

## **Gender, devolution and political representation: Evidence from the UK and Spain**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the hitherto under-researched relationship between political decentralization and women's political representation, specifically their descriptive or numerical presence. In doing so, we adopt a party-centered approach, arguing that political parties are a key mediating variable between the formal institutions of the state and gender equality outcomes. The empirical analysis evaluates this relationship in the context of a qualitative comparative case study of the adoption and implementation of candidate gender quotas in the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party and the British Labour Party. We conclude that party organizational dynamics play a key role in explaining numerical increases in women's representation and that political parties need to be considered as independent (and gendered) actors in any analysis of the relationship between state architecture and women's politics.

### **Keywords**

Decentralization, political parties, candidate selection, women's representation, gender quotas

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## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Political decentralization has been one of the most notable worldwide trends in recent decades. In Western Europe, for example, the dichotomy between federal and unitary states has been increasingly eroded, as decentralized state architectures in the form of federations – such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland – coexist with ongoing processes of decentralization in a number of countries, older and newer democracies alike – including France, Italy, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Spain. As questions of constitutional and institutional restructuring have become ever more politically relevant, these developments have led to various innovations in political participation. Globally, the most common reforms have been provisions for the increased representation of women, including constitutional, legal, and party quotas which have been adopted in more than one hundred countries, most within the last two decades (see Krook 2009).

In this paper, we explore the hitherto under-researched relationship between political decentralization and women’s representation. Specifically, we examine the impact of decentralizing reforms on the organizational dynamics of political parties and how this relationship, in turn, affects the adoption and implementation of gender quotas to increase women’s descriptive, or numerical, representation. In evaluating this relationship, we adopt a party-centered approach, arguing that parties are a key mediating variable between the formal institutions of the state and gender equality outcomes. Although political decentralization strongly affects party systems, party organization and electoral strategies at different tiers of government (Hough and Jeffery 2006), most federalism scholars pay only superficial attention to political parties (see Filippov et al. 2004). Those scholars that do address the role of parties often assume that processes of federalization and decentralization are exogenous to party system dynamics (Chhibber and Kollman 2004), failing to acknowledge that parties themselves can initiate decentralizing reforms, or that parties’ internal dynamics can “absorb and even overturn the pressures arising from institutional change” (Hopkin and Bradbury 2006, 136). Crucially, we conceive of these dynamics as gendered. Not only have parties traditionally been male-dominated – that is, men have typically monopolized decision-

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making and candidate selection bodies – but they have historically been built around “unacknowledged traditional conceptions of gender relations” which shape both formal party rules and informal norms and practices (Lovenduski 2005, 58). Thus, by highlighting the importance of (gender) power relations and focusing on parties as actors in their own right, we can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between decentralizing reforms, party organizational dynamics, and gender equality outcomes – in this case, numerical increases in women’s representation.

We evaluate this relationship in the context of a qualitative comparative case study of quota adoption and implementation in Spain and Britain, two parliamentary democracies where the electoral and legislative arenas are party-determined and which have relatively recently undergone significant devolution of power to regional institutions. Indeed, the Spanish and British cases have sometimes been identified as “federations in the making” or “quasi-federations” (Moreno 2001; Bogdanor 2003). In keeping with our party-centered approach, the empirical analysis focuses on two state-wide political parties<sup>2</sup>: the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party/*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) and the British Labour Party. Both parties present candidates for state-wide and regional elections and have tight organizational linkages between party levels (Fabre 2008). As such, we exclude non state-wide parties which contest regional and/or state-wide elections in just one or few regions from our analysis, as they do not face the challenge of maintaining a coherent organization across a multi-level polity. In addition, both parties have taken leading roles in promoting women’s representation in their respective countries. These similarities provide a useful foundation for examining the impact of decentralizing reforms on party organization and for evaluating the effects of that relationship on the adoption and implementation of gender quotas.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The first section reviews the literature on federalism, party politics, and gender politics, and makes the case for a theoretical approach that is both party-centered and gendered. The second section sets the context for the case studies. It describes the multi-level framework of government and party organization in Spain and Britain and provides an overview of debates over women’s representation in both countries. The third section compares the Spanish and

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<sup>2</sup> We use the term “state-wide” rather than “national” as the latter is contested in both countries. For the sake of the comparison, we use the term “region” to denote “the key meso-level of government” in each state (Swenden and Maddens 2009, 3). When examining party organization, we refer to “central” and “regional” levels.

