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Irina Stefuriuc

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# GOVERNMENT FORMATION IN MULTI-LEVEL SETTINGS

## Spanish Regional Coalitions and the Quest for Vertical Congruence

*Irina Ștefuriuc*

### ABSTRACT

It is generally assumed that in multi-level political systems political actors desire to form regional coalitions that match the party composition of the coalition governing at the central level, and that where this matching attempt does not occur it is because a possible new coalition formula for the central level is being tested at the regional one. This article shows that the congruence of party composition of government coalitions across levels is in itself neither desirable nor undesirable for regional political actors. Its strategic potential is mediated by three other factors: the institutional setting regulating the intensity of cross-level intergovernmental cooperation in policy-making, the type of party in question and its respective relative bargaining weight at both levels of government. Empirical evidence from four Spanish regional government-formation cases supports this argument.

KEY WORDS ■ coalition formation ■ elite respondents ■ regional politics ■ Spain

### Introduction

Coalition formation is one of the main challenges that political parties face in decentralized political systems. Still, it has received surprisingly little attention from scholars of party politics in multi-level settings. In unitary systems, coalition formation can be a complex game, yet the determinants of coalition formation at the national level belong mostly to the same level of party action. National-level governments generally respond to national-level stimuli, such as parliamentary and party system characteristics, party organizational features and, more generally, the structure of national electoral competition.

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On the contrary, decentralized systems come by default with a need to coordinate party action across levels of governance (Hopkin, 2003; Thorlakson, 2006). In such settings, political parties operate simultaneously in different party systems, hold different weights therein and need to strike deals with possibly different partners at different levels. All this adds to the complexity of the coalition game. While most of the existing literature gives a good account of sub-national coalitions *per se* (Mershon and Hamann, 2007; Reniu, 2005; Sturm, 1993), there is very little research that focuses explicitly on the national–sub-national linkages.<sup>1</sup>

This article looks at one aspect of coalition formation – the vertical congruence of government composition across levels – and analyses its strategic importance for political parties. It starts by providing a theoretical framework for analysis, then moves to process-trace four recent cases of regional government formation in Spain, exploring via interview material how party leaders evaluate congruence and its implications. These cases bring evidence that congruence is not something regional party leaders would automatically seek, but rather a variable whose strategic potential is activated by three other factors: the institutional setting, the type of party organization and the distribution of each party's bargaining weight at both the national and the sub-national level.

### What is Coalition Congruence and Why Does It Matter?

Congruence is a characteristic of a government coalition in relation to another coalition. It is the situation in which the party composition of a sub-national government coincides with that of the national government.<sup>2</sup>

Coalition congruence is an important aspect of coalition politics in multi-level systems. Intergovernmental relations between the centre and the territorial units are at the same time relations *between political parties* (when the government composition is different across levels) or *within political parties* (when it matches). As the regions and the central government share competencies in many policy areas, intergovernmental relations and decision-making are thus likely to be affected by congruence or the lack of it. The larger and the more substantive this shared-competence zone is, the more congruence matters.

The general assumption proposed in the literature is that party leaders will, insofar as electoral arithmetic makes it possible, attempt to enter into congruent coalition formulae across levels (Roberts, 1989). This assumption is plausible for three reasons. First, incongruence has generally been associated with stalemate in those policy areas which necessitate joint decision-making between the centre and the regions (Hough and Jeffery, 2006). Second, where incongruent majorities occur, intergovernmental relations are more vulnerable to the logic of inter-party conflict (Bolleyer, 2006). Third, incongruence is also naturally assumed to generate tension in the party

organization – governing at one level with a party who is your opponent at another level is an idea that cannot be easily sold, either to party militants or voters.

Moreover, congruence widens the spectrum of issues that can be negotiated. What one party renounces at one level might be compensated by a payoff at the other level. It is often the case that coalition agreements at the regional level include national-level arrangements. Such package deals typically involve commitments in what regards legislative voting behaviour across levels (Sturm, 2001), or are extending commitments to coalesce with the same partners at both levels.

At the same time, however, although strongly interlinked, both the national and the sub-national level of government are characterized by certain dynamics of their own. Sometimes incongruence is simply unavoidable, or the costs of congruence too high to be worth paying. As Hopkin put it:

[E]stablishing consistent rules for coalition formation within the national-level party may be difficult if some regional elites are expected to forego opportunities to govern at regional level for the sake of a party line they may not fully support. (Hopkin, 2003: 234–5)

Other principles, such as the electoral representativeness of the government, policy proximity on important local issues or sheer office-seeking might take precedence over congruence.

Classical coalition theory offers a wide range of expectations about coalition formation regarding coalition size (minimal and minimum winning theory), partisan composition (median legislature and core party hypotheses, incumbent coalition hypotheses) and the link between size and composition (minimum connected winning and minimal range hypotheses).<sup>3</sup> Existing research of sub-national coalitions has already tested some of the classical predictions about coalition formation, obtaining mixed results.<sup>4</sup> However, most contributions point to the crucial importance of vertical congruence for explaining coalition formation in multi-level settings (Downs, 1998; Pappi et al., 2005; Roberts, 1989). This analysis focuses on this latter aspect only, while acknowledging the fact that future research will need to test systematically the explanatory power of this variable in comparison or in addition to existing theories of coalition formation. This article looks at congruence from the perspective of political parties. Congruence is a characteristic of the party composition of governments *compared* across levels, but it is also a feature that the parties involved in coalition formation consciously assume. If we take the central government as the reference point, we can analyse the governing strategies of regional party organizations. It is argued here that for regional party organizations the strategic potential of congruence is activated by three factors – by the institutional setting (type of decentralization), by the type of party in question (state-wide or non-state-wide) and by its respective bargaining weights at both levels of government.

## Full Congruence, Full Incongruence and Halfway between the Two

We defined congruence as the coincidence of the party composition of governments across levels. This coincidence may take three forms: full congruence – the same parties are participating in both the regional and the central government; full incongruence – there is no overlap; and partial (in)congruence – some, but not all, of the governing parties at one level are also governing at the other level.

Full congruence and full incongruence have fairly straightforward consequences for political parties and intergovernmental relations. As the same party or set of parties is governing at both levels, full congruence also means that the relations between the two governments are also relations within the political parties forming them – that is, relations between the central and the regional party organization. Unless these are characterized by serious conflict, which would make regional politicians prefer to negotiate with national leaders of other parties rather than with their own national leaders, full congruence can be assumed to be preferable to both partial congruence and full incongruence.

