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Why new Parties? Changes in the number of Parties over time within Countries

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Abstract

Political science knows a fair amount about the variables explaining party systems fragmentation or the constant in the equation of the number of parties. But we know much less about changes in the number of parties over time within countries or the slope in the equation of the number of parties. This paper fills this gap explaining the entry of new viable competitors in party systems after the founding election. Using empirical evidence from Spain, we show that when there is an electoral market failure and the higher the number of perfectly elastic voters, the higher the probability of new viable entrants.

Keywords: Coordination, electoral system, electoral market failure, party system.

Resumen

La ciencia política tiene un conocimiento bastante extenso de las variables que explican el sistema de fragmentación de partidos o de la constante en la ecuación del número de partidos. Pero, en cambio, se sabe mucho menos sobre los cambios en el número de partidos en el tiempo en los países o la pendiente de la ecuación en el número de los partidos. Este trabajo viene a cubrir esta carencia al explicar la entrada de los nuevos competidores viables en el sistema de partidos después de la elección fundacional. Utilizando la evidencia empírica de España, mostramos que cuando hay un fallo del mercado electoral y cuanto mayor es el número de votantes perfectamente elásticos, mayor es la probabilidad de nuevas entradas viables.

Palabras clave: coordinación, sistema electoral, fallo de mercado electoral, sistema de partidos.

Introduction

Given that entering the electoral fray is costly, once political actors have good information about the relative chances of potential competitors, the number of parties within countries over time tends to reduce. Candidates prefer not to invest their resources when they believe that they will surely lose, therefore, their dominant strategy is withdrawal. However, sometimes we observe that new parties appear as viable competitors and hence equilibria break. If electoral systems and cleavages rarely change much within countries, how can the new equilibria be explained? On the one hand, according to the theories on electoral coordination, particularly to what Cox (1997) states, entry of new viable parties is not a common phenomenon and has to do with coordination failures and subsequent realignments. On the other hand, Chhibber and Kollman (1998, 2004) argue that party system change in the long-term depends on the degree of political and economic centralization.

In this paper we argue that these explanations are not enough to account for new entries. Using the case of Spain from 1980 to 2006, we show, first, that party system change in the short-term is not as unusual as the electoral systems scholarship holds. And second, that in accounting for changes in the number of parties within countries, electoral market failures and the number of elastic voters (or the institutionalization of party systems) play a crucial role.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. The first section presents the theoretical argument on party system change. The second section describes our case study, the data and the hypotheses. The third section discusses the results of the empirical analysis. Section four concludes.

1. Theoretical arguments

The number of parties competing within party systems is a function of the incentives for electoral coordination. Coordination problems arise because there are fewer seats to be filled than there are potential candidates wishing to fill them (Cox, 1999, 145-146). According to the received wisdom within electoral studies (Cox, 1997), incentives for electoral coordination are institutional or defined by electoral systems and sociological or defined by the structure of cleavages. First, the lower the number of seats to be filled in a district, the higher the level of support (votes) parties need to amass to win the seats. As a result, the lower the district magnitude, the lower the number of parties. Second, as the number of distinct ethnic, religious, or linguistic groups in a district increases, the chances of malcoordination increases and hence the number of entrants or parties.

In accounting for changes in the number of parties over time within single countries, explanations based solely on electoral systems or population diversity are strained: these features rarely change much within countries, and certainly not as often as party systems undergo change (Chhibber and Kollman 1998, 328; 2004, chapter 1). According to these institutional and sociological incentives, given that entry is costly and votes tend to concentrate on viable parties, a progressive reduction of the number of parties should be expected (ß < 1) until a Duvergerian equilibrium was reached and then ß = 1. The assumptions behind this coordination are the clarity of expectations regarding viability at the time at which entry decisions must be made and that elites are concerned only with winning the current election (Cox, 1997, 151). But these incentives are not able to explain the appearance of new viable parties in the short term. Accordingly, for electoral systems literature an increment or a mere change in the number of viable entrants is an unusual scenario explained by coordination failures and subsequent critical realignments (Key, 1955; Mayhew, 2000) or, in other words, by abrupt changes in voting, nominating and policy-making strategy on the part of elites and voters (Cox, 1997, chapters 12, 13 and 14). But the high costs of coordination failures and the fact that realignments require that a large number of politicians and voters change their behavior in a coordinated fashion, mean that realignments are not frequent. Hence, how can the successful entry of new competitors be explained?