British state-wide parties and assesses how party organizational dynamics have affected the adoption and implementation of gender quotas in a context of decentralizing state structures. The final section discusses the main findings and outlines areas for future research.

### **Decentralization, political parties and women's representation**

Our starting point is that we can only understand the relationship between decentralizing reforms and gender equality outcomes by investigating the “inner lives” of political parties. While there is a growing body of research on the impact of state architecture – that is, vertical and horizontal power allocations – on women's politics (Hausman et al. 2010; Vickers 2010; Chappell and Vickers 2011), the role of political parties as actors is downplayed in much of this work. In analyzing whether particular forms of state architecture serve as a barrier to or an opportunity for women's equality seeking, most scholars focus on the impact of formal institutional structures on policy outcomes (see for example Chappell 2002). Even those scholars who do directly address women's numerical representation ignore or underplay political party factors, while over-privileging systemic variables such as electoral systems or the role of women's movement organization (see for example Vickers 2011; Orbals et al. 2011).

In contrast, research on women's representation has increasingly focused on the internal dynamics of political parties as a crucial area in need of further investigation. While systemic variables structure the overall context of recruitment, parties are the main “gatekeepers” to political office in most countries, particularly in parliamentary democracies. Research in the field demonstrates that aspiring women candidates face significant obstacles in the recruitment process, for example, highlighting widespread incidences of direct and indirect discrimination by candidate selectors (Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Shepherd-Robinson and Lovenduski 2002). These interactions take place within a wider framework of formal and informal party rules and practices which are shaped and structured by gender norms (Lovenduski 2005). To a limited extent, these scholars have addressed the relationship between state architecture, party organizational dynamics and women's numerical representation. While some argue that decentralized candidate selection processes are more likely to result in numerical increases in women's representation, on the basis that localized concerns engage more women (Lovenduski and Norris 1993) or that a selection process taking place closer to party members might more easily attract previously excluded groups (Norris 1997),

research on gender quotas demonstrates that these measures are more likely to be successful in highly centralized candidate selection processes (Matland and Studlar 1996; Caul Kittilson 2006). However, much of the work on gender quotas still focuses on why quotas are adopted rather than how they are implemented, thus failing to thoroughly examine intra-party dynamics (for exceptions, see Davidson-Schmich 2006; Threlfall 2007). Moreover, research in this area focuses largely on national elections, disregarding the multi-level setting in which parties operate.

Meanwhile, the literature on comparative federalism similarly fails to comprehensively engage with political parties. Work in the field generally assumes 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). However, a growing body of research has challenged this assumption, demonstrating that the relationship between state architecture and party organization is not necessarily straightforward. Party characteristics cannot simply be read off from the territorial configuration of the state, nor are decentralizing reforms necessarily accompanied by party organizational change (see for example Hopkin 2003, 2009; Swenden and Maddens 2009). Yet, in analyzing the relationship between decentralizing reforms and political parties, these scholars have generally focused on ethno-regionalist conflicts, largely ignoring issues of women and gender, as well as other marginalized groups. This omission is particularly surprising given global developments such as the rise of candidate gender quotas and the key role of women activists as agents in recent processes of institutional and constitutional restructuring.

This paper takes the first step towards integrating these different bodies of literature in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between decentralizing reforms, party organizational dynamics, and gender equality outcomes. In doing so, we adopt an approach that is both party-centered and gendered. Following Fabre and Méndez (2009, 103), we apply Elazar’s (1987) distinction of the distribution of powers in federal systems to an analysis of the vertical integration of state-wide parties, namely the organizational linkages established between the central and regional levels of a political party (Thorlakson 2011). The “shared-rule” dimension addresses the degree of regional party influence in central party boards, measured through the participation of regional branches in central party organs and decision-making processes. The “self-rule” dimension addresses the degree of

organizational autonomy allocated to regional party branches in the management of regional party affairs, including autonomy on candidate selection processes and party policy for regional elections. We argue that these dimensions provide a useful framework through which to evaluate the success or failure of party gender quotas. Specifically, we expect that the stronger shared-rule and the weaker self-rule are, the more successful quota adoption and implementation will be.

