

The Unfinished Politicisation of the Periphery: How is the Center/Periphery Divide in Scandinavian Local Party Systems Doing?

by

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Abstract:

Half a century ago Stein Rokkan claimed that the degree of party politicization of local politics differ among the center and the periphery: The further away from the center of the country a municipality is located, the less does the local party system at the council resemble that of the national parliament. Rokkan also claimed that the periphery would eventually catch up and that the difference between the center and the periphery would over time disappear. Using data on recent local elections in the three Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden and Denmark), we test if local party system nationalization is weaker in municipalities further away from the capital of the country; we find this is still the case in all three countries half a century after Rokkan's writings on the subject. The lag-of-the-periphery is not strong, but it is still there.

Half a century has passed since Norwegian social scientist Stein Rokkan published a number of articles and papers which dealt with the political differences between a country's center and its periphery. These works became the foundation stones for his seminal contributions to the field of political geography (Rokkan & Valen, 1962; Rokkan, 1966).

Rokkan here coined the term "politicization", whereby he meant '[the] breakdown of the traditional systems of local rule through the entry of nationally organised parties into municipal elections' (Rokkan, 1966: 244); this concept of "politicization", or "party politicization" as it is also termed, has been used very often, when scholars have been analyzing political parties using some kind of spatial dimension (e.g., Webb 2000; Aars & Ringkjøb 2005; Gyford, 1985; Kjaer & Elklit, 2010a).

Basically, Rokkan's idea was to consider time as geography simultaneously, since his theory did not claim a constant difference between center and periphery, but primarily that there was a lag-of-the-periphery, because modernization starts in the political center only to spread to the periphery after some time. As Rokkan himself put it:

"... we focus on differences in time-lags between local units and are particularly concerned to explore possible processes of spread from the central, highly commercialized and industrialized areas, to the peripheral, economically less developed areas. Our concern is not only with a process in time but also with a process in space" (Rokkan, 1970: 182).

Consequently, Rokkan also prognosticated a kind of closure where the periphery would eventually catch up, eliminating the center/periphery differences (ultimately thereby also dissolving the dichotomy itself) and in his study of Norway he focused on

"... the rapidly dwindling pockets of communities in the 'prepolitical' phase: the last of the communes to be brought under the sway of the national party system", also claiming that "(w)e shall in fact be concerned with the end-phase in a continuous movement towards a 'politicization' of the total territory" (Rokkan, 1970: 182-3).

Another "geography variable" which for decades has attracted considerably scholarly interest is size; not, however, as the area of a political entity as such, but defined as the number of people inhabiting the political unit. Most famously this is seen in another seminal work, namely *Size*

and Democracy (Dahl and Tufte, 1973) where the authors also touch upon the party system dimension when they state in relation to the difference between municipalities that

“[a]mong political units within a democratic country where a system of proportional representation obtains, the number of parties (or party lists) presented to the voters at election increases with unit size’ (Dahl & Tufte, 1973: 100).

Newton takes this point a step further when he hypothesizes that

“the larger and more urban the authority, the more likely it is to have not just a party system, but also a developed and competitive party system” (Newton, 1982: 201).

By ‘developed’ Newton here implies the same presence (and dominance) by the nationwide parties as Rokkan describes as the result of party politicization.

Even though Rokkan is mostly renowned for addressing the center/periphery dichotomy (as are Dahl and Tufte for the large/small distinction), Rokkan was by no means blind to the size dimension in his explanation of the development of party systems: “(the) effect of all these developments was to spread party politics further and further into the periphery and to intensify the efforts of mobilization even in local contexts” (1970: 192), but he also addresses the size-dimension when he writes that: ”The process of politicization was almost immediate in the cities, but very gradual in the countryside” (1970: 191). Rokkan actually includes both dimensions when eventually stating that: “The last communes to be reached by this wave of politicization were generally small and sparsely populated units in the periphery” (1970: 193).

So the simple theory of party politicization for which Stein Rokkan is so famous – the further away from the political center, the less is local politics dominated by the national political parties – is actually in his own writing more complex as he also include a dimension of size operationalized as population. What we want to do here is to disentangle these two dimensions and see if we can determine whether center/periphery or large/small is the significant dimension when spatial variations in party systems are to be explained.

