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# **The Performance of National-Level Parties in Local and Regional Elections**

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# The Performance of National-Level Parties in Local and Regional Elections

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Political parties link society to government (Dalton, Farrell and McAlister, 2011). They may supply this link at different levels: local, regional, national and these days (in the case of the EU) even at a supranational level. In many countries, the same political parties are active at all levels. The British Labour and Conservative parties, for example, present candidates for the European, British, regional (Scotland, Wales, London) and the municipal levels. Even the regionally based Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Welsh Plaid Cymru compete at all of these levels. Yet it is not necessary that the same parties will be present at all levels. In Australia, for instance, federal and state-level parties are almost absent from the local scene, which is dominated by non-partisan elected representatives or by local lists.

The integration or separation of party politics at the various levels is not a static arrangement. It can be challenged. In several countries where national-level parties used to dominate the local scenes, there are more and more instances in which this dominance is challenged. A book titled “Farewell to the Party Model?,” that examined local government in a dozen European countries, identified a trend of an increase in the participation in local elections and in electoral success of local lists (Reiser and Holtmann, 2008).

There are also signs for such a phenomenon in regional politics. A research that compared the performance of parties in national and regional elections have found strong empirical evidence for growing differentiation in voting patterns in countries such as Germany, Austria and Belgium (Detterbeck, 2012). In other countries there are signs of electoral “denationalization,” that is expressed, for example, increasing electoral success of regional based parties in regional elections. In Sicily, for example, a regional-based electoral coalition secured in the 2012 elections an unprecedented one-sixth of the seats in the regional parliament. In Scotland, the SNP has been the ruling party in the devolved parliament since 2007, and received a high record of 46.5% of the vote in the 2016 elections.

In this paper we will compare changes over time in the voting patterns in various levels -- local, regional and national – in a group of twenty countries. The aim is to see whether we can detect a change in the strength of national-level parties in local and regional levels.<sup>1</sup> We start with several theoretical considerations and discuss the meaning and importance of national-level parties performance at sub-national levels. We claim that a weakening of the performance of national-level parties in the two sub-national arenas (local and regional) may point to yet another erosion of their roles as mediators between state and society.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term national-level parties, which is used in research literature interchangeably with other terms as statewide parties and national parties.

The second section looks at local politics. It demonstrates that in several countries, national-level parties have lost their longtime hold – an almost monopoly – in local politics in favor of local parties and/or independent councilors. We use the values of three measurements to assess the developments over time: (1) the national share of votes or seats gained by local lists in local elections; (2) the share of seats held by the representatives of local lists in the city councils or assemblies of the 5 largest municipalities in each country; and (3) the existence of mayors who ran as independents or under a label of a local party. We find that in about half of the cases there is some decline in the power of national level parties, but only in Israel they lost their control of local politics. The third section focus on regional politics. It uses the values of the dissimilarity index (Johnston, 1980; Jeffery and Hough, 2003) which reflects the difference in parties vote share at regional and national levels, to see if the difference of voting patterns in national elections and in regional elections have changes over time. We find many cases in which the gaps in voting patterns has widened, what implies weakening of national-level parties at the regional level.

### **Party Performance in Multi-Level Arenas**

Since political parties links society and government, they are expected to be present at all levels of democratic representative government, beyond the national one. Yet, it is not necessarily the same parties that are active at all levels. Most notably, in Canada, the national-level parties do not play a role in local politics. At this level, the political actors are local lists or independent councillors. There is also separation between the parties that dominate the regional level and the national (or “federal”) parties, even though they are sometimes linked in weak or stronger ways (especially the New Democratic Party). Such separation is still rare within Europe, where national-level parties still dominate regional and local politics. Even regionally based parties in Europe, even those with separatist ideologies, tend to compete at all levels. There are, however, some good reasons to expect that more and more separate, independent, solely local and regional parties will enter the scene and win more and more support and also that the electoral fortunes of national-level parties will differ, more and more, from one level to the other.

First, citizens’ affiliation with parties is in decline: less citizen are party members; in surveys, less declare they identify with any party; and more and more are willing to change their vote from one election to the next (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). In such circumstances, it is easier to convince them to support new regional and local parties. Such development might simply lead to national-level parties decline in the regional and local arenas or to a redefinition of their role in these arenas. That is, national parties that read this new map will adapt by either give up and concentrate on the national level or by changing and becoming more federative. Yet even the federative path may prove to be destructive on the long term, if and when the local and regional autonomous units will discover that they are better off on their own, as they did in the Israeli case (Brichta, 1998).