Full incongruence means that there is no overlap at all – the set of parties governing at the regional level is either in opposition or has no parliamentary presence at the centre. Intergovernmental relations thus become relations between parties, and the degree of conflict that characterizes them is filtered by the degree of conflict between the parties involved. If a region is governed by parties not present at the national level, we can expect intergovernmental relations to be rather smooth, as they are not relations between competitors in the electoral arena. On the contrary, if the two sets of governing parties are also playing the roles of government and opposition at the centre, one can expect this to generate more partisan conflict in intergovernmental relations.

Partial (in)congruence is the most complex situation. Some parties are present in both governments, and some only in one of them. The parties that are present in both governments are in a peculiar situation, as they are either governing at one level with what constitutes the opposition at the other level – which puts them in a delicate situation of sharing a bed with the enemy – or governing at one level with parties that are not present at the other level, which should normally be less problematic.

In classifying governments one should be aware of those situations in which, while apparently governing in incongruent formulae, parties are engaged in a stable pattern of vote-exchange across levels. Single-party minority governments rely on the support of other parties in the legislature, and stable agreements between government and parliamentary supporting parties amount to camouflaged or informal governing coalitions (Strøm, 1990). Thus, if two parties exchange the roles of governing and supporting parties across levels, it would be misleading to claim that the government formulae they are involved in are incongruent.

An example will clarify this argument. In 1993, the Spanish Socialist Party/*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) lost its majority in the Spanish parliament. Its government was supported by the Catalan Nationalists – *Convergència i Unió* (CiU). Two years later, it was the Catalan Socialists' (PSC's) turn to facilitate the investiture of a minority CiU government in Catalonia. This cross-level exchange continued in 1996, when the CiU lent their support to the minority government of the Popular Party/*Partido Popular* (PP) at the state level, through 1999, when a second CiU minority government was invested in Catalonia with the help of votes provided by the PP MPs (Reniu, 2001). Thus, although these pairs of single-party minority governments appear incongruent (CiU/PSOE; CiU/PP), they actually are congruent informal coalitions (CiU–PSC/PSOE–CiU<sup>5</sup>; CiU–PP/PP–CiU).

Full congruence is comfortable, full incongruence can be less so and partial congruence is difficult to manage. But is that true for all parties in all settings? The argument of this article is that the strategic values of congruence and incongruence can increase or decrease depending on three other factors: the institutional setting, the type of party in question and the distribution of bargaining power at both levels.

### Institutions: Veto Players and Joint Decision-Making

What we need to consider here is whether the sub-national level is necessary for decision-making at the national level and how clearly separated the distribution of powers between the centre and the regions is.

As regards the first aspect, those institutional settings in which the regions are collective veto players in national-level decision-making are more likely to foster the formation of congruent governments. As Thorlakson (2006: 45) argues:

[P]ressure for congruent coalitions can occur in response to the institutional incentives of 'joint federalism' systems, where a high degree of intergovernmental coordination is required in policy making, and sub-state governments may potentially block federal legislation. (See also König et al., 2003)

This would imply that in those federal systems where the veto power of sub-state governments on the federal government policy is low or non-existent, institutional pressures for coalition congruence are also lower.

However, the institutional effects on congruence are also mediated by a second factor: the distribution of power across levels. In federal and quasi-federal systems, depending on the area, policy-making can take place exclusively at the federal level, exclusively at the regional level or both levels may share policy-making competencies. Incongruence arises as a potential problem mostly for shared policy-making, where bilateral vertical intergovernmental cooperation between the levels is required.

In those cases where close bilateral cooperation between the central and the regional governments is required, congruence is preferable even if the sub-national units are not collective veto players for the action of the central government. Congruence will provide the parties involved with a complementary channel of negotiation in addition to the institutional one: the intra-party channel. Personal intra-party relationships can mediate inter-governmental conflict and solve disputes in what can be perceived by political actors as a more amiable setting.

### Party Attributes – Territorial Pervasiveness and Bargaining Weight

The distinction between state-wide and non-state-wide parties (SWPs and NSWPs) and the bargaining weight parties hold at the two levels mediates the perceived worth of congruence. For the regional branches of SWPs, defined here as parties that contest *both* regional and national elections in all or nearly all regions of the country under the same electoral banner (Ştefuriuc, 2007), stepping into congruent coalitions is desirable, as it means bringing intergovernmental relations into the internal party arena and ensuring thus a fluid relationship with the central government. Also, as these are parties that can play the two-level game, negotiating over the formation of congruent governments opens up a larger area of payoffs in the deal – the losses at one level can be compensated with benefits at the other.

At the same time, however, SWPs need to maintain a coherent and coordinated organizational line both horizontally and vertically. Regional organizations of the party governing at the central level are faced with a ‘double loyalty’ problem, as they are both agents of their national party organization in the region (van Houten, 2005) and representatives of the regional interests at the centre. This position can become a source of serious organizational strain when the policy lines of the regional and the central government are clashing. Partial congruence, an SWP governing at both levels but in different coalition formulae, has a good potential to generate such a clash.

A clash is most likely to occur in two situations: when the SWP is in a coalition with a strong and radical party (this can be for example an ideologically extreme party or a radical regionalist party) or when the SWP is not the leading party in the regional government, that is, when it does not have the sufficient bargaining strength to dissuade its partners from deviating too much from the line of the central government. In both cases, the regional branch of the SWP, which otherwise acts as a bridge between the two governments, is caught between two fires.

NSWPs are defined here as parties that:

... contest either regional or national elections, or both, in a limited territory of the country (one or several, but never all regions) and which

retain a separate parliamentary group organization in sub-national parliaments. (Ștefuriuc, 2007: 53)

There are two categories of NSWPs: those whose governing potential is limited at the regional level, either because they only compete in regional elections or are very small at the national level, and those which can potentially play the two-level game because their national-level representation allows them to.

Small NSWPs with no real power at the centre benefit from congruence when they govern at the sub-national level with the same partner that is governing at the centre, provided that their claims do not clash strongly with the position of the state-wide partner on the territorial dimension of party competition. As these types of party can basically not play the two-level game, they are limited to catering for the interests of their electorate by using regional-level resources only.

On the contrary, large NSWPs who also have bargaining leverage at the national level can play a profitable two-level game. If such a party has the right amount of legislative power to be a pivotal party for the configuration of a parliamentary majority at the centre, it can use this powerful position to extract benefits at both levels. In order to maximize its gains, this kind of party is most likely to seek congruence, or a camouflaged form of it,<sup>6</sup> as this will minimize uncertainty and guarantee a stable system of exchange across levels.