On the one hand, for voluntary party quotas to be effectively implemented at the various elections the party competes in, all party levels should be committed to the measure adopted in order to enforce its application. This relates to the extent to which regional branches have participated in the particular decision-making process involved in the adoption of party quotas (shared-rule). If the central leadership board contains several regional representatives or party conferences 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.

On the other hand, the implementation of gender quotas is more effective the more centralized the candidate selection process is, which means that self-rule is low or at least moderate. First, in centralized party organizations, the central party has more control over its local and regional branches and is, therefore, better able to enforce quota reforms (Caul Kittilson 2006). Second, centralized selection processes neutralize local power monopolies and avoid self-nomination (Baldez 2004, 238), which disadvantages women because they are less likely to promote their own candidacies. And, finally, the more centralized and institutionalized candidate selection processes are, the easier it is for women and other outsider candidates to determine what needs to be done to run for office (Davidson-Schmich 2006).

In addition, we posit that the success of quota adoption and implementation is mediated by the organizational inertias of the parties themselves. Political parties are gendered organizations within which formal and informal party rules, norms and practices are shaped and structured by gender power relations (see Lovenduski 2005; Kenny and Mackay 2011). This insight allows us to gain a fuller picture of the tensions raised by decentralizing reforms. While parties may change their organizational structure in response to decentralizing reforms, these changes are filtered by established party structures and practices or even path-determined by past commitments and historical legacies (Hopkin and Bradbury 2006; Kenny 2011).

## **Party organizational change and women's representation in Spain and Britain**

The PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) and the British Labour Party provide excellent examples of the complex relationship between decentralizing reforms, party organizational dynamics, and gender equality outcomes. While in both the Spanish and British cases the formal institutional context remains important, it cannot fully explain the relationships and distribution of competences between party levels (Fabre 2008: 326). Despite the creation of new regional governments, the effects of political decentralization on party organization have been rather limited.

In Spain, democratization and political decentralization were concurrent processes starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The previous unitary state gave way to a multi-level polity divided into 17 regions, the Autonomous Communities (*Comunidades Autónomas*), each with its own legislative and executive institutions. While initially some regions acquired higher levels of autonomy than the rest, incremental transferences of competences over time have transformed Spain from an asymmetric decentralized system into a largely symmetric quasi-federation (Aja 2003).

However, while political decentralization has clearly shaped Spanish state-wide parties' electoral and governing strategies, and they all organize according to the structure of the state, their internal decentralization has remained to a great extent isolated from the broader process of institutional change (Fabre and Méndez-Lago 2009). In the case of the PSOE, the party emerged from the transition period as a federal party with a formally decentralized structure, with a special arrangement in Catalonia<sup>3</sup>. Yet, while the PSOE was an important actor in the promotion and implementation of decentralizing reforms during the transition, the party quickly adopted a centralized approach to party organization after winning power in 1982. As political decentralization began after forty years of dictatorship rule, the PSOE was concerned with establishing a strong and cohesive party organization, and the centralization of power served this goal. While its regional branches have made moderate gains in the definition of electoral strategies and party platforms in the past few decades, the survival of central executive power has remained a key characteristic of decision-making within the PSOE (Hopkin 2009, 195).

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<sup>3</sup> The PSOE has regional branches throughout the state, with the exception of the region of Catalonia. The Party of the Catalan Socialists (PSC) operates as a sister party with a federal-type agreement. It is completely autonomous to select its candidates and the reform of its statutes does not need the PSOE's approval.

In the British case, in contrast, the process of political decentralization is much more recent, with the devolution campaign gaining momentum in the 1990s in the context of a long-established democracy<sup>4</sup>. The system of devolution in the United Kingdom is asymmetric, in that the devolved regions have different sets of competences, institutional forms, and ways of working (Jeffrey 2009). For example, the devolution settlement was much more limited in Wales than in Scotland, and the National Assembly for Wales has weaker legislative powers than the Scottish Parliament<sup>5</sup>.

While the British state-wide parties have also 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” (Riker 1975, 137) between changes in state architecture and in party organization. Labour was a key proponent of the devolution reforms, largely as a response to the threat posed by the rise of nationalist parties in its electoral strongholds in Scotland and Wales. Yet, even after devolution was implemented, the expected decentralization in the party organization has not occurred. The party remains highly centralized, although pressure for internal party decision-making to be devolved downwards has led to some organizational changes, for example, loosening central control over election campaigns in these regions. Overall, the party has largely avoided significant internal reforms, leaving many long-standing structures and practices intact (Hopkin and Bradbury 2006, 149-50).

