

Party systems under stress: downsizing parliaments as an adaptation strategy to the effects of the economic crisis.

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Abstract

Among the important consequences derived from the economic crisis, there have been deep changes in the political arena as shown by the electoral results of the last elections in the most affected countries – Spain, Portugal, Greece and Ireland. While at the national level none of the European countries have passed major electoral reforms since the beginning of the crisis, there have been debates in several of those countries at the national and/or the subnational level on the pertinence of a change in the electoral rules. In Portugal and Ireland there have been debates on the reduction of the number of seats in their Parliaments as well as in several Autonomous Communities in Spain.

Drawing on rational choice approaches to electoral reform (Benoit 2004, Boix 1999, Colomer 2005) and on the basis of a comparative analysis of the Spanish electoral reform debates at the subnational level (Autonomous Communities), we propose a framework that aims to explain the emergence of this type of institutional reform in the context of economic crisis. We find that established parties are using minor electoral reforms as part of a broader strategy in which the objective is to maintain their status quo vis-à-vis the threats the crisis has entailed for their survival and their electoral success (emergence of new parties, increasing volatility, dealignment). In order to avoid major losses due to these threats, established parties would put forth minor institutional changes that are easier to be enacted than major reforms.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the crisis in 2008, reforms on the diminution of assembly size have been debated in several European countries, such as Italy, Ireland, Portugal or Spain. In this paper we argue that beyond the arguments for the reduction of costs linked to the reduction of the number of MPs, there are outcome contingent motivations, that is, political parties expect to be better off as the result of the reform. The current political and economic circumstances trigger the emergence of these type of proposals that have the preservation of the status quo as their main objective. In the context of the most severe economic crisis since 1945, established political parties face the challenge of being punished by their voters for their failure to redress the economic situation. Economic voting has been proven to be at work in the last elections², with government replacements in most of the countries that have been touched by the crisis. At the same time, voters are showing increasing levels of dissatisfaction with the democratic institutions and the quality of democracy.

In this research, we hypothesize that when harsh economic circumstances take place and citizens' disaffection is boosted, new and small parties might be able to capitalize on this situation. As a consequence, established parties would have incentives to restrain the arena of competition in order to guarantee their status quo and their survival in the long term. In this paper we focus on the analysis of the determinants of the Spanish Popular Party (PP)'s strategy to propose the reduction of the assembly size in the Autonomous Communities (ACs hereafter) since 2011.

Since 1982, when it became the biggest opposition party, the party has enjoyed the benefits derived from an electoral system that rewards the main political parties, especially at the national level³. Consequently it has never been in favour of reforming the system ever since⁴ (Montero and Riera 2008). Shugart (2008) posited that it is the evaluation of past performance under the current electoral system that shapes parties' preferences for a new system. Consequently, the party's position was coherent with findings in the literature according to which candidates (Bowler et al. 2006) and political parties (Pilet and Bol 2011) are less prone to support a change in the rules when they win or when they are satisfied with the current rules. However, in spite of governing most of the regions and having an absolute majority at the national level, it seems that the party has recently modified its attitudes towards the electoral system, especially at the subnational level of government, proposing drastic cuts in the number of regional MPs. Therefore this change in the party's stances towards the electoral systems in Spain constitutes an interesting case of study and unveiling the PP's motivations to put forth this type of electoral reform may help us deepen our understanding of electoral system change processes.

Through the analysis of the circumstances under which proposals to downsize regional parliaments in Spain have emerged, we show how the economic crisis is responsible for the

² See for instance, Nezi in Greece (2012), Marsh and Mikhaylov in Ireland (2012), Palmer and Whitten for the UK (2011), through comparative analysis of Southern European countries (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2012).

³ This is because of the rather small district magnitudes that severely reduce proportionality. For the impact of the electoral system in the Spanish party system see, for instance, Moreno and Oñate 2004 and Hopkin 2005. For a complete review of the Spanish electoral systems, see Montero et al. 1992.

⁴ The electoral manifestos have more often than not contained vague references to the necessity of improvement of the electoral laws but no specific reforms proposals have been put forth. The only exception could be the pledge for the establishment of a commission to analyse the issue in 2008 manifesto.

increasing levels of volatility, especially the extra parliamentary volatility, and how this is in its turn linked to the proposals to reduce the number of parliamentarians. In so doing, this paper aims at providing new theoretical insights on the political consequences of economic crisis focusing on a specific type of institutional reform, the change of electoral rules. Two contributions of this paper need to be highlighted. Firstly, though we can find in the literature on electoral system changes frequent references to crisis as triggering events or important factors explaining the success of reform proposals, much less effort has been done to provide theoretical frameworks that may be applied in comparative research (Rahat 2008). This is mainly due to the predominance of case studies on the field, which tend to emphasize the chain of events -often related to idiosyncratic elements - leading to reform⁵. Although there have been some cross-country studies that focus on the link between public dissatisfaction and the enactment of reforms (Norris 2011⁶), there is still fertile ground for analysis. In this study we provide some arguments and measurements that may help in travelling further in the role of crisis in institutional reform processes. The second contribution of the paper is that, contrary to many studies in the field of electoral reforms (e.g Boix 1999, Bartolini and Mair 1990; Norris 2011), we focus on the analysis of the factors leading to the emergence of the debate and not on the factors explaining the success of the reform. Electoral reforms should be regarded as a multi stage process (Rahat 2008) and it should be taken into account that parties' motivations and institutional constraints may differ in each of the stages of the reform process.

2. The Spanish Case

The issue of reducing the number of members in parliament first appeared in the political agenda in the electoral campaign for the general elections that were held on November 2011. Mariano Rajoy, at that time, leader of the opposition centre right Popular Party said publicly that a reduction of the number of representatives was needed in Spain. He referred to parliamentarians at the national level, arguing that the Congress should pass from having 350 to 300 deputies. The elections were won by the PP with an absolute majority of the seats as was expected by citizens and experts⁷.

In this context, citizens' discontent towards political parties and politicians based on the incapacity of the former to redress the economic crisis triggered protest movements that claimed for electoral reforms among other political changes. However, the topic of electoral reforms did not

⁵ For instance, those studies on the impact of the Tangentopoli scandal in the Italian reforms (Donovan 1995 , Baldini 2011) or the impact of corruption in the Japanese ones.

⁶ In this line, Norris (2011) looked at the link between institutional reforms and citizens' satisfaction with democracy or trust in government and demonstrated that "*democratic aspirations (support for democracy as an ideal) are a strong, significant, and robust predictor of the occurrence of subsequent electoral reforms*"(2011:531).

⁷ Polls had been consistently showing from June 2011 that the Socialist Party (PSOE)'s vote share would be around 30% and the PP would obtain around 45%.

