Abstract

Across Western Europe, autonomist parties have mobilised to defend the rights of distinct cultural (and often linguistic) national communities to determine their own futures. Given the important role played by autonomist parties in introducing a territorial dimension into many party systems, they have been categorised as niche parties by some scholars (Meguid, 2005, 2008). This literature has provided important insights into some of the ways in which autonomist parties impact upon established patterns of party competition. However, this paper argues that there are also several limitations to such an approach. Not only are autonomist parties more mainstream than niche actors in many places, but the current literature also ignores how autonomist parties themselves make strategic decisions about how to compete with established rivals, and how they are affected by the strategies of their state-wide competitors. This paper explores the strategic behaviour of autonomist parties in two contexts: Scotland and Wales. The aim is to understand the opportunities and challenges that autonomist parties face in trying to enhance their electoral appeal (which requires going beyond their core business to appeal to a broader electoral constituency). The argument developed is that many of the conceptual tools developed to understand established party responses to competition from niche parties, are also useful for analysing the strategic behaviour of autonomist parties in multi-dimensional, multi-level political arenas. The paper's findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of territory in party competition.
Autonomist parties as strategic actors: Evidence from Scotland and Wales

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Introduction

Across Western Europe, autonomist parties have mobilised to defend the rights of distinct cultural (and often linguistic) national communities to determine their own futures. Given the important role played by autonomist parties in introducing a territorial dimension into many party systems, they have been categorised as 'niche' parties by some scholars. This categorisation, however, is problematic in several respects. It ignores the breadth of ideological positions adopted by members of this party family, as well as capacity of many autonomist parties to behave strategically in party competitive contexts.

This paper aims to redress these shortcomings by undertaking a systematic examination of the strategic behaviour of autonomist parties. In particular, it examines the ways in which autonomist parties seek to transform themselves from being niche actors (defined by their territorial ambitions) to mainstream political parties with electoral appeal beyond their core support base. Departing from the assumption that autonomist parties are vote-maximising actors, it is argued that autonomist parties have at their disposal the same strategic tools as mainstream political parties. The next section considers how these strategic tools may be employed by autonomist parties in political spaces that are two-dimensional (territorial and left-right), and multi-level (regional and state-wide) in nature.

These propositions are then tested through the empirical analysis of the electoral strategies of two autonomist parties: the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru (the Party of Wales, PC). These case studies are chosen because, whilst both parties have a long history of mobilising in defence of specific territorial interests, a relatively recent process of devolution has provided a new opportunity structure for the SNP and PC to pursue their vote-seeking goals. The paper examines how each party has sought to compete with their mainstream rivals in both territories, and how strategies have been adapted to take account of the multi-level nature of party competition. To do so, the empirical focus is primarily on parties' regional and state-wide election campaigns, since these are effectively a "marketing" effort where the goal is to "achieve a strategic advantage by making owned issues the programmatic meaning of the election and the criteria by which voters make their choice" (Petrocik, 1996: 828). The paper draws on parties' own campaign materials, press and scholarly analysis of election campaigns, as well as semi-structured interviews undertaken with representatives of the SNP and PC between July 2012 and February 2013. The paper concludes by considering the implications of the findings for more general understandings of party competition in multi-dimensional, multi-level political contexts.

Theorising the strategic behaviour of autonomist parties

The defining characteristic of the autonomist party family is the claim that distinct national communities on the peripheries of larger states have the right to determine their own futures. Having mobilised in opposition to the "pressures of the centralizing, standardizing, and 'rationalizing' machinery of the nation-state (Lipset and Rokkan,
1967: 14), autonomist parties' demands are intrinsically territorial since they relate to the question of who has the right to exercise political authority over a clearly delineated national (peripheral) territory (Alonso, 2012: 25). The emergence and evolution of the centre-periphery conflict has varied from place to place, as has the nature of autonomist parties' territorial demands and their success in realising them (Rokkan and Unwin, 1983: 141; Elias and Tronconi, 2011a,b; De Winter, 1998). In many cases, however, autonomist parties have been highly successful in introducing a territorial dimension into established party systems. Where autonomist parties have enjoyed growing levels of electoral support, other political parties have been forced to acknowledge and respond to peripheral territorial demands, often in the form of decentralising reforms that enhance a peripheral nation's self-government. Far from undermining the autonomist cause, such reforms have often had the effect of entrenching the territorial dimension as a permanent part of the political structure and competitive dynamics of many states (Keating, 2011; Alonso, 2012: 162).

Given this success in introducing, giving new visibility to, and sustaining a territorial dimension within established party systems, autonomist parties have been categorised as niche parties (Meguid, 2005, 2008; Adams et al., 2006; Jensen and Spoon, 2010; Wagner, 2011). Meguid (2005: 347-348) conceptualises niche parties as rejecting the class-based orientation of politics, relying on 'novel' issues that do not coincide with existing lines of political division, and adopting of policies on only a limited set of issues. Moreover, they are parties that are strongly ideologically orientated and, as a consequence, are averse to strategic behaviour that might see policy goals moderated for electoral gains (Meguid, 2008: 15). For such actors, compromising on core ideological principles is considered risky for several reasons. Firstly, it can provoke the wrath of party members opposed to the watering down of fundamental ideological positions, which in turn may cause disillusionment among activists that deliver the party's core vote and voters that dislike divided parties (Adams et al., 2006). Secondly, voters often think of parties as 'owning' particular issues that are closely associated with the party's identity (Petrocik, 1996); changing a party's ideological positioning could undermine voters' perception of what the party stands for. The implication of both these observations is that niche parties - including autonomist parties - have little choice but to defend a very narrow range of issues.

