Kenny and Mackay 2011b). In Wales, in contrast, the issue has remained more pressing, as continuing opposition to quotas has led to fears that gains could be easily reversed. In the 2003 Welsh elections, for example, the use of AWS in constituency selections was only narrowly passed by the Welsh regional conference after a bitter debate (Chaney 2010, 192).

However, in both regions, the controversy over the 1999 selections created significant pressure for internal party decision making to be devolved downwards. From 2000 onwards, the Scottish and Welsh branches have control over candidate and leadership selection although these processes still take place within a framework of centrally prescribed principles (Hopkin and Bradbury 2006). In the absence of intervention by central party actors, the Scottish and Welsh branches have been reluctant to make further equality guarantees. In the recent 2011 devolved elections, for example, both regional branches failed to use AWS, relying instead on softer measures such as gender-balanced short-lists which do not guarantee equality outcomes. Labour still leads on women’s representation in both regions but this is largely due to candidate incumbency rather than its active promotion. Meanwhile, underlying patterns of decline in the recruitment of female candidates over time raises questions as to the sustainability of quota reforms in regional elections (Chaney 2010; Kenny and Mackay 2011b).

(INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE)

(INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE)

Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between political decentralization, political parties, and women’s representation in two important cases of devolution in Western Europe. While in both cases political decentralization has led to the strengthening of regional party structures, the impact of institutional change on party organization has been more moderate than expected. In Spain, while regional interests have become more integrated in the PSOE’s central decision-making, the central leadership still prevails. The combination of moderate intra-party shared-rule and limited self-rule has allowed quota reforms to be smoothly adopted and successfully enforced at both the central and regional tiers, overcoming the potential fragmenting effect of multiple levels. In
Britain, Labour has attempted to maintain party cohesion post-devolution through central party oversight and low integration of regional branches in central decision making. While low shared-rule and limited self-rule initially facilitated quota adoption and implementation, central-regional tensions have resulted in more autonomy for the regional branches, reducing the central party’s capacity to effectively retain quota reforms.

While processes of decentralization and federalization may open up new avenues for women’s political representation, our findings suggest that the effect of political decentralization on representative outcomes is contingent on a number of additional variables related to parties’ internal dynamics. In particular, we show that party organizational factors play a key role in explaining how quotas are successfully adopted and implemented, lending further weight to existing research in the field. However, whereas party centralization may be a necessary condition for positive gender change, it is not always a sufficient one. Indeed, although party centralization provides an essential “organizing and coercing” force (Murray 2010, 152), in practice, the impact of centralization depends on both the ability and willingness of party elites to adopt and implement quota reforms as well as the establishment of effective sanctions for non-compliance, among other factors.

Our analysis also highlights why both gender politics and party politics scholars should not overlook the importance of the regional dimension. New processes of political decentralization and the deepening of the transfer of power to the regional level in established decentralized countries have made party organization and candidate selection more complex and multi-layered. Thus, future studies of women’s numerical representation must take these developments into account. Our research points to how the multi-level dynamics of state-wide parties can be analyzed comparatively, and outlines a framework for examining the adoption and implementation of gender quotas in compounded polities.

Our findings also have implications for the literature on comparative federalism, challenging expectations that we can “measure” federalism and decentralization by measuring parties (Riker 1974, 137). Both the Spanish and British cases suggest that the organizational incentives embedded in federal and decentralized states do not offer an adequate basis for predicting the impact of decentralization on political parties. Given that our analysis focuses on two European leftist parties with a tradition of centralization, further comparative research is needed to examine how variations in types of party organization and party systems affect party responses to decentralizing reforms, and how this, in turn, affects the adoption and implementation of party gender quotas. In doing so, however, we cannot assume that differences in factors such as party ideology can easily predict how parties organize in multi-level contexts (see Thorlakson 2011). In Spain, for example, parties share a strong degree of centralization across the ideological spectrum. There is considerable potential for dialogue here with the emerging body of literature on territorial party politics, which has increasingly problematized the assumption that there is a straightforward causal relationship between changes in state architecture and party organizational change (see Swenden and Maddens 2009).

Overall, we conclude that party responses to the organizational incentives embedded in the territorial configuration of the state depend to a
great extent on their own internal dynamics. Our analysis suggests that while

differences in the degree of party centralization can be partially attributed to

factors such as incumbency and the degree of interconnectedness between
electoral arenas, party responses to decentralizing reforms largely depend on

the parties themselves, in that they are shaped by their own history, organizational traditions, and internal (gendered) power relations. As such, we
cannot fully grasp the relationship between state architecture and women’s
politics without a thorough understanding of political parties as complex
organizations in their own right.

Endnotes

1 We use the term “state-wide” rather than “national” as the latter is contested in both Spain and

Britain. For the sake of comparison, we use “region” to denote “the key meso-level of
government” (Swenden and Maddens 2009, 3). When examining party organization, we refer to
“central” and “regional” levels.

2 Evidence suggests the adoption of gender quotas and improved performance on women’s
representation by one party in the political system sets in motion a dynamic of “contagion”
whereby other parties will respond in order to compete (Matland and Studlar 1996).

3 Comparative research suggests that while there is a strong and consistent association
between proportional electoral systems and higher levels of women’s representation, they are

not the “most direct mechanisms” of increases in women’s political presence (Caul Kittilson
2006, 127; see also Norris 2004).

4 We refer to Britain, rather than the United Kingdom, as Northern Ireland is not included in our
analysis. It is marked by a unique political setting and has a territory-specific party system in

which no “mainland” state-wide parties seek election.

5 Elections to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales use the Additional
Member System (AMS), a combination of first-past-the-post constituency seats and regional
party lists.

6 The PSOE has party branches in each region with the exception of Catalonia where the Party
of the Catalan Socialists (PSC) operates as a sister party with a federal-type agreement. Thus,
PSC decisions over party rules and candidate selection do not need the PSOE’s approval.

7 Party feminists could also use to their advantage the fact that the PSC had already introduced
a gender quota guaranteeing women 12% of the positions on party committees and candidate
lists.

8 The provinces are sub-regional administrative divisions found throughout the state which
match the electoral constituencies for state-wide and (most) regional elections.

9 Scotland was excluded from this process due to boundary changes and the overall reduction
of Scottish constituencies (Cutts et al. 2008).

10 While this potentially excludes truncated, bifurcated or extremely stratarchical parties, as
found in Belgium or Canada, for example, these are the exception rather than the rule in
processes of federalization and decentralization (see Swenden and Maddens 2009; Thorlakson
2011)
References


### Table 1  Women in the Congress of Deputies, Spain, 1979-2011 (percentages)

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<tr>
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*Source: Based on Verge (2007, 203-04) updated by the authors.*
Table 2  Women in regional parliaments, Spain, 1983-2011 (percentages)

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Source: Own elaboration based on Coller et al. (2007). All regions hold elections the same day but the Basque Country, Catalonia, Galicia and Andalusia have their own electoral calendar, so their averages have been clustered with the closer election date of the other regions.
Table 3  Women in the House of Commons, United Kingdom, 1979-2010 (percentages)

<table>
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Source: Based on Shepherd-Robinson and Lovenduski (2002), updated by the authors. Cons: Conservative Party; LibDem: Liberal Democrats.
Table 4  Women in regional parliaments, United Kingdom, 1999-2011
(percentages)

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Source: Based on Kenny and Mackay (2011b) updated by the authors.