Rokkan was also recognized for his empirical work as he usually tried to support his theorization with empirical data, quite often from his native country of Norway. However, when it came to his theory on party politicization Rokkan fell a little short and could only contribute

with some very basic statistics. The reason was that he faced two shortcomings, one conceptual and one data-related. As for the conceptual, Rokkan recognized that “politicization ... is a matter of degree and it must be of interest to establish a gradual index”. He also suggested a very rough index with five values combining “information on the number of party lists registered at local elections with data on the size of the vote for local lists without any explicit party affiliation” (Rokkan, 1970: 196).¹ However, this index is too simple, limiting what kind of analysis it can be used for. We have, therefore, developed a more sophisticated index, *the index of local party system nationalization*, which specifically measures the two dimensions, Rokkan wanted to combine (Kjaer & Elklit, 2010a; 2010b).

Rokkan suggested at least some partial solution as to how to measure the dependent variable (how party politicized the local party system is), but he more or less renounced in regard to a more sophisticated measure of his key independent variable (the center/periphery status). Attempting to measure the accessibility to polling stations in a municipality he “... sought to assemble data on the road networks and other transport facilities, but this proved technically very cumbersome” (Rokkan, 1970: 187).

And when it came to the distance between the municipality and the political center – as Rokkan simply defined as the capital – he did not try to calculate that himself, but relied on a broader index of “peripherality” originally worked out to tap agricultural differences, but where “relative isolation in terms of the existing transport networks” are included as one criteria (along with other criteria such as income, tax rates, population turnover, and number of people working in the primary sector). Today, however, the simple distance between each of the municipalities and the capital is easily calculated, which means that one can have a much cleaner measure of this main independent variable.

If Rokkan was right that the periphery would eventually catch up with the center, we might find ourselves in a situation where the phenomenon we are interested in – centre/periphery differences – have vanished. However, Rokkan was not at all specific as to how fast he predicted the periphery to catch up with the centre, i.e. when the process of party politicization would have been completed, so we might still hope that our more sophisticated measures will

¹ The index values are: “No lists”, “One list, mostly non-political votes”, “One list, fewer non-political”, “Two or more, some non-political”, “Two or more, no non-political” (Rokkan, 1970: 195).

allow us to detect such differences, which will subsequently allow us to pronounce on how the process has gone in the countries we are studying.

We will therefore in this article study if the process of party politicization has been completed and – if not – apply our index of local party system nationalization and the measurement of the municipalities's distance to the capital to test Rokkans original hypothesis – the longer the distance to the center, the less party system nationalization – in order to see if it can still explain potential differences. We do so by looking at Stein Rokkan's home turf: The three Scandinavian countries, i.e. Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

Measuring and Explaining Local Party System Nationalization

According to Rokkan the “nationalization” of the local party system involves two more or less overlapping processes. The basic idea is that the national parties – or nationwide parties as we will refer to them to avoid any misunderstandings – first penetrate (Webb 2000: 30) the municipalities and their political realm. This will subsequently result in the local parties – or non-partisan lists as they are often denoted – being superseded and they will disappear from the local politics arenas they used to dominate. However, Rokkan points out that this is supposed to be a gradual process.

Not only do the nationwide parties not target and invade all municipalities simultaneously (the basic idea is that they start at the center and move further and further outwards, into the periphery); the non-partisan lists might also not ‘surrender’ without a fight and there can be substantial pockets of resistance in some municipalities. So the nationwide parties might not attack all municipalities at the same time and pace and the non-partisan lists might put up a harder fight in some municipalities than in other. However, this also implies that a static measure of how nationalized a given local party system is (how far the process of party politicization has gone) at a specific point of time, has to take into account both dimensions: How far the nationwide parties have advanced and how much the non-partisan lists have pulled back. To give a precise and detailed description of the position one needs to include both dimensions.

To combine the measurement of the advance of the nationwide parties and the remaining presence of the non-partisan lists we have developed “the index of local party system

nationalization” (Kjaer & Elklit, 2010a, 2010b). For the application of the index, see Kjaer and Elklit (2010a, 2010b) and Ennser-Jedenastik & Hansen (2013). This index measures for each municipality the degree to which the local party system resemble the national party system in the same country. The index comes in slightly different forms. Depending on the specific purpose: It can measure parties running or parties elected, and among parties elected it can measure the absolute number of parties or the effective number of parties (Kjaer & Elklit, 2010a). Here we use the index in the form, where it measures the degree of resemblance in terms of the absolute number of parties elected and for this variant of the index of local party system nationalization (LPSN) the formula is:

$$\text{LPSN} = \frac{\text{NP}_C \times 100}{\text{NP}_P + \text{LL}_C}$$

where NP_C is the number of nationwide parties elected to the local council, NP_P is the number of nationwide parties elected to the national parliament, and LL_C is the number of local lists (non-partisan lists) elected to the local council. The index runs from 0 to 100 and the higher value the more nationalized the local party system. If in a municipality in a country with six parties in the national parliament, five of these parties are elected to the municipal council together with one local (non-partisan) list, the index is simply calculated in this way: $\text{LPSN} = (5 \times 100) / (6 + 1) = 71.4$; if in another municipality only three of the national parties are elected together with two non-partisan list, the index will then be $(3 \times 100) / (6 + 2) = 37.5$. Our claim is that the difference between the two values of the index reflect well the relative differences in the degree of local party system nationalization between the two imagined municipalities.

