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## Do regional party primaries affect the ideological cohesion of political parties in multi-level systems? Evidence from Spain.

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### *Abstract*

Parties have strong incentives to present a relatively cohesive policy position to the voters across different levels of a political system. However, the adoption of inclusive forms of candidate selection methods like primaries could result in the selection of top candidates for elections on the subnational sphere who are not favoured by the party leadership. This is often seen as a threat to high levels of intra-party programmatic cohesion. Because sub-national party organisations depend to a significant degree on the support from their national party, we argue that regional party branches that selected their top candidates by means of a primary adopt a policy position that deviates less strongly from the one of their national party. However, candidates selected by primaries might need to be responsive to the preferences of their regional electorate, so that the incentives for parties at a regional level to deviate substantially from the position of their national party organisation could increase. By analysing the content of 150 regional election manifestos of Spanish parties, we find that if a parties' top candidate for a regional election is selected in a primary, then the policy distance between the respective regional and national party decreases. However, this effect is not observable for recently founded parties.

## Introduction

Political parties as the key actors in representative democracies have increasingly implemented strategies to make intra-party decision-making processes more inclusive (e.g., Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Spies and Kaiser, 2014; Indridason and Kristinsson, 2015; Poguntke et al., 2016; Borz and Janda, 2018; Cordero and Collier, 2018; Ignazi, 2018). One major reason for the adoption of more inclusive methods of candidate selection is the crisis of political trust in political parties, which has increased significantly in the last decade (e.g., Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014; Cordero et al. 2016). These strategies cover, amongst other things, the introduction of primaries to select the parties' candidates for the next elections (e.g., Hopkin, 2001; Quinn, 2004; Detterbeck, 2013; Sandri et al., 2015; Cross et al., 2016). Primaries can result in the selection of candidates that are favoured by the party leadership, which is likely to end in a programmatically unified and cohesive election campaign so that the chances of increasing their share of the vote in the upcoming elections grow (e.g., Bawn et al., 2012).

However, primaries can also lead to the election of candidates that are not supported at all by the leadership of the respective party, which could provoke a lot of tension and conflicts on the one hand and a complicated election campaign because of the lack of a coherent strategy on the other (see e.g., Lazarus, 2005; Hassell, 2015). The selection of Donald Trump as the presidential nominee of the Republican Party in the 2016 election in the United States is a prominent and recent example. Despite the eventual success of the Trump campaign, we know from recent studies on intra-party cohesion that citizens are more likely to choose unified parties instead of programmatically more heterogeneous parties because the former are perceived by the voters as being better able to deal with the most pressing issues of the time (Greene and Haber, 2015). If primaries bring the risk of selecting top candidates for elections

who are likely to deviate programmatically from the party line, so that voters perceive a party as being programmatically less cohesive, what implications do primaries have on the other decisive step in the election campaign besides nominating candidates, that is, the formulation of policy positions in the respective party's election manifesto? More precisely, we aim to assess the extent to which the introduction of primaries affects the ideological cohesion within parties in a multi-level system and whether there is a variation between established parties and recently founded parties that emphasises the importance of (internal) direct democracy.

Here we argue that parties have strong incentives to present a relatively cohesive policy position to voters across different levels of a political system. However, the introduction of new and more inclusive forms of candidate selection methods like primaries could result in the selection of top candidates for elections on the subnational sphere who are not favoured by the national party leadership. Because sub-national party organisations depend on the support of their national party to a decisive degree, in particular during election campaigns (e.g., Hassell, 2015: 77-78), regional party branches that selected their top candidates for an upcoming election by means of a primary should adopt a policy position close to the one of their national party to secure the support of the national party organisation. However, in particular top candidates selected by primaries might need to be responsive to the preferences of their regional electorate which helped them to win the race and to get nominated as the regional parties' top candidate. Thus, we develop a competing hypothesis which states that the incentives to deviate programmatically from the position of their party at the national level increase for regional party organisations that chose their top candidates in a primary. Finally, we refer to the literature on party organisation and argue that recently founded parties, which tend to emphasise inclusive forms of intra-party decision-making, tend to give their sub-national

sections more programmatic leeway (e.g., Mair and Mudde 1998; Poguntke et al. 2016: 668, 672). We should therefore find evidence for the first or second hypothesis only in the case of established parties and not for recently founded, younger parties which present themselves as being internally more democratic. The results of several multivariate regression models support the first hypothesis: if the top candidate for the next regional election is selected by means of a primary, then the ideological distance between the regional and national party decreases significantly. In line with the third hypothesis, this effect is not observable for more recently founded, younger parties, which are also usually in favour of stronger elements of direct democracy.

### **Primaries and the cohesion of party policy positions in multi-level systems**

European parties have just recently started to open up some internal decision-making processes to party members on a regular basis and often choose levels below the national one – that is, the local or regional level – to experiment with new forms of intra-party participation like primaries (for recent overviews see e.g., Pilet and Cross, 2014; Sandri et al., 2015; Cross et al., 2016). One reason why party members or even party supporters (without officially being party members) are increasingly included in the processes of intra-party decision making can be to make parties more attractive, in order to try and reduce the decline in the number of party members (e.g., van Biezen, 2012). Moreover, the introduction of further possibilities of intra-party participation is considered to help stop the further erosion of trust citizens attach to political institutions, which is a particular problem for political parties and the party elites in Southern Europe (e.g., Cordero et al., 2016).

Party officials have traditionally been responsible for choosing those politicians that might

seem more appealing to their electorate in what has been defined as “the secret garden of politics” (Gallagher and Marsh, 1988). Centralised selection of candidates guarantees some coherence between parties’ positions at the regional and national levels (e.g., Baumann et al., 2017). The latter is important since a high degree of intra-party policy cohesion should – by following recent studies that focus on the effect of perceived intra-party conflict on voter decision-making (Greene and Haber, 2015) – increase the chances that voters consider a party and its representatives as able to solve the most important problems. The latter should also increase the likelihood that voters cast their ballot for such a party. Of course, national party organisations and their leaders know that the interests of the citizens in a specific region might vary from the electorate on the national level, so that the national party organisation tolerates slight programmatic deviations of regional party branches from the programmatic profile of the national party (León, 2014).<sup>1</sup> Following this argument and assuming that parties are primarily interested in increasing their vote share in elections, so that a party can win control over as many (cabinet) offices as possible, which should then increase the chances that a party can implement a maximum number of its policy pledges (Strøm and Müller, 1999), parties have strong incentives to present a relatively cohesive and consistent policy profile to the voters not only across time, but also across different levels of a political system. Adopting a less consistent policy profile not only decreases the support for a party, but is also likely to alienate the traditional supporters of the respective parties (Adams et al. 2011). In order to maximise the number of votes in upcoming elections, the national party leadership in multi-level structured polities should push their sub-national party organisations to adopt policy positions that are close to those of the national party or – to cater to the regional electorate’s interests

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, parties that compete for votes in German states or in the Swiss cantons adjust their policy positions in such a way that they fit in with the socioeconomic and cultural background of the respective region (Müller, 2009; Giger et al., 2011). This increases the chance that such parties extend their vote share in the respective regional election.

