



# An economic explanation of the nationalization of electoral politics<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The literature on the nationalization of electoral politics focuses on the institutional characteristics of political regimes and the structure and organization of social cleavages. We argue that the nationalization of electoral politics is also driven by economic performance. Economic perturbations increase vote transfers from large (and highly nationalized) parties to small (and weakly nationalized) parties. Permissive electoral systems exacerbate the influence of economic performance on nationalization. Pooled cross-sectional time-series regression analysis is conducted on data from 43 countries and 475 elections between 1950 and 2012. The party-level mechanisms are shown through a closer look at Austria, Portugal and Ireland.

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## 1. Introduction

In less than four years, between the May 2007 and the February 2011 lower house elections, nationalization in the Irish party system suffered an abrupt decline. According to the Standardized and Weighted Party System Nationalization Score by [Bochsler \(2010\)](#), nationalization dramatically dropped from 0.73 to 0.39. To what extent can existing research explain this short-term variation in Ireland?

For us, the nationalization of party systems refers to “the extent to which parties compete with equal strength across various geographical units within a nation. Strongly nationalized party systems are systems where the vote share of each party is similar across geographical units (e.g. districts, provinces and regions), while weakly nationalized party systems exhibit large variation in

the vote shares of parties across sub-national units” ([Kasuya and Moenius, 2008](#): 136). <sup>1</sup> In the comparative literature on parties and party systems, there are two major theoretical approaches to the study of the nationalization of electoral politics. The first approach is institutional, as it links nationalization to the value of the offices sought and how important coordination is to obtain them. The second is sociological, and relates nationalization to the survival of territorial politics; more specifically, the existence of geographically-concentrated groups increases the chances of mal-coordination. However, as neither institutions nor cleavages change very often, institutional and sociological explanations can hardly account for short-term variations in nationalization. The abrupt decline of nationalization in Ireland is, therefore, intriguing.

In this paper, we propose a third approach to the study of nationalization: aggregate economic voting, which presumes that nationalization in the short term is driven by the nation's economic performance. Economic perturbations (i.e. economic crises) increase vote transfers from large parties to small parties. As the latter are less nationalized than the former, the aggregated consequence is that economic crises weaken the nationalization of the party system. Permissive electoral systems exacerbate the influence of economic performance on nationalization, as the ability to voice discontent with the perceived economic management by big parties increases with the number of parties. In Ireland, according to Eurostat, the GDP growth rate was over 5 percent in 2007 but it fell sharply to –2.1 percent in 2008, with a further steep decline

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<sup>1</sup> In Morgenstern et al.'s terms (2009), this is the static or distributional dimension of nationalization.

to –5.5 percent in 2009. In 2010, the growth rate recovered somewhat but remained negative at –0.8 percent. <sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, support for the two biggest parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, dropped from 68.9 percent in 2007 to 53.6 percent in 2011.

This paper tests the economic voting explanation using data from 475 elections in 43 countries between 1950 and 2012, and the party-level mechanisms are shown by means of a more in-depth analysis of elections and parties in Austria, Portugal and Ireland.

The article continues as follows. In the next section, previous research is discussed and the argument that economic voting should affect the nationalization of electoral politics is presented. The third section describes the methods and the aggregate and party-level data and shows the results of the empirical analyses. The last section brings together our conclusions.

## 2. Arguments

Explanations of the degree of nationalization of electoral politics, or the extent to which parties' vote shares are similar across districts (or other subnational units), have focused on institutional and sociological variables. While the institutional characteristics of political regimes affect the expected benefits of cross-district coordination, or more specifically the available opportunities to trade votes across districts in order to maximize the chances of winning the offices sought, the preferences of the elite and mass actors who must coordinate across districts are determined by the structure of cleavages.

### 2.1. Institutional explanation

The incentives faced by politicians to coordinate their electoral actions across districts in order to win more seats and executive portfolios (i.e., the expected benefits of cross-district coordination) are affected by the electoral system, the nature of the executive, and the degree of political and economic centralization.