Second, recent movements towards strengthening local government, through devolution (McAteer and Bennett, 2005; Jeffery, 2006), decentralization (Sellers and Lidstrom, 2007) and ‘New Localism’ (Pratchett, 2004) may help new regional and local forces to make their case. With local governments busy providing services there may be reduced support for national-level parties that are constructed around values

and worldviews that no longer interest much of the public (Evans, 2010). These parties will also have more credit when promising to focus on regional or local concerns.

Still, there are several good reasons for national-level parties to make the effort and stay dominant also at the local and regional scenes. First, it allows national parties to communicate with local interests, to be able to respond to their grievances through policy and patronage. This might help to sustain and even re-strengthen the parties links with society and might be found to be electorally beneficial. In negative terms, a party that exists only at the national level may be too far from the citizens and too busy with grand issues to be able to truly serve the citizens and be responsive.

Second, a national-level party which operates in the municipal and regional levels can more effectively create a solid base of membership that will serve as its ambassadors in local society and as its army of volunteers. Especially at bad national electoral times, national-level parties may actually survive and be resilient thanks to their local and regional strongholds.

Third, local and regional politics often serve as a ‘greenhouse’ in which future politicians grow, socialize and acquire experience. Many national-level politicians started out in local politics, gained experience and power, and only later stepped up to the national level. In Israel, for instance, it was found that a quarter of the cabinet ministers started their political career at the local level (Kenig and Barnea, 2009: 270). In Germany, many Chancellors and federal ministers reached these high federal offices only after serving in local and *Lander* governments (Fischer and Kaiser, 2009). Seven current prime ministers (as of May 2016) held local or regional political offices prior to ascending to national-level politics: Matteo Renzi of Italy, Charles Michel of Belgium, Mariano Rajoy of Spain, Lars Løkke Rasmussen of Denmark, Erna Solberg of Norway, António Costa of Portugal and Xavier Bettel of Luxembourg. Indeed, the importance of ‘playing’ at the local and the regional political fields indeed brings parties in most democracies to compete in these levels.

The voting patterns for local and regional elections are not identical – sometimes even not even similar – to those at the national level. The differences may stem from various reasons. Scholars explain, for example, that because these elections are seen as second-order elections, voters feel that there is less at stake and thus voter turnout is lower and voting patterns are different compared to national elections (Reif and Schmidt, 1980). Voters sometimes use their second-order elections vote to punish the governing parties (Tufte, 1975) or to balance the power of the governing parties in the federal level by supporting regional or opposition parties in sub-national levels (Lutz Kern and Hainmueller, 2006). Different results may also stem from the low turnout: opposition and regional party voters are more likely to participate to make a stance than are supporters of the governing parties. The timing of elections also influences differences between voting patterns at this levels: whether elections take place at the same day, and if not, the time gap between elections were found to influence the amount of difference in voting patterns (Jeffery and Hough, 2001). Finally, in some countries, we may expect to find larger difference in voting patterns in elections which are held in more powerful (in terms of authority) or distinct (in terms of national, linguistic or ethnic identity) regions. In fact, there are places where regional

elections are not perceived as less important than national elections (Schakel and Jeffery, 2013).

All of these factors may explain differences in the gaps in the power of national-level parties at the various levels across countries and sometimes between elections. But our purpose here is different and is about finding if there are changes **over time** in the power of national-level parties at the local and regional levels. The factors mentioned above are not expected to be stronger or weaker along time but are dependent on specific contexts. We are aware, however, that some factors like electoral reform at the local level, specifically direct elections for governors or mayors may encourage the creation and success of regional and local parties, and we will relate to it in our analysis.

### **The Performance of National-Level Parties in Local Politics**

In most parliamentary democracies, national-level parties were and still are the dominant actors in municipal politics. The few countries in which we could not find national or regional parties in local politics – Canada and less profoundly Australia and New Zealand – are the exceptions. Evidently, parties in democracies see the importance of local politics, fiercely compete in local elections and indeed in most cases occupy the lion share of elected positions in local government.

Is there a change over time? Did national level parties lost ground in local politics to local lists or independent councilors over time? Following the analysis of trends in local government in some established democracies, made in the collection of Reiser and Holtmann (2008), it seems that an increase in the electoral success of local lists and independents is evident in some countries: in the United Kingdom (Copus, Clark and Bottom, 2008), Sweden (Worlund, 2008), Belgium (Steyvers, Reynaert, De Ceuninck and Valeke, 2008), and the Netherlands (Boogers, 2008). In Israel, local lists are already holding the majority of council seats and mayoral positions. Moreover, there is extremely low representation for the large national aggregative parties in local politics and a relatively significant representation for smaller and sectarian national parties (Kenig and Tuttnauer, forthcoming). A reversed trend was evident in only few countries like Norway (Aars and Ringkjøb, 2008) and Finland (Sundberg and Gylling, 1992) in which national-level parties gained or re-gained power while local lists and independents declined. We thus have a collection of case studies that points to the existence of change, and especially, but not solely, in the direction of national-level parties decline in the local arena. The analysis here will try to examine change over time through a cross-national comparative analysis. We will try cover as many established democracies as we can from a pre-defined group of 20 on which we could gather the necessary information.