(Müller 2009, 2013; Giger et al. 2011; León, 2014; Klingelhöfer, 2016) – that deviate only slightly from the policy program of the national party.

Yet, the selection of a top candidate for a regional election by means of a primary increases the chances that the respective selectorate – the members or supporters of that particular party in a region – choose a politician who is not the person most-favoured by the national party leadership because of his or her deviating policy views. If the regional party branch incorporated the deviating policy position of its top candidate in its election manifesto for the regional election, the electoral success of the party would be in jeopardy because of its low degree of policy cohesion, which voters are likely to perceive (Greene and Haber, 2015). In order to prevent such a situation, which would endanger the parties' goal of winning as many votes as possible in the following elections, the national party organization has some tools at their disposal that could make the regional party branch (which selected its party leader by means of a primary) toe the party line and to deviate only marginally from the position of the national party. We know from the literature on party organisation and its effects that regional or local party branches and their candidates are reliant on the financial or administrative support of the national party (e.g., Fabre, 2011; Fabre and Swenden, 2013). During regional or local election campaigns, this support can include the presence and activity of important politicians who act at the national level (see e.g., Detterbeck, 2012). National party organisations are usually in a better position to provide competent and experienced campaign staff and might, in addition, be better able to facilitate the acquisition of monetary resources than their sub-national branches (Hassell, 2015: 77). If the national party withdraws their support for a regional party – either directly by giving their respective regional party less funding or by reducing the “moral support” by impeding activities of leading national politicians in regional election campaigns

—then the regional party’s chances of maximising its vote share in the upcoming election are at risk because of the less professional campaign.

Furthermore, the political aspirations of politicians that were elected as the regional party chair or the top candidate of the regional party for the next election in a (closed or open) primary are likely to influence the programmatic profile adopted by a regional party in its election manifesto. If the selected top candidate for the next regional election pushes for an election manifesto which deviates strongly from the policy positions that her party on the national level adopted, her chances for a political career in the national sphere of the political system could be in danger (Hassell, 2015: 77-78). In order to secure the continued support of the national party, a regional party branch and the (primary selected) top candidate for the regional election should signal their loyalty to the national party leadership with an election manifesto that comes programmatically close to the policy position of the national party. The manifesto should therefore only deviate slightly from the position of the national party, so that the specific preferences of the electorate in the respective region are taken into account by the regional party (León, 2014).<sup>2</sup> Following this reasoning, we would expect that a regional party branch that selected its candidate by means of a primary deviates *less strongly* from the programmatic position of the respective national party compared to regional parties that did not use primaries to select their top candidates (*H1*).

However, candidates selected through primaries can have incentives for deviating from the usual policy position their regional party adopts. This is because they have to serve not only

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<sup>2</sup> The selection of a top candidate for an election normally takes place before the party formulates and officially approves its election manifesto. In fact, in the cases studied here —Spanish parties at the regional level— we find that the outcome of the candidate selection process of these parties was decided 153 days before the regional elections on average.

the interests of their party and its leadership, but they are – in terms of the principal agent framework (e.g., Müller, 2000; Carey, 2007; van Houten, 2009) – also responsible to the specific selectorate that chose them. That selectorate can have policy positions that deviate significantly from the policy profile of the national and regional party leadership (e.g., Hill and Tausanovitch, 2018). Vote-seeking candidates within regional party primaries need to address the interests of a different constituency than the party leaders acting at the national level, who have to take the preferences of the voters in the overall country into account. Moreover, top candidates selected in primaries have to fulfil the pledges they made during the candidate selection campaign and have to be responsive in particular to the selectorate that helped them to win the primary. In the US, several studies have shown that participants in Democrat and Republican primaries favour ideologically more radical candidates who therefore have a high chance of winning the party nomination, but are then likely to lose in the general election because the majority of the electorate prefers more moderate candidates (e.g., Brady et al., 2007; Hall and Snyder, 2013; Hall, 2015). These findings suggest that politicians who seek to win a party's nomination have to be responsive to the preferences of the regional parties' selectorate which can (in the case of a closed and in particular of an open primary) deviate from that of the national party and the usual position of the regional party branch. Following this theoretical perspective, a regional party should adjust its policy positions to those of the top candidate selected in the primary and should ignore the preferences of its national party organisation and revise its 'usual' policy position which takes the socioeconomic characteristics of the region into account with the one of the top candidate selected in the primary. These considerations result in the following hypothesis: a regional party branch that selected its candidate by means of a primary deviates *more strongly* from the programmatic position of the respective national party compared to regional parties that did not use primaries



to select their top candidates (*H2*).

The causal mechanisms outlined in hypotheses 1 and 2 should, however, depend on the organisational structure of the political parties, which have changed not only over time, but which also vary between the ideological party families (for an overview see-e.g., Bille, 2001; Bardi et al., 2014; Cross et al., 2016: 49-56; Poguntke et al., 2016). While established mass parties are characterised by a large membership and a complex, hierarchically organised apparatus (Rohrschneider and Whitefield, 2012: 118-121), left-libertarian, green and (left-wing) populist parties tend to adopt a much more egalitarian and inclusive decision-making process with several elements of direct democracy (Poguntke 2002; Mair and Mudde, 1998). In terms of intra-party politics, liberal, libertarian, green and populist parties give their members more programmatic leeway than traditional mass parties from the social democratic, (former) communist, Christian democratic/Catholic or conservative party family, where the national party leadership has strong powers (Poguntke et al., 2016: 669-672). We should therefore find evidence for the first or second hypotheses in the case of established mass parties (e.g., Katz and Mair, 1995), but not in the case of younger parties that favour elements of direct democracy like the selection of candidates by (open or closed) primaries (e.g., Cross and Blais, 2012; Chiru et al., 2015: 46-47; Smith and Tsutsumi, 2016). Our third hypothesis thus reads as follows: there is no significant difference between the programmatic position of a regional party branch that selected its candidate by means of a primary and the position of the respective national party in the case of younger, recently founded parties (*H3*).