More recent work has challenged the 'niche' nature of autonomist parties (Gómez-Reino, 2006; Elias, 2009; Hepburn, 2009a; Alonso, 2012). Whilst the pursuit of narrowly-defined territorial goals may have first motivated these actors to mobilise politically and electorally, participation in competitive electoral arenas has often led autonomist parties to adapt their ideological profiles in different ways. On the one hand, autonomist parties have been pragmatic and flexible in how they define their territorial goals, often shifting position in response to tactical considerations arising from party competitive pressures or broader processes of spatial restructuring (including decentralisation and European integration). On the other hand, autonomist parties are not only concerned about constitutional change and greater self-government. Territorial goals are often complimented by a broader socio-economic vision of the kind of society that is desired for the national territory. This means taking up a position on the left-right ideological dimension that has historically structured party competition in many established political systems. Such "issue diversification" (Alonso, 2012: 36-7) has been especially evident among autonomist parties seeking to make the transition from being marginal political actors, to being key players in the competition to enter public office and influence policy-making process. In other words, assuming ideological stances alongside (or sometimes instead of) demanding territorial reform is often a deliberate electoral strategy employed by autonomist parties that want to broaden their voter appeal and compete with partisan rivals that define themselves primarily in left-right terms (Elias and Tronconi, 2011c).
These observations point to the problems arising from categorising niche parties on the basis of the party family that they belong to, and assuming that a niche profile is a fixed characteristic that fundamentally differentiates these actors from mainstream parties. An alternative conceptualisation proposed by Wagner (2011) posits niche party status to be "a fluid, continuous rather than a fixed, binary characteristic". By focusing on the ideological profile of political actors, Wagner argues that political parties can move back and forth between being 'niche' and 'mainstream' actors, depending on what specific issues they chose to include and emphasise in their policy programmes. Issue manipulation is especially attractive to vote-maximising parties that perceive there to be an electoral advantage to adapting or moderating policy positions, or changing the degree of emphasis given to a specific issue (ibid.; Wagner, 2012).

As noted above, there is no shortage of evidence of autonomist parties adopting such vote-seeking strategies in the competition for votes. To date, however, the strategic behaviour of autonomist parties has received little systematic scholarly examination. Such an examination requires answering two questions about the nature of autonomist party strategising in electoral competition. Firstly, what strategic options do autonomist parties have at their disposal when they engage in electoral competition? Secondly, how do electoral strategies play out in a multi-level context? In order to answer these questions, the rest of this section serves two purposes. Firstly, it identifies the strategic options available to autonomist parties as they seek to compete with their mainstream rivals for votes in a two-dimensional ideological space. Secondly, it considers how these strategic options may be adapted as autonomist parties compete simultaneously in multiple territorial arenas.

**Autonomist party strategies in a two-dimensional space**

For analytical parsimony, this article focuses on the strategic behaviour of autonomist parties in a political space that is assumed to be two-dimensional. As noted above, territory - and the defence of the national territory's interests within a larger state's governing structures - is a fundamental part of autonomist parties' identities and political projects. Given that autonomist parties originally mobilised in defence of territorial interests, the territorial dimension is expected to be the primary dimension of competition for these actors (Alonso, 2012: 19). At the same time, however, autonomist parties also mobilise within political systems where the main axis of competition between established parties is usually the left-right one (predominantly defined in terms of positioning on economic issues - see Wagner, 2011). Competing along this secondary dimension may become unavoidable for a party at election times, particularly when the goal is to appeal to non-nationalist voters beyond a traditional support base.

Within such a two-dimensional space, what are the strategic choices available to autonomist parties? Following Alonso (2012), this article argues that in electoral competition, autonomist parties have at their disposal the same choice of strategic moves that is available to mainstream parties. These choices are derived from spatial and saliency theories of party competition. According to this literature, political parties take decisions about the position they have on a given issue and how much importance they give to it at a particular point in time (Hobolt and Green, 2008; Wagner, 2011). There is also scope for parties to give prominence to 'valence' issues.

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1 Of course, the exact nature and number of dimensions structuring party competition may vary over time and between political systems. For the purposes of parsimony, however, this article assumes party competition to take place within a two-dimensional political space, namely the territorial and left-right dimensions.
that relate to general impressions of the party’s credibility and its reputation for policy-delivery (Clarke et al., 2004, 2009). Parties will emphasise those issues - positional or valence - which have greatest voter appeal and on which they have credibility and reputational advantage over their competitors. Moreover, when there are two or more relevant dimensions of competition in a political system, parties will consider the distribution of voters’ preferences and the strategies of their rivals along the two dimensions simultaneously when deciding which move to make (Alonso, 2012: 33).