For both the PSOE and Labour, the fundamental issue of party organization raised by political decentralization was the selection of new party elites, opening up possibilities for women candidates to be selected and elected. In the Spanish case, women’s representation was initially an issue of very low priority on the political agenda. In the three first state-wide legislative elections held in 1977, 1979 and 1982, women’s representation oscillated between 5 per cent and 6 per cent (stagnating at around 20 out of 350 seats). On average, the first regional elections held in 1983 yielded the same results – an average of 5.6 per cent. The concurrent processes of democratization and decentralization were not accompanied by any measure to increase women’s representation, nor was there a public debate on the issue. This was particularly the case for the PSOE, whose membership was dominated by “strongly

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<sup>4</sup> Northern Ireland is not included in our analysis as it is marked by a unique political setting and has a territory-specific party system in which no “mainland” state-wide parties seek election.

<sup>5</sup> These powers were subsequently expanded in the Government of Wales Act 2006 and the Welsh devolution referendum held on 3 March 2011.

motivated male gatekeepers...the bearers of its historic legacies, the sons of the defeated, the exiled and the dead” (Threlfall 2007, 1079). Despite this background, the PSOE eventually pioneered the adoption of party gender quotas in the 1980s and 1990s, accommodating feminist demands for increased numerical representation. As Table 1 shows, Spain has seen notable increases in women’s representation in the Congress of Deputies over the last three decades, mostly due to the proactive role taken by the PSOE.

Increases in women’s representation in state-wide elections have been paralleled by those found in regional parliaments, as Table 2 demonstrates. In 2003 and 2004, women’s representation reached 36 per cent at both levels, a “critical mass” of women parliamentarians. After the introduction of a statutory quota by the 2007 Equality Law, the percentage of female deputies increased to 43 per cent at the regional level, while no significant increase has been observed at the state-wide level.

Table 1 Women in the Congress of Deputies, Spain, 1979-2008 (percentages)

Election year	PSOE	PP	Total
1979	5	11	5
1982	7	1	6
1986	7	6	8
1989	17	10	13
1993	18	15	16
1996	28	14	22
2000	37	25	28
2004	46	28	36
2008	43	32	37

Source: Based on Verge (2007, 203-04) updated by the authors.

Table 2 Women in regional parliaments, Spain, 1983-2011 (percentages)

Regional mean	1983	1987	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011
PSOE	6	10	16	22	35	42	46	43
PP	5	4	11	15	26	35	39	42
Total	6	7	14	20	30	36	43	42

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.

Like the PSOE, the Labour Party has also taken the lead in promoting women’s representation at both state-wide and regional levels. This transformation is all the more surprising given that the party has traditionally been male-dominated, structured around the model of the Labour activist, the male unionized industrial worker. Yet from the late

1970s onwards, debates in the Labour Party over organizational and policy matters have included claims for women’s representation (Lovenduski 2005). After limited gains at the state-wide level, processes of decentralization and campaigns for home rule for the historic nations of Scotland and Wales opened up new possibilities for feminist actors to push for gains in representation (Kenny and Mackay 2011). Whereas the devolution debate in Wales was largely top-down, in Scotland, women activists working inside and outside parties – in particular Labour – successfully introduced a gendered perspective to these wider reform debates (Russell et al. 2002). Whereas all of the main parties declared their concern for more women in politics, only Labour adopted and implemented strong gender quotas in the run-up to the first regional elections in 1999.

Ultimately, women comprised 37.2 per cent of the new Scottish Parliament and 40 per cent of the new National Assembly for Wales (rising shortly afterwards to 42 per cent). As Tables 3 and 4 illustrate, this “gender coup” was all the more impressive given the continuing under-representation of women at the state-wide level, where the current percentage of women in the House of Commons has stagnated at 22 per cent.

Table 3 Women in the House of Commons, United Kingdom, 1979-2010 (percentages)

Election year	Labour	Cons	LibDem	Total
1979	4	2	0	3
1983	5	3	0	4
1987	9	5	6	6
1992	14	6	10	9
1997	24	8	7	18
2001	23	8	10	18
2005	28	9	16	20
2010	31	16	12	22

*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)

Region	Election year	Labour	Cons	LibDem	Main NSWP	Total
Scotland	1999	50	17	12	43	37
	2003	56	22	12	33	40
	2007	50	29	13	26	33
	2011	46	40	20	28	35
Wales	1999	54	0	50	35	40
	2003	63	18	50	50	50
	2007	62	8	50	47	47
	2011	50	29	40	36	42

*Source:* Based on Mackay and Kenny (2009) updated by the authors.