We test our expectations on the basis of a novel dataset that provides information on the candidate selection regime of Spanish regional parties and on the policy positions Spanish

parties adopted in their manifestos for parliamentary elections on the regional and national level of the political system. Before presenting and discussing the data and the results in more detail, we provide an overview of the Spanish political system in the next section.

### **Regional primaries and candidate selection regimes in Spain**

Spain is a decentralised country where regions have a high degree of authority (Hooghe et al., 2016; Vall-Prat and Rodon, 2017). This affects the congruence between regional and national manifestos because regional party branches might find incentives in deviating from the national party positions as voters are more aware of the different levels of governance (León, 2014). At the same time, a party's credibility and, consequently, its electoral performance is in danger if regional branches are too distant from the policy program of the national party (Klingelhöfer, 2016). Furthermore, although the regional parties have their own budget and receive some funds from the regional parliaments, in Spain public funds are provided to the national parties, which gives the national party organisations considerable power and authority over sub-national branches and should provide a financial incentive for the regional parties to follow the national parties' policy profile (van Houten, 2009: 146-147). In this tug-of-war between following the programmatic line of the national party and adjusting it to the preferences of the voters in the region, the way in which the community has acquired its autonomy plays a key role (León, 2012). Andalusia, Catalonia, Basque Country, Navarre and Galicia are all communities with a strong regional identities which in the first years after their transition to democracy had already been given more political authority – in particular in terms of “self-rule” – than the other Spanish regions. In the case of these regions, the parties' positions on decentralisation are as relevant for voters as the ones on a general left-right dimension (León, 2014).

Concerning candidate selection regimes, low inclusiveness of party members was one of the defining characteristics of Spanish parties (Hopkin, 2001; Ramiro, 2016: 128). However, this has changed in recent years. Most of the main parties have unevenly introduced new methods of candidate selection (Cordero et al., 2016). As Figure 1 shows, parties mostly selected their candidates by less inclusive methods such as an election by delegates during party conventions. Among the 150 manifestos collected here for the period between 2003 and 2016, just 34 came from a party branch that selected its candidate by means of a primary election with at least two candidates.<sup>3</sup>

\*\*\*Figure 1 about here\*\*\*

The election of regional candidates by party members was first adopted by the Socialists (PSOE) and also (though not to the same extent and without the results being binding) the communist United Left (IU) in 1998. However, the instrument of selecting candidates through primaries was not used on a regular basis. Until the emergence of the left-wing party *Podemos* (“We can”) in 2014, primaries were an alternative way for parties to select regional and local candidates in times of internal weakness and bad electoral prospects. After the first round of introducing primaries in the late 1990s, the media focussed on internal struggles and division when reporting about the primaries and their results (Ramiro, 2016). This strengthened the association between choosing primaries to select party leaders or candidates and existing intra-party conflict. Two decades later, the emergence of *Ciudadanos* (“Citizens”) and *Podemos* (“We can”) in Spanish politics not only challenged the two-party system, it also changed the

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<sup>3</sup> See Table A1 in the appendix with more information about the 34 primary elections in the five parties studied here for the time period from 2003 to 2016.

view on how parties should select their candidates (Cordero et al., 2016; Orriols and Cordero, 2016; Rodon and Hierro, 2016). These new parties made internal democracy one of their main ideals; primaries were no longer seen as the result of a party's incapacity to calm dissenters, but as an effort to bring parties closer to the demands of their supporters. This forced PSOE and IU to adopt more inclusive candidate selection regimes and gave incentives for some supporters of the conservative People's Party (PP) to claim more internal democracy.

## **Data and methods**

As the focus of this paper lies on the effects of primaries on the ideological congruence between the parties' regional branches and the position of the national party organisation, the dependent variable measures the squared distance between the policy position of a party's regional branch, as adopted in its election manifesto, and the position of the same party on the national level.<sup>4</sup> We restrict our analysis to an ideological left-right dimension and a decentralisation policy dimension.<sup>5</sup> Both structure Spanish party competition and voting behaviour to a decisive degree (e.g., Benoit and Laver, 2006). We measure the positions of the national parties on both policy dimensions by referring to the data from the Chapel Hill expert surveys (Bakker et al., 2015). We apply Wordscores (Laver et al., 2003) to the full text of 150 election manifestos of Spanish regional parties that cover the time period from 2003 to 2016 and measure their positions on the left-right axis and on the decentralisation policy dimension. The estimated Wordscores values were rescaled according to the transformation suggested by Martin and Vanberg (2008).

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<sup>4</sup> A descriptive overview on the characteristics of all variables can be found in Table A2 in the appendix.

<sup>5</sup> Figure A1 in the appendix shows the estimated positions of the regional parties' manifestos on the two dimensions under study. Figures A2 and A3 provide information on the distribution of the two dependent variables by type of party.

To estimate the regional parties' positions on the left-right and decentralisation dimensions with the assistance of the Wordscores approach, we used as reference texts the national manifestos of PP, PSOE and IU for the General Elections of 2000, 2004, 2008, 2011 and 2015, and the national manifestos of *Ciudadanos* and *Podemos* for 2015.<sup>6</sup> Reference scores stem from the relevant Chapel Hill expert survey.<sup>7</sup> Several studies show that Wordscores is a valid and reliable method for estimating the positions of political actors, not only across country and time, but also for estimating positions of political actors on the sub-national level (e.g., Klemmensen et al., 2007; Bräuninger et al., 2013).<sup>8</sup>

The main independent variable is whether a top candidate of a regional party branch for the position of the regional Prime Minister post was selected through an intra-party primary or not. Thus, we computed a simple dummy variable that takes the value 1 when the candidate was selected through a primary election with more than one competing candidate, and 0 when the candidate was selected by a different, less inclusive selection procedure. This information was obtained from press and party releases. While in 34 cases the candidate was selected by means of a primary, an exclusive selectorate chose the candidates in the remaining 116 cases of the

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<sup>6</sup> We could only use the national parties' manifestos of 2008, 2011 and 2015 in case of the decentralisation policy dimension because the Chapel Hill expert surveys did not gather information on this issue for the years 2000 and 2004. This leaves us with 135 cases when analysing the determinants of the distances between regional and national parties on the decentralisation policy dimension, while the analysis is based on 150 cases when focussing on the distances between regional and national party branches on the left-right dimension.

<sup>7</sup> We refrain from estimating the party positions with other reference scores like the one of the Comparative Manifesto Project (MARPOR; see Volkens et al., 2013). This is not only because of presenting a concise and compact analysis, but also for the reason that the correlation between Wordscores estimates based on expert survey scores as reference scores and MARPOR data as reference scores is significantly positive, also for the Spanish case (Bräuninger et al., 2013: 15).