To explain potential differences in the level of local party system nationalization across municipalities we include three different variables. Our main explanatory variable is the peripheral status of the municipality, the Rokkanian hypothesis stipulating that the farther away, the less party politicized. We will measure this by taking the driving distance from City Hall in the municipality to the National Parliament in the country. In most countries today this information is available online; if the addresses are entered into routeplanning sites, the distance will be returned.

We also include the population size of the municipality. The hypothesis is that larger municipalities will be more interesting to nationwide parties to conquer as they represent more voters which might be convinced to vote for the party locally and who might, therefore, also consider for the party at national elections. Larger municipalities can also be more attractive to the nationwide parties than smaller because it is easier to set up camp as more voters and therefore also potentially more supporters and a critical mass for forming an organization, i.e building a local branch of the nationwide party.

Eventually, we include as a control variable the number of seats in the municipal/local council. The hypothesis is that the larger the council, the easier it is – if the electoral system is one of proportional representation – even for the smaller nationwide parties to get represented at the councils since the natural threshold then gets lower (for a discussion of this, see Kjaer and Elklit, 2014). However, it should be noticed that this could also be beneficial to the non-partisan lists which would then have the opposite effect on the degree to which the local party system is nationalized.

Analysis

Even though the hypothesis are straightforward, the dependent variable easily calculated, and only a few control variables are included, the empirical testing of whether there still is a lag-of-the-periphery to be found when studying local party system nationalization can be difficult enough because of lack of accessible data. In many countries the official electoral statistics are not very detailed and often they do not include information on the party level. However, in the three Scandinavian countries, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, there is a long tradition for including local politics in the data which the national statistical bureaus gather and release after each local election.

Consequently, we have both for Norway and for Sweden and Denmark unique datasets at our fingertips which allow us to test the hypothesis. We have compiled data from three recent elections, the 2011 local elections on Norway, the 2010 local elections in Sweden and the 2009 local elections in Denmark. And we have then calculated the index of local party system

nationalization for each of the 429 Norwegian, the 290 Swedish, and the 98 Danish municipalities. The results can be seen in Figures 1-3, respectively.

*** Figure 1 goes here ***

*** Figure 2 goes here ***

*** Figure 3 goes here ***

Just by looking at the maps we can see that the level of local party system nationalization is different in the three countries. The map for Sweden is darker than the one for Norway which is again darker than the Danish one which illustrates the differences in the level of local party system nationalization where the mean are 86.4, 71.5, and 63.4, respectively. So in Sweden we find a more nationalized local party system than in Norway, which is again more nationalized than Denmark.

In this paper we are, however, more interested in the geographic differences. Simple eyeballing again gives the impression that distance to the center matters, at least it seems like the figures are a little brighter in the Northeastern part of Norway, in Northern Sweden and in Western Denmark, localities far from the three capitals, Oslo, Stockholm and Copenhagen, respectively. However, in Denmark one of the most nationalized local party systems are found in the middle of the map in the easternmost part of the peninsula of Jutland and this is the municipality of Aarhus which happens to be the second largest city in Denmark. This illustrates that it is important not only to test the hypothesis about the peripheral status more systematically, but also to include control variables such as population size when doing this.

Table 1 presents a model explaining the index of local party system nationalization by peripheral status, size of municipality and number of seats in local councils for each of the three countries (OLS regression).

*** Table 1 goes here ***

The analyses in Table 1 shows first of all that in all three countries the periphery still lags behind when it comes to what Rokkan called party politicization. The further away from the political center, i.e., the capitals of Oslo, Stockholm, and Copenhagen, respectively, the less party politicized is the local party system. And this is even so when municipal size and council size is controlled for. This pattern is found in all the countries, so even though this test of Rokkan's hypothesis only is conducted half a century after it was first formulated, it can still be shown that despite differences in geography and size, there are still remarkable reminiscences from the lag-of-the-periphery-pattern to be found in all three Scandinavian countries.