As a reaction to this gap in the literature, Chhibber and Kollman (1998, 2004) have shown that decentralization can contribute to explain the appearance of new parties. According to them, as national governments decentralize authority, we should expect an increment of the number of parties at the national level. But since this mechanism works in the medium or long-term, we lack again a compelling explanation for short-term increases in the number of parties.

As we will show later, changes in the number of parties within countries, particularly the weaker and the newer the electoral system is, are not *rara avis.* We argue that there are additional incentives for parties to enter the electoral fray. The entry of new viable parties requires that a significant number of voters change their behaviour in a coordinated fashion. This re-coordination is costly, since it must be, at least, negotiated and publicized. There are two key variables affecting the likelihood of an alternative coordination. Once a party system has been formed after the founding election in a political system, new political entrepreneurs and losers (i.e., non-viable parties in the previous election) will decide again to enter a race on the basis of their chance of winning a seat. Their probability of winning a seat and, hence, their entry decisions depend on two variables. First, the number of (perfectly) elastic voters, available to change their partisan preference if they receive a better offer. As is well known, certain factors

anchor voters, such as strong psychological identifications, resulting from organizational encapsulation, cultural bonds, and the like making voters changes quite unlikely (Bartolini, 2002, 93). As a result, the probability of finding new viable parties will be higher before voters develop strong loyalties for parties, politicians, and ideological labels, and before they develop habits in partisan voting that are difficult to change. In other words, the institutionalization of party systems matters (Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006): the higher the degree of institutionalization, the lower the probability of changes in the number of viable parties.

Second, there are market failures. According to the seminal contribution of Cox (1997, chapter 1), elections can be seen as systems of exchange subject to equilibrating mechanisms. Voters' demands are anticipated and fulfilled within the political market when there are clearly known common expectations about who is and who is not viable. Given the existence of these expectations, "the number and type of parties that voters are willing to vote for turns out to equal the number and type of parties that are willing and able to stand for election" (Cox, 1997, 8). However, it is possible for political demands shared by a significant number of individuals to eventually be left unsatisfied and therefore the number of parties that voters are willing to vote for is lower than the number and parties competing.

According to the conceptual framework provided by Hirschman (1970), when parties are subject to lapses from efficient or otherwise functional behaviour (i.e., there are failures of parties to live up to the behaviour which is expected of them), voters have two possibilities to react to these failings. The easiest solution is that of exit. Some discontent voters can decide to exit by simply staying home on election day. Abstention may be a radical way of reacting to deterioration; voters simply quit the party system (Gidengil *et al.,* 2001). On the other hand, some voters, who feel disconnected from the performance of political and/or governmental processes, may feel attracted to non-established parties and to blank and null voting to voice their disaffection. As it is well known, third parties in two-party systems or minor parties in multiparty systems can benefit from generalised antiparty sentiments, especially if these parties adopt antiparty rhetoric, incorporate more "grass roots" organisational structures, and mobilise people's dissatisfaction with party politics in general by offering a "new way" of doing politics. These third or small parties are usually labelled "antiparty" or "antiestablishment" parties, and a vote for those parties can be thought of as a voice against politics as usual; they serve as vehicles channelling political discontent by providing voters with an alternative means of representation within the existing party structure (Bélanger, 2004, 1054-7; see also Kitschelt, 1989, and Poguntke, 1996).

Finally, given that electoral systems are a constant within countries, they cannot explain the entry of new viable parties. However, this does not imply

that they are completely irrelevant. Electoral market failures provide an opportunity for potential competitors. Since the appearance of new viable parties requires a re-coordination of voters, we hypothesize that the lower the level of support needed to win seats, the more likely new viable parties or politicians will enter the electoral system.

On the basis of these arguments, our hypotheses on the entry of new viable parties after the founding election in a given party system are the following:

H_1: the more institutionalized a party system is, the lower the probability of finding new viable entrants.

H_2: all else equal, if politicians are sensitive to the degree of centralization in the manner Chhibber and Kollman (1998, 2004) describe, as national governments exert less political and economic control over local areas, the probability of finding new viable parties should be higher.

H_3: the higher the level of abstention (i.e., the more important the market failure), the higher the probability of finding new viable entrants.

H_4: the stronger an electoral system in a given district is, the lower the probability of finding a new viable party when there is a market failure; but district magnitude by itself should not affect the probability of finding new viable parties.