<sup>8</sup> Because the selected reference texts – that is, the manifestos of the Spanish parties for the election to the national parliament – are written in Castilian Spanish, we can only derive the positions of regional parties which draft their manifestos in Castilian. Regional parties that wrote their manifestos in the respective regional language could therefore not be included in the Wordscores estimation and the analysis. Future research could make use of translation tools that might allow the inclusion of political texts in the content analysis, which were originally written in a different language than the other documents.

150 candidate selection procedures we have analysed.<sup>9</sup> To test our third hypothesis, we computed a simple dummy variable ‘new parties’ that differentiates between the established parties (PP, PSOE and IU) and new parties (*Podemos* and *Ciudadanos*), which push for more elements of direct democracy.<sup>10</sup>

We control for other factors that could affect the programmatic distance between regional and national parties. First, we take factors related to the influence of the national party into account. We focus on their participation in the national government at the time of the regional election and on the difference between a party’s vote share in the regional election and its vote share in the region for the national election. Because of unpopular policies introduced by the national government, parties supporting the national government could provide their regional party branches more programmatic “room for manoeuvre” to gain the support of disappointed voters (e.g., Herzog and Benoit, 2015; Baumann et al., 2017; Cabeza et al., 2017). Similarly, regional branches that are more successful in the region than the national party can feel legitimised to move away from the official national discourse in order to secure their pre-eminence in the region.

Secondly, we pay attention to the structural characteristics of the region. In multi-level systems with a vertical fragmentation of powers, we need to consider competences of regional governments in the decision-making process on the regional and national levels. All Spanish

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<sup>9</sup> We only identified those candidate selection processes as primaries in which the selectorate could choose between at least two candidates. If only one candidate was seeking the nomination of her party, it is likely that the candidate was designated by the party elite (Aylott and Bolin, 2016). See Table A1 in the appendix for an overview on the characteristics of the primary elections covered in the analysis.

<sup>10</sup> *Podemos* established mandatory primaries to select its top candidates with the only exception of the Catalan elections of 2015. Because *Podemos* formed a pre-electoral coalition (“*Catalunya Sí que es Pot*”) that included four different political parties and members of non-political organizations, the pre-electoral coalitions’ candidate for the office of the First Minister of Catalonia was not selected in a primary.

regions enjoy a high degree of self-government and the differences in their competences as the *Regional Authority Index* (RAI, see Hooghe et al., 2016) shows. However, as the RAI scores do not show much variation during the period from 2003 to 2016, we control for the cumulative number of competences related to welfare state policy transferred from the central government to the regional ones in the analyses (Vall-Prat and Rodon, 2017). We also include a dummy as a further explanatory variable that identifies those regions that acceded faster to subnational government competences and have a distinct culture, language and traditions (Catalonia, Basque Country, Navarre and Galicia). A significant amount of the population living in these regions identifies with the region rather than with Spain (Vall-Prat and Rodon, 2017). The reason for adopting this simple dichotomy is twofold. On the one hand, the longer that citizens experience decentralisation, the better they are able to distinguish between national and regional competences (León, 2012), which might incentivise parties to deviate from the programmatic guidelines of the party at the national level. On the other hand, regional branches of state-wide parties might want to pay more attention to regional demands in those places where regional identities are stronger, so that deviating from the position of the national party should be more likely in these particular cases.

The economic situation of a country is often considered to be an important factor in shaping the programmatic strategies of parties and thus the content of election manifestos (e.g., Ward et al., 2011). Differences between wealthy and poor regions have – as the cases of Germany and Switzerland show – an impact on what the regional party branches propose in their manifestos (e.g., Müller, 2009; Giger et al., 2011). For this reason, we include a variable that measures the difference between the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the region and the

national GDP in the respective year of the regional election.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the outcomes of open and closed primaries can be very different as described in the “law of curvilinear disparity” (May, 1973). According to May (1973), party members tend to be more radical than party sympathisers and elites because they are driven by ideological concerns and not by office-seeking principles, so therefore they are likely to support less moderate candidates. Thus, we estimate a separate series of regression models in which our main independent variables are dummies for closed and open primaries.

The structure of the data can be considered hierarchical or at least similar to the structure of time-series data. However, because of the small number of observations on the inferior level, we refrain from estimating a multilevel regression model (see-e.g., Stegmüller, 2013). In light of these limitations, we follow the empirical strategy adopted by Klingelhöfer (2016) and estimate ordinary least squared (OLS) regression models with robust standard errors clustered by a dyad of region and the election year.

## Analysis

Table 1 presents the results of four OLS regression models. The dependent variable is the squared distance between the regional party branch and the national party on the left-right dimension (models 1 and 2) and on the decentralisation policy dimension (models 3 and 4). In contrast to models 1 and 3, models 2 and 4 include an interaction term between the variable that provides information on whether a regional parties’ top candidate was selected by means of a primary and the variable that identifies *Podemos* and *Ciudadanos* as the new Spanish

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<sup>11</sup> Data on the regional and national GDP is taken from the OECD database (<http://stats.oecd.org>).



parties that emphasise more inclusive methods of intra-party democracy. Models 2 and 4 thus allow for testing hypothesis 3.

\*\*\*Table 1 about here\*\*\*

The estimated effect of the main explanatory variable supports the expectation summarised in our first hypothesis: regional parties that chose primaries as their candidate selection mechanism formulate positions in their manifestos that deviate less from those of their respective national party organisation. This should help to secure the support for the regional party branch from the national party organisation during the election campaign. Thus, selecting a candidate through primaries increases the ideological congruence of a party in the Spanish multi-level system as those regional branches with top candidates elected through this method deviated less from the position of the national party than regional parties that selected their top candidate by less inclusive candidate selection methods. However, the results are very different when shifting the perspective to the distance between a regional and national party on a policy dimension that differentiates between positive and negative positions on further decentralisation steps (see model 3). While the effect of the distance variable shows the expected negative effect, it does not reach standard levels of statistical significance. In terms of the control variables, the estimates indicate that regional parties deviate significantly more from the policy position of their national party on the left-right dimension in case of historical regions, while in the case of the decentralisation policy dimension regional party branches deviate more when its national party organisation is a member of the national government. The remaining contextual variables are not statistically significant.