Table 1 also shows that the effect of council size is as expected and this is again the case for all three countries. The more seats in the council, the more nationalized the party system – this was expected since the more seats the lower natural threshold and the better chances for minor parties, at least under proportional representation as we have in all three countries (see also Kjaer & Elklit, 2014).

When it comes to population size, the findings are less clear and mostly not meeting the expectations. We hypothesized (as did Rokkan) that lower degree of party politicization should be found in smaller municipalities, but Table 1 demonstrates that this correlation is only found in Denmark (but where it is not statistical significant). In Norway and Sweden the relationship is significant, but in the opposite direction: In the larger municipalities the party system is less nationalized (when peripheral status and number of seats are controlled for). It might be that the major parties – not least the Labour party, but also the Conservatives – dominates these larger municipalities, making it more difficult for the minor parties of the opposition to obtain representation in these Labour/Conservative strongholds.

However, even though we find this statistical significant effect of peripheral status on the index of local party system nationalization across all three countries, it is not very substantial. When in Denmark the index decreases with a little more than two indexpoints when we move 100 km away from Copenhagen, it means that in a municipality with five (of the eight) nationwide parties and one non-partisan list at the council, then – everything else being equal – this municipality would have had five nationwide parties and two non-partisan lists instead of one, if it had been located 100 km further away from Copenhagen.

It was clarified above that the index of local party system nationalization is comprised of two dimensions, namely the percentage of the nationwide parties, who are represented at the

council, and the percentage of the non-partisan parties/lists represented at the council. In Tables 2 and 3 the same analysis with peripheral status, population size and number of council seats as explanatory variables has been conducted with percentage of nationwide parties represented and percentage of represented local/non-partisan parties as dependent variables to see if the effect of the distance from the center is more closely connected to one of the two dimensions than to the other .

*** Table 2 goes here ***

*** Table 3 goes here ***

Tables 2 and 3 shows that the effect of the distance to the center is connected to both dimensions as the peripheral variable is negative correlated with the percentage of nationwide parties and positively correlated with the percentage of represented parties which are local lists (although this latter correlation is not significant in the Danish case). It is also so that the pattern for the presence of the nationwide parties is much more due to the included explanatory variables than is the case in regard to the presence of non-partisan lists: The models in Table 2 explain much more of the variation between the municipalities than the models in Table 3.

Has the lag of the periphery decreased over time? A look at Denmark 1970-2009

Even though we have demonstrated that the periphery has not (yet?) caught up, party politicization could still have been going on as a gradual process as Rokkan hypotesized. It is supposed to be a dynamic process and finding that at a given point of time the periphery has not fully caught up, does of course not mean that some process of party politicization has not been developing. We do not have data for all three countries over time, but for one of the countries, Denmark, we do have access to data going back to the 1966 elections, and therefore we will look at the Danish case in more detail.

A feature which has been demonstrated to influence local party system nationalization is reforms amalgamating municipalities. The reason is that institutional change can be exploited by

the nationwide parties to spread even further (Kjaer & Elklit, 2010b). In the Danish case we actually have some data over time. We can thus compare the 2009 local elections to the last elections under the old municipal structure where Denmark had 275 municipalities. In Figure 4 the index has been plotted on a map with 275 municipalities, and again from mere eye-balling it can be observed that party politization was lower in 2001 than in 2009 (Figure 4 is brighter than Figure 3). In 2001 the mean of the index was 51.9 compared to the 63.4 in 2009. A regression analysis similar to the one in Table 1 returns similar results for the 2001 data (index=25,154 – 5,190***distance – .465 pop. size + 2,304*** seats (N=275, R²=.36)).

*** Figure 4 goes here ***

Since we have data from each election since 1966 we can calculate the index mean for each of the elections for municipalities at the center, in the middle and in the periphery of Denmark, which is done in Figure 5.

*** Figure 5 goes here ***

Figure 5 shows that even though the periphery still lags behind, the difference has in Denmark been decreasing over the past 50 years.

Conclusions

The conclusions are that (1) that our index of local party system nationalization is well suited to study the degree to which national parties and the national party system have penetrated local politics in the Scandinavian countries, the very phenomenon Stein Rokkan was so concerned about in his seminal writings, (2) that the center/periphery divide in the Scandinavian local party systems is still there now, fifty years after Rokkan wrote about it, and (3) the differences between center and periphery in this regard is only disappearing slowly, even though the Danish experience show that institutional developments – by speeding up the processes – may contribute significantly to the changes.