Cons: Conservative Party; LibDem: Liberal Democrats. Main non state-wide party (NSWP): Scottish National Party (SNP) in Scotland and Plaid Cymru (PC) in Wales.

### **Decentralization, intra-party dynamics and gender quotas**

The story of women's representation in Spain and Britain highlights the leading role of the PSOE and the Labour Party in increasing the numbers of women in public office. In doing so, it shows the importance of examining intra-party dynamics in order to gain a more comprehensive account of how and why political parties reach the decision to promote women's numerical representation and how these decisions are implemented. Therefore, in this section, we adopt an approach that is party-centered and gendered, seeking to evaluate how party vertical integration – measured here in terms of shared-rule and self-rule – and intra-party power relations have affected the adoption and implementation of gender quotas in a context of decentralizing reforms.

#### *Shared-rule: explaining quota adoption*

When evaluating the impact of party vertical integration on quota adoption, significant differences emerge between both parties. In the case of the PSOE, its strong levels of shared-rule help explain how quotas were adopted in a party whose membership remained over 80 per cent male until the early 1990s (Verge 2007, 166). Gender quotas were pioneered by a regional party federated with the PSOE in the region of Catalonia, the Party of the Catalan Socialists (PSC). In 1982, the PSC guaranteed women 12 per cent of the places on party committees and on candidate lists, a percentage which was later raised to 15 per cent in 1987. In 1988, the PSOE followed its regional counterpart and passed a 25 per cent gender quota in party offices and electoral lists, after a period of strategic lobbying led by the party's women's section. The quota provisions were gradually enlarged over the next decade until reaching a gender-neutral formulation of parity – in which any sex is entitled to neither less than 40 per cent nor more than 60 per cent of representation in party committees or candidatures – in 1997 in the PSOE and in 2000 in the PSC.

It should be noted that these changes took place only after a series of internal party crises beginning in the 1980s – including leadership scandals, declining electoral support, and electoral defeat at the state-wide level in 1996 – which opened the door for an extended process of party and leadership renewal. The introduction of gender quotas, then, was seen as a key mechanism of internal party democratization that would breathe new life into the party's leadership, membership and voter base. The adoption of quotas was also a function of internal party power games, allowing party leaders to better control the process of political appointments (Threlfall 2005, 154).

Nonetheless, the entire party structure replicated the measures adopted once they were approved at the central level. These outcomes can be explained by a number of organizational factors. First, delegates at the central party conference represent the districts of the regions they belong to.<sup>6</sup> Territorial inclusiveness is a criterion that is also applied to the composition of party organs in the quasi-consensual negotiations which take place during party conferences, including the leading central decision-making bodies, the Federal Committee and the Federal Executive Commission. Second, regional conferences are celebrated in cascade after the central party conference has been held, ensuring that the principles adopted at the state-wide level are subsequently translated at the lower echelons of the party organization. This ensured that the 25 per cent quota and the parity policy were smoothly incorporated into regional party rules. In the case of the PSOE, strong shared-rule ensured that the adoption of gender quotas was a central-level decision that was reached democratically, with consensus from regional and central party actors, over several party conferences, thus avoiding the appearance of imposed central intervention.

In contrast, the British Labour Party presents lower levels of shared-rule than its Spanish counterpart. Decisional power is concentrated around state-wide party organs – namely the annual party conference, the National Executive Committee and the Parliamentary Labour Party – and there is no formal regional representation on these bodies (Fabre 2008). The pressures arising from devolution, then, ran against Labour’s “organizational traditions and routines” (Hopkin 2009, 185), raising tensions over the balance of power within the party. Questions over women’s representation were absolutely central to these debates.