### **Spanish Regional Governments: Does Congruence Matter?**

The Spanish institutional setting does not provide the regions (or autonomous communities) with collective veto power in the decision-making process at the national level. Furthermore, horizontal institutional collaboration among regional governments is virtually non-existent. Intergovernmental relations in Spain are almost exclusively bilateral and vertical, between the central government and each of the 17 regional governments (Aja, 2003; Bolleyer, 2006). This bilateralism logically infuses a high a priori preference for congruence, as negotiation between two governments necessarily also means negotiation between the parties forming the two governments.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the asymmetrical elements of the Spanish system lead us to expect that preference for congruence will be higher in some regions and lower in others. Although Spain has come a long way in its transformation from an asymmetrical to an almost symmetrical federation, variance among sub-national units still exists. The strongest persisting element of asymmetry is given by different levels of fiscal autonomy. The Basque Country and Navarre enjoy a much higher level of fiscal autonomy than all the other regions due to the recognition of the historical rights of their territorial administration to raise their own taxes, making them less dependent on



regional investments from the central government and thus more indifferent to congruence or incongruence. Up until the adoption of a new statute of autonomy in Catalonia, all the other autonomous communities were subject to an even and significantly lower level of fiscal autonomy.<sup>8</sup> The new financing system in the recently adopted Catalan statute of autonomy introduces an additional element of asymmetry.

As regards general policy-making powers, although in practice the distinction the Spanish Constitution makes between historical nationalities (Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia) and the other autonomous communities is no longer an indicator of different levels of regional autonomy except in linguistic, civil law and sometimes police matters, historical nationalities have tended to develop privileged relations with the central government (Swenden, 2006: 263). Again, the new Catalan Statute of Autonomy shifts the balance towards more asymmetry by expanding the range of competencies for the Catalan government.<sup>9</sup>

Besides legally enshrined asymmetry, a large amount of variance among regions stems from how much they actually need the central government for policy-making. Although formally their sets of powers is largely equivalent, some regions need cooperation with central government more than others, be it for example for economic reasons or for particular grand projects, like is the case for reforming the statutes of autonomy. Although this feature might appear ad hoc, it is actually a systemic characteristic fostered by the institutional practice of bilateral intergovernmental negotiations and, as the case studies will show, it explains to a large degree the strategic quest for coalition congruence.<sup>10</sup>

Asymmetry is also a characteristic of the party system(s) in Spain. The regional party systems are largely different from the national one (Pallarés and Keating, 2006). At the centre, there are two large SWPs – PSOE and PP – which alternate in government due to a majoritarian twist in the PR electoral system. A third SWP, the United Left/*Izquierda Unida* (IU) is also represented, but its parliamentary strength is small due to the same characteristic of the electoral system. On the contrary, there are four NSWPs which have traditionally been well represented – CiU, Basque Nationalist Party/*Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV), Canary Coalition/*Coalición Canaria* (CC) and, more recently, Republican Left of Catalonia/*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC) – and which occasionally are pivotal for the conformation of a parliamentary majority. Other NSWPs are small and infrequently represented. In many regions though, regionalist parties are strong, and regional parliaments typically contain the three SWPs alongside one or more regionalist parties. Notably, these are also the regions where coalition and minority governments are frequent (see Reniu, 2005).

In order to assess the strategic importance of congruence for coalition formation, this article looks at four recent cases: the Maragall three-party cabinet in Catalonia, the Martín minority cabinet in the Canary Islands, the Ibarretxe three-party cabinet in the Basque Country and the Touriño

two-party cabinet in Galicia. The main data source comes from personal interviews with regional party politicians that were involved in the coalition negotiations.<sup>11</sup> All interviews were carried out between May and June 2006.

This case selection is justified by empirical and theoretical considerations. Theoretically, this selection covers a good range of coalition types (see Table 1). From the informal legislative coalition that supports the single-party minority government in the Canary Islands, through the minimal winning connected coalitions in Catalonia and Galicia, to the three-party minority government in the Basque Country. Empirically, these are important cases to study, not only for their relevance as regional coalition cases, but because most of the parties involved traditionally played an important role in the stability of the national government in Spain and thus the multi-level dynamics are more present than elsewhere.

**Table 1.** Congruence of government composition across levels

	2003 <i>(regional elections in Catalonia and the Canary Islands)</i>	2004 <i>(state-level elections)</i>	2005 <i>(regional elections in the Basque Country and Galicia)</i>
State level	PP	psoe	psoe
Catalonia	PSC-ERC-ICV <i>(incongruent)</i>	PSC-ERC-ICV <i>(congruent)</i>	PSC-ERC-ICV <i>(congruent)</i> / psc-icv <i>(congruent)</i>
Canary Islands	CC-PPCan <i>(congruent)</i>	CC-PPCan <i>(incongruent)</i>	CC-PPCan <i>(incongruent)</i> / cc (pscan) <i>(congruent)</i>
Basque Country			pnv-ea/eb/iu <i>(incongruent)</i>
Galicia			PSdeG-BNG <i>(congruent)</i>

\* Lower-case abbreviations indicate minority governments. If there is a constant supporting party it is indicated in parenthesis.

\*\* Changes in composition during the same year are indicated following a slash mark.

\*\*\* Congruence and incongruence refer to the composition of regional governments as compared to that of the national government.

Party acronyms: PP – Partido Popular; PSOE – Partido Socialista Obrero Español; PSC – Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya; ERC – Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya; ICV – Iniciativa per Catalunya – Verds; CC – Coalición Canaria; PPCan – Partido Popular de Canarias; PSCan – Partido Socialista de Canarias; PNV – Partido Nacionalista Vasco; EA – Eusko Alkartasuna; EB/IU – Ezker Batua/Izquierda Unida; PSdeG – Partido Socialista de Galicia; BNG – Bloque Nacionalista Galego.

## The ‘Tripartito Catalán’

The regional elections of 2003 in Catalonia opened up three viable coalition possibilities – a coalition between the Socialists (PSC) and the moderate nationalist *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), a coalition between the two nationalist parties, CiU and the left-wing independentist *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), and the three-party coalition that actually formed, between the PSC, ERC and the small green party *Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds* (ICV). With the first option quickly discarded by the PSC and with the green party unambiguously supporting a left-wing coalition, ERC became the pivotal player.