The party politicization that Rokkan forecasted half a century ago has been going on in the Scandinavian countries, but the process has not yet come to an end and the nationwide political parties have not (yet) managed to dominate local politics entirely. In Denmark, two major amalgamation reforms (in 1970 and 2007) have led to an increase in the local party system nationalization over the past decades (Kjaer & Elklit, 2010b), whereas in Norway and Sweden evidence points to the non-partisan lists being more robust and even expanding their territory (see Aars and Ringkjøb 2005; and Erlingsson, 2008). As it is concluded elsewhere in regard to the Norwegian case: “Non-partisan alternatives remain a significant factor in local elections and in local councils. Rokkan’s fourth and final step of the nation-building process was thus never fully completed” (Aars & Ringkjøb, 2005: 177).

The long-lived non-partisan dimension of local politics is one thing, the reminiscences of the lag-of-the-periphery in regard to the party politicization another – and, indeed, quite surprising. Even though it should be recalled that Rokkan did not set an expiration date for the traditional local party system in the periphery, it is surprising that we continue to find spatial differences half a century after Rokkan’s writings on the subject. But why is there still signs of a lag-of-the-periphery?

Arguing along the two dimensions identified by Rokkan – and used as building blocks in our index of local party system nationalization – one can claim that the explanation should be found with the non-partisan lists as well as with the nationwide parties. Local non-partisan lists seem to be very long-lived (Reiser & Holtman, 2008; Brezovsek & Smerkolj, 2011; Gendzwill, 2012) as there appears to be a well-established demand for this non-partisanship and more so in the periphery where they have been a part of local politics for long. And the nationwide parties are still more present close to the center, which might be explained by the fact that the national party system is not that frozen; from time to time new parties are born and if they still tend to spread from the center and out, the lag-of-the-periphery will be kept alive, at least to some degree. Our analyses do not allow us to test this particular hypothesis, but as we have now seen that reminiscences of the lag-of-the-periphery still exist, it might lead to research trying to explain these spatial differences.

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Figure 1. The index of local party system nationalization for each of the 429 municipalities in Norway after the local elections of 2011.