This literature leads to several expectations about the strategic behaviour of autonomist parties in electoral competition with state-wide parties. Firstly, and as noted above, territorial concerns are expected to be given greatest prominence, since this constitutes the raison d’être of this party family. However, there is scope for variability in both the exact nature of territorial demands and the relative salience of these vis-à-vis other issue dimensions (Alonso, 2012: 28). For example, in a context where there is little popular support for an autonomist party's territorial preferences, or where state-wide parties have adopted a similar stance on territorial issues, there may be incentives for the autonomist party either to shift its own position (e.g. to become more radical) or to shift emphasis onto other issue dimensions with greater voter-appeal. Secondly, and as noted above, there is an additional incentive to emphasise non-territorial issues when an autonomist party wants to broaden its electoral appeal and/or aspires to being a party of government. In such a situation, autonomist parties need to show voters that they are able to address the full range of problems facing the nation. This, in turn, is also likely to require giving prominence to other salient issue dimensions, and competing with state-wide parties to appear credible on left-right issues. In doing so, Meguid (2005: 349; 2008: 29) argues that political parties have two strategic choices. The first - an accommodative strategy - foresees adopting a similar position to one’s closest partisan rival. The aim is to challenge for issue credibility, and thus issue ownership, as a way of attracting votes away from a competitor party. The second - an adversarial party - involves adopting a contrary position to that espoused by a rival party, thus giving voters a clear choice between rival policy positions. Thirdly, autonomist parties can choose to compete on both issue dimensions (territorial and left-right) simultaneously. Doing so would allow autonomist parties to present a 'nation-building' argument that links the case for territorial reform with an alternative socio-economic vision for the self-governing nation.

The choices autonomist parties make about the positions they take on different issues, and which issues to priorities in electoral competition, will depend on the distribution of voter preferences and the structure of party competition in each particular context (Alonso, 2012: 29). However, none of these strategies are risk-free. As suggested above, any changes in the nature or prominence of an autonomist party's core territorial demands may give rise to damaging internal tensions and/or undermine the party's external image. Strategic issue diversification away from the territorial dimension also has to be credible if it is to be successful, and this means challenging mainstream left- or right-wing state-wide parties for ownership of issues on which they have a much longer track-record. Doing so is likely to be much easier for autonomist parties who have an ideological legacy on such issues, which can be drawn upon to legitimise socio-economic claims.

**Autonomist party strategies in multi-level contexts**

These strategic moves will arguably need to be adapted further in cases where autonomist parties compete at multiple territorial levels simultaneously. Decentralising reforms have created new regional opportunity structures which have allowed many autonomist parties to make significant electoral breakthroughs, secure
policy influence and enter government (Elias and Tronconi, 2011a,c). At the same time, however, there are strong incentives for autonomist parties to continue to seek representation and influence at the state level. On the one hand, it is here that any future decisions about the territorial organisation of political authority will be made. On the other, the complex inter-relatedness of many policy areas means that there may well be policy areas still under the control of central government that nevertheless have an impact on decision-making at the regional level. Autonomist parties have also recognised the symbolic importance of representation at the European level (Elias, 2008; Hepburn, 2010), although this supranational dimension is not considered further here.

The challenge, therefore, is to understand autonomist parties' strategic behaviour in multi-dimensional, multi-layered political contexts. One possibility is that autonomist party strategies (that is, issue positioning and salience) respect the constitutional division of labour within a multi-level political system. This expectation is informed by the scholarly work on multi-level voting which has demonstrated that voters distinguish between different types of elections, and cast their vote on the basis of territorially relevant (that is, regional vs. state-wide) considerations (Jeffery and Hough, 2003; Wyn Jones and Scully, 2006). Based on this logic, autonomist parties would be expected to focus on state-level issues (and especially constitutional reform) in state-wide elections, whilst giving priority to decentralised issues in regional elections. In addition, the literature on multi-level voting has also demonstrated that autonomist parties often have an electoral advantage in regional elections since voters are more willing to support them based on their credibility as defenders of regional interests. There is thus arguably more scope for autonomist parties to diversify their policy programme beyond the territorial dimension at the regional level, because of the potential availability of a broader electorate and the better prospects of securing government office and/or policy influence in the regional political arena. These different opportunity structures at different territorial levels create the possibility that autonomist parties may simultaneously be niche actors at one territorial level, whilst being more mainstream actors at another.

**Autonomist party strategies in Scotland and Wales: An Empirical Analysis**

The main focus of this paper is on the strategic choices of the SNP and PC in post-devolution Scotland and Wales respectively. However, as noted above, these parties have a much longer record of political mobilisation. The analysis thus begins by providing a brief overview of the evolution of Scottish and Welsh nationalism within the context of a unitary British state. This serves to provide an overview of the strategic behaviour of the SNP and PC as they sought to mobilise electoral support for, and political commitment to, territorial reform.