Is there any evidence for the third hypothesis in which we argued that we should see no significant difference in the programmatic behaviour of regional party branches that adopted primaries if these parties were recently founded? The results of the regression models 2 and 4 presented in Table 1 again show that primaries have a distinct impact on each of the two dimensions we concentrate on. According to the estimated coefficients presented in models 2 and 4 in table 1, the significantly positive effect of the interaction term compensates the negative effect of the variable that identifies new parties on the squared left-right distance between regional and national parties. Conversely, being a new party that holds primaries has a positive impact on the distance between regional and national parties on the decentralisation dimension, meaning that the policy congruence between the regional and national level decreases for non-established parties.

Since the interpretation of interaction terms and their substantive effects on the basis of the significance levels of their respective coefficients can be misleading (for example, Brambor et al., 2006; Mitchell, 2012), we calculated as a first step the average marginal effects of primaries. Figure 2 shows that parties holding primaries to choose their top candidate for a regional election deviate less on the left-right dimension from the positions of the national party, regardless of whether the party is an established party or a new one. However, the results indicate that the effect of primaries for new parties is not as strong as in the case of established parties: when just taking the point estimator into account, the squared distance between a regional party branch and its national party organisation on the left-right dimension is about twice as much for established parties compared to new parties. This would be in line with what we formulated in the third hypothesis. Yet, this pattern is not observable when shifting the focus to the decentralisation policy dimension, where the marginal effects are not statistically

significant from zero on the 95% level.

\*\*\*Figure 2 about here\*\*\*

As a second step, we estimate the predicted squared distances for the two dimensions being studied in order to provide a better understanding of the substantive meaning of the interaction effect. Figure 3 shows that for the established parties in our sample – PP, PSOE and IU – the distances between the regional and national parties on the left-right dimension and the decentralisation policy dimension are significantly smaller when they adopt primaries as their candidate selection method. However, for both *Ciudadanos* and *Podemos*, holding primaries does not lead to a significant difference in the predicted policy congruence between regional and national manifestos. This again supports our third hypothesis according to which younger parties which push for stronger elements of direct democracy give their regional branches more programmatic leeway even if they select their top candidates by means of a primary.

\*\*\*Figure 3 about here\*\*\*

To check the robustness of these findings, we replicate the models with dummy variables covering information on the degree of inclusiveness of the process of candidate selection. We differentiate between the adoption of closed primaries and of open primaries. However, we should note that only new parties held both closed and open primaries besides non-inclusive methods of candidate selection, while in the case of established parties none adopted open primaries. For this reason, the interaction term between open primaries and new parties cannot be excluded in the regression model, because the variable on open primaries actually refers

only to non-established parties. The results presented in models 1 and 2 of table 2 demonstrate that regional parties deviate less strongly from the policy position of their national party organisation on the left-right dimension in the case of open primaries (see also Figure 4). This, again, supports our first hypothesis.

\*\*\*Table 2 and Figure 4 about here\*\*\*

In the case of decentralisation policy, being a new party holding closed or open primaries increases the distance between regional and national parties. Figure 4 shows the marginal effects of closed and open primaries exclusively for new parties. Only in the case of open primaries do the regional party branches decrease the distance from their national party organisation on the left-right dimension. There is, however, no statistically significant effect when shifting the perspective to the decentralisation policy dimension. On the basis of these findings, we can conclude that the type of the primary matters for the programmatic heterogeneity within new parties in the Spanish multi-level system, while the simple differentiation between primaries and non-inclusive methods of candidate selection helps to explain the differences in the congruence between regional and national organisations for established parties. The effects of the control variables show again almost no significant impact. Similarly to the results presented in Table 1, there is evidence that regional parties deviate significantly more from the policy position of their national party on the left-right dimension in the historical regions and also if the party is a member of the national government in the case of decentralisation policy.

Taken together, adopting primaries as the method of selecting regional parties' top candidates

affects the policy distance between a regional and a national party, in particular for established parties.<sup>12</sup> It seems that regional party branches from these party families that selected their top candidates by means of a primary try to signal to their national party that they tend to stick to the ideological and policy area-specific position of the national party. This finding indicates that primaries can have a disciplining function in a multi-level system in terms of appearing ideologically united as a party.

## **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to answer the question of what effect the adoption of primaries as the selection mechanism for top candidates by regional party branches has on the programmatic cohesion within a party in a multi-level system. We found – by focussing on the parties in the Spanish multi-level system – empirical evidence for what might be a “top down-effect”: if a regional party branch selects its top candidate for the upcoming regional election by means of a primary, then the regional party drafts a manifesto which is ideologically closer to the position of the respective national party. This general effect is, however, not observable for decentralisation policy, which is the second dimension that structures Spanish party competition. We also tested a third hypothesis, in which we argued that the ‘age’ of parties should have a mediating effect on the impact of adopting primaries on the programmatic distance to the national party organisation. The results indicated that the regional branches of established parties close the programmatic gap to their national party organisation on the left-right dimension and on decentralisation policy when adopting primaries to select their top candidates for an election to the regional parliament. This pattern is, as expected, not

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<sup>12</sup> The substantive effects of the main explanatory variables remain stable when including a time trend variable as a further independent variable in the analysis (see Tables A3 and A4 and Figures A4-A6 in the appendix).

observable for younger parties. Finally, the type of primary, that is, if it was a primary open to all voters or only for party members, makes a difference only for the more recently founded parties and here only in case of the left-right dimension.

We are, of course, aware of the limitations of our study. Ideally, we would need information on the exact point in time when a regional party branch decided on their top candidate for the regional election and when the respective regional party drafted and decided its election manifesto, so that we would be safe from endogeneity concerns. This data is, unfortunately, not completely available, but the information we could collect is that the formulation of the election manifesto takes place after the selection of a regional parties' top candidate. Along these lines, more information is required on which candidate in the regional primary election is supported by the national party leadership and which candidate is not, which could be measured by a content analysis of media reports. Furthermore, data on the policy positions of the candidates in the regional primaries would be helpful, so that we could measure the programmatic distance between the candidates in the primary elections and the national and the regional party leaderships. Further research could collect this information, for instance on the basis of the speeches of the respective candidates or a detailed media analysis, so that a more precise evaluation of the hypotheses is possible. If the candidate who was not supported by the national party leadership won the regional primary, we would expect that in particular this regional party branch formulates policy positions in its manifesto that come very close to the ones of the national party. In addition, information on the degree of competitiveness in the selection process of a regional parties' top candidate and on the chosen electoral system adopted in the primary elections would be helpful for a more detailed analysis (see, however, Table A1 in the appendix). Finally, we have to emphasise that this study was restricted to only

one multi-level system. Further research should develop a comparative research design, so that the number of cases and the variation among the characteristics of the main explanatory variables – for instance, if a primary was open or closed for non-party members – increases.