2. Data and methods. Why Spain?

We rely on data from subnational or regional elections in Spain to show that electoral market failures and the number of elastic voters can influence the number of parties over time within countries (i.e., the slope of the equation in party systems fragmentation). There are at least three methodological reasons for selection regional elections in Spain as our empirical case: they allow us to test our hypotheses controlling for different variables, like institutional features or the socio-economic situation, for example, that might also explain the number of parties competing. First, in all regional elections the allocation of seats to parties is proportional to the votes following a D'Hondt systems of party list proportional representation. There are 3 or 5%

legal thresholds at the district or regional level[1]. Although all districts are plurinominal, with the exception of Formentera, in the Balearic Islands, there are very important differences in district magnitude within (see figure 1) and across electoral systems (see figure 2) [2]. These imply that the effects of our key independent variables are tested in districts with low and high magnitudes[3]. To determine the electoral permissiveness of districts, we use the concept of effective electoral threshold, that is, the proportion of votes that secures parliamentary representation to any party with a probability of at least 50% (Lijphart, 1994; Taagepera and Shugart, 1989). As the effective electoral threshold increases, the likelihood of strategic behavior among voters and elites rises. The effective threshold is calculated as an average of the inclusion threshold —the minimum percentage of the vote that gives a party a seat under the most favorable circumstances— and the exclusion threshold —the maximum percentage of votes that, under the most unfavorable conditions, is still insufficient for a party to obtain representation:[4]

$$T_{ef} = \frac{50\%}{M+1} + \frac{50\%}{2M} \ ,$$

where M is the number of seats in the district. As it can be seen in Table 1, the effective threshold at the district level ranges from 3 to 50%; the standard deviation for all the districts (6.76) is very similar to the mean (7.4).

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[1] In The Canary Islands there are two legal thresholds: parties have to win at least the 20% of the votes at the district level or, alternatively, the 3% of the votes at the regional level.

[2] The only changes in the regional electoral systems have been an increase in the electoral threshold in four Regions or Autonomous Communities (ACs) from 3 to 5% (or 13 districts in our dataset) and in two ACs from 5 to 3% (or 8 districts in the dataset).

[3] For a detailed analysis of the regional electoral systems in Spain, see Lago (2004).

[4] When the legal threshold is higher than the threshold of inclusion (100/2M), the threshold of inclusion is equal to the legal threshold.

FIGURE 1: AVERAGE EFFECTIVE THRESHOLD OVER TIME IN REGIONAL ELECTIONS IN SPAIN, 1980-2006
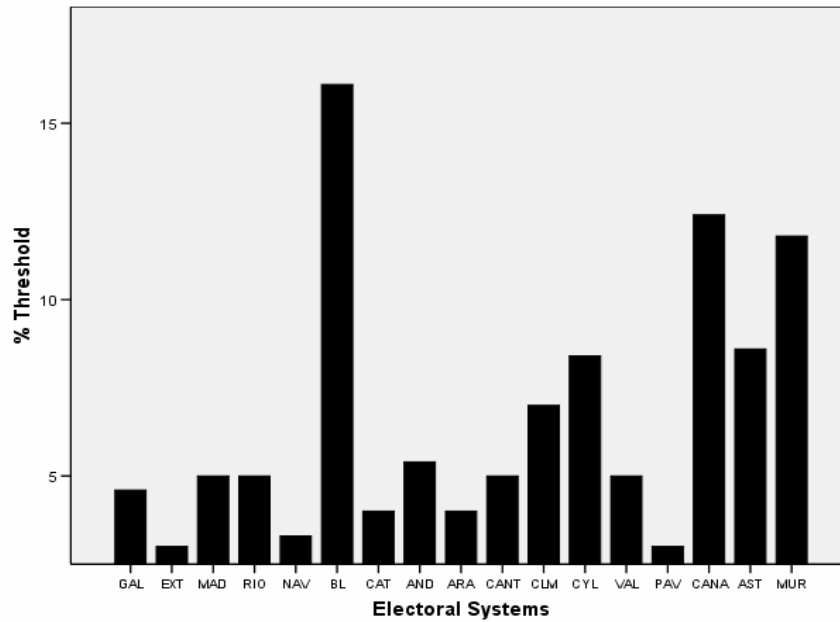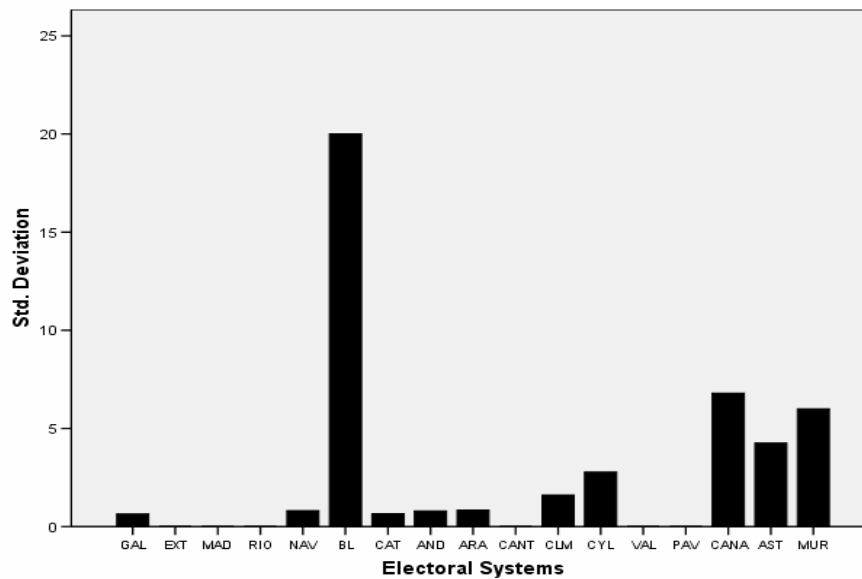