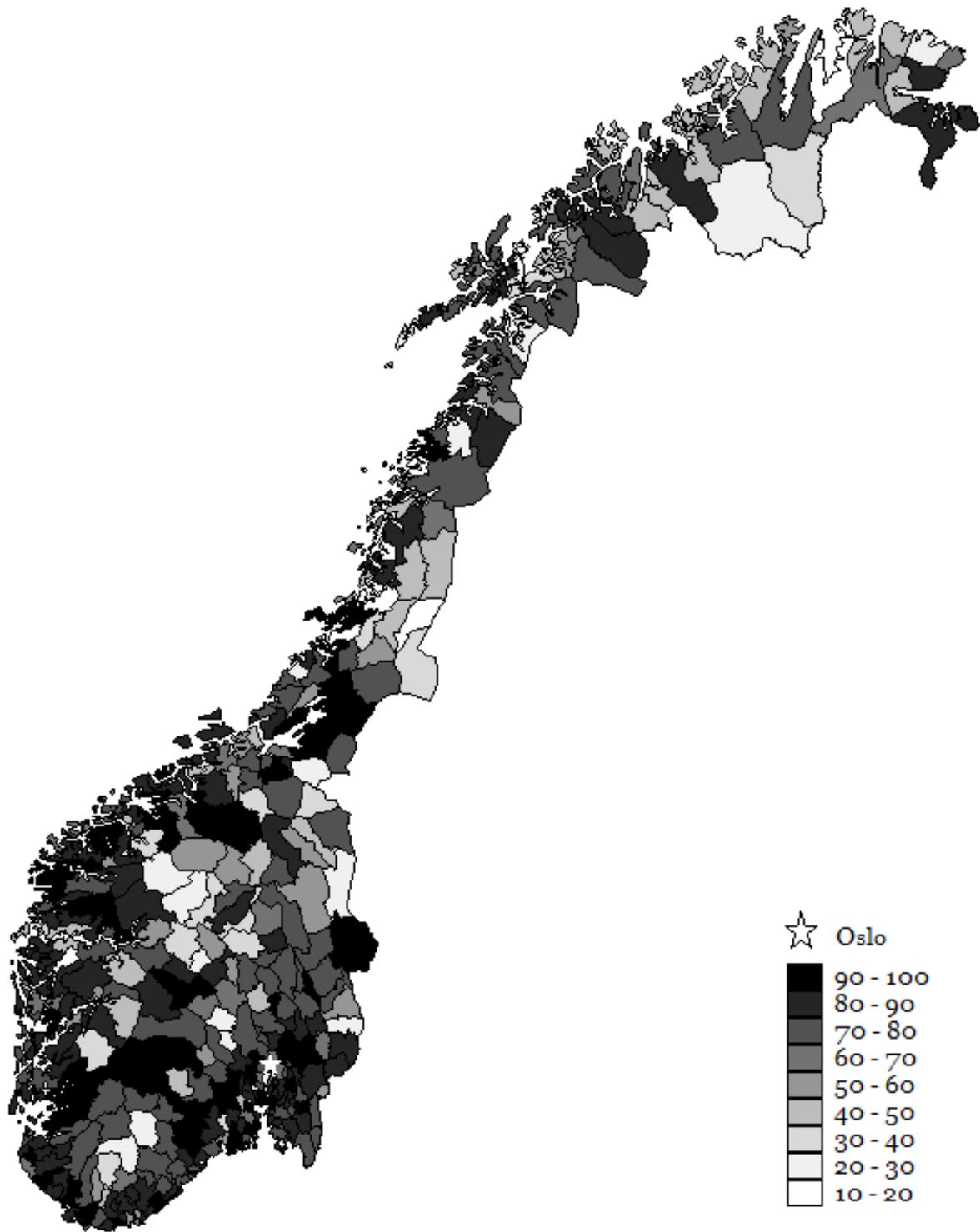


Figure 2. The index of local party system nationalization for each of the 290 municipalities in Sweden after the local elections of 2010.

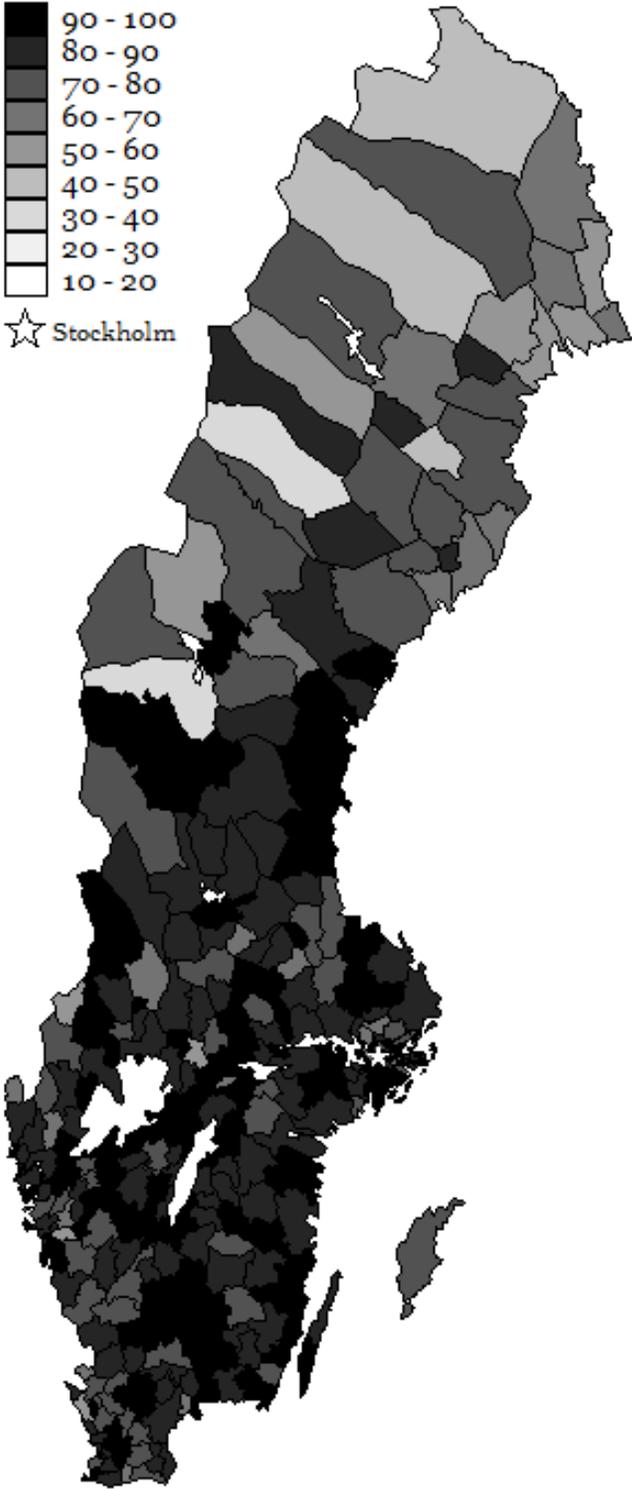


Figure 3. The index of local party system nationalization for each of the 98 municipalities in Denmark after the local elections of 2009.