The ERC played a double game, negotiating with both the CiU and the PSC for some weeks after the elections, strengthening thus its bargaining position with both negotiation partners. The final choice of the ERC was strategically motivated by several reasons, as one ERC interviewee explained: (1) as a left-wing regionalist party, the ERC was ideologically closer to the PSC and the ICV than to the CiU on the left–right axis (see Figure 1); (2) the ERC estimated that its primary policy goal, the reform of the statute of autonomy for Catalonia, which needed the approval of a large majority in the Catalan parliament, was going to be easier with the PSC in government rather than in opposition (as a nationalist party, the CiU in opposition was not going to be able to oppose the reform by default, which was not at all guaranteed with the PSC in opposition); (3) this coalition would enable the party to win votes, by opening new spaces within the PSC electorate, while their electoral expansion into the nationalist camp had already reached its maximum with the 2003 elections.

Once the PSOE won the national elections of 2004, but did not secure a majority in the Spanish parliament, ERC had an even stronger justification for its choice. It could then play the card of congruence to become the key party in the investiture vote of Zapatero’s minority government in April 2004. The ERC’s tactics in the Spanish *Congreso* was to condition its support on payoffs with respect to the adoption of a new statute of autonomy of Catalonia within generous terms.

So was congruence a case in point? Not at the time of government formation. For the parties in the coalition there were three factors that mattered: (1) this was the first real opportunity to replace the CiU in government after 23 years (moreover, for the Catalan Socialists it was the only coalition option that enabled them to hold the leading position in the government); (2) after four years of absolute majority of the PP at the national level, an alternative left-wing government for Catalonia and, for the PSOE, a bastion of power during the conservative national mandate, was an appealing option; and (3) as Figure 1 clearly shows, this was the only winning coalition that was ideologically compact with respect to both the territorial and the left–right dimension of party competition.

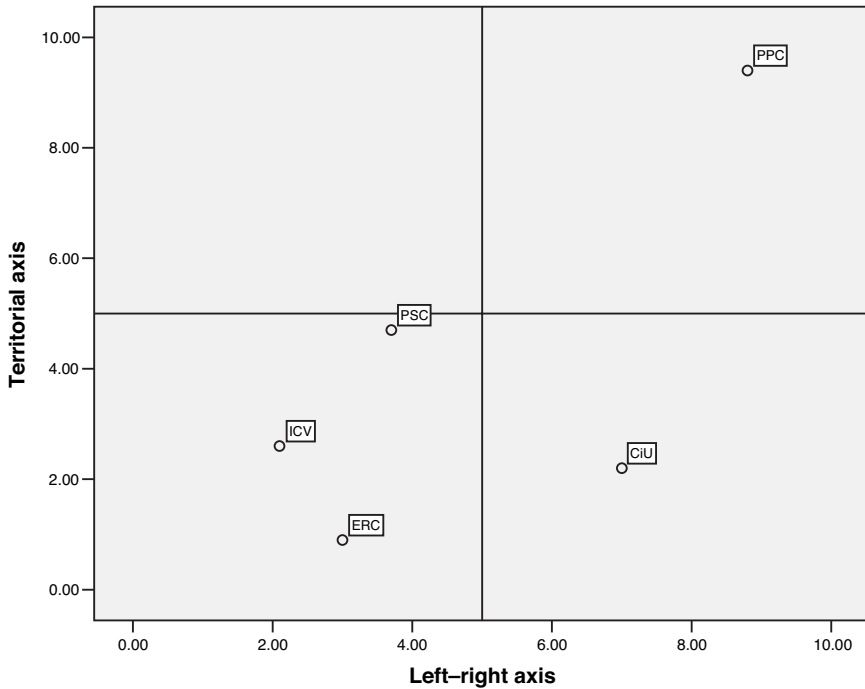


Figure 1. Two-dimensional ideological positioning in Catalonia, 2003

- \* Seat distribution: CiU – 46; PSC – 42; ERC – 23; PPC – 15; ICV – 9.
- \*\* Party acronyms: CiU – *Convergència i Unió*; PSC – *Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya*; ERC – *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*; PPC – *Partido Popular de Catalunya*; ICV – *Iniciativa per Catalunya – Verds*.
- \*\*\* The positions of the parties on the left–right and territorial dimensions of party competition are derived from interviews with party politicians. Each interviewee was asked to place his/her own party and the other parties in the legislature on a scale from 0 to 10. Two dimensions of party competition were identified: the left–right axis (0 = left, 10 = right) and the territorial axis (0 = a pro-decentralization position, 10 = a pro-centralist position). For reasons of time and resources, only politicians from governing and supporting parties could be interviewed. The positions shown on the graph represent averages of all responses. Thus, for example, the PSC left–right position is derived as an average of the party politicians' own positioning and of the placements that the other party politicians from the coalition gave for the PSC, while the position of a non-governing party such as the PP is derived from averaging the placements of this party by politicians from parties in the governing coalition only. At least two party leaders involved in coalition negotiations or familiar with the negotiation context were interviewed for each party. Although incomplete, I argue that this is a reliable way of deriving party positions, as what matters ultimately is the distance between the parties as perceived by the leaders involved in coalition negotiations. For a review of the methods used for deriving party policy positions, see Mair (2001).

Nevertheless, there was an important latent potential to congruence that all parties were aware of. The reform of Catalonia's statute of autonomy – which became the objective no. 1 of the new coalition government – had been blocked so far by a complicated situation of incongruent parliamentary majorities across levels. During the 1996–2000 period, when the PP was

governing in minority at the national level, it relied among others on the support of the CiU, which drew important benefits for Catalonia on this account. However, the CiU had to return the favours during 1999–2003, when its minority cabinet was supported in the regional parliament by the Catalan PP. One of the conditions for offering support was a promise on the part of the CiU to postpone the reform indefinitely.

When the new Catalan government took office in December 2003, the PP was still holding a comfortable majority in the Spanish parliament, which meant that even if the Catalan parliament successfully adopted the bill, the reform would get blocked at the next step, in the Spanish *Congreso*. Congruence, and especially the lack of it, was thus particularly salient.

It was the formation of a congruent coalition at the national level that unblocked this situation. The Socialists won the Spanish elections in March 2004 but controlled only a minority of seats in the *Congreso*. The ERC readily offered its parliamentary support to Zapatero's cabinet and the reform was given a sturdy start. However, there were two particularly difficult items on the agenda once the proposed reform bill reached the *Congreso*. One was the definition of Catalonia as a 'nation', which was a non-negotiable demand placed on the table by the powerful ERC, and the second was the new financial system for Catalonia.