Three different measurements were applied to evaluate whether national-level parties have lost ground in local politics. The first measurement looks at the overall electoral performance of local lists or independent candidates in local elections. It is based on various sources that reported national summaries of local elections results, either as the share of votes received by each party or the share of council seats won by a party nationwide. We could not, of course, impose our definition of “local parties” on other scholars whose data was used here, although in general the rules we suggested below are the norm. In any case, because we study trends within each country, what is central here is to use the same definition and measurements within each case in order

to reliably identify trends. This, and the fact that we base our analysis on various sources, should make us cautious when comparing the magnitudes of national trends, but as long as we stick to sources that make the same definitions of local lists/independents within each country the measurement of trends is reliable. The prominent drawback of this measurement is that it suits only the countries where local elections are held nationally on the same day. This substantially reduced the number of countries that could be analyzed this way to 12 (Table 1).

Table 1 presents the percentages of seats or votes that were won by local parties in the closest elections to the year that appears in the first row. In six countries we can detect a growth in the power of local parties and independents, in three we detected stability and in two there is a reverse trend of decline in the power of local parties and independents. Variance is evident not only when looking at the existence and direction of the trends, but also in their magnitude. The increase in the power of local parties in Israel from 9% to 75% is no less than dramatic, implying a transformation of the local arena into a separate realm. In all other cases, even those in which local parties and independents made a substantial breakthrough (Netherlands, Ireland), national-level parties still dominate the scene.

**Table 1. The Strength of Local Parties in Local Elections – National Summaries**

Country	~1975	~1985	~1995	~2005	~2015	trend
Austria				5.3		n.a.
Belgium	~23	~20	~18	~46		+
Denmark	14.5	10.0	10.0	6.0	4.1	-
Finland	2.6	3.0	3.6	3.3	1.7	?
Ireland	7.9		8.7	9.9	20.3	+
Israel	8.9	16.5	35.0	52.0	75.0	+
Luxembourg		2.4	2.5	2.5		?
Netherlands	8.4	11.7	16.4	22.1	27.8	+
Norway	8.0	5.0	9.0	4.0	4.6	-
Portugal	4.0	1.4	2.3	2.5		?
Spain**		7.4	3.3	6.6	15.4	+
Sweden	1.7	2.6	3.8	5.5		+

+ = increase in the power of local lists and independents

- = decrease in the power of local lists and independents

? = no evident trend

\* White cells reflect share of support (votes) to local parties, grey cells reflect share of seats held by local parties.

\*\* Refers to local elections that are held on the same day in 13 out of the 17 regions.

sources: Aars and Ringkjøb, 2008; Blom-Hansen and Heeager, 2011; Brichta, Vigoda-Gadot and Pade, 2010; Databank Verkiezingsuitslagen, 2016; Dumont, Kies and Poirier, 2011; Fallend, 2011; Infoelectoral, 2016; Sjoblom, 2011; Steyvers et al., 2008; Sundberg and Gylling, 1992; Worlund, 2008.

The cases of Denmark and Norway are especially interesting because they demonstrate that national-level parties are not doomed to fail but can make breakthroughs to the local arena. This is the case not only for Denmark, in which the

power of local lists was cut by more than 70% in the 1975-2015 period, but also for Norway. While the data in Table 1 is about a moderate decline of local parties, looking a decade back tells about a possible even more sharp change than in Denmark: during 20-year period from 1963 to 1983, support for local lists slumped from 27% to 5% (Aars and Ringkjøb, 2008: 218-9).

An additional drawback of this measurement concerns the problem of not having identical information. That is, when we look at data about the share of seats in local councils, there is a bias towards small local authorities. The smaller a local authority is, the more is it likely that nationwide political considerations would not play a significant role in local elections and so voters would vote for candidates from local lists or for independents. Since there are many small local authorities the overall result might distort the picture and create a bias in favor of the local parties and independents. This is not a problem when we look at trends within each country. But this means we should be much more careful when making cross-national comparisons.

In order to overcome this problem, we applied a second measurement that examines national-level parties performance in local level in *more* countries, but at a *smaller* number of municipalities. We calculated the share of local parties/independent representatives in the legislative organs (city councils and the sorts) of the 5 largest cities (as of 2015) in 16 established democracies in two points in time: most recent local elections prior to 1985 and most recent local elections prior to 2015.<sup>2</sup> Note that unlike small municipalities in the periphery, local elections in largest cities is much more likely to be nationalized. Thus, a breakthrough of local forces or independents (or their decline) is of much a significance from the point of view of national-level parties.