El País, 2011. 'Cómo están y qué esperan las principales formaciones políticas' 14 November. Available at: http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2011/11/14/actualidad/1321267757_438600.html

El Mundo 2011, 'Mayoría abrumadora para el PP y debacle socialista, según los sondeos' 13 November, Available at: <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2011/11/13/espana/1321179511.html#>

enjoy any saliency in the pre-electoral debates (Chari 2013). Nonetheless, the message of reducing the number of MPs started to leak to lower levels of government and the year 2012 witnessed a blast of proposals to downsize regional parliaments. Most of them were done after a meeting that was held in July 2012 between the PP's National Direction and the presidents of those regions governed by the party in which they concluded that the party aimed at an overall reduction of 20% of the regional legislators. The proposed reductions ranged from 14% in Navarre to 50% in Madrid's region⁸.

The analysis of these cases allows us to disentangle how the context may have had an impact in changing the party's stances towards electoral reforms. Besides, the choice of these cases study is sustained on several reasons. On the first place, from a system-level perspective, the regions share the main characteristics of the electoral system and, at the same time, allow for variation in terms of the number of political parties and other characteristics of the political competition. Besides, electoral institutions at this level of government have been very stable since their creation: there have not been any major electoral reforms at this level of government⁹. Moreover, focusing on the incentives of a single party, the Popular Party (PP), in different settings constitutes a valuable case of study since it allows for the control of intraparty characteristics: it is party characterized by its organizational unity, its organizational cohesiveness and the centralization of decision making¹⁰ (Astudillo and Garcia Guereta 2007)¹¹.

The main hypothesis of this research is that institutional reform proposals aiming at the restriction of the structure of competition, such as reforms reducing proportionality, are likely to appear in contexts of electoral shocks, that is, sudden changes in which the small parties-the ones that have been traditionally excluded from parliamentary representation- are successful in attracting a significant part of the electorate. These electoral shocks are expected to occur when the government fails to provide good economic outcomes and the political system is perceived as being malfunctioning. Under these circumstances, voters would be more prone to switch their votes to parties outside the parliamentary arena. Established parties, threatened by the success of the smaller parties, would put forth reforms to guarantee the exclusion of the small parties from the system, most notably through institutional change like electoral reforms.

This paper is organized as follows: in the second section we present the different rationales that can explain the party's proposals to reduce the arena of competition and their theoretical foundations. The study will theorize how the electoral consequences of the economic crisis may explain the proposals to restrain the arena of competition, such as the ones aiming to reduce assembly size. Specifically we will look into how changes in volatility within parties in the

⁸ Apart from the proposals put forth by the PP, similar ones were proposed by other parties in some regions, notably the national centrist party Unión Progreso y Democracia (UPyD) and other regional parties (Foro in Asturias and Union del Pueblo Navarro (UPN) in Navarre).

⁹ We can highlight those changes related to the introduction of gender quotas or some minor changes in the electoral thresholds.

¹⁰ The party's statutes provide the national leadership the prerogative of vetoing the subnational organs' decisions on salient issues (Astudillo and García Guereta 2007)

¹¹ This fact allows for the control of one of the main weak points of the rational choice theory: the assumption of political parties as unitary actors.

parliamentary arena and in volatility within parties outside the parliamentary system can be considered as factors that can trigger the emergence of reform proposals.

In the third section, we will describe the data we use and provide a brief description of the subnational electoral rules in Spain. Then, we will present the empirical part of the study that starts with the operationalization of the different types of volatility. We will continue with the analysis of how these changes in electoral behaviour are related to the evolution of the economy and the citizens' dissatisfaction with the political system. The empirical analysis will conclude with the findings in which we will show how the different elements derived from the economic crisis may have played a role in the strategy of the Spanish People's Party to propose reforms to reduce the size of the subnational assemblies. Finally, in section four we will address the discussion of the findings and some suggestions of how the present paper may contribute to further research.

3. The economic crisis and its consequences: A triggering event for institutional reform?

In spite of the vast amount of competing explanations¹², studies in the field of electoral system change have been dominated by analysis in which rational choice assumptions tend to prevail. The triad police, votes and seats (Strøm and Müller 1999) has proved to be useful to explain parties behaviours. Rational choice accounts of electoral reforms argue that this type of institutional changes are the result of strategic calculations among elites, which are the ones who ultimately dominate the process, and whose objectives are reduced to maximize profits or minimize losses (Boix 1999, Benoit 2004, Colomer 2005, Blais and Shugart 2008).

This rational choice approach offers two types of explanations to address the question of stability and change of electoral systems. The first perspective argues that there is no institutional equilibrium in the interests of the political parties competing within a system. As a consequence, the main actors will pursue a continuous struggle over the regime structure (Rahat 2008) with the aim to implement reforms in their own benefit. For instance, in their study of 1988 Korean elections, Brady and Mo argued that parties would try to *"maximize their seat-share, given their (expected) votes, through the choice of electoral rules"* (Brady and Mo 1992:406). Benoit followed this same argument when he posited that changes in the electoral rules *"will occur when a political party or coalition of political parties supports an alternative which will bring it more seats than the status quo electoral system, and also has the power to effect through fiat that institutional alternative"* (Benoit 2004: 373–4)¹³.

¹² Such explanations range from individual and collective rational interests (Colomer 2005, Boix 1999, Benoit 2004), values (Bowler et al. 2006; Katz 2005; Ka-Lok 2001; Scarrow 2001; Birch et al. 2002), collective political outcomes, based on historical (Elster et al. 1998; Mackie and Rose 1991), economic (Rogowski 1987) or sociological origins (Rokkan 1970).

¹³ It should be noted, however, that there are other conceptions of self-interest that tend to be more complex, like Mesquita's (2000), Rahat's multi-stage approach of the parties' strategies (2008) or Andrews and Jackman's (2005) emphasis on the role of uncertainty in the formation of preferences on electoral system.

The second perspective offered by rational choice accounts of electoral system change is that electoral institutions reflect the equilibrium of interests of the main actors in the political system (Rahat 2008). This equilibrium would last until a strong external shock¹⁴ impacts the electoral competition and alters the equilibrium of interests. These circumstances would hence lead to a change of the electoral rules. In Boix's (1999) study of the determinants of choice of electoral systems in the European democracies during the first decades of the twentieth century, he argues that the success of electoral reforms was contingent upon the level of threat the new emerging parties imposed on the old ruling parties. Though Boix's analyses focused on a time where the extension of the franchise led to major changes both in terms of voters' realignment and changes in parties' organizational structures, we argue that strong external shocks may bring on episodes of electoral system change in contemporary democracies too.

Although there is a broad range of case studies that have suggested that electoral reforms may emerge at times of important political crisis, there is a lack of consensus of the type of external shock or crisis that can lead to electoral reforms (Rahat 2008). It has been argued that a political crisis - understood in the sense of a swift change in the context or a rapid deterioration of citizens' satisfaction with political institutions- may lead to reform. For instance, corruption has been said to have had an impact in the Japanese (Reed and Thies 2001) and Italian cases (Donovan 2005). Other scholars point at the crisis of confidence in institutions as the main factor leading to reform (Farrell 2001), such as Crisp and Rey in their study about Venezuela during the 1980s and 1990s. In New Zealand, the lack of confidence in the main parties and the institutions to redress the economic crisis has been pointed out as the main reason behind the reform that took place in the 1990s (Vowles 1995).