FIGURE 2: STANDARD DEVIATION OF THE AVERAGE EFFECTIVE THRESHOLD WITHIN ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND OVER TIME IN REGIONAL ELECTIONS IN SPAIN, 1980-2006

Second, the democratic transition and consolidation in Spain has taken shape around a dual process of democratization and decentralization. In just a few years, a highly centralized territorial distribution of power was replaced with the *Estado de las autonomías,* a *de facto* asymmetrical federal state with 17 Autonomous Communities (AC), each of them with a wide range of institutions, powers, and resources (Gunther, Montero, and Botella, 2004, ch. 6). Following the 1978 Constitution, all AC elect their parliaments and governments and have their respective public administrations, budgets, and resources. As Subirats and Gallego (2002, 3) have summarized, the process of decentralization has converted "a unitary state into one of the most decentralized in Europe. ... In twenty years the Autonomous Communities [have been created] to administer over one-third of all public expenditures, ... nearly one million employees, ... [and about] three thousand laws ... through institutions that have been directed by two hundred regional presidents and ministers, and over a thousand members of parliaments". In fact, among the 15 members of the former European Union, and after Denmark, Spain is the country where the national government administers the lowest level of public spending: 52% (Bosch and Espasa, 2006, 21).

If the degree of political and financial decentralization influences the number of parties, as Chhibber and Kollman (1998, 2004) argue, then we should observe a very significant increase in the number of subnational parties in Spain over time: this is our hypothesis number 2. As usual in the literature on fiscal decentralization, we employ the ratio between regional government public expenditure and regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the criteria to determine the economic resources managed by regional governments. As can be seen in Figure 3, this ratio has significantly increased over time, especially in the poorest regions[5]. Given that we are interested in the change of incentives for entry over time, this variable will be introduced in the empirical analysis as the difference between consecutive years. The data for each AC have been extrapolated to the districts integrating the regional electoral system.

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[5]Given that fiscal equalization is very strong in Spain (Lago-Peñas, 2007), per capita regional governments resources (including both own taxes and equalization grants) are not correlated with per capita regional GDP. Hence, the lower the per capita GDP, the higher the ratio spending/GDP. A mathematical demonstration of this result is straightforward. Let be two regions i and j. If per capita GDP is higher in region i $\left(\dfrac{GDP_i}{POP_i} > \dfrac{GDP_j}{POP_j} \right)$ and per