Despite these limitations and the empirical focus on only one multi-level system, we can conclude that more inclusive methods of candidate selection such as primaries do not necessarily imply an increase of ideological heterogeneity within a political party. The findings presented in this contribution rather suggest the opposite: since regional parties need support from their national party organisation at least to some degree, primaries can have a disciplining function when it comes to the formulation of an ideological position in the regional parties' election manifesto. Of course and as indicated above, this conclusion drawn from the Spanish multi-level system has to be cross-checked with data from other (European) countries in which parties recently started selecting their candidates on the basis of primaries. Yet, the results indicate that primaries are not a danger for party democracy and do not necessarily foster intra-party policy conflicts. Instead, primaries could strengthen parties and their role in representative democracies by making intra-party decision processes more inclusive while concurrently setting incentives for all actors within parties to develop cohesive policy positions.

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Figure 1: Number and type of candidate selection regimes in Spanish regions in the time period between 2000 and 2016, by party

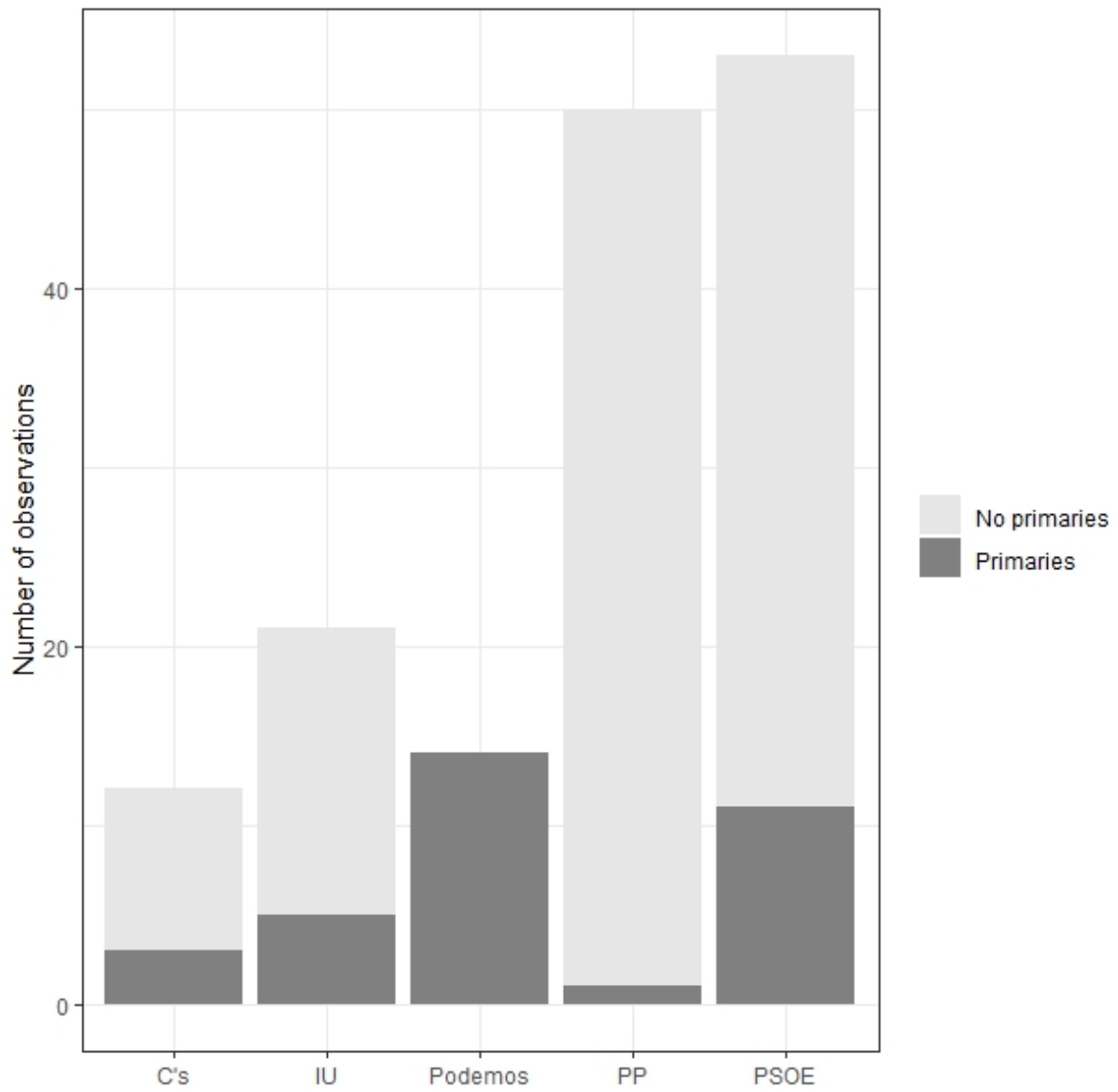
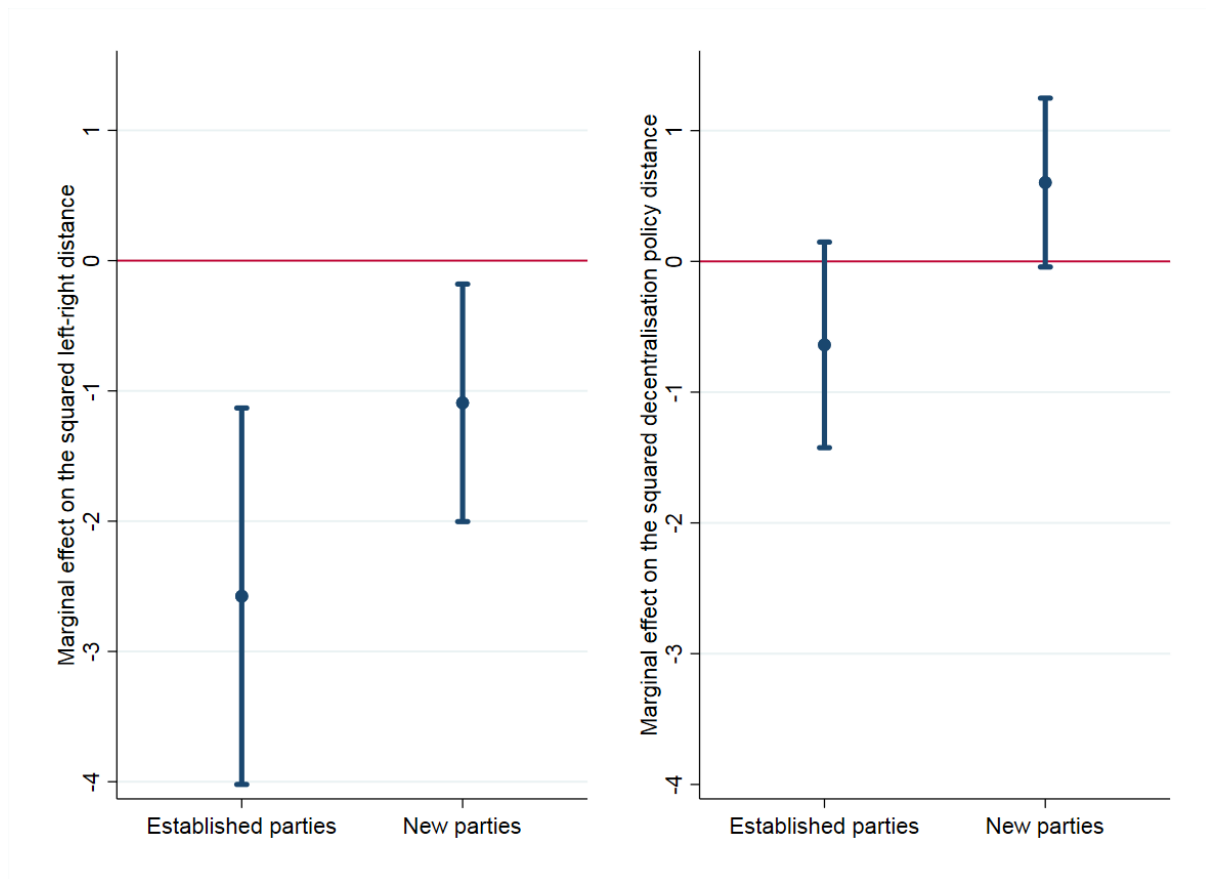
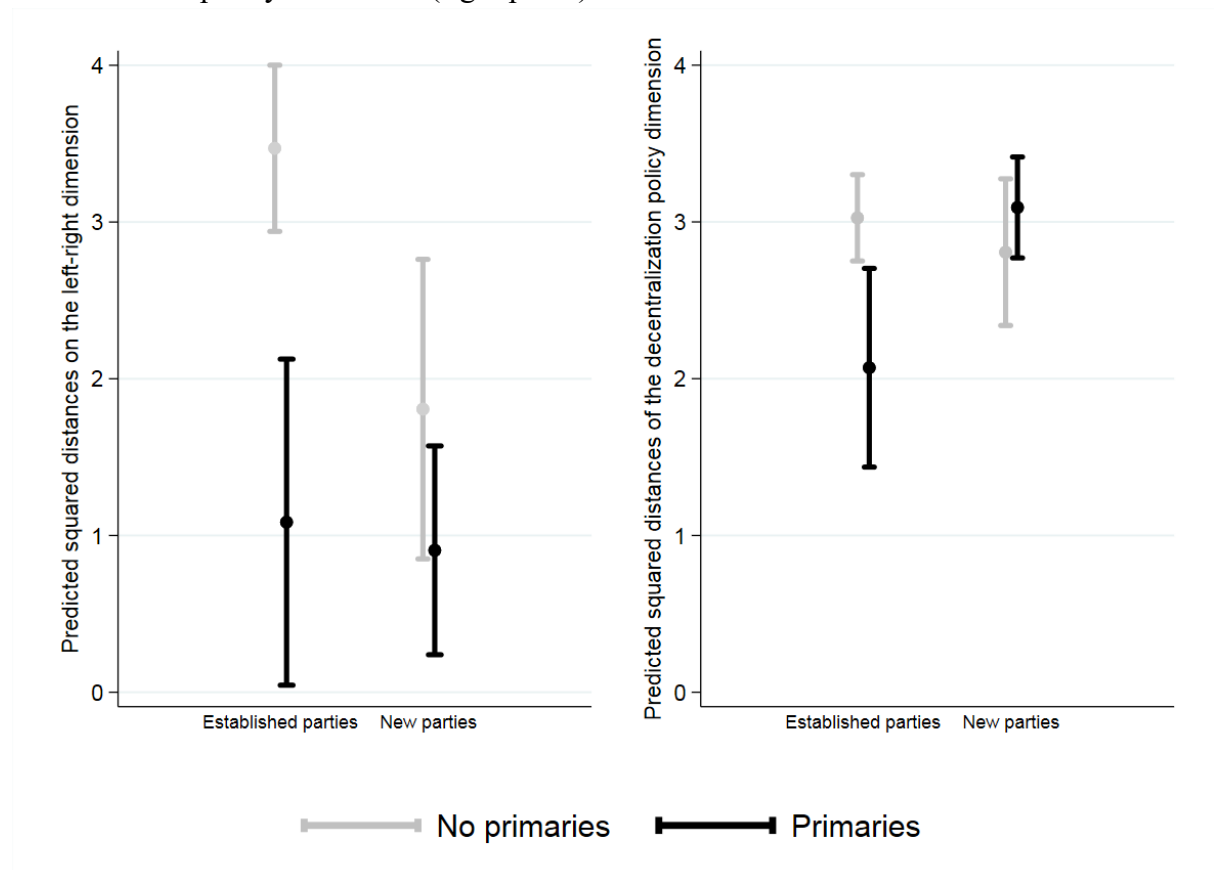