However, the fact that most of the countries while having witnessed such crises did not experienced any electoral reform strongly undermines the argument. Besides, the lack of a clear conceptualisation of the characteristics of these crises and how it may be applied to large-n studies leaves unanswered the question of the link between times of political crisis and institutional reforms. In addition, more often than not, the study of electoral reform determinants encompasses different types of reforms disregarding the type of consequences they may entail¹⁵. In this sense, we argue that it is important to distinguish between those reforms that aim at more open structures of competition and those whose goal is to restrain it. Political parties' incentives may be completely different depending on the direction of reform and so will be the conditions for the emergence of the debate.

Taagepera (2007) argued that the degree of inclusiveness of an electoral system- its openness to small parties- was contingent upon three elements: electoral formula, district

¹⁴ We may also link this idea to some institutional approaches to electoral reforms (Shugart 2001, Shugart and Wattenberg 2001), especially the differentiation between contingent and inherent factors for reform (Shugart 2001).

¹⁵ We do not refer here to wholesale replacements of the electoral system that entail large doses of uncertainty over their effects and consequences but rather to partial or minor reforms which tend to be overlooked in the literature (Leyenaar and Jacobs 2011)

magnitude¹⁶ and assembly size. By altering these elements as well as the legal thresholds, established parties would be trying to secure their status quo and to prevent party system fragmentation. As Mair posited (2002), the maintenance of familiar and closed patterns of competition can also simply be the result of the parties' strategy of self-preservation. If the parties in the system feel threatened by the emerging parties, they may share the interest in closing the system to the potential competitors. When an established political party proposes this type of electoral reform, it may be aiming at the initiation of a cartelization dynamics of the electoral system design. After all, as the cartel party theory built by Katz and Mair (2003, 2009) already posited, the leaders of different political parties have progressively more interests in common in maintaining their current position and, consequently, they establish cartel practices. One of the practices pointed out by these authors was the promotion of institutional reforms to maintain close structures of competitions in order to "capitalize, marginalize or co-opt new challengers" (Kitschelt 2000) that may be able to threaten their advantaged position.

Therefore, it is important to note that the framework we propose here aims at explaining the emergence of those reform proposals characterized by achieving less inclusive electoral dynamics. On the basis of this, in this research we will first analyse what we consider as an electoral shock and secondly we will look at the main determinants of these shocks and their impact on the emergence of reform proposals.

In this paper, external shocks are understood as rapid changes in the electorate's behaviour. For reforms proposals to emerge in the agenda, these changes have to be sufficiently profound to alter the equilibrium among the actors in the political arena and threaten the electoral prospects of the established parties. In this sense, the punishment of the incumbents does not qualify on its own as electoral shock; it is not a condition for the enactment or the proposal of an electoral reform. Political parties can get used to a limited degree of uncertainty and variation in their electoral results. Nonetheless, when this variation increases strongly, established parties would have more incentives to propose reforms with the objective of keeping the status quo situation under control.

One of the most common measures of aggregate stability and variation of party systems is electoral volatility (Bartolini and Mair 1990, Caramani 2006, Lane and Ersson 2007, Pedersen 1979). The absolute change in the share of votes that are gained or lost by each party is added and divided by two. It reflects the changes in the electorate's preferences. When this volatility boosts, not only established parties no longer benefit from the degree of certitude they had before over the results of the elections but this would also affect the likelihood of proposing a reform on the electoral system.

However, in line with other scholars (Birch 2001 and 2003; Sikk 2005; Tavits 2008; Mainwaring et al. 2009, Powell and Tucker 2012), we argue that it is important to distinguish between parties in the system - those that have legislative representation- , and parties outside the system - the ones that have been traditionally been left with no representation or the new emerging

¹⁶ Assembly size diminutions can entail diminutions in district magnitude and there is consensus on the fact that district magnitude can affect proportionality more than the electoral formula (Taagepera and Laakso 1980:443; Taagepera and Shugart 1989:112-25, Sartori 1986, Rae 1967, Jones 1993)¹⁶.

parties. We agree with Powell and Tucker (2012) when they claim that the standard measures of volatility are actually composed by two very different components. The first of them would be the volatility that stems from the vote switching across parties in the parliamentary system. This kind of **within-system volatility** is indeed a healthy component of democracy since it reflects that governments are held accountable and power is reallocated within the system. The second component of volatility is the one caused by the entry in the parliamentary arena of new parties and the exit of other ones¹⁷. This **extra-system** component is linked to party system instability and it is the one more related to increasing levels of uncertainty over the outcome of elections.

Though the differentiation between the two types of volatility has essentially been done so far only for studies analysing the question of new party entry (Birch 2001 and 2003; Sikk 2005; Tavits 2008; Mainwaring et al. 2009)), we argue that it can be fruitfully used when analysing the incentives for electoral reform. It is therefore important to differentiate between both since they may trigger different rationales for reform.

3.1. Rationales for reform

On the one hand, **within-system volatility** is expected to be linked to poor government performance in the sense of punishment of the incumbents and the result of the mechanisms of accountability. This argument stems from the fact that voters in times of economic crisis may be tempted to switch their vote to other parties that were already in the system. However, a marked increase in within-system volatility would probably entail an increase in the fragmentation in the party system. As a consequence, power will be more dispersed across parties and hence it may lead to the need for coalition governments or may complicate government dynamics. The bigger parties would therefore be interested in maintaining their share of power within the system and, to that end, they would try to reduce the number of MPs with the aim of reducing the proportionality of the system¹⁸.

On the other hand, **extra-system volatility** taps a failure of representation with the parties that are in the parliamentary arena. Voters switch their votes from parties inside parliament to smaller and new political parties. This is a sign of loss of trust and legitimacy of the political system. Norris (2011) studied the impact of citizen dissatisfaction with regime legitimacy on the enactment of reforms. Lack of support for the regime would bring about more salient debates on electoral system change and she concluded that “democratic aspirations (support for democracy as an ideal) are a strong, significant, and robust predictor of the occurrence of subsequent electoral

¹⁷ It is important to note that we only draw partially on Mainwaring et al. (2009)’s conceptualisation of extra and within-system types of volatility. For these authors the interest lies on the entry of new parties, that is, the ones that did not exist hitherto. In our perspective the focus lies in the parliamentary arena, hence, we conceive as “new parties” the parties that gain representation in parliament but that have been excluded from it in previous elections.

¹⁸ The reduction of assembly size would entail a reduction in proportionality as long as it is accompanied by reducing district magnitude in PR systems (Lundell 2012). Besides, the electoral formula, there are between two and four probable causes of disproportionality in a system: the distribution of votes, district magnitude, malapportionment or the use of thresholds (Gallagher 1991). Lundell (2012) also shows how assembly size positively affects the degree of proportionality in systems with single-member districts.

reforms”(2011:531). Political actors would have a stronger reformist zeal in order to gain support for the regime. However, we argue that the link between reform proposals and citizens’ dissatisfaction with the political system lies on the electoral threat to the established parties’ status quo.