**Autonomist party strategies within a unitary British State**

The SNP was established in 1934 with the explicit aim of establishing a Scottish Parliament. How this would be achieved, however, was left vague; in its early years, the party's constitutional ambitions lay 'somewhere between devolution and independence within the Empire' (Lynch, 2002: 10). In subsequent decades, the SNP would develop a much stronger commitment to separating Scotland from the UK and establishing it as an independent sovereign state with full powers over its affairs, although there remained scope for flexibility in articulating this ambition (Hepburn, 2009b: 192). Early socio-economic policies were social-democratic in nature, although it would take until 1974 for the party to formally declare itself as such (Mitchell, 1996: 192, 207; Lynch, 2011). The party's programme made little electoral impact, however; by the 1959 general election the party still could not muster more than 0.5% of the Scottish vote.
In contrast, the 1960s and 1970s were decades of broad electoral advancement for the SNP. A key event was the election of Winnie Ewing as the party's first parliamentary representative in the 1967 Hamilton by-election. Disillusionment with the Labour government at the state-level contributed in no small part to the surge in SNP support in this and earlier by-elections, alongside more effective local campaigning and a more professional organisational structure (Mitchell, 1996; Lynch, 2011). The results had the effect of forcing state-wide competitors to offer concessions to the SNP's territorial agenda. Whilst Labour established a Royal Commission to examine the constitutional structure of the United Kingdom, the Conservatives responded by supporting the creation of a Scottish Assembly (Mitchell, 1990). Further pressure was placed on the former with the SNP's spectacular performance in the October 1974 general election, when it secured 30.4% of the vote and 11 parliamentary seats. Struggling to govern with a very small majority, Labour proceeded to publish plans for devolution to Scotland and Wales in exchange for parliamentary support from the Scottish and Welsh nationalists. This blackmail potential led to devolution referenda being held in both territories on 1 March 1979.

The referendum failed to deliver devolution to Scotland. This defeat was followed a few months later by a general election in which the SNP's support plummeted (from 30.4% in October 1974 to 15.3%). Some of the blame for this placed on the party's support for devolution, rather than independence as had always been its formal goal (Lynch, 2002: 156). The election of a Thatcher-led Conservative government ideologically opposed to devolution had the effect of removing the issue of constitutional reform completely from the British political agenda. In such a context of marginalisation, the SNP struggled to define itself ideologically and strategically. Eventually, the party re-positioned itself as a moderate centre-left party in pursuit of 'independence in Europe' as its long-term constitutional ambition. The assertion of a social-democratic identity was a result of competition for the left-of-centre vote with the Labour Party during the 1970s; this profile was consolidated and strengthened during the 1980s as a way of establish clear ideological distance from Thatcher's free-market Conservatism (Maxwell, 2009). Hand-in-hand with revisions in the party's policies on European integration and NATO, the SNP emerged as a more relevant and credible political party, reflected in its improving electoral fortunes throughout the 1980s and 1990s. This renewed appeal was also due to popular dissatisfaction with Conservative government policies in Westminster that paid scant regard to Scotland and Scottish interests.

However, the geographical distribution of the party's support made it difficult to translate votes into seats under the first-past-the-post system used for British general elections. Nevertheless, the renewed electoral threat posed by Scottish nationalism once again served to influence the territorial agenda of its main state-wide rival, the Labour party. Labour's renewed commitment to devolution for the UK's constituent nations can be understood as an accommodative strategy designed to challenge the SNP's ownership of the Scottish autonomy issue (Mitchell, 1998).

In Wales, PC was established in 1925 out of concern for the fate of the Welsh language and the communities within which it was predominantly spoken. The party's original goal was to build 'Welsh Wales', although alternative constitutional ambitions were articulated over subsequent decades (Davies, 1983: 151-168). To its

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2 Although there was majority support for the proposals on offer, the turnout was less than the 40% required for the referendum result to be legally binding.

3 PC aimed to secure 'dominion status' for Wales within the British Commonwealth during the 1930s; by the 1950s this had evolved into a demand for autonomy within a Britannic confederation.
linguistic and constitutional ambitions was added an economic policy that posited small-scale capitalism and co-operatives as the key to Welsh prosperity (Wyn Jones, 2007). However, the party's programme had little appeal to Welsh voters; in the 1945 general election it attracted a mere 1.2% of the vote in Wales. Gwynfor Evans's leadership from 1945 onwards was marked with considerable ideological continuity, although this had little positive effect on the party's electoral fortunes.

PC's electoral breakthrough came in a by-election in 1966; having come third in Carmarthen-West in the general election some weeks previously, Evans won the seat from the Labour party to become PC's first representative within the House of Commons. The victory was followed by two other strong by-election performances (although no seats), a performance attributable in no small part to disillusionment with the Labour government in its mining heartlands in South Wales. The electoral challenge PC posed to Labour led the latter to adopt a dismissive strategy within the House of Commons, "with all things Welsh...being interpreted as a concession to nationalism" (Evans, 2005: 296). The resultant difficulty in putting nationalist issues onto the political agenda contributed to Evans' failure to retain his seat in the 1970 general election. However, further seats were won and retained from 1974 onwards. This enabled PC, along with the SNP, to push for devolution at the state-level in the way outlined above.

Just as in Scotland, however, the referendum did not deliver devolution to Wales (79.7% of those votes rejected the proposals). The result, and substantial electoral decline in the 1979 general election, plunged PC into a period of turmoil. The party's response by the end of the 1980s was to re-position itself ideologically on both the constitutional and left-right dimensions. 'Full national status in Europe' was adopted as PC's long-term goal for Wales, whilst a long-held rejection of conventional left-right ideologies was replaced by a commitment to democratic socialism (Elias, 2009; Wyn Jones, 2007). Just as in Scotland, this latter ideological positioning was motivated by two strategic considerations: a desire to contest the centre-left vote with its main rival in Wales, the Labour Party, and to present a clear contrast with right-wing Thatcherism. Armed with a new progressive policy agenda, PC gradually acquired greater political credibility and electoral appeal. Similarly to the SNP, PC also benefitted from disillusionment with a Conservative government perceived to have little interest in, or concern for, the distinctive policy needs of Wales. By the 1997 general election, PC claimed 9.7% of the Welsh vote (although as in Scotland the electoral system constrained the translation of votes into seats).