Our definition of ‘local parties’ was based on three decisions. First, we did not regard provincial or regional parties as local parties even in the cases where they had no representation in the national parliaments. For instance, we did not regard Bayern Partei (in Munich), Grande Sud (in Palermo) or ERC (in Barcelona) as local parties because they also compete in the national and the regional levels. Second, we included ‘independents’ since they are, by definition, not affiliated with national-level or regional-level parties. Third, our distinction was based on party labels. In other words, we regarded as ‘local’ even the parties that had loose affiliation with national-level parties as long as their label lacked this national-level party’s name. For

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<sup>2</sup> The list of cities is as follows: **Austria** – Graz, Linz, Salzburg, Innsbruck and Klagenfurt (Vienna was excluded because the city council corresponds to the parliament of the Lander of Vienna); **Belgium** – Antwerp, Ghent, Charleroi, Liege, City of Brussels; **Canada** – Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Calgary, Edmonton; **Denmark** – Copenhagen, Odense, Aalborg, Aarhus, Frederiksberg; **Finland** – Helsinki, Espoo, Tampere, Vantaa, Oulu; **France** – Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Toulouse, Nice; **Germany** – Munich, Cologne, Frankfurt, Essen, Dortmund (Berlin and Hamburg were excluded because their city councils correspond to the parliaments of the Landers of Berlin and Hamburg); **Ireland** – Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Waterford; **Israel** – Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Rishon LeZion, Ashdod; **Italy** – Rome, Milan, Naples, Turin, Palermo; **Netherlands** – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, Eindhoven; **Norway** – Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, Stavanger, Kristiansand; **Portugal** – Lisbon, Sintra, Vila Nova Gaia, Porto, Loures; **Spain** – Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville, Zaragoza; **Sweden** – Stockholm, Goteborg, Malmo, Uppsala, Vasteras; **UK** – London (we did not refer to the London Assembly but rather to the aggregative London Boroughs Councils, Birmingham, Leeds, Glasgow, Sheffield).

example, we regarded ‘Ahora Madrid’, who won 20 city council seats on the 2015 municipal election, as a local party despite the fact it was supported by Podemos and other political (some local, some regional, some national) parties or movements. This is not only the practical distinction for a large  $n$  cross national comparative study, but also a justified one: “By using a Local name, these political groups emphasize their focus on the municipality and simultaneously highlight their independence from political parties” (Reiser, 2008: 284).

In many cases local lists, candidates in the local lists and “independents” are affiliated in one way or another with national-level parties. Yet for us, the very decision to blur this affiliation, to refrain from using the party national brand name, is a sign for change. It is not only a tactical move that intends to enable candidates to make electoral gains, for example to ask the support of voters of various national-level parties. Once this decision is made, it is also likely to increase the autonomy of elected candidates from their national party up to a point where they can claim to have an independent power base.

The findings, presented in Table 2, show that 11 countries witnessed an increase in the representation of local parties since 1985, three witnessed no change and only in two there was a decline (Sweden and Finland). If we are interested in the cases of the more significant increases in the power of local parties (and decline of the national-level parties), then we are left with six countries: Israel, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Italy and Ireland.

**Table 2. The Share (in %) of Local Parties/Independents Councilors in the Municipal Councils of the 5 Largest Cities in 16 Democracies**

Country	most recent elections prior to 1985	most recent elections prior to 2015	Change
Israel	26.8	56.4	+29.4
Spain	0	23.8	+23.8
Portugal	0	20.0	+20.0
Netherlands	0	17.3	+17.3
Italy	0.5	11.1	+10.6
Ireland	8.3	18.5	+10.2
Germany	0	4.5	+4.5
Austria	7.4	9.0	+1.6
France	0	1.1	+1.1
UK	1.4	2.4	+1
Belgium	0	0.4	+0.4
Norway	1.0	1.0	-
Denmark	0	0	-
Canada	100	100	-
Sweden	1.5	1.3	-0.2
Finland	3.5	0.3	-3.1

To complete the picture, we also looked at the affiliation of the mayors of the five largest cities in ten established democracies since 1980 and up to 2015 or the closest elections to these years. For some of the cases we were able to find data for all elections and for some we were able to gather only partial data. This overview identified no trends for most cases. No change occurred in Canada, in which all of the mayors, just as council members, were not formally affiliated with a federal party. No change occurred in Germany, Italy, Sweden (data only on 3 cities since 1988), Norway (only Oslo since 1995), Netherlands and Belgium (4 cities) in which all mayors were affiliated with national-level parties. No change was also evident in Austria where all mayors were affiliated with national parties except for the mayors of Innsbruck. For the UK we have only the case of London since 2000.<sup>3</sup> Ken Livingstone, a Labour politician, was elected mayor as an independent in the 2000 elections but returned to his party and was elected as its candidate to a second term in 2004. His successor, Boris Johnson, was elected mayor as a candidate of the Conservative Party and he was recently replaced by Sadiq Khan who was elected as a candidate of the Labour.