For instance, in those countries that have been more affected by the current economic crisis, commitments and agreements with supranational and international organizations have reduced the governments’ room for manoeuvre and the kind of economic policies that are delivered by successive governments of different parties are very much alike. This may boost citizens’ dissatisfaction and under these circumstances and consequently new parties may appear. According to Wolinetz (2002), Katz and Mair cartel party style of politics is *“likely to generate its own response in the form of anti-party sentiment and parties capable of mobilizing it. This makes room for anti-establishment parties, such as Pogunke’s (1993) new politics party, as well as extreme right populist parties, but leaves open the question of whether all established parties have become so alike that there is no point in distinguishing among them”*. The M5S in Italy, Golden Dawn in Greece are some of the examples that have emerged or been strengthened as a result of the crisis and the parties’ responses to it¹⁹. Therefore, drawing on Mainwaring et al. (2009)’s framework, we expect that volatility among parties that have been excluded from parliamentary representation is likely to be higher when (1) the government performance is poor, (2) the number of parties is relatively low and voters do not have many choices to select from, (3) institutional rules make more difficult the party entry, (4) citizens’ dissatisfaction with the political system is higher.

When extra-system volatility is high, it may increase the complexity of the information voters have to gather to decide their vote. In so doing, the effective government accountability also becomes harder (Mainwaring et al. 2009). Besides, the more important these new competitors become, the more likely it will be that personalistic anti-system politicians emerge and entail a danger for democratic quality of the regime (Mainwaring et al. 2009). What is more important for our research however is that when extra-system volatility arises, established political parties’ electoral prospects will be threatened. Under these circumstances, the number of parties will increase and this can entail not only a relative diminution of power of parties within the system, but can also bring about harder government formation processes and more obstacles in policy making. Therefore, established parties are expected to propose reforms to raise the barriers of the system when extra-system volatility increases.

In a nutshell, though both types of volatility may be linked to the emergence of reform bids, it is the increase of extra-system volatility the one that is expected to boost the likelihood of the reform debate. On the one hand, we expect both types of volatility to be related to worsening economic outputs, though extra-system volatility should increase more when the economic circumstances are harsher. Powell and Tucker posited that we may expect elites to form new political parties when the economy is performing particularly poorly. They claimed that elites would not expend effort to create new parties if they expect that the good economy conditions would favour the incumbent party. Under the same argument, we would expect the new and the small parties to be especially successful in times of economic crisis. On the other hand, dissatisfaction with

¹⁹ Besides these emerging parties, established parties sometimes also have to deal with the new parties created out of defection from their own ranks, or at least, they have to face the risk of defection within their MPs. (Katz and Mair 2009).

the political system is also expected to have a strong impact on extra-system volatility. Therefore, we expect that the increase in extra system volatility leads the established political parties to undertake reforms aiming at the closing of the system.

In the following section we will provide a brief description of the cases under study and the main characteristic of their electoral systems. Secondly, we will present the operationalization of the extra and within-system types of volatility before analysing whether the evolution of both types of electoral volatility is contingent upon the factors we posited above in the case of the Spanish regions. Then, we will analyse whether recent developments of both types of volatility may be behind the PP' s proposals to diminish assembly size at the subnational level.

4. Empirical analysis

4.1. Data

In order to test whether increases in volatility have triggered the PP' s proposals for reform, we will focus the next analyses on the 13 slow-track regions²⁰: Aragon, Castile-La Mancha, Castile and León, Extremadura, Valencian Community, the Balearic Islands, the Canary Islands, Asturias, Cantabria, La Rioja, Navarre, Murcia and Madrid. Several reasons sustain this choice. In the first place, the fact of sharing the same electoral calendar²¹ allows for a better comparison. Furthermore, not only they constitute the majority of the regions (13 out of 17), but also they are also the regions in which the stakes for the party are higher with the exception of Galicia. Besides, the characteristics of electoral competition are relatively more homogeneous²² and these regions share similar levels of autonomy. There are also good reasons to exclude the fast-track regions on the basis of the determinants of voting behaviour. It has been argued that where the vote is structured around nationalist cleavages, the elasticity of the vote of nationalist voters is weaker

²⁰ Since the 1980s a complex system of asymmetric decentralization has been developed in Spain with the creation of seventeen autonomous communities plus two autonomous cities. Two were the main paths that were settled by the Spanish Constitution that regions could follow to attain autonomy. The fast-track regions are therefore excluded from the present research. These are Catalonia, Andalusia, Galice, and Basque Country.

²¹ Since the reform of the LOREG in March 1991 (Llera Ramo 1998).

²² Though it should be noticed that the expression "*electoral Spains*" (Vallés 1991) usually refers to the different patterns of electoral behaviour that can be found across the regions, it is usually used to contrast the two main groups that Lago Peñas labels as dominant and eccentric models (Lago Peñas 2004). The former is characterized by party systems with a bipolar structure in which the state-wide parties concentrate most of the electoral support. Most of the slow-track communities would be encompassed in the dominant model, except for Navarre and the Canary Islands that would be included under the eccentric model label. In the latter category, nationalist parties enjoy higher levels of electoral support and the systems are the most fragmented and polarised. We therefore exclude from analysis all the fast-track regions because, with the exception of Andalusia, can be also classified as eccentric models. Besides, another argument to focus on the slow-track regions is that the electoral results have less political impact at the national level than the electoral results in the fast-track regions. This is due to the different electoral calendar, the relevance of the nationalist parties in the national arena and the fact that Galicia and Andalusia are the traditional strongholds of the two main state-wide parties (Llera Ramo 1998).

and therefore economic voting is less pronounced (Aguilar and Sánchez-Cuenca 2007; Lago Peñas and Lago Peñas 2011)²³.

Regarding the regions' electoral systems it should be noted that all the regions have the capacity to design their own electoral rules by virtue of the articles 149.1.1^o and 152.1 of the Constitution, but, in spite of this, they all developed very similar electoral systems following the example of the electoral system for the Spanish Congress of Deputies²⁴: a proportional closed list system under D'Hondt formula for the allocation of seats. Most regions use the province as electoral district²⁵. Average district magnitude and electoral thresholds vary across regions though the later show less variance. Most of the regions apply a legal threshold of between 3 and 5% of the votes at the district or at the regional level²⁶. Assembly size is very heterogeneous among ACs. It is usually specified as a function of the regions' populations, with a minimum number of seats per district. In most of the regions, assembly size is fixed in the Statute of Autonomy and requires qualified majorities to be changed (in some cases, even the approval in the Spanish Congress). Though changes within those limits do not require qualified majorities, up to 2011 only changes related to variations in population were approved and in most of the cases these changes entailed increases in the assembly size²⁷. More information on the ACs' electoral systems, their legal entrenchment and the requirements to enact the reforms is shown in table 1 in the appendix.