Autonomist party strategies in post-devolution Scotland and Wales

One expectation arising from the literature on party competition (as referred to above) is that political parties are keenly aware of voter preferences and priorities when deciding on which issues to campaign on in an election. In Scotland and Wales, the preferred constitutional set-up of the SNP and PC - independence - has relatively little support among the electorate (see Figure 1). And yet, constitutional reform is central to these parties' identities. The strategic behaviour of the SNP and PC post-devolution has thus focused on pursuing independence whilst at the same time cultivating broader electoral appeal on the basis of policy programmes aimed at addressing key socio-economic challenges in Scotland and Wales respectively. Doing this, however, has not always been straight-forward; party positioning and self-presentation on the territorial and left-right dimensions has varied over time and across territorial levels. Having outlined the main electoral strategies employed in both cases, this section concludes by considering the extent to which they have been successful in enabling SNP and PC to become mainstream actors in their respective political arenas.
i. Autonomist parties' territorial strategies in a multi-level context

Given the lack of popular support for their constitutional goals, and the shared desire to broaden their electoral appeal beyond a core nationalist electorate, it is not surprising that the SNP and PC have sought to vary the salience of the territorial dimension in their electoral programmes. For example, a contrasting approach was taken by both parties SNP and PC to the first regional and general elections of the post-devolution period, held in 1999 and 2001 respectively. The former were striking for the low salience given to core constitutional demands, with both parties preferring to focus on policy programmes for the newly established devolved institutions (see below). For example, in the 1999 Scottish parliament election campaign, 'independence for Scotland' featured last on the SNP's 10-point policy pledge (Lynch, 2002: ). In contrast, ahead of the 2001 campaign the SNP's Alex Salmond declared that "Our general election campaign will be a clear clarion call for independence. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that the SNP will evangelise the independence issue" (Alex Salmond, quoted in Torrance, 2011: 276). The party's election manifesto which began with the declaration that "We stand for independence" (SNP, 2001: 2) also outlined key SNP policies for a future independent Scotland. In PC's case, whilst the party's general election manifesto eschewed the terminology of "full national status in Europe", it did argue the case for further legislative powers for the NAW (Plaid Cymru, 2001) and this was a consistent (albeit secondary - see below) theme of the party's campaign (Wyn Jones and Trystan, 2002: ).

Upon first consideration, these variable electoral strategies would seem to lend support to the hypothesis that autonomist parties tailor their electoral programmes to the decision-making scope of political institutions at different territorial levels. However, such a conclusion would be incorrect for three reasons. Firstly, downplaying the territorial dimension in 1999 was a strategic response to the specific political conditions in which the elections were held. More specifically, the fact of having just held a referendum on devolution meant that constitutional issues were not perceived to be a priority for voters more interested in issues such as education and health. As one SNP interviewee noted, "there was perhaps understandably a sense that we've only got this devolved parliament, is this really the time to push for independence?". Especially in Wales, the narrowness of the referendum result saw PC feel a responsibility to ensure that the new Assembly was made to work (PC interview). In subsequent devolved elections, core constitutional goals have been given more prominence, albeit packaged as part of a gradualist territorial strategy that places emphasis on incremental constitutional change subject to sufficient levels of popular support (see below).

Secondly, bold statements about the primacy of constitutional goals in the 2001 election gave way to more sophisticated strategic positioning during the campaign itself. In the SNP's case, there was evidence of a new approach to trying to secure constitutional reform within a multi-level, multi-dimensional political setting. The SNP attempted to re-frame the independence issue in order to present a more pragmatic and credible roadmap for achieving constitutional change. Two features of this strategy were in evidence in the 2001 campaign: a change of policy to support holding a referendum on independence (rather that independence being triggered automatically in the event that the SNP elected a majority of Scottish MPs) (Torrance, 2011: 276); and talking up fiscal autonomy for Scotland (whereby the Scottish Parliament would have the responsibility for raising taxes to pay for devolved policy expenditure). Both of these moves constituted an attempt to dampen fears about the SNP's long-term ambitions for Scotland (SNP interview). The first tried to remove the independence issue from electoral contestation; holding a separate independence referendum aimed to quell voter fears about the
constitutional consequences of voting for the SNP. The second move sought to develop a more positive and gradualist road-map towards Scottish independence (SNP interview). Making the case for fiscal autonomy, and outlining how the SNP in government within the Scottish Parliament would spend any tax revenues raised, was a step in the process of "creating the winning conditions" for a future referendum on Scottish independence (Trench, 2011). It was a strategy that would define the SNP's approach to subsequent regional and state-wide elections, and one which tried to establish a linkage between the SNP's policy proposals for the current Scottish Parliament and its longer-term constitutional ambitions. The SNP's aim was thus two-fold: to "make as much of a difference as we can with the current powers of the Scottish Parliament, and to show why we need the powers of Independence" (SNP, 2003: 2).