In Spain all mayors of the 5 large cities since 1983 and up to 2011 were affiliated with national parties. In the last local elections of spring 2015 three elected mayors of the five largest cities were heading local lists. These were loosely supported by the newly-formed Podemos movement that was founded in early 2014 and that successfully compete the national elections of December 2015.<sup>4</sup> It is too early to frame this as a trend. It may be a one-shot earthquake that may develop into a trend or maybe it will be synchronized somehow with national-level parties. We are thus left with Israel where we can find a clear trend of decline of national-level parties: one mayor (in the five largest cities) ran under a local party label in 1983 and 1989 elections; two in 1993 and 1998 elections; three in 2003 elections and all five in 2008 and 2013 elections.

To summarize, in all examined democracies except Israel national parties still dominate the local scene. In a few cases the national parties improved their stand vis-à-vis local parties and independents, and in some other no trend can be detected. In about half of the cases, local parties and independents made some progress since the 1980s, as evident in their national share of votes or seats and in the number of seats they occupy in the councils of the five large cities. Yet in most cases these are small and moderate breakthroughs, and the dominance of national-level parties is evident not only in their holding the lion shares of council seats, but in keeping the position of mayors in their hands.

### **The exception to the rule: the intriguing case of Israel**

As we saw, the Israeli case is an extreme case in which the local scene experienced a radical transformation from an almost monopoly of the national-level parties to the dominance of local parties. This process coincided with the adoption of reform that separated the dates of the national and local elections and determined that mayors will

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<sup>3</sup> In most cities in the United Kingdom, Lord-Mayors are appointed for a 1-year term. By convention, during their term in office they are non-political and non-executive.

<sup>4</sup> The leadership of Podemos decided not to run in the local elections but rather to support local grassroots candidacies. Following our definition we included the five lists supported by Podemos as 'local'. These are: Ahora Madrid, Guanyem Barcelona, València en Comú, Participa Sevilla and Zaragoza En Común.

be directly elected. It is interesting to see if we can detect a similar effect in countries which adopted direct election of mayors.

The Israeli experience tells us that this reform is expected to encourage the creation and success of local parties because mayors, for their part, need to get the support of a majority, or at least a large plurality, of voters. This makes affiliation with a national-level party a burden in many cases, rather than an asset, because the candidates need to break beyond the party electorate. Thus candidates for mayors are likely to blur their partisan affiliation and to establish local “nonpartisan” lists. Over time, this trend might go beyond the mayoral competition into the competition for council seats, legitimizing the claim for genuine local representation. National-level parties, for their part, might not be able to resist this trend, because at least at the first stages of this development, it is their own candidates that blur their affiliation in the name of electoral success. The national-level parties are expected to wait patiently and count the success of its “hidden” candidates after the elections. The problem is that over the years the “semi” local lists and mayoral candidates become more and more independent. Its relationship with national-level parties are, many times, instrumental and unstable, and reaches a point when party switches become very common.

A reform that introduced direct elections for mayors was also adopted in Italy, Germany (in the Landers of Bavaria and Baden Wurtemberg this practice existed as early as the 1950s), Austria, Wallonia in Belgium and for some cities in the UK (Scarow 2001; Magre and Bertana, 2007; Bedock, Mair and Wilson, 2012). It would be interesting to see if it had similar influences on the power of national-level parties.

It would seem that Italy, that adopted direct elections for mayors in 1995 and in which local parties are getting stronger, fits our expectations. The system of direct elections of mayors encouraged the formation of local lists that serve as platforms for mayoral candidates, even if they also lead a coalition of national-level parties. For instance, in the 2013 Rome municipal elections we could find the *Civic List Marino for Mayor* (won 5 council seats) and *Alfio Marchini for Mayor* (won 3 council seats). In the 2011 Milan municipal elections the local platform *Milano Civica per Pisapia Sindaco* won 2 council seats and similar lists succeeded in Naples and Palermo as well.

Germany and Austria also fits our expectations, although the increase in the presence of local lists and independents is much more moderate, and elected mayors still come from one of two the large national-level parties. Yet Ireland and the Netherlands, where we saw an increase of local lists and independents, did not adopt direct elections for mayors. And in several cities elsewhere that adopted direct elections, national-level parties still dominate (London). It thus seems that direct elections for mayors creates opportunities for local parties, but that the extent to which these are facilitated is dependent on other national factors. Identifying these factors is beyond the scope of this article. Yet it seems plausible to speculate that rates of national-level party decline at the local level are influenced by the overall extent of party decline in a given country. Indeed, Israel and Italy are the two countries in which Rahat and Kenig (2016) identified the highest levels of party decline.