The first item, with strong symbolic connotations, raised sharp objections from the PP, which accused Zapatero of 'balkanizing' Spain, but also raised critiques within the Socialist ranks themselves.<sup>12</sup> The second item provoked serious turmoil inside the Socialist Party, as Socialist leaders of solidarity-benefiting regions, such as Extremadura and Andalusia, claimed that the new fiscal advantages of Catalonia were violating the principle of territorial solidarity enshrined in the Spanish constitution.<sup>13</sup> The reform was thus again at a standstill and internal tension inside the PSOE was becoming costly. The solution adopted by Zapatero was to implicitly break the legislative coalition at the centre with the ERC, shifting it to a new coalition with the CiU, which agreed on softening the Catalan demands on both issues.

This, in turn, created turmoil in the Catalan government. The ERC no longer felt committed to a text that was, in their opinion, too far from what was originally voted in the Catalan parliament and, in the final stage of the reform adoption, the referendum, it campaigned for a rejection of the text. This left no alternative for the government's head in Catalonia but to dismiss the ERC ministers and call early elections for the autumn of 2006.<sup>14</sup>

### Canary Islands – the Regionalist–Socialist Coalition

In 2003 there were few doubts as to which of the two SWPs present in the parliament of the Canary Islands would be approached by the Coalición Canaria (CC) to form a coalition. Congruence has always been a crucial determinant of coalition formation for the regionalists, who make it clear

in their electoral campaign that they always ‘go with the party in Madrid’, as one of the CC interviewees put it, thus placing much less emphasis on ideological proximity or other classical determinants of coalition formation. Therefore, in 2003, as everyone expected, the CC signed a government agreement with the Partido Popular de Canarias (PPCan), the regional branch of the Popular Party.

The reasons why congruence is important for the regionalists in the Canary Islands are quite transparent. Many of the important policies initiated by the Canary government need to be carried out in agreement and collaboration with the central government – such as health, fiscal or water policy. Furthermore, the islands enjoy a special status in both Spain and Europe, being an outermost European region that benefits from important sums from European structural funds. That is why, for the negotiations in Brussels, the CC needs to make sure that the Spanish government gets the best deal for the region. Last, but not least, owing to their geographic position, the Canary Islands are the main target of illegal immigration from African countries to Spain. Immigration falls within the exclusive jurisdiction of the central government in Spain and the Canary government cannot address the issue without the consent and support of the central government. A good relationship with the central government is thus essential. The regionalists perceive that this is guaranteed by congruent alliances across levels.

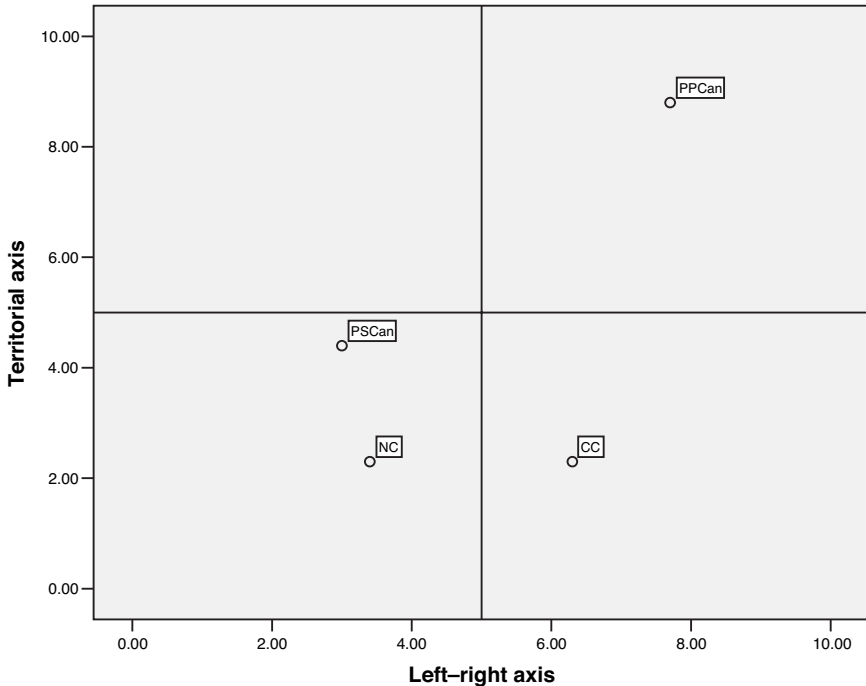
The 2003 coalition re-edited the coalition that had existed since 1995 between the CC and the PPCan. This coalition survived, either formally or as a parliamentary formula, until 2005, when the head of the regional government dismissed the Popular Party’s regional ministers. His justification was that the coalition with the PPCan was undermining relations between the Canary Islands and the central government. In the context of increasing polarization between Spain’s two main parties at the national level, the partisan conflict was infiltrating into the intergovernmental relations. According to the CC leaders, the PP was using all available channels, including the Canary government, to contest the central Socialist government. For the PP, they said, Canary politics had been transformed into just another battleground for opposing the party in central government. This was far from being beneficial in a context in which close cooperation was ever more necessary.<sup>15</sup>

After the exit of the PPCan, a legislative agreement was quickly struck with the regional branch of the Socialist Party (PSCan). As Figure 2 clearly shows, if both the left–right and the territorial dimensions of competition are taken into account, the CC is closer to the Socialists than it is to its previous partner, the PPCan. However, this was never quoted as a factor for the rapprochement, which further supports the argument that congruence-related considerations come first – as the bulk of the government’s action pertains to multi-level politics. As one interviewee put it:

[I]n general it is not worth [it] allying with a party that does not hold the power in Madrid, because especially at the regional level there are many decisions which are made in Madrid, for us more important than

for the rest of the autonomous communities – for reasons of distance, separation, transports, the African Coast, etc. (Interview with CC party leader, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 10.05.2006)

But why not form a real governing coalition with the Socialists, rather than rely on their support on only a few selected policy issues? It was the Socialists' choice not to step into a formal government coalition, a choice motivated by long-term electoral objectives. According to a Socialist interviewee, the Socialists' strategy in the Canary Islands is to attempt to gain sufficient seats to allow them to be the largest force in any governing partnership with the regionalists. They know that otherwise their fate in the Islands will always be decided by the government-and-opposition dynamics at the central level. Thus, by simply tolerating the government, the PSOE can afford to maintain a critical attitude and once the electoral campaign for the next election starts it can avoid all blame for any governmental mismanagement and present itself as an alternative governing option.