Thirdly, both the SNP and PC also campaigned in the 2001 election - and in subsequent general elections - on issues outside the territorial dimension. They have positioned themselves on, and given salience to, non-territorial issues remaining under the control of central government when there has been an electoral incentive to do so. Thus, for example, in the 2010 general election the SNP launched a staunch defence of Scottish army regiments threatened by Labour government cuts to the defence budget; PC, meanwhile, pledged to fight to raise pensions in an appeal to the so-called "grey vote" in Wales (Western Mail, 22 April 2010). But discussions of devolved policy areas have featured equally prominently in both parties' electioneering. This disrespect of constitutional divisions of labour has been justified by the inter-relatedness of policy-making in a multi-level state. For example, John Swinney, the SNP's new leader, argued in 2001 that "health is fundamental to this election because the resources that are available for the health service will come from the Westminster parliament" (BBC, 8 May 2001). A similar inter-relationship was flagged up by the SNP and PC in the 2010 general election, in an attempt to highlight the implications of the economic crisis for the financing of Scottish and Welsh devolution (Mitchell and Van der Zwet, 2010; Bradbury, 2010).

Autonomist party strategies on the territorial dimension as described thus far have focused on the concrete constitutional demands made by the SNP and PC. However, the post-devolution period has also seen persistent attempts to present the territorial dimension as a valence issue (Johns et al., 2009), where what is contested is the ability to defend Scottish or Welsh interests (rather that specific constitutional arrangements per se). In this respect, SNP and PC have sought to present themselves as the only parties able to stand up for their nation's interests, not least because they are the only actors that have mobilised and organised exclusively within the national territory. The arguments articulated in the 1999 devolved elections are typical of the narrative articulated repeatedly by the nationalists: whilst the SNP warned voters that they faced a choice between "a Scottish party which decides its policies in Scotland and a London party which has its strings pulled by Blairite control freaks" (The Herald, 7 April 1999), PC's re-branding as 'the Party of Wales' was contrasted to Labour as 'the party of London' (McAllister, 2000: 110-1). This rhetoric has become especially pronounced in the context of general election contests, where the SNP and PC have struggled to uphold the levels of support attracted in devolved elections due to the dynamic of multi-level voting, as described above. In this context, the challenge is to convince voters of their relevance at the state level (Curtice, 2002: 76; McEwen, 2005); in the words of one PC interviewee, "we have to work extra hard to persuade our people to come out for a Westminster election". The strategic response has been to try to persuade voters of the need for a strong Scottish/Welsh voice at the state level. For example, the SNP sought to make the 2005 general election campaign in Scotland exclusively about which party could be trusted to deliver for Scotland: "Operation Make Scotland Matter [in reference to the
SNP's campaign slogan] is about trusting the SNP to win for Scotland - because when the SNP wins, Scotland wins" (Alex Slamond, quoted in The Sunday Herald, 1 May 2005). A similar desire informed the stated intention of the SNP and PC to act as 'Celtic champions' in the event of a hung parliament after the 2010 general election (Bradbury, 2010).

ii. Autonomist parties' left-right strategies in a multi-level context

At the same time as pursuing these territorial strategies, however, SNP and PC have also continued to cultivate electoral support on the basis of a broader political agenda that gives priority to socio-economic alongside territorial reform. Efforts in this respect have focused predominantly on the devolved political arena, where the vote-seeking aspirations of these parties are most likely to be met, and consequently where the opportunities of influencing policy and entering government are greatest (SNP and PC interviews). As noted above, securing electoral appeal beyond their territorial niche informed early efforts to downplay core constitutional goals in devolved elections. More recently (and for reasons discussed below), party narratives have sought to link immediate devolved policy challenges with long-term territorial reform.

In attempting to develop comprehensive and credible devolved policy platforms, the SNP and PC have sought to position themselves ideologically on the left-right dimension and have employed valence arguments aimed at cultivating an image of moderation and responsibility. In both respects, SNP and PC have engaged in strategic moves that challenge state-wide parties for ownership of the left-right policy space, and of the reputation as a trustworthy party of government. Given the left-of-centre ideological tradition within both parties, it is unsurprising that they have sought to situate themselves on the left in the devolved policy space, and that their main partisan rival was the dominant Labour party in both places. Challenges to Labour's ownership of the left-of-centre political space have primarily taken the form of claims that the party had abandoned core left-wing principles. For example, in the 1999 devolved election in Scotland, the SNP contrasted its own proposals for increasing tax revenue as a means of investing in public services to a "London Labour" government committed to cutting public investment (Jones, 1999: 4; Cuthbert and Cuthbert, 2009: 109). In Wales, PC sought to present itself in very similar terms, with New Labour's "Blairite agenda" denounced for its centralism and its abandonment of left-wing principles (Plaid Cymru, 1999: 1). As these examples demonstrate, attacks on Labour's ideological credibility have combined easily with attacks on its territorial valence credentials (as outlined above). Neither has such strategic positioning been confined to the devolved arena. Bradbury (2006: 120), for example, notes that a distinctive feature of PC's 2005 general election campaign was its explicit targeting of the left-wing vote in Wales, a move clearly intended to appeal to non-nationalist voters disillusioned by Labour's record in Welsh and UK government.