As a result of sustained campaigning within Labour, organized women’s activists aligned with the party’s left were able to put women’s representation on the agenda starting in the early 1980s, linking arguments for gender-balanced representation to the party’s wider modernization program. After the campaign for gender quotas stalled at the state-wide level due to legal challenges (see Lovenduski 2005), the focus shifted to the newly devolved institutions. In 1997, the National Executive Committee (NEC) established a Women’s Representation Taskforce to devise a positive action

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<sup>6</sup> These districts correspond to a sub-regional administrative division found throughout the state, namely the provinces, which also match the electoral constituencies for state-wide and regional elections.

system tailored to the hybrid electoral system used in Scotland and Wales<sup>7</sup>. The taskforce proposed that the party implement a quota measure called the “twinning” scheme<sup>8</sup>, which had been devised by Scottish Labour women and academics. The twinning scheme was supported by the central party leadership, who hoped that gender balance in the devolved institutions would reinforce the party’s “modern” image. Fair representation for women would inject new blood into the system, breaking the hold of unrepresentative local constituency activists, who were largely male, over the selection process (Bradbury et al. 2000). In addition, women were now represented in equal numbers to men in the NEC, as a result of internal party quotas introduced in 1989. These women proved to be highly influential in the NEC’s decision to recommend the scheme, which, with the support of the party leadership, was endorsed by the Labour Party Conference in 1997 (Russell et al 2002).

The proposal initially caused little controversy, given that the lack of regional representation at the conference meant that the bulk of the delegates were drawn from English constituencies. However, while the policy was subsequently adopted by the Scottish regional branch of the party, it met with considerably more resistance in Wales, particularly from the constituencies which were more male-dominated than in Scotland. Rather than force the twinning policy through, the Welsh Labour Party executive issued an internal consultation paper and left the decision to the regional party conference held in 1998 (Russell et al. 2002). After a concerted effort by the central party to impose its will, the policy was adopted at the Welsh Labour Party conference by a very narrow margin, despite significant opposition from traditionalists and many trade unions (Edwards and McAllister 2002). Thus, in the case of Labour, low shared-rule meant that the central-level decision to adopt gender quotas for elections to the devolved institutions was more controversial, leading to internal conflicts and power struggles between the central party and its regional branches.

#### *Self-rule: explaining quota implementation*

In order to explain increases in women’s numerical representation, we must also examine how and why quotas are successfully implemented. The dimension of party

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<sup>7</sup> Elections to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales use the Additional Member System (AMS) in which candidates are elected via a combination of first-past-the-post constituency seats and regional party lists.

<sup>8</sup> Realizing that most of Labour’s seats would come through constituencies rather than the regional lists, the “twinning” scheme 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.

vertical integration that most clearly affects quota implementation is the degree of self-rule – that is, the degree of autonomy of the regional party branches in selecting candidates for office. Concerning the PSOE, the party’s regional branches have a consultative role in state-wide elections, as it is the districts of the regional branches (equivalent to electoral constituencies) which draft candidate tickets and submit them to a state-wide electoral commission, which holds veto power and can rearrange the order of candidates. The composition of this electoral commission takes territorial balance into account. The commission subsequently presents the lists to the Federal Committee for final approval. In the case of regional elections, the regional party branches approve the candidates’ tickets for regional parliaments put forward by their districts, but the Federal Committee must also ratify them (Verge 2007, 328). Thus, the party’s formal claims of internal federalism do not hold in practice, and self-rule in the candidate selection process is rather limited.

The PSOE’s high degree of central control over candidate selection helps explain how party gender quotas were successfully implemented and effectively enforced even in a context of electoral decline, risking a backlash among male incumbents (Threlfall 2007, 1079). After the 1997 parity decision, regional party branches formally complied with the quota provisions, but continued to place women candidates in unwinnable positions on the party list. Under the Spanish proportional electoral system, seats are allocated through the d’Hondt method using closed party lists, so candidates need to be ranked sufficiently high up the list in order to win seats. While these gendered practices initially limited the success of gender quotas, the central party adopted further measures to ensure that parity was also applied to winnable seats. In addition, since 1999, a representative of the Women’s Section sits in the state-wide electoral commission and holds veto power: lists failing to comply with the quota provisions are amended (Verge 2007, 172).