**Figure 2.** Two-dimensional ideological positioning in the Canary Islands, 2005

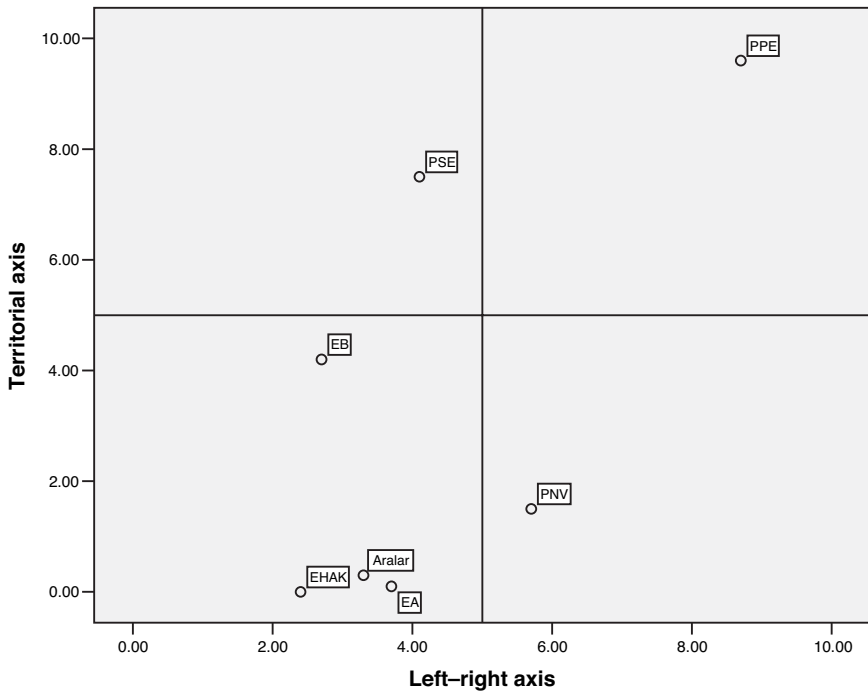
\* Seat distribution: PP – 17; PSOE – 17; CC – 23; NC – 3.

\*\* Party acronyms: PP – Partido Popular; PSOE – Partido Socialista Obrero Español; CC – Coalición Canaria; NC – Nueva Canaria

\*\*\* The positions of the parties on the left–right and territorial dimensions of party competition are derived in the same way as for Catalonia 2003.

### The Basque Country – the Coalition between Nationalists and Non-nationalists

The coalition that took office after the regional elections of 2005 in the Basque Country is formed by two NSWPs, i.e. the PNV and Basque Solidarity/*Eusko Alkartasuna* (EA)<sup>16</sup> and the regional federation of the third Spanish SWP, *Izquierda Unida* (IU) (called United Left/*Ezker Batua* [EB]). Its history goes back to the previous legislature, where the same formula was chosen. Although the Basque parliament counts seven parliamentary groups, the real coalition alternatives were reduced to a maximum of two. One was the incumbent coalition, the formula that was adopted. The other was a coalition between the Basque branch of the Popular Party (PPE) and that of the Socialist Party (PSE). Both would have held a minority status (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Two-dimensional ideological positioning in the Basque Country, 2005

\* Seat distribution: PNV – 21; EA – 8; PSE – 18; PPE – 15; EB/IU – 3; Aralar – 1; EHAK – 9

\*\* Party acronyms: PNV – Partido Nacionalista Vasco; EA – Eusko Alkartasuna; PSOE/PSE – Partido Socialista de Euskadi/Partido Socialista Obrero Español; PPE/PP – Partido Popular de Euskadi/Partido Popular; EB/IU – Ezker Batua/Izquierda Unida; EHAK – Euskal Herrialdeetako Alderdi Komunista – Partido Comunista de las Tierras Vascas; Aralar – Aralar.

\*\*\* The positions of the parties on the left–right and territorial dimensions of party competition are derived in the same way as for Catalonia 2003.



This second alternative, however, was highly improbable if the Basque political stage is placed in context. Although in the year 2001 the two state-wide parties attempted to form a coalition in the Basque Country to countervail the nationalist front, in 2005 a similar coalition was difficult to imagine. Their strategic alliance was becoming untenable in the context of an ever-stronger polarization between the PP and the PSOE in Spain. Zapatero's approach to the territorial reform of Spain – based on the principle of a plurinational Spain – is deeply at odds with the centralist turn the PP is taking under the leadership of Mariano Rajoy. Thus, after Zapatero's arrival in central government the dispute between the two main central parties, the PSOE and the PP, reached maximum levels of conflict.

The PNV–EA–EB coalition controls 31 out of the 75 parliamentary seats. It was invested with the support of the Basque communists (EHAK), support that was granted for the sake of enabling a government to take office, rather than clear benefits of any other nature. As the party that offered to represent the voters of Herri Batasuna (the party that was illegalized in 2002 on grounds of its links with the ETA terrorist organization and has since been banned from participating in elections) the EHAK was excluded from any coalition negotiations. It is not a classical supporting party and it generally votes against all government initiatives in the Basque parliament. At the time of writing it is rather Aralar, a small NSWP with only 1 MP, and the PSE that support the government on negotiated pieces of legislation and facilitate the passing of the budget bills.

Why not include the Socialists in the government, or strike a stable parliamentary support agreement? First of all, the coalition has a solid experience of negotiating its bills with the opposition, as in the previous legislature it also had a minority status. One could argue that the congruence would make its life easier. However, as the Basque statute of autonomy grants substantially more powers to the Basque government than that of any other autonomous community, the necessity for everyday policy coordination between Madrid and Vitoria, the capital of the Basque Country, is limited. The Basque government can put in practice a wide series of policies without having to cooperate with the central government. Second, just as in the Canary Islands, the Basque Socialists declare that their coalition strategy rests on the clear principle (officially adopted by the party) that they would participate in a coalition government only under the condition that the head of the government would belong to their party.

As Figure 3 shows, this coalition is also compact from an ideological point of view. Although not all partners are located on the same side of the left–right divide, the fact that they are sufficiently close to each other on the left–right scale and, most importantly, that they are on the same side of the territorial divide explains why this coalition was formed. Taking into account the primary policy goal of the two largest coalition partners, the PNV and the EA – i.e. revising the statute of autonomy of the Basque Country and,

possibly with that, the Spanish state model as a whole – no other coalition would have been consistent with this goal.