4.2. Operationalization of the types of volatility and the independent factors

The first step to analyze whether the impact of the crisis on the emergence of reform proposals is to test whether the crisis has triggered changes in the electoral behaviour. In order to capture the measure to which voters have switched their votes to political options that are outside of the system or if, on the contrary, they have switched their votes within the parties in the system, we have drawn on Powell and Tucker (2012) methodology to calculate both types of volatility. These authors based their two types of volatility on the Pedersen index (Pedersen 1979) and considered a party to be in the system when it had achieved at least 2% of the vote share. Since our aim is to measure the extent to which established parties may be threatened by the growing smaller or new

²³ Opposite to this arguments, previous research had pointed out the "Individual economic difficulties, coupled with a belief that national economic policies are inadequate, push voters toward a regional vote preference"(Lancaster and Lewis-Beck 1989: 40). What is clear is that differences between regions with and without nationalist vote do exist and it is necessary to take them into account.

²⁴ The electoral rules for the Spanish Congress were first fixed by the law 1/1977 of 4th January for Political Reform (Ley 1/1977 de 4 de enero para la Reforma Política), and after developed in the Royal Decree 20/1977 18th March (Real Decreto ley 20/1977 de 18 marzo sobre normas electorales). These elements were later on included in the Constitution of 1978 and developed in the Organic Law 5/1985 19th June of the Electoral Procedures (Ley Orgánica del regimen electoral general (LOREG) and included in the Statutes of Autonomy (Presno Linera 2007).

²⁵ Notable exceptions are Asturias and Murcia, where constituencies are defined as groups of municipalities, and the islands.

²⁶ The most different thresholds are found in the Canary Islands in which, besides having the only single-member district to be found in Spain, the electoral thresholds are applied at the island level and are as high as 20%.

²⁷ An important exception is Castile and Leon which due to the decreasing trend in population figures had already reduced the number of parliamentarians (Oliver 2011) : 84 deputies (1983, 1987, 1991 y 1995), 83 (1999), 82 (2003), 83 (2007) and 84 (2011).

parties, we consider a party to be in the system when its electoral results allow it to gain legislative representation. Consequently, a party will be considered to be in the system when its share of votes exceeds the average “effective threshold of representation” across the districts in each of the regions. This measure, firstly proposed by Taagepera and Shugart (1989) and also developed by Lijphart (1994), calculates the proportion of votes that secures parliamentary representation to any party with a probability of 50%. It is roughly equal to the average of 1) the threshold of exclusion, which is the maximum percentage of votes that a party can obtain without being able to win a seat; and 2) the threshold of inclusion, which is the minimum percentage of votes that a party can win and still gain a seat. We draw on one of measurements proposed by Lijphart (1994) and we calculate the regional effective threshold of representation as the median of the effective threshold across districts that is computed in each of them as follows: $T=75\%/M+1$ ²⁸.

Once we know which parties would be considered to be in the system and which outside, we calculate the two different types of volatility as follows. On the one hand, Powell and Tucker (2012) defined Extra-system Volatility as the volatility from party entry and exit defined as:

$$\text{Extra – system Volatility} = \frac{|\sum_{o=1}^n p_{ot} + \sum_{w=1}^n p_{w(t+1)}|}{2}$$

Whereas for Powell and Tucker o and w stand for old (but disappearing) and new parties respectively, we deviate from this in order to tap into the change of votes to parties within and outside of the legislative arena. We consider that o =parties outside the system, that is, parties that could *only* gain representation at election t and w = parties that could *only* gain seats at the election $t+1$. Within-system volatility, on the other hand, reflects the change across political parties in the system both at election t and at election $t+1$. It is defined as:

$$\text{Within – system Volatility} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n |p_{it} - p_{i(t+1)}|}{2}$$

It is essentially the same equation than for Extra-system volatility with the exception that only those parties that achieve representation at both elections are included in the calculation. Both types of volatility, A and B, sum up the traditional Perderson Index, the total volatility in the electoral arena.

$$\text{Total volatility} = \text{Extra-System Volatility} + \text{Within-System Volatility}$$

In order to explain the variance in these indicators, our hypotheses rely mainly on two different factors: poor economic performance and a marked increase in citizens’ dissatisfaction with the political system. Regarding the former, the impact of the economic performance on volatility is usually measured through some measure of GDP, such as GDP change between elections, change from 1989 for the analysis of post- communist countries (Powell and Tucker 2012), or per capita GDP

²⁸ We assume, as Lijphart and Taagepera did before, that the number of parties roughly equals M .

growth (Mainwaring et al., 2009). In this sense, the first of our explanatory variables is GDP growth rate as a measure of government performance.

The second factor is citizens' dissatisfaction with the political system. We used as independent variable data taken from a time series item included in the surveys of the Centre for Sociological Research in Spain (CIS) in which interviewees are asked whether they believe that the political situation is the same, better or worse than a year ago. We have included in the model the percentage of people believing that the situation is worse. Moreover, we have also included the log of the average district magnitude to account for district-at-large regions like Madrid and the effective number of parties²⁹ at the previous election as control variables. Tables 2 and 3 in the appendix contain the descriptive statistics of the variables taken into consideration.

4.3. Analysis of the determinants of volatility

We have performed the following analyses on the basis of electoral data of the 13 slow-track regions since the first elections in 1983 until 2011. Pearson correlations (table 2) show how parameters of government economic performance and of perceptions of the political situation are related to both types of volatility. However, whereas within-system volatility seems to have a stronger and more significant correlation with unemployment, extra-system volatility appears to be influenced to a similar degree by the bad perception of the political situation. In order to disentangle the difference between the factors leading to the growth of the two types of volatility, we have run three OLS regressions to explain the variance in the Pedersen index, extra and within-system volatility indicators. Table 3 reports the unstandardized regression coefficients; standard errors are clustered by autonomous community³⁰. Although the estimates are not significant, GDP growth rates have the expected negative sign for extra and within-system volatility, showing the link between poor economic performance and changes in the electorate's preferences. Perceptions of the political situation seem to matter too. The percentage of people that believe that the political situation is worse at time t than at $t-1$ is strongly correlated with both types of volatility, especially with extra-system volatility. This confirms that voters will be more prone to switch their votes to options outside the parliamentary arena when they feel more dissatisfied with the political situation.

District magnitude is significant for both subtypes of volatility. The negative sign of the estimate in the model explaining extra-system volatility reflects that voters would tend to vote for parties outside the parliamentary arena when the systems have higher barriers to prevent the entry of smaller parties. This would in its turn cause a lower number of competing parties in the system. On the opposite, within-system volatility tends to be higher when the structure of competition is more open, that is, when the party system is more fragmented and party entry in the parliamentary arena is facilitated by the low barriers included in the institutional rules.

²⁹ We used the standard measure $1/\sum_{i=1}^n p_i^2$ (Laakso and Taagepera 1979)

³⁰ Multi-level analysis were also run taking into account regions and time separately as levels of analysis. We report the results of the OLS regressions with clustered errors by regions to facilitate the interpretation and because 1) time did not have any effect once the regions were taken into consideration and 2) the results of the multilevel analysis were coherent with the ones obtained through the OLS regressions.