Figure 2: Average marginal effects of primary on the squared distance between the regional party branches and their national parties on the left-right dimension (left panel) and the decentralisation policy dimension (right panel)



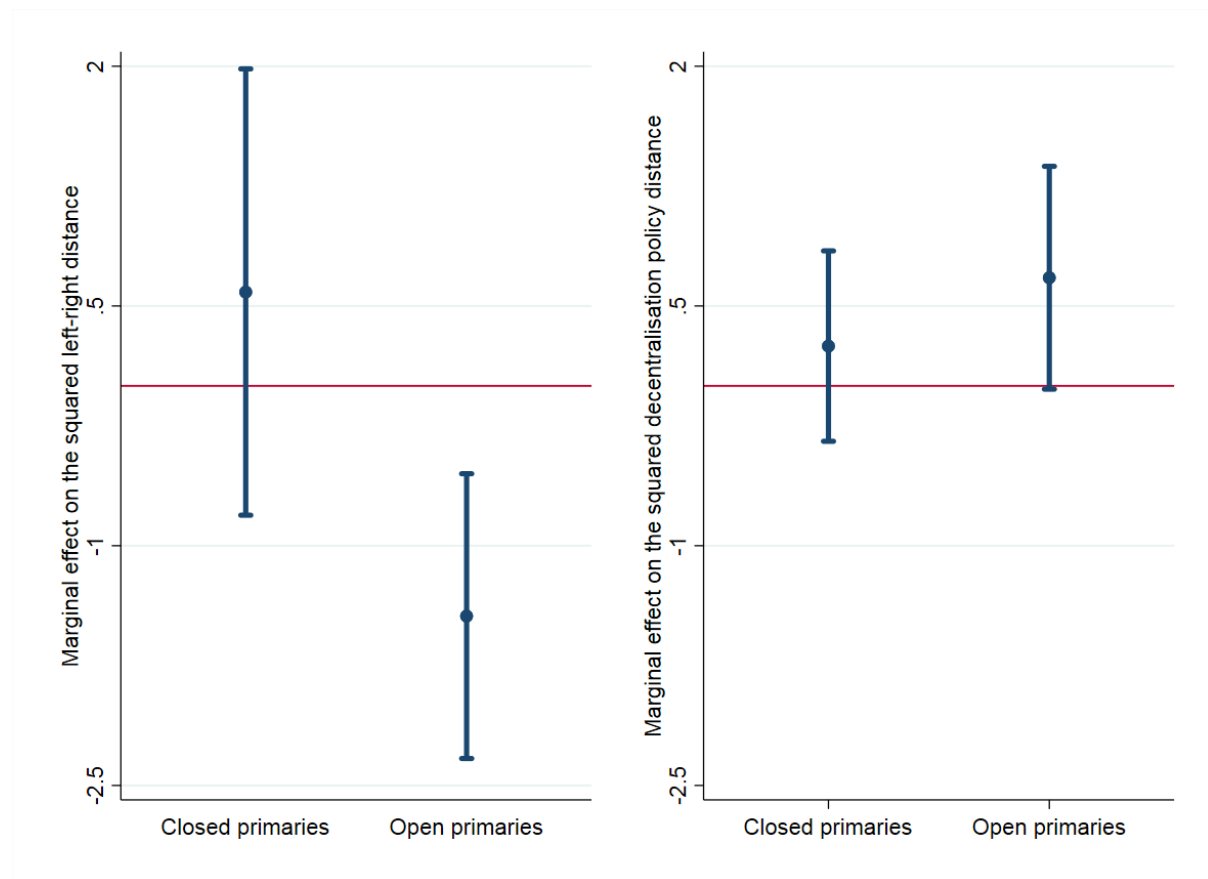
Note: Estimates are based on the second and fourth regression models presented in table 2. Adjusted predicted effects with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 3: Predicted squared distance between the regional party branches and their national parties on the left-right dimension (left panel) and the decentralisation policy dimension (right panel)



Note: Estimates are based on the second and fourth regression models presented in table 1. Adjusted predictions with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 4: Average marginal effects of closed and open primary on the squared distance between the regional party branches and their national parties on the left-right dimension (left panel) and the decentralisation policy dimension (right panel)



Note: Estimates are based on the second and fourth regression models presented in table 2. Adjusted predicted effects with 95% confidence intervals

Table 1: Determinants of the squared distance between the left-right positions (models 1 and 2) and decentralisation positions (models 3 and 4) of regional party branches and their national party

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Main explanatory variables</i>				
Primaries	-2.135*** (0.539)	-2.576*** (0.721)	-0.267 (0.310)	-0.638 (0.391)
New parties	-0.903 (0.646)	-1.664* (0.712)	0.424 (0.309)	-0.219 (0.352)
Primaries X new parties		1.484+ (0.802)		1.241** (0.452)
<i>Control variables</i>				
Party represented in national government	-1.364 (0.828)	-1.403+ (0.828)	0.932** (0.295)	0.894** (0.296)
Difference in regional- national vote	-0.0616 (0.0820)	-0.0588 (0.0829)	-0.0168 (0.0309)	-0.0149 (0.0314)
Competences transferred to the region	-0.00636 (0.00390)	-0.00605 (0.00389)	-0.00310 (0.00203)	-0.00285 (0.00203)
Historical region	2.441* (1.194)	2.340+ (1.198)	0.655 (0.608)	0.566 (0.627)
Difference in regional- national GDP	-0.0794 (0.0498)	-0.0745 (0.0504)	-0.00921 (0.0351)	-0.00519 (0.0364)
Constant	6.508*** (1.291)	4.423*** (1.018)	3.248*** (0.592)	3.032*** (0.440)
<i>N</i>	150	150	135	135
adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.088	0.085	0.095	0.110
<i>AIC</i>	835.6	836.9	485.2	483.8
<i>BIC</i>	859.6	864.0	508.4	510.0

Comments: Estimates of an OLS regression model. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by region and year of election. Standard errors in parentheses.

+ p<0.10, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001.



Table 2: Determinants of the squared distance between the left-right positions (models 1 and 2) and decentralisation positions (models 3 and 4) of regional party branches and their national party, differentiated by type of primary

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Main explanatory variables</i>				
Open primaries	-2.120*** (0.596)	-1.440** (0.445)	0.486 (0.353)	0.677+ (0.346)
Closed primaries	-2.140** (0.642)	-2.573*** (0.722)	-0.516 (0.350)	-0.639 (0.392)
New parties	-0.912 (0.761)	-1.662* (0.717)	-0.00657 (0.357)	-0.220 (0.353)
Closed primaries X new parties		3.160** (1.043)		0.888+ (0.461)
<i>Control variables</i>				
Party represented in national government	-1.364 (0.833)	-1.404+ (0.832)	0.907** (0.295)	0.894** (0.297)
Difference in regional-national vote	-0.0616 (0.0823)	-0.0574 (0.0832)	-0.0164 (0.0313)	-0.0153 (0.0316)
Competences transferred to the region	-0.00636 (0.00391)	-0.00609 (0.00389)	-0.00290 (0.00205)	-0.00284 (0.00204)
Historical region	2.440* (1.197)	2.323+ (1.198)	0.599 (0.624)	0.568 (0.632)
Difference in regional-national GDP	-0.0794 (0.0501)	-0.0679 (0.0512)	-0.00986 (0.0359)	-0.00662 (0.0369)
Constant	4.373*** (1.020)	4.442*** (1.019)	3.004*** (0.442)	3.027*** (0.443)
<i>N</i>	150	150	135	135
adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.081	0.083	0.106	0.105
<i>AIC</i>	837.6	838.2	484.4	485.6
<i>BIC</i>	864.7	868.3	510.5	514.6

Comments: Estimates of an OLS regression model. Robust standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered by region and year of election. Standard errors in parentheses.

+ p<0.10, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001