## The National-Regional Divide in Voting Patterns

Voting patterns in regional elections are not always similar to the voting patterns in national elections. Sometimes regional party systems are substantially different from the national ones. As can be expected these differences are more common in regions with a distinct national or ethno-linguistic identity and/or with substantial constitutional powers. It is thus not surprising to find regional voting patterns and party systems, which are very different from the national voting patterns and party systems, in regions such as Quebec (Canada), Catalonia (Spain) or Corse (France).

In the framework of this study, we are interested in detecting changes in the performance of national-level parties in regional elections over time. If the difference of voting patterns between national (first-order) vis-à-vis regional (second-order) election decreases and voting patterns become similar over time, then we detect a process of *nationalization*. That is, a process homogenization of voting behavior where peripheral and regional specificities disappear (Caramani, 2004). While many scholars agree that nationalization was a dominant trend until the 1960s, there is disagreement whether since then there has been a resurgence of distinct territorial-regional patterns. If we find that the difference in voting patterns between the two levels have increased over time, then we may speak of a process of *denationalization* of electoral politics, as territorial variations have grown (Detterbeck, 2012: 90).

Denationalization is a good indicator for the weakening of national-level parties hold in the regional arena. That is, the more nationalized a system is, the more their hold as a group of the same species (national-level parties) is strong. Differences, or *denationalization* testifies for the break of the national balance, the weakening of ties between the levels and in the minds of the voters.

Luckily for our purposes, the number of countries using regional elections has increased over the past decades. Once an institutional trait that was practiced almost exclusively by federal countries (Germany, Canada, Austria, Australia, Switzerland), regional elections were adopted during the last decades by several semi-federal countries as well as unitary countries (Table 3). Denmark, Italy, Norway and Sweden introduced regional elections in the 1970s, followed later on by other nations such as Spain, France and Belgium (which turned into a federal state in the mid-1990s). As part of the devolution process of the late 1990s in the United Kingdom, regional elections were introduced in Scotland, Wales and London.

**Table 3: The Introduction of Regional Elections since the 1970s**

<b>country</b>	<b>region/s</b>	<b>first election</b>
Australia	Northern Territory	1974
	Australian Capital Territory	1989
Belgium	Brussels-Capital	1989
	Wallonia, Flanders	1995
Canada	Yukon	1978
Denmark	15 regions*	1974
France	22 regions**	1986
Germany	The five new Landers created following reunification	1990
Italy	20 regions	1970
Norway	19 regions	1975
Spain	17 regions	1980-83
	Ceuta, Mellila	1995
Sweden	24 regions***	1973
United Kingdom	Scotland, Wales	1999
	London	2000

\* In the early 2000s an administrative reform reduced the number of regions to five.

\*\* excluding the 4 overseas regions of Guadeloupe, Guiana, La Reunion and Martinique. A 2014 administrative reform reduced the number of regions to 13.

\*\*\* In the late 1990s an administrative reform reduced the number of regions to 21.

This expansion of regional elections was accompanied with allotting broader power and authorities to the regional, sub-national units. This ‘territorial reconstruction’ has vitalized sub-state political arenas and as a consequence the importance of regional politics and elections grew. In some cases, it created an environment where regional issues, the performance of regional government and the credibility of regional candidates became more important than national-level party alignments and statewide political dynamics (Detterbeck, 2012: 41).

If we take these regionalization trends and add the body of evidence that indicates a decline of parties (e.g. smaller levels of party loyalty, increased electoral volatility and the sort) we may expect national-level parties to experience increasing difficulties in holding to their power at the regional level. All these phenomenon, that were detected in the national-level, could be manifested even more fiercely in sub-state politics, where regional parties may exist and local issues and interests often overshadow voter national alignments or traditional ideological positions. These could make more people to “split” their vote between national and regional elections. If this is the case, we might expect to find a growth in the asymmetry between national and regional voting patterns.

A common measure that allows calculating the difference in voting patterns between regional and national elections is the *index of dissimilarity* (Johnston, 1980). This index compares the results of a national elections with the results of regional election which is the closest in time. There are several kinds of possibilities for comparisons of regional and national vote. For our purpose here, we use the index that evaluates the

extent to which a regional electorate votes differently in regional and national elections. This measurement keeps the regional electorate constant but varies with the type of elections (Jeffrey and Hough, 2003; Schakel, 2013).