Table 2: Pearson correlations

	Unemployment (national level)	GDP growth rate (national level)	Political situation is perceived as being worse than at time t-1 [†]
Extra-system volatility (subnational level)	0.265*	-0.119	0.477**
Within-system volatility (subnational level)	0.442**	-0.283*	0.348*

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

[†] National level sample. Source: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (time series code A301020020)

Table 3: Determinants of volatility

	Pedersen Index	Extra- system volatility	Within- system volatility
GDP change between elections	.346 (.558)	-1.506 (.903)	-.389 (.907)
Effectivenumber of parties (t-1)	4.351*** (.582)	.926 (.770)	3.340** (1.198)
Log average district magnitude (logmeanDM)	.535 (.688)	-1.886** (.834)	4.525** (1.885)
Political situation is perceived as being worse than at time t-1 [†]	.101** (.036)	.088** (.037)	.036 (.025)
(Constant)	-8.047* (2.481)	.764 (2.568)	11.141** (4.410)
R ²	.424	.191	.309
N	89	91	91

4.4. Evolution of volatility and the link with electoral reform proposals.

If poor economic outcomes and increasing citizens' dissatisfaction with the political situation tend to boost extra-system volatility, the question that needs to be answered now is

whether recent proposals to diminish the size of parliament in the Spanish regions can be related to the growth of this type of volatility in a period which is characterized by a harsh economic situation and growing political disaffection. The analysis of the evolution of the different types of volatility in the 13 slow-track regions for the elections³¹ at this level of government confirms not only their linkage with economic outcomes, but also shows to which extent recent results can explain the party's desire to achieve the closure of the structure of competition.

In this sense, we can observe how the evolution of unemployment (figure 1) and GDP growth rates (figure 2) are closely related to the change in both types of volatility. Interestingly, the two highest peaks in volatility coincide with the two deepest crises Spain has witnessed since 1987³²: the period between 1992 and 1995 and the years after 2008 both in terms of unemployment and GDP growth.

FIGURES 1 AND 2 AROUND HERE

While one may argue that the established parties should have also been motivated to reduce the structure of competition in 1995, we observe that 2011 elections are, however, very different. Whereas figure 3 reflects the absolute increase in both types of volatility in the last elections, figure 4 shows how both types of volatility boost to the point that they have the biggest relative variation in the electoral history of these regions, being extra-system volatility the one that grows at a higher rate and has done so since 2007. Its growth rate has more than doubled in just two elections. This extremely rapid increase may be behind the party's will to restrain the arena of competition through measures like the ones they have recently proposed to downsize regional parliaments.

FIGURES 3 AND 4 AROUND HERE

In a nutshell, these findings suggest that the switch of votes to extra parliamentary parties would act as a pressure on the established parties and that this would explain their desire of raising the barriers in the system, for instance through the diminution of assembly size. The results presented here confirm that this type of proposals would emerge in times of profound deterioration of the economy and increasing citizens' dissatisfaction that would trigger the switch of votes to political parties outside of the parliamentary system.

5. Discussion

This research has demonstrated not only how volatility has been boosted during the crisis, but also that it has been volatility among extra parliamentary parties the one that has increased more in relative terms. Besides, the study has provided evidence on how this type of volatility is linked to the economic crisis, especially to changes in economic growth and unemployment rates and the worsening of citizens' evaluation of the political system. The economic crisis would therefore constitute at the same time a window of opportunity for reform and the cause of the

³¹ See table 5 for the dispersion of volatility across regions and across elections.

³² Figures also show that the current crisis is deeper than the one experienced in the nineties and that volatility has increased more. This is probably due to the different pre-crisis levels.

changes in the electoral arena that trigger the emergence of the reform proposals. We consider that in light of these three factors, the PP is carrying out a strategy which stems from outcome contingent motivations (Reed and Thies 2001; Shugart and Wattenberg 2001), that is, the desire to change the rules to benefit from the system. Two non-exclusive reasons may be behind these proposals: on the one hand, the party's own survival in the sense of minimizing losses vis-à-vis the parties that are already in the system – the increase in within-system volatility. On the other hand, the party would aim at the protection against parties that have been traditionally been excluded from parliamentary representation or new emerging parties- the growing extra-system volatility. The party's ultimate goal would be to maintain their power and seat share in spite of the growing competition derived from the switch of votes to other political parties. This type of reforms would be a perfect example of the 'Lampedusian' idea according to which if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.

There may be other types of motivations that deserve further study, such as short horizon strategies in which short-term vote maximizing motivations predominate. Under this logic, parties' final objective when proposing this kind of proposals would be to increase their levels of electoral support in forthcoming elections and to foster the legitimacy of their decisions in other domains, notably those related to austerity measures. However, we argue that this type of proposals, labelled by Reed and Thies (2001) (and further elaborated by Shugart and Wattenberg (2001)) as act-contingent proposals, are arguably not the main motivators for the proposals in the Spanish case due to its mismatch with the electoral calendar³³.

In conclusion, the economic crisis and voters' dissatisfaction would be the breeding ground in which political parties take the decision to propose this type of institutional reforms. The likelihood of the emergence of this type of reforms in the agenda is expected to be higher when the crisis and the associated citizens' dissatisfaction persist in time due to their effects in boosting extra-system volatility. Beyond the specific case of downsizing parliament, the mechanisms proposed here can shed light on the motivations to propose reforms that aim at the restriction of the arena of competition, such as the increasing thresholds or changes in the regulation of party finances or organization. Besides, differentiating among the different types of volatility constitute an interesting framework to analyse parties' preferences and their strategies in times of crisis. At the same time, not only the absolute volatility levels but also their relative rise may also be useful as a means to operationalize the electoral consequences of crisis. The link between economic crises, citizens' satisfaction with democracy, the legitimacy of institutions and the attempts of changing the institutional rules will remain in the scientific agenda in the years to come. In this sense, further cross-national research would be needed in order to provide more robust evidence on the factors that trigger the emergence of debates on institutional reform.

³³ The elections took place in Andalusia (in March), Basque Country, Galicia (in October both) and Catalonia (in November). It is important to note that the elections for the three later regions were early elections and were called for after the PP launched its strategy to propose the reduction of regional MPs.