The PSOE’s centralized structure has also resulted in a “contagion effect” from party quotas to legal quotas.<sup>9</sup> Efforts by the PSOE and other left-wing parties to introduce a statutory quota at the state-wide level were initially rejected due to the opposition of the conservative Popular Party (PP), which held the majority of seats (Verge 2011). However, the PSOE’s tight vertical integration across party levels

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<sup>9</sup> Evidence suggests that the adoption of gender quotas and improved performance on women’s representation by one party or one level of the political system sets in motion a dynamic of “contagion” whereby other parties will respond in order to compete (Matland and Studlar 1996).

allowed it to circumvent this blockade at the regional level, using its regional branches to incorporate “zipping”<sup>10</sup> into the electoral laws of some of the autonomous communities the party governed, namely Castile-La Mancha and the Balearic Islands in 2002. The party was therefore able to present itself before the Spanish electorate as the party that championed equality. After the state-wide PP-led government legally challenged these reforms before the Constitutional Court, which suspended their implementation, the PSOE voluntarily adopted zipping in these as well as in other regions in the subsequent regional elections held in 2003. Once the PSOE returned to power in 2004, the party expanded its modernizing program to the wider institutional context by pushing through the Equality Law, approved in 2007, which requires parties to incorporate a minimum of 40 per cent and a maximum of 60 per cent of any sex into candidate lists for all elections. The PSOE-led government also withdrew the unconstitutionality appeals that were pending on the regional quota laws, which allowed these reforms to be successfully implemented.

There is also some evidence of a “contagion effect” across the Spanish party system – as almost all of the Spanish parties have followed the PSOE’s lead and adopted either gender quotas or informal targets for women’s representation (Verge 2011). However, cross-party divisions still exist, and the enforcement of the Equality Law, clearly defined along PSOE’s parity policy, has not eroded the differences between the PSOE and its main electoral competitor, the PP. Although PP’s tight vertical integration has also allowed the party to feminize its institutional representation once a vague recommendation for gender balance was issued by the central leadership at the end of the 1990s, the PP’s commitment to gender-balanced representation is not as strong as the PSOE’s. Whereas the levels of women’s regional deputies are basically the same for both parties after the 2011 regional elections, 43 per cent of the PSOE’s deputies in the state-wide Congress of Deputies are women, while less than a third of the PP’s deputies are women (see Tables 1 and 2).<sup>11</sup>

Candidate selection in the Labour Party presents a more complicated picture. Despite its highly centralized structure, Labour has a long tradition of decentralized constituency-based selection. In the late 1980s and 1990s, however, the process became

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<sup>10</sup> Zipping is a quota measure in which men and women alternate from top to bottom of the candidates’ tickets.

<sup>11</sup> No clear pattern prevails for non state-wide parties. Some of them had also adopted gender quotas prior to the adoption of the Equality Law and have tended to produce gender-balanced parliamentary delegations while others still fall short of the statutory quota provisions among their elected deputies.

increasingly centralized as part of a wider reform trajectory of party modernization (Hopkin 2009). In the run-up to the 1999 elections for the devolved institutions, questions were raised as to the devolution of decision-making within the party. However, for the party leadership, the priority was not on devolving selection procedures to the Scottish and Welsh regional branches, but rather on attracting a wider pool of applicants to ensure that seats in the new devolved institutions would not simply go to the “usual suspects” (Bradbury et al. 2000). The party introduced a pre-selection approval procedure, which established a central panel of approved constituency and list candidates. The selection boards that drew up these approved lists included state-wide, Scottish and Welsh party members as well as non-party members. While constituency selection was left to one-member-one-vote, the electoral boards overseeing list selection were made up of members from both the regional party branches and the central party.

As a result of the party’s centralized structure, once the center was persuaded to support gender quotas, the party was able to enforce these reforms in both Scotland and a recalcitrant Wales to ensure gender balance in candidate selection (Kenny and Mackay 2011). However, this centralized approach proved to be controversial. In Scotland, party officials were accused of implementing an ideological test of the New Labour credentials of prospective candidates, rejecting several prominent party figures on the nationalist-left wing of the party. Meanwhile, 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 Bradbury et al. 2000, 161-65).

The controversy over the 1999 selections created significant pressure for internal party decision making to be devolved downwards, leading to a distinct “change of tone” as well as several “organizational concessions” on the part of the Labour Party (Hopkin and Bradbury 2006, 142). In 2000, control over leadership selection was devolved to the Scottish and Welsh regional branches while a year later control over candidate selection was also devolved, although these decisions still take place within a framework of centrally prescribed principles (Fabre 2008). In Scotland, however, the regional branch has increasingly returned to the party’s past tradition of decentralized constituency-based selection. After the perceived controversies of central party intervention in 1999, the Scottish party branch has also been reluctant to implement further quota reforms, which has had a detrimental impact on trends in the recruitment and election of female

candidates over time (Kenny and Mackay 2011). In the absence of intervention by either regional or central party actors, local constituency selectorates have been left with considerable leeway to circumvent or subvert quota reforms and to return to past traditions such as the privileging of “favorite sons” (Kenny 2011).