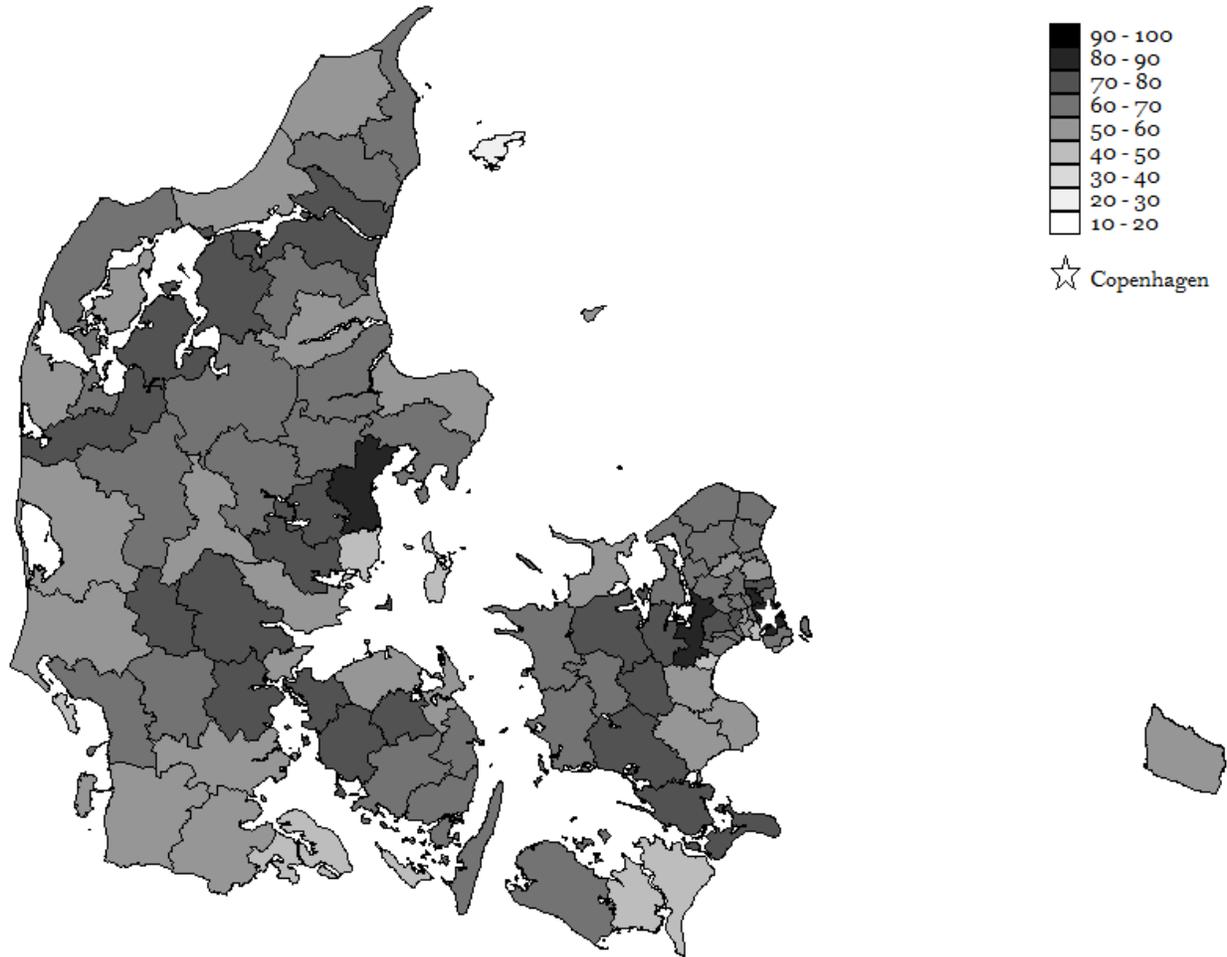


Figure 4. The index of local party system nationalization for each of the 275 municipalities in Denmark after the local elections of 2001.



Figure 5: Index of local party system nationalization Denmark 1966-2009 split by geography.