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Appendix

Figure 1: Volatility and unemployment

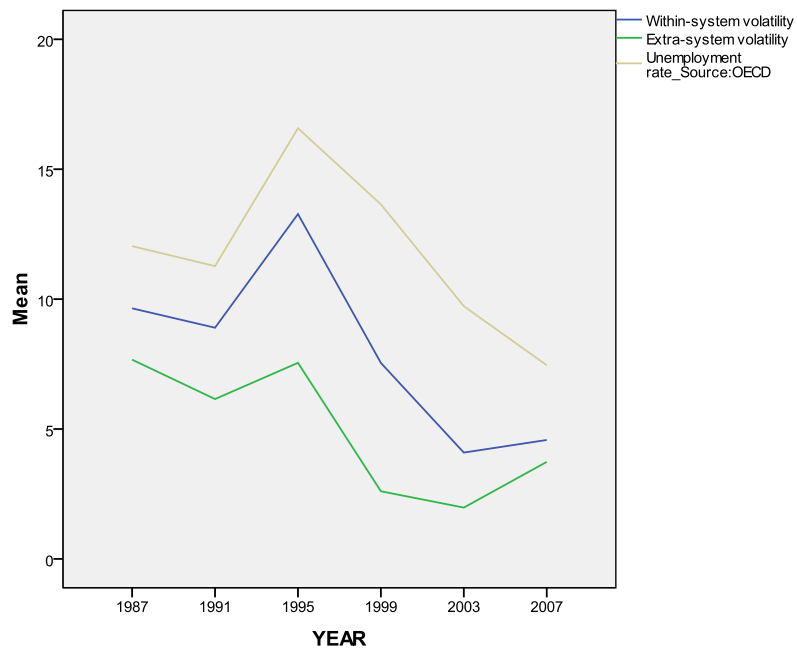


Figure 2: Economic growth and volatility

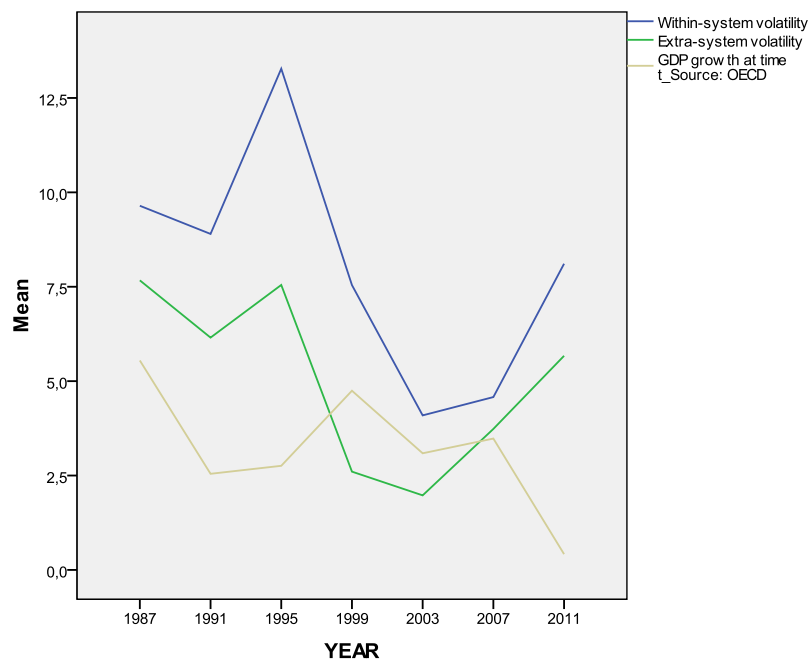


Figure 3: evolution of the Pedersen Index, Type A and Type B volatility

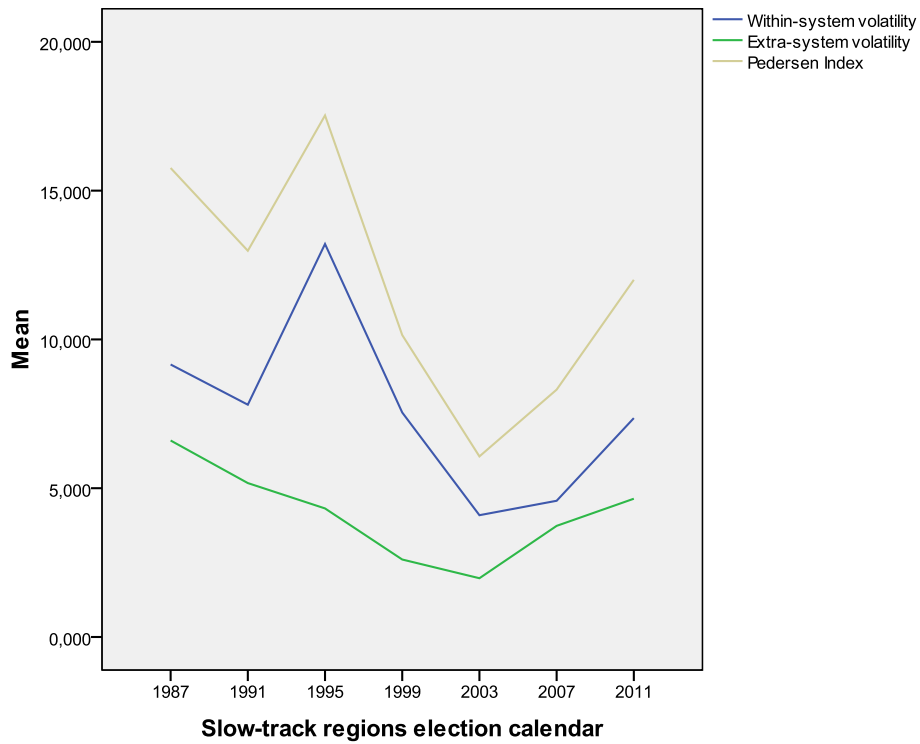


Figure 4: per cent variation of the Pedersen Index, Type A and Type B volatility

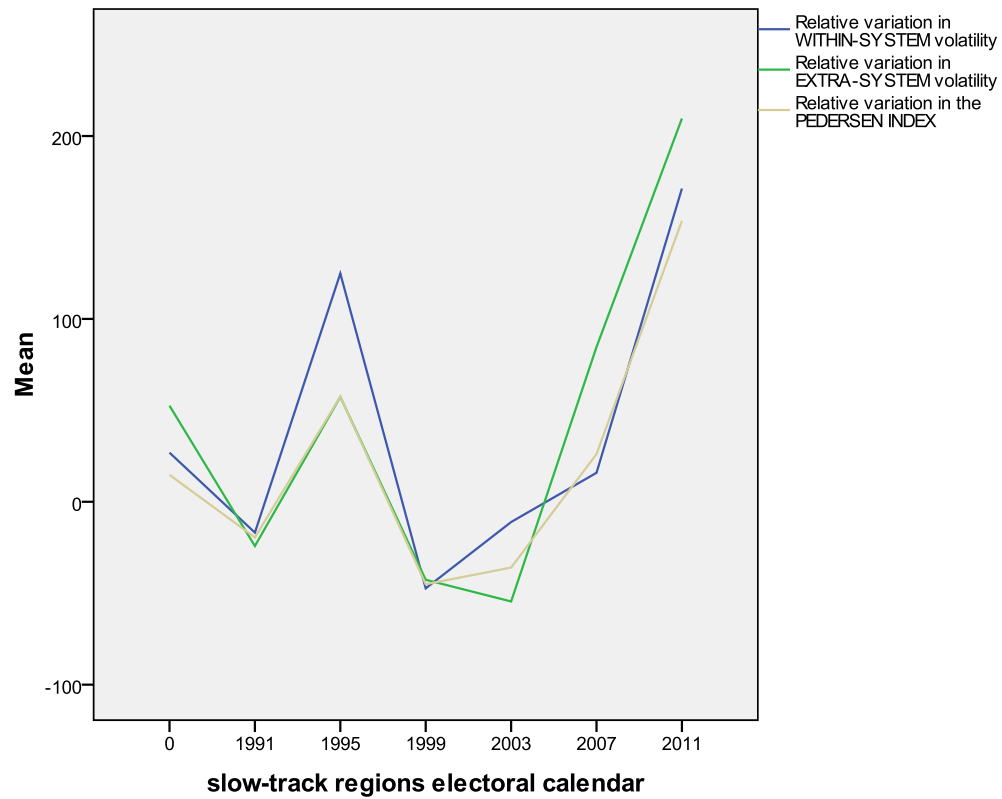


Figure 5: Evolution of the Volatility.