#### 2.1.1. Electoral system

The nationalization of parties and party systems is influenced by national election thresholds, district magnitudes, the number of districts, and personal votes. First, as Cox (1999: 157) explains, election thresholds operating at the national level or at the level of the secondary electoral district in mixed-member electoral systems are an obvious incentive to politicians to ally across district boundaries. Among mixed-member systems, it can be hypothesized that cross-district alliances will be greater in mixed-member proportional ones than in mixed-member majoritarian ones due to the presence of a seat linkage between the single-member district and PR tiers.

Second, the role of district magnitude is not clear. According to Cox (1999: 156), there is no theoretical reason to expect district magnitude to affect nationalization. On the contrary, Cox and Knoll (2003: 6) argue that the larger the district magnitude in the system, the fewer wasted votes there will be in each district and so fewer incentives for politicians to combine votes across districts. Consequently, nationalization should decrease with average district magnitude. In the same vein, Brancati (2008) argues that PR systems may increase the strength of regional parties because PR systems are more open to small parties and because regional parties tend to be small. Finally, Morgenstern et al. (2009: 1327–8)

suggest that single-member district plurality systems should decrease nationalization relative to proportional representation systems: 'Since a plurality is required to win the seat in SMD systems, parties may avoid spending the resources (good candidates, costs, and effort) to compete where they have little chance of winning. In proportional representation (PR) systems, by contrast, wasted vote-winning opportunities are costly, because it takes far fewer votes to win a legislative seat'. In our view, nationalization is clearly affected by district magnitude variation within electoral systems. When the number of seats to be filled differs greatly, election results do also and then nationalization will reduce. To the best of our knowledge, this hypothesis has not been explicitly tested.

Third, Harbers (2010) argues that nationalization does not depend on district magnitude, but on the number of districts within an electoral system. The argument is that linkage across districts becomes more challenging as the number of districts increases. The larger the number of districts, the more demanding it is for a party to maintain an organizational structure.

Fourth, it can be hypothesized that the nationalization of party systems is negatively related to the incentives to cultivate a personal vote provided by electoral systems (Carey and Shugart, 1995). The less important personal reputation is (or the more important party labels are), the greater the nationalization. This expectation is strongly supported by Golosov (2014): party-list proportional representation systems lead to higher levels of nationalization, while SNTV/STV and mixed-superposition systems reduce nationalization scores. Similarly, Simón (2013a) shows that the impact of decentralization on nationalization is conditional on the extent to which electoral laws encourage personal voting. When electoral laws are candidate-centred, party labels are not very relevant to the (re-)election of politicians; this makes candidates more likely to compete locally in a decentralized country and to weaken party system nationalization.

#### 2.1.2. The nature of the executive

In contrast with parliamentary elections, presidential elections are usually considered a key variable driving the alliance of legislative candidates across districts. The mechanism underlying this effect is that when there are presidential elections candidates for the lower house often want to link with national-party candidates (Brancati, 2008; Shugart and Carey, 1992). However, as presidential coattails affect legislative fragmentation differently depending on the number of presidential candidates (Golder, 2006), they can reduce, increase or have no effect on the nationalization of electoral politics. On the contrary, Morgenstern et al. (2009: 1327) argue that having a presidential or a parliamentary system does not matter, given that the incentives for parties to spread their support across the nation are the same in both cases. This claim is supported by a recent paper by Golosov (2014) using data from 80 countries worldwide.

#### 2.1.3. The degree of political and economic centralization

According to Chhibber and Kollman (1998, 2004), party systems are shaped by the authority granted to different levels of government or, in other words, by fiscal and political decentralization. Voters are more likely to support national political parties as the national government becomes more important in their lives. As this happens, candidates are also more likely to forsake local parties and assume the labels of national parties. The mechanism behind the impact of decentralization is controversial. Chhibber and Kollman argue that as national governments exert more political or economic control over local areas candidates have greater incentives to associate themselves with national organizations, and voters have greater incentives to abandon locally competitive but nationally

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, from 2000 to 2007 the unemployment rate in Ireland remained fairly stable at around 4.5%, and then increased to 5.7% in 2008. In 2009, it more than doubled to 12%. The rate continued to increase over the next three years to stand at 14.7% in 2012.

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