### Galicia – the Socialist–Nationalist Coalition

The elections that took place in 2005 in Galicia were very tight. There was only a one-seat difference between the results of the Popular Party of Galicia (PPdeG) and the summed seats of the Galician Socialists (PSdeG) and the Nationalist Galician Block/*Bloque Nacionalista Galego* (BNG). This one-seat difference gave the Socialists and the Nationalists the unprecedented opportunity to push the PPdeG into opposition after 14 uninterrupted years of governing with a parliamentary majority.

Unlike in the other three cases, the coalition choices in Galicia were unambiguously limited to one. According to the interviewees, the disposition to form a coalition government was manifest already during the electoral campaign. The primary motivation for such a coalition was the desire to finally get into government after so many years of exercising a powerless opposition. Ideological compatibility came second – both partners qualify themselves as centre–left parties, agreeing thus mostly on the issues of wealth redistribution and public spending (see Figure 4).

However, the parties are at odds on the second dimension of political competition – the opposition between a centralist and a regionalist vision of the Spanish state. Serious friction occurred during the negotiation on issues related to the reform of the statute of autonomy and the regionalist demands that were to be mirrored in the coalition agreement.

Coalition congruence is an interesting factor to look at in this case. The description above shows that this was at best a second-order determinant of the formula chosen, as basically there was no other choice. The fact that this government is partially congruent with the central government is probably more a happy coincidence than sheer party strategy. So how do the actors involved evaluate congruence?

For the Socialists, the fact that they govern at both levels is perceived to be beneficial. Although it belongs to the group of regions with enhanced policy-making autonomy, Galicia is also one of the poorest regions of Spain and needs massive public investment from the central government. As one PSdeG politician explained:

[Congruence] is very important in what concerns the State's commitments for public investment in Galicia and for reducing conflicts. The dynamic of a federal country results in the inevitable existence of conflict between the federal and the territorial powers. If there is also a difference in political color, these discrepancies transform in true conflicts. If there is congruence, negotiation and amiable resolution prevail. [Congruence] is good from all points of view. (Interview with PSdeG party leader, Santiago de Compostela, 20 June 2006)

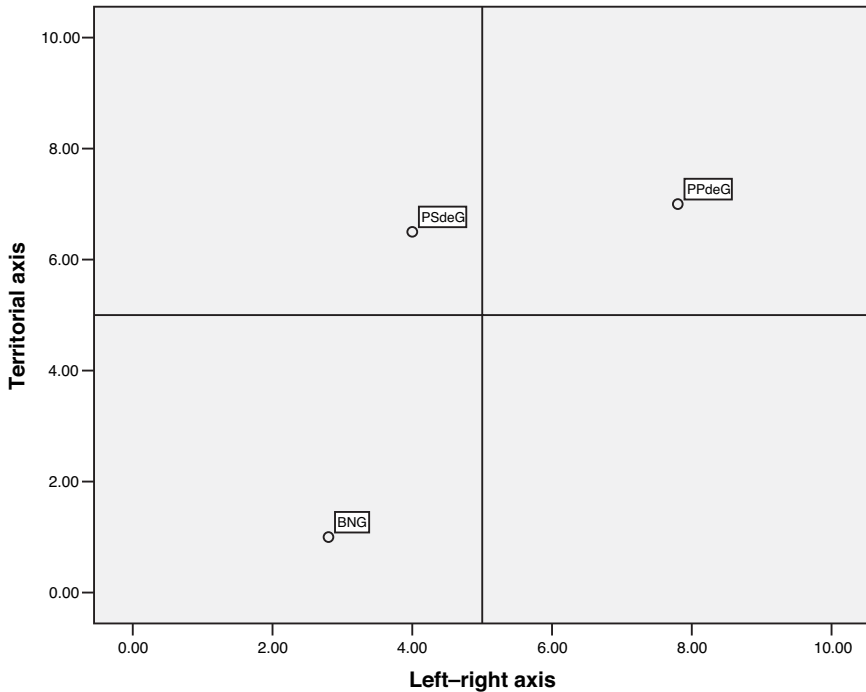


Figure 4. Two-dimensional ideological positioning in Galicia, 2005

\* Seat distribution: PPdeG – 37; PSdeG/PSOE – 25; BNG – 13.

\*\* Party acronyms: PPdeG – Partido Popular de Galicia/Partido Popular; PSdeG – Partido Socialista de Galicia/ Partido Socialista Obrero Español; BNG – Bloque Nacionalista Galego.

\*\*\* The positions of the parties on the left–right and territorial dimensions of party competition are derived in the same way as for Catalonia 2003.

However, the Socialists are aware of the potential dangers of this only partially congruent situation for their own position as double-agents (representing both the interests of their national party in Galicia and the interests of the regional government at the centre). As mentioned above, the reforms in the nationalist sphere that the BNG was pushing for created some serious problems during negotiations. Owing to its stronger bargaining power, the PSdeG managed to soften the nationalistic touch of the coalition agreement – the ‘historical debt’ of the Spanish state to Galicia was framed as ‘structural deficit’ (*Faro de Vigo*, 6 July 2005) and the controversial definition of Galicia as a ‘nation’ within Spain was also eliminated (*El País*, 11 July 2005). One Socialist politician described this as ‘strategic framing’ – and indeed the Catalan experience where controversy over nationalist symbolism generated substantial intra-party tension in the PSOE shows that this strategy serves the goal of maintaining the party organization conflict-free.

For the nationalists too, the issue has two facets. They perceive their Socialist partners in Galicia as having very little autonomy with regard to

the line imposed by the national party leadership. They believe that territorial demands can be effectively met through the regional government's own bargaining position rather than through a coincidence of political colour across levels of government. They see congruence as worthy insofar as the central government is anyway sympathetic to certain territorial claims of the Galician government, but also as a constraining factor to the capacity of this latter to impose strong(er) territorial claims. This is because the state-wide partner is in a position of double-loyalty between catering for the interests of the region and catering for the interests of the national party. As by definition a state-wide partner is most likely to be less sensitive to territorial claims, these are going to have to be watered down during negotiations, especially if the weight proportion of the two partners in government is tilted in favour of the state-wide partner.

### Concluding Discussion

This article started from the claim that coalition congruence is not a strategy parties would automatically seek in multi-level settings. Its importance as a determinant of coalition formation depends on the interaction with other factors. The argument can be summarized as follows.