- ✓ Pedersen Index,
- ✓ Type B (within-system volatility) and
- ✓ Type A (extra-system volatility).

Dispersion across regions.

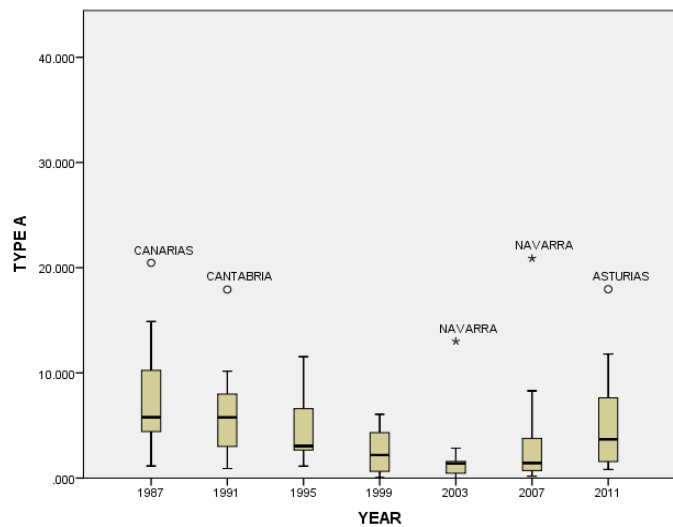
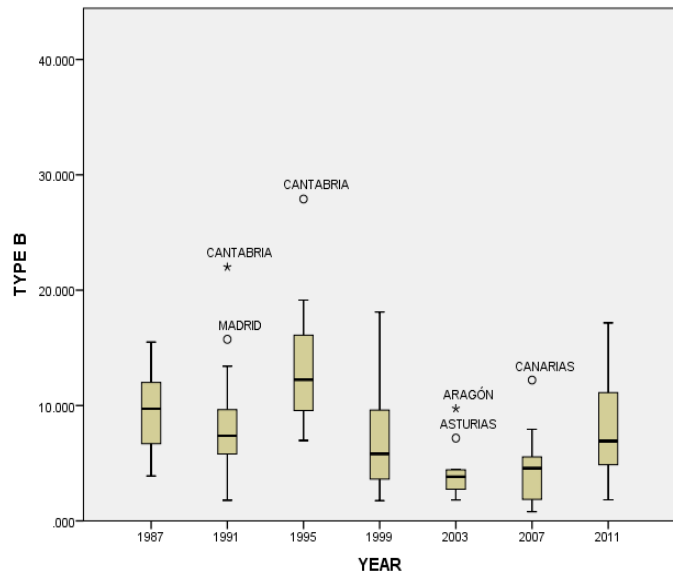
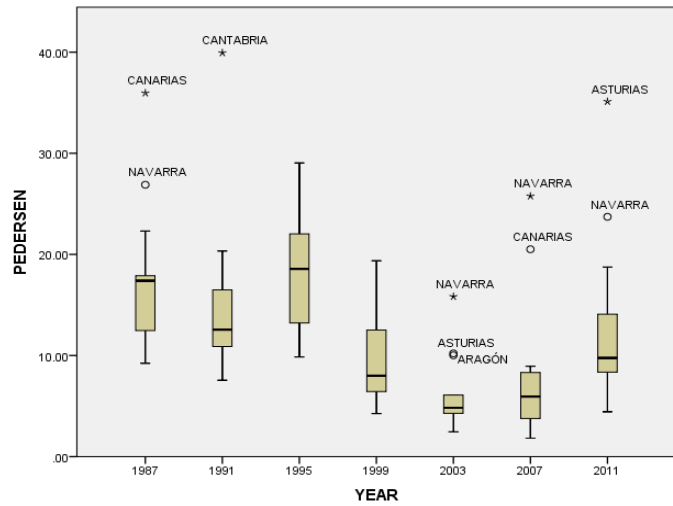


Table 1: Main characteristics and legal entrenchment of the subnational electoral systems

REGION	Number of districts	Average district magnitude	Assembly size	Proposed change	Limits fixed in the STATUTE of autonomy
ANDALUSIA	8	13.6	109	80	mín. 109 seats
CANTABRIA	1	39.0	39	35	35-45
COMMUNITY OF MADRID	1	129.0	129	65	1 seat for each 50000 inhabitant or fraction superior to 25000
EXTREMADURA	2	32.5	65	45	max 65
GALICIA	4	17.8	75	61	60-80
ISLAS BALEARES	4	14.8	59	31	No specific provisions
NAVARRRE	1	58.0	50	43	40-60
PRINCIPADO DE ASTURIAS	3	15.0	45	35	min 35 (according to the Statute of Autonomy) and a range between 35 and 45 according to the electoral law
COMUNIDAD VALENCIANA	3	29.7	99	79	min 99
LA RIOJA	1	33.0	33	25	32-40
ARAGON	3	22.0	67	*	65-80
CASTILE LA MANCHA	5	8.8	49	25	47-59 according to art 10.2 of the electoral law (49-57 according to law 12/2007 which is in force for the first time for 2011 elections)
CANARIAS	7	9.1	60	50 ⁺	50-70
CASTILE AND LEON	9	9.3	84		A seat for each 45000 inhabitants or fraction superior to 22500
MURCIA	5	9.0	45		45-55
CATALONIA	4	33.8	135	108	100-150
BASQUE COUNTRY	3	20.0	80	60	75 according to the electoral law

*In Aragón, the PP did not proposed a concrete figure and only claimed that the party aimed at establishing meetings with other parties to discuss the issue.

⁺ The President of the Cabildo of Gran Canaria proposed this figure.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics. Volatility

Descriptive statistics				
		Within-system volatility	Extra-system volatility	Pedersen Index
N	Valid	128	128	121
Mean		8,40	5,25	12,16
Median		7,35	3,05	10,96
Std. Deviation		5,10	6,28	6,42
Minimum		,800	,000	1,825
Maximum		27,9	46,3	29,0

Table 3: Descriptive statistics: Independent variables

Descriptive statistics						
		GDP growth rate	Fractionalization	Median district magnitude	Unemployment (subnational level)	Number of parties at t-1
N	Valid	128	128	128	110	111
Mean		,13	,69	27,54	14,36	3,35
Median		,37	,69	18,00	14,00	3,22
Std. Deviation		1,32	,07	29,18	6,32	,83
Minimum		-4,64	,530	6,0	4	2,13
Maximum		3,4	,8	129,0	34,0	5,8