This index is identical to the Pedersen (1979) index of electoral volatility, but instead of comparing party support in an election with previous elections, party support in national elections is compared to regional elections. It is calculated by taking the sum of absolute differences between regional and national vote shares for each party and dividing the sum by 2 (Schakel and Dandoy, 2013: 19):

$$\frac{1}{2} \sum_{i=1}^n |X_{iN} - X_{iR}|$$

where  $X_{iN}$  is the percentage of the vote won by party  $i$  in a given national election, N, and  $X_{iR}$  is the percentage of vote won by party  $i$  in the closest (in time) regional election, R, to the national elections in question. If all voters would cast their vote differently, the index would be 100, and if all voters would vote the same, the index would be 0.

To evaluate whether a change has occurred through time we used the dataset of Schakel (ibid) which presents the values of dissimilarity index in more than a dozen countries. We performed the following procedure:

- (1) We calculated unweighted national averages of dissimilarity values for the individual regions. This gave us a value for a certain year. The decision to calculate unweighted averages is not optimal, of course. It gives an equal weight to small and large regions (e.g. Northern Territory vs. New South Wales in Australia) and an equal weight to regions with weak powers and regions with strong power (e.g. Extremadura vs. Catalonia in Spain). However, with no available consistent solution of how to weight different regions this was the best available option.<sup>5</sup>
- (2) using the values we received in the first stage, we calculated averages by decade, starting with the decade covering the years 1970-1979 and ending with 2000-2009, as 2009 was the last available year in the Schakel dataset.

Table 4 exemplifies our calculation procedure for Austria, with its nine regions. As evident, there is an increase in the values of dissimilarity index between the 1980s and the 2000s (the value for the 1970s, which is not presented in the table is even lower, at 4.7). That is, a process of denationalization is evident in the case of Austria.

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<sup>5</sup> We also calculated the medians in order to neutralize the influence of the extreme values.

**Table 4: Calculating the Dissimilarity Index for Austria**

year (national election)	'83	'86	'90	'94	'95	'99	'02	'06	'08
Burgenland	5.95	5.06	3.38	5.18	4.38	10.7	7.43	7.53	18.63
Karnten	5.15	6.81	2.62	7.65	6.13	9.43	19.15	37.71	7.86
Niederösterreich	6.15	6.14	8.71	10.36	9.83	14.15	5.56	16.63	21.28
Oberösterreich	8.92	11.93	12.64	16.69	14.10	14.21	2.26	14.93	18.62
Salzburg	5.54	11.98	14.94	13.38	13.42	13.68	13.87	16.27	22.97
Steiermark	8.21	13.31	11.55	9.34	7.58	20.25	5.72	9.06	27.12
Tirol	9.25	13.18	9.61	12.31	20.75	13.13	4.66	11.14	18.13
Vorarlberg	7.64	6.59	9.81	16.2	20.44	12.21	6.65	16.89	27.07
Wien	1.62	6.52	7.1	6.14	9.57	9.96	16.14	9.6	14.61
averages	6.49	9.06	8.93	10.81	11.8	13.08	9.05	15.53	19.59
average 1980s	7.78								
average 1990s				11.15					
average 2000s							14.72		

Table 5 presents changes over the years in the values of the dissimilarity index in 14 countries. Overall, we can point to a clear process of denationalization, of an increase in the asymmetry in the voting patterns in 9 of the 14 countries under consideration (the case of Belgium is perhaps too early to call). In Austria, Canada, Italy and Japan the increase is the largest. In three countries there is stability and only in Denmark there are signs for decrease. We excluded the case of the United Kingdom because the dataset did not include enough cases of regional elections (only three in Scotland and Wales and two in London) that will allow us to detect any trend.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 5. Dissimilarity Index: Vote in the Region for National Elections vs. Vote in the Region for the Regional Elections, Averages by Decade\***

Country	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	trend
Australia	11.1	6.7	12.0	10.4	stable
Austria	4.7	7.8	11.2	14.7	+
Belgium	n.a.	n.a.	10.7	15.4	+ (?)
Canada	18.9	16.3	29.9	26.5	+
Denmark**	14.1	14.2	8.5	10.3	-
France	n.a.	16.7	18.2	21.4	+
Germany	5.3	6.1	7.3	11.4	+
Italy	7.9	5.6	17.2	22.4	+
Japan	12.3	12.9	22.1	28.1	+
Netherlands	12.3	7.9	12.1	11.5	stable
Norway	n.a.	6.6	11.9	10.5	+
Spain	n.a.	10.1	9.4	9.2	stable
Sweden	1.8	2.0	5.1	4.0	+
Switzerland	16.6	16.4	18.1	20.5	+

<sup>6</sup> Yet, our own calculations for the 2010 and 2015 elections (compared to the 2011 and 2016 elections in Scotland and Wales) indicate the maintenance of relatively high dissimilarity values for the two regions.