The trend of internal decentralization and increasing self-rule within Labour has also meant that quota reforms have not diffused across party levels. Indeed, as already highlighted, we see some evidence of a process of “contagion in reverse”, as Labour has increasingly sought to avoid the apparent controversy of quota reforms (Mackay and Kenny 2009). There is also little evidence of contagion of quota reforms across parties, as seen in the Spanish case. In response to Labour’s use of twinning for the 1999 elections to the devolved institutions, its main electoral rival in Scotland, the Scottish National Party (SNP), implemented unofficial measures to encourage women to stand for election; similarly, in Wales, its main electoral rival, Plaid Cymru (PC), implemented a “gender template” on the regional lists (Russell et al. 2002). Post 1999, however, women’s representation has been pursued far more vigorously in Wales than Scotland. The issue of women’s representation has not retained high salience for Scottish political parties after 1999, nor has it remained a matter of party competition (Kenny and Mackay 2011). In contrast, women’s representation was highly politically salient in the 2010 state-wide elections, although ultimately none of the British state-wide parties met their own targets for women’s representation, nor have they matched the levels attained in regional elections (see Tables 3 and 4).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the relationship between political decentralization and women’s numerical representation in two important cases of decentralization in contemporary Western Europe. Our aim has been to address the limitations of the existing literature on federalism, party politics, and gender politics, and to explore the potential explanatory leverage to be gained from a detailed analysis of the “inner lives” of political parties.

Our contention is that a party-centered approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between decentralizing reforms, party organization and gender equality outcomes. While feminist agency – particularly party feminists – provided the initial impetus for reform in our cases, evidence from Spain and Britain demonstrates that the success of gender quota reforms cannot be reduced a

priori to the agency of women. Our empirical analysis of the PSOE and Labour shows that in order to understand how and why gender quotas are adopted and effectively implemented it is crucial to go beyond either overly structural or agent-centered accounts to look at the internal dynamics of parties.

In Spain, decentralizing reforms have not had a significant impact on party organization. Strong intra-party shared-rule combined with limited self-rule has allowed the PSOE's quota reforms to be successfully implemented and effectively enforced at both central and regional party levels and has also helped overcome the potential fragmenting effect of multiple levels. Conversely, in the British case, shared-rule is rather low and the autonomy of the regional branches has significantly increased with devolution thereby reducing the capacity of the party's central leadership to effectively implement and enforce quota reforms.

The cases of the PSOE and the Labour Party also highlight the importance of (gendered) party power relations in explaining the success or failure of quota reforms. In both cases, the success of gender quotas has been dependent on the relevance of women's political representation to the party's electoral fortunes and to the (male) leadership's wider priorities. In the PSOE, contrary to what might be expected, the party's return to power in 2004 has reinforced the link between women's representation and party renewal. With the adoption of the state-wide Equality Law and regional statutory quotas, the PSOE continues to present itself to the electorate as the party that is the best advocate for gender equality. Meanwhile, in the case of Labour, there is clear evidence that gender parity has slipped down the party's agenda. Ongoing intra-party tensions between central party intervention and local control have limited the success of quota reforms in the devolved institutions, and have opened up new spaces for local selectorates to return to gendered practices of political patronage.

Overall, this paper provides a more comprehensive understanding of the "secret garden" of internal party dynamics that can enrich the literature on federalism, party politics, and gender politics. It demonstrates that political parties need to be considered as independent and gendered actors in any analysis of the relationship between state architecture and women's politics. While the formal institutions of the state shape the context in which parties operate, parties also have "lives" of their own. This paper confirms that the relationship between state architecture and party organization is not straightforward, and that this relationship has important consequences for women's representation. It also provides new evidence on the

dynamics of quota adoption and implementation, demonstrating that these measures are more likely to be successful in highly centralized party organizations accompanied by effective enforcement measures that can counter long-established gender-biased practices. These findings will be of interest to academics and activists alike, offering insights into the circumstances and conditions under which numerical increases in women's representation can be achieved.

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