First, I argued that coalition congruence is desirable when close inter-governmental cooperation is necessary on important policies. The four cases analysed here seem to support this argument. In the Canary Islands, where good relations with the central government appear vital to the main party of the legislature, congruence is explicitly the main determinant of government formation. At the other extreme lies the Basque case, where congruence is not such a relevant factor, because the sub-national government has greater leeway in policy-making owing to its high fiscal autonomy. In Catalonia, due to the special nature of the government's primary goal for the period analysed here, congruence was acknowledged by the political actors involved as being crucial – not so much for the formation of the government, but for its maintenance; passing to an incongruent situation at the centre had a direct effect on breaking the Catalan coalition. Galicia is the only case where congruence, although positively valued for its capacity to facilitate smooth intergovernmental relations, does not seem to have played a determining role in the process of government formation, simply because there was no other viable coalition after the 2005 elections.

Then I argued that congruence would be perceived as having different levels of utility depending on the type of party considered (state-wide or non-state-wide) and the relative bargaining weight this party holds at the two governing levels. My claim was that the regional leadership of state-wide parties values congruence highly only when the partnership with a non-state-wide partner does not pose a threat to the internal cohesion of the state-wide party as a whole and when the state-wide party is the larger

coalition partner. The cases of Galicia and the Canary Islands support this expectation – a clear Socialist strategy in both cases is to ally with a regionalist partner only as long as this regionalist partner would be the weaker force in the coalition. In the case of Catalonia, Socialist interviewees report that the strong bargaining position of its radical NSW partner posed a serious threat to the cohesion of the Socialist federation. All these cases also illustrate the concerns of NSW leaders regarding the ‘double-agent’ position of SWPs, but also their acknowledgement of the fact that congruence is indeed beneficial as it ensures a smoother intergovernmental cooperation on vital policy issues and it insulates to a certain extent the regional arena from the government-and-opposition dynamics at the centre, thus avoiding the regional arena becoming just another battleground for the disputes between the two main parties at the centre.

The conclusions of this research draw heavily on the Spanish case. Further research is necessary for testing and developing a theory of coalition formation in multi-level settings. Thick descriptions of coalition formation processes in symmetrical federal systems, such as Germany, and in systems where there are no state-wide parties, as in Belgium, are needed if definitive conclusions are to be reached.

Nevertheless, this article shows clearly that congruence is an important variable for coalition formation in multi-level systems. It also shows that a coalition theory that ignores institutional effects and party attributes, or fails to account for possible differences in party goals *at different levels*, is not going to take us very far in explaining government formation in such settings. That is why we should be cautious before simply testing quantitatively classical coalition models with regional-level data, but rather should supplement this by a qualitative analysis of party strategy.

## Notes

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- 1 Notable exceptions are Roberts (1989); Downs (1998); and Buelens and Deschouwer (2007).
- 2 Obviously, one could also compare the composition of the national government with that of individual regional governments. As the central government constitutes a single common reference point for all the regions, it is more likely that regional party leaders look at the coalition configuration at the centre rather than the other way around.
- 3 For a good review, see Martin and Stevenson (2001) or De Winter and Dumont (2006).
- 4 See, for example, Mershon and Hamann (2007) for Spain or Pappi et al. (2005) for Germany.

- 5 The same pattern was present for the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), which also supported externally the PSOE minority government while forming a regional coalition with the Basque Socialists (PSE). From 1996 onwards, although PNV supports the minority PP government alongside the CiU and Coalición Canaria (CC), an incongruent PNV–PSE continues in the Basque country until 1998.
- 6 See the discussion above about how to qualify informal coalitions in terms of congruence/incongruence.
- 7 Also, while the regional governments cannot veto national legislation, the central government can exercise veto rights on regional legislation. However, these veto rights are conditional on the decisions of an impartial body, the Constitutional Court – the central government is not able to veto regional legislation directly, but by being constitutionally granted the right to appeal to the Spanish Constitutional Court against it. The Court may decide in favour of or against the central government’s complaint.
- 8 With the exception of the Canary Islands, which has some fiscal privileges, although much reduced in comparison with the Basque Country and Navarre.
- 9 At this moment in time, however, it is difficult to assess whether asymmetry in levels of policy-making will become a lasting characteristic of the system. Several other autonomous communities have already engaged in statute reform in order to equal the autonomy level of Catalonia, while at the same time complaints introduced against several provisions of the new Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia are still awaiting the decision of the Constitutional Court.
- 10 As Moreno (2001: 92) notes: ‘[O]wing to the open nature of the provisions of the 1978 Constitution regarding state territorial organization, a climate of permanent political bargaining among local, regional and central governments is bound to remain as the most characteristic feature of the (as yet unfinished) Spanish process of decentralization’.
- 11 At least two party leaders were interviewed from each party. All interviews were carried out between April and June 2006. Anonymity is preserved, as many interviewees hold public functions.
- 12 It should be noted that the PSC is not simply the Catalan organizational branch of the PSOE, but is a separate organization associated with the Socialist federation, and its position on statute reform did not always coincide with that of the rest of the PSOE.
- 13 This principle of territorial solidarity translates into the practice of transfers from the well-off to the poorer regions (Moreno, 2001). The Spanish constitution states that ‘the state should guarantee the effective application of the solidarity principle . . . so that differences between their statutes of autonomy may in no case imply economic or social privileges’ (Moreno, 2001: 99).
- 14 At the time of writing, a new PSC–ERC–ICV coalition was formed in Catalonia, which gave rise to an instant withdrawal of support on the part of the CiU for the central government’s initiatives, such as the 2007 budget.
- 15 In recent years, the arrival of illegal immigrants in the harbours of the Canary Islands has intensified. Cooperation with the central government and the urgency of elaborating a joint immigration plan have intensified accordingly.
- 16 EA was born as a splinter from the PNV in 1995. In 2005, both parties defined themselves as nationalists, the two big differences between them being that (1) the EA was more in favour of Basque independence, while the PNV was the proponent of a special relationship of the Basque Country with Spain, to be defined through

the Basque people's right to self-determination, and that (2) the EA was more to the left, while the PNV is a centre-right political party (see Figure 3).

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IRINA ȘTEFURIUC is a post-doctoral researcher at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. She has recently completed her PhD thesis on 'Subnational Coalition Formation in Multilevel Settings: A Comparative Analysis of Spain and Germany'.  
 ADDRESS: Department of Political Science, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium. [email: irina.stefuriuc@vub.ac.be]

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