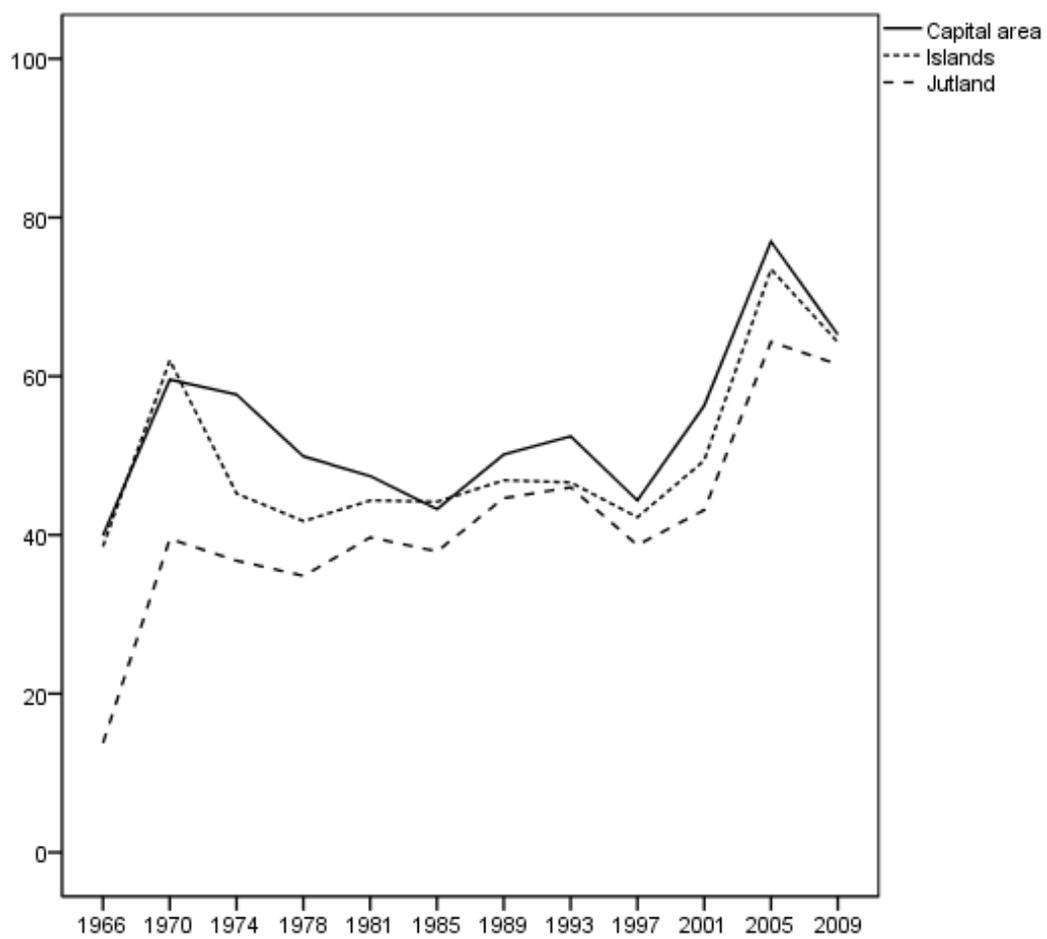


Table 1: The index of local party system nationalization. Beta (S.E.).

	Norway	Sweden	Denmark
Periphery (distance to capital km/100)	-.932*** (.202)	-2.118*** (.296)	-2.348** (.808)
Population size (inhabitants/10,000)	-1.584*** (.332)	-.436** (.140)	.321 (.200)
Council size (number of seats)	1.285*** (.124)	.374*** (.074)	.669** (.208)
Constant	46.225*** (3.533)	79.197*** (3.449)	48.111*** (4.374)
Adj. R ²	.28	.23	.32
N	429	290	98

Table 2: Percentage of nationwide parties represented at the council. Beta (S.E.).

	Norway	Sweden	Denmark
Periphery (distance to capital km/100)	-.611** (.183)	-1.743*** (.258)	-2.293** (.668)
Population size (inhabitants/10000)	-1.361*** (.302)	-.536*** (.122)	.172 (.166)
Council size (number of seats)	1.613*** (.113)	.453*** (.065)	.646*** (.172)
Constant	41.109*** (3.210)	80.423*** (3.009)	53.432*** (3.616)
Adj. R ²	.40	.27	.33
N	429	290	98

Table 3: Percentage of the parties/lists represented at the councils which are local (non-partisan) lists. Beta (S.E.).

	Norway	Sweden	Denmark
Periphery (distance to capital km/100)	.695*** (.168)	.837*** (.199)	1.393 (.910)
Population size (inhabitants/10000)	.805** (.277)	-.025 (.094)	-.108 (.226)
Council size (number of seats)	-.239* (.103)	.017 (.050)	-.449 (.234)
Constant	12.949*** (2.946)	3.223 (2.315)	18.864*** (4.927)
Adj. R ²	.06	.05	.09
N	429	290	98