This observation points again points to the multi-level nature of autonomist parties' strategising, this time with regard to gaining competitive advantage on the secondary (i.e. left right) dimension of competition. The fact that, as noted above, devolved issues have featured consistently in the SNP and PC's general election campaigns is further evidence of this dynamic. There are two incentives to ignore constitutional boundaries in this way. Firstly, the parties have sought to benefit electorally from the fact that devolved issues are regularly among the most important issues for voters in general elections (SNP interview). In the 2001 and 2005 elections, for example, health and education were identified as priorities (Curtice, 2002: 71; Brown, 2001: 138); talking up the nationalists' positions and reputations in these areas was clearly designed to tap into popular concerns about these policy areas. Secondly, talking about devolved politics gives the SNP and PC an opportunity to critique the devolved
records of other parties in Scotland/Wales - not least the governing record of Labour in Scotland (until 2007) and Wales - and outline alternative nationalist programmes of government. For example, the 2001 general election served as a platform for positioning the parties ahead of the 2003 devolved elections, in a bid to be best placed to profit from any voter dissatisfaction with Labour (as the main partisan rival in both places) (Curtice, 2002: 65; Wyn Jones and Trystan, 200?): A similar dynamic has been in evidence in subsequent general election campaigns. Laying claim to a distinctive left-right policy space in Scotland and Wales, and challenging established parties for issue ownership and governing credibility, is thus a strategy pursued at multiple territorial levels simultaneously.

iii. Autonomist party strategies and the challenges of shifting from niche to mainstream

Thus far, the paper has considered the strategic behaviour of autonomist parties in isolation. But to what extent have these strategic moves in a multi-dimensional and multi-level political system been successful in meeting the vote-maximisation aspirations of the SNP and PC? Answering this question requires considering autonomist parties' strategic behaviour in the competitive context in which it occurs, where voter preferences and the behaviour of rival parties combine to determine the ability of autonomist parties to meet their electoral aspirations. The aim here is not to provide a full account of these parties' electoral performances in the post-devolution period. Rather, it is to gain a better understanding of the challenges facing autonomist parties as they seek to become mainstream parties in complex multi-dimensional, multi-layered political systems.

One of the key features of the electoral strategies described above is autonomist parties' efforts to articulate long-term constitutional goals in a context where there is no overwhelming public support for such radical territorial reform. Efforts to play down constitutional goals and focus on devolved policy agendas in the early post-devolution period were frustrated in three ways. Firstly, both the SNP and PC experienced considerable internal opposition to their leaderships' perceived watering down of key party goals. In the run-up to, and after, the 2003 Scottish election, there had been sustained criticism of the apparent watering down of the party's commitment to independence. In the 2003 Scottish election, the SNP's electoral decline can be attributed in large part to this discontent (SNP interviews). Some of these disillusioned voters found a home with other pro-independence parties (such as the Scottish Socialist Party) on the SNP's left flank (Massetti 2009: 94); others who had supported the SNP in 1999 simply did not turn out to vote for the party (SNP interview). During the same period, Plaid Cymru had similar problems in retaining the support of its core electorate, and this also contributed to the party failing in 2003 to maintain the level of electoral support secured in the 1999 Welsh election (PC interview). Secondly, playing down independence also proved an easy target for the attacks of rival parties. The SNP and PC may have sought to downplay the territorial dimension, but rival parties' adversarial strategies ensured that this remained a key election issue. In 1999, for example, relentless attacks on the SNP's goal of independence - such as Labour's rhetoric that "divorce is expensive" - focused on the disruption and extortionate costs that such a move would entail (Jones, 2000). Whilst similar efforts were made in Wales to discredit PC's territorial ambitions, in Scotland they were reinforced by "a very aggressive media onslaught [on the SNP]. . .It was very much an election where we were being attacked all the time" (SNP interviewee). This contributed to generating a climate of distrust among voters about the true intentions of hypothetical SNP government. Thirdly, state-wide parties also challenged the credibility of the SNP and PC as potential parties of government. This was done most virulently - and with most success - in Scotland. Also in 1999, the
SNP's failure to explain how it would spend money raised through reinstating the UK Government's proposed 1p cut in income tax, and leader Alex Salmond's remarks about the questionable legitimacy of the on-going Kosovo War, were seized upon by rivals as evidence of the SNP's lack of fitness to govern (Jones, 2000; Paterson et al., 2000). Taken together, these adversarial strategies by the SNP's electoral competitors served to undermine its self-portrayal as a moderate and responsible party fit to govern in Scotland.

SNP and PC efforts at re-packaging the territorial dimension, and developing a clearer linkage between constitutional goals and regional governance, can be understood as a strategic response to these difficulties. Whilst the re-assertion of the rhetoric of independence (as noted above) aimed at keeping core supporters happy, couching long-term constitutional goals in a more gradualist narrative focused on nation-building from a governing position simultaneously aimed to appeal to voters not motivated solely by constitutional issues. This alternative approach has been most successful in Scotland. The SNP performed strongly in, and was able to enter regional government after, the 2007 Scottish election because it convinced voters that it could be trusted to look after Scotland's interests, and that it was a credible and competent party of government (Johns et al., 2010). In this respect, the party clearly benefitted from the perception that the incumbent Labour government had run out of steam, and that no other party could offer a serious policy programme as the basis for governing Scotland. This Scottish dimension thus remains crucial: whilst state-wide parties in Scotland continue to struggle to define and articulate a distinctly Scottish political project, the SNP (at least in devolved elections) has benefited from being perceived as the party best placed to put Scotland first (Johns et al., 2009). In such a context, state-wide party attacks on the SNP's constitutional policy have lost their potency. As noted by one SNP interviewee in relation to the 2011 Scottish election campaign when the SNP secured a majority in the Scottish Parliament, "we were very fortunate the opposition fought a referendum campaign". Ironically, the SNP's focus on a policy agenda for the Scottish Parliament resonated with voters more concerned with economic recovery than Scottish independence.