- + means increase in the gap between national and regional voting.  
 - means decrease in the gap between national and regional voting.

\* Median values sometimes produced slightly different results, but not to the extent that affected the general trend. Only in one case – the Netherlands – the trend was changed from "stable" to "-".

\*\* The dataset does not include the regions of Greenland and the Faroe Islands, whose party systems are completely incongruent with the party system of the other parts of Denmark.

### Integrated Discussion

This paper examined the performance of national-level parties in local and regional elections. Several measurements were used to identify changes in the power of national parties over time. For local elections, we looked at trends in the national share of votes for local lists and independent candidates and inspected the success of local lists (and mayoral candidates) in the 5 largest cities of each country. For regional elections, we used the index of dissimilarity to find out whether levels of asymmetry in the voters' preference in national and regional elections has changed over time.

Table 6 presents a summary of the findings. As evident, in very few cases we could operate all three measurements. The first one could not be operated in countries where local elections are not held nationally in one day. The third one could not be operated in countries where no regional elections take place. Even in the case of the second measurement, for which we could obtain the most full and comprehensive data, we had a couple of missing cases that have to do with the availability of data.

**Table 6. Summary of Findings**

<b>Country</b>	<b>local parties – national summary</b>	<b>local parties in the 5 largest cities</b>	<b>dissimilarity– national vs. regional elections</b>	<b>verdict: the power of national-level parties</b>
Australia		stable	stable	stable
Austria		+	+	decline
Belgium	+	stable		moderate decline
Canada		stable	+	moderate decline
Denmark	-	stable	-	increase
Finland	stable	-		moderate increase
France		stable	+	moderate decline
Germany		+	+	decline
Ireland	+	+		decline
Israel	+	+		decline
Italy		+	+	decline
Japan			+	moderate decline
Luxembourg	stable			indecisive
Netherlands	+	+	stable	decline
Norway	-	stable	+	indecisive
Portugal	stable	+		moderate decline
Spain	+	+	stable	decline
Sweden	+	stable	+	decline
Switzerland			+	moderate decline
UK		stable		indecisive

The findings indicate that 16 out of the 20 of the countries examined have gone through change. From these 16 cases, in 14 countries the change was in the direction of a decline or moderate decline in the power of national-level parties. In many cases of municipal elections, local lists and independents are doing better than in the past. In regional elections, there is growing asymmetry of the vote between national and sub-national elections. These changes may be explained by processes of new localism and of territorial reconstruction that leads to enhanced sense of regionalism and localism. In any case, these are also linked to processes that has to do with the political parties themselves, that paved the way for increased “split voting” and for new opportunities for new regional and local parties. Moreover, the evident direction of most of these changes, is another indicator for the decline in party-society linkage.

It is evident that national-level parties decline at the sub-national levels varies from one country to another. A few countries actually experienced increase in national parties’ power at the regional and local levels. A few others mainly saw stability. But even among the vast majority that experienced decline, we witness various levels of change, from moderate change to a larger change.

What are the implications of these changes for democracy? On the one hand, the development of separate local polities might be seen as a positive one. People are closer to their genuinely local or regional representative who are responsive to their local or regional interests and accountable for their actions specifically at these levels. This is also about decentralization and dispersion of political power, a development that is seen from a liberal point of view as positive.

On the other hand, some types of local lists might hurt democracy. This especially applies to lists with strong local clientelistic nature that are established to promote private interests and to antiparty populist and extreme local parties, which often find it easier to pass the more relaxed legal or effective thresholds at the local and regional levels. In addition, many of the local lists are short lived up to a point that they can hardly be seen as focal points for responsiveness and accountability. It may also be more burdensome to promote projects that needs national support when the two systems are separated.

If democratic theory can be a source for both pros and cons of these developments, we argue that for political parties, and therefore for party democracy, these are bad news. And because we hold that alternatives to party democracy are either inferior (e.g. personalized democracy) or unfortunately inapplicable for running a national polity (e.g. deliberative democracy), this is bad news for democracy.

Political parties that lack local or regional bases will be much less linked to society. They will find it hard to communicate with people and (especially localized or regionalized) groups within society; they will lack core of volunteers and loyal voters that will help them mobilize voters; those politicians who will be socialized at the loose local “parties” will be of more of an opportunistic kind and less team players. While nonpartisan personalized politics at the local level is something that a democracy may live with and even enjoy, its implications for the national level are rather problematic. But this is only a possible future scenario for all countries but

Israel. And in Israel, save for some party scholars (and not in any case all them, see Brichta, 1998), nobody really noticed that there is a problem.

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