In Wales, PC's effort to challenge Labour as the dominant party of Welsh politics has been less successful. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, PC's claim to be the only real 'party of Wales' has been strongly contested by rival state-wide parties. PC's electoral breakthrough in the 1999 Welsh election was attributable in no small part to its Welsh credentials, an image enhanced by the perception that Labour's leadership in Wales had been imposed by the party's London-based hierarchy (Trystan et al., 2003). In subsequent years, however, Labour - as well as other state-wide parties - have sought to re-brand themselves and their policy agendas in order to strengthen their own claims to stand up for Wales. One element of this has been to advocate distinctive policies for Wales compared to England. From its position in government in Wales since 1999, Labour in particular has not shied away from adopting divergent (and more left-wing) policy approaches to those pursued by New Labour in central government. Doing so has given added credibility to the party's Welsh credentials, and has enabled it to fend off PC's encroaches upon left-of-centre policy space in Wales. The effectiveness of Labour's strategy was particularly clear to see during the 2010 and 2011 general and Welsh elections respectively. In contrast to previous electoral contests in post-devolution Wales, both elections were dominated by the economic downturn and the implications for public expenditure. Whilst PC sought to score electoral points through attacking Labour's

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4 A divisive contest to elect the leadership of Welsh Labour had seen London-backed Alun Michael triumphing over the rival candidate Rhodri Morgan (Mungham, 2000). Media coverage of the Welsh election campaign was dominated by this contest, and gave added resonance to PC's claim to be the only party able to stand up for Welsh interests.
record of delivery on health and education in Wales, Labour's claim to "stand-up for Wales" in difficult economic times had far greater resonance with Welsh voters. The fact that voters also remained more trusting of Labour than PC as a party of government also contributed to the latter's electoral decline in the 2011 Welsh election.

Conclusion

Much of the scholarly work on autonomist parties has been dedicated to understanding the key features of this party family: its origins, evolution, ideological profile and organisational features. On the basis of their rootedness in the centre-periphery cleavage and the consequent specificity of their territorial demands, autonomist parties have been categorised as a 'niche' phenomenon, quite distinct from other types of mainstream parties. Thinking of autonomist parties in this way was consistent with a more general scholarly understanding of the role of territory in contemporary politics, as somehow being "special or different, a form of zero-sum politics unamenable to the normal process of political exchange" (Keating, 2011).

This work contributes to a growing literature that, in contrast, asserts the 'normality' of territorial politics, and autonomist parties as the political agents fundamentally rooted in the territorial cleavage. Specifically, this paper has argued that autonomist parties, conceived as vote-seeking parties, can i. act deliberately to appeal to voters beyond their territorial niche, and ii. have the same strategic tools as mainstream parties at their disposal in order to do so. This is a clear departure from the work of scholars like Meguid (2005, 2008) that assume the ideological inflexibility and strategic incapacity of autonomist parties as niche actors. The empirical evidence presented here demonstrates how the SNP and PC have sought to manipulate issue position and salience, and utilised valence arguments, in an attempt to become mainstream political players in their respective political systems. With regard to the territorial dimension, early efforts at downplaying long-term constitutional demands have given way to a re-packaging the issue of independence; a pragmatic and responsible approach has been articulated that links responsible governance to making the case for the need for radical constitutional change. On the left-right dimension, the SNP and PC have similarly employed accommodative tactics to challenge for ownership of a distinctive Scottish/Welsh policy space, whilst valence arguments have aimed at establishing reputations as trustworthy parties of government. The findings also suggest that there is a clear multi-level dimension to autonomist parties' strategic behaviour, whereby different institutional and political context affects the strategies and opportunities available to each party. On the one hand, there is evidence that vote-seeking ambitions drive autonomist parties to campaign on issues that have the most electoral appeal, regardless of whether they relate to devolved or centralised spheres of competence. On the other hand, however, patterns of multi-level voting and party competitive dynamics at the state level have also forced autonomist parties to adapt their strategies. The difficulties the SNP and PC face in appealing to voters in general elections has informed strategic responses that emphasise the relevance of these actors in the state-wide context.

This paper also reveals, however, the specific challenges faced by autonomist parties as they seek to become mainstream actors. The shift of focus away from the niche business of territorial reform on the one hand, and the challenge these parties pose to established dynamics of party competition on the other, have in different ways posed difficulties for the SNP and PC in meeting their vote-seeking goals. This suggests that whilst autonomist parties behave strategically in comparable ways to mainstream parties, the fact that they start from a different point - that is, from being niche parties - gives rise to challenges that are specific to these party types. In this
respect, this paper adds to other scholarly work that has recently began to examine the shift from niche to mainstream more systematically.

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