FIGURE 3: REGIONAL GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURE OVER GDP IN SPAIN
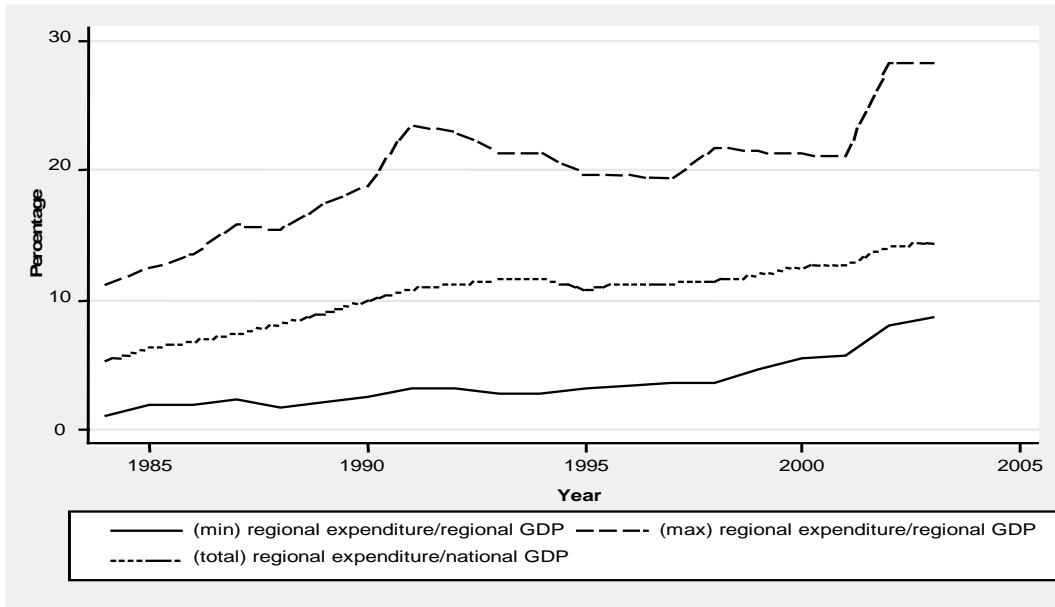
But this hypothesis based on the degree of centralization goes against our hypothesis 1, i.e. as a consequence of the institutionalization of party systems, the number of parties tends to reduce. The analysis of subnational elections in Spain over the last 25 years is an excellent case for determining which one of these two opposite forces is stronger. To observe the level of institutionalization of party systems we use two measures. First, electoral volatility, or the change in vote shares obtained by individual parties in a given district across consecutive elections, that is measured according to the Pedersen index[6]. As Roberts and Wibbels (1999, 578) point out, "differences in organizational continuity and entrenchment [of party systems] are indicative

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capita regional expenditure is the same $\left(\dfrac{E_i}{POP_i} = \dfrac{E_j}{POP_j} \right)$ then per capita expenditure must be higher in region j

$$\left(\dfrac{E_i}{GDP_i} < \dfrac{E_j}{GDP_j} \right)$$

[6] The index (Pedersen, 1983) provides a measure of net aggregate vote shifts from one election to another. It is calculated as the sum of individual party gains and losses divided by two. The index yields a scale from 0 to 100, corresponding to the net shift in voting percentages. A 0 signifies that no parties lost or gained vote (or seat) percentages, while 100 means that all the votes (or seats) went to a new set of parties.

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of varying levels of institutionalization, and it can be expected that highly institutionalized party systems will discourage electoral volatility by closing off the electoral marketplace, narrowing the range of viable alternatives, and socializing voters to embrace established partisan identities". Second, the logarithm of the number of years passed since the first regional election in each AC[7]. The number of elections held since 1980 goes from 8 in Catalonia and the Basque Country, and 7 in Galicia and Andalusia, to 6 in the remaining 13 ACs.

Finally, the third methodological reason to select Spain as our case study is the multilevel character of party competition: the significant regional cleavage in Spain has been transformed into major variations of the vote distribution across most Communities. The so-called *regional voting*, for instance, measures the electoral distinctiveness of each Community. That is, the extent to which its voters support nationalist, regionalist, or local parties and/or the extent to which they give proportional support within the region for national parties.[8] In comparative terms, the Spanish levels of regional voting in national elections are among the highest in Europe (Lee 1968; Hearl and Budge, 1996, 172-173; Linz and Montero, 2001, 181) and regional voting is particularly high in those Communities with nationalist or regionalist parties, whose strength in both national and sub-national elections. No European region (apart from the quite exceptional case of Northern Ireland) surpasses the regional voting levels of the Basque Country or Catalonia, and no European country has as many regions in which sub-national parties are as significant as in Spain. As Llamazares and Marks (2006) have summarized, both regions have the strongest and most durable ethno-territorial movements in Southern Europe and, along with the Flemish and Scottish ones, both are among the most influential.

We have taken as a case every district in every electoral systems and election. Our dependent variable, *Entry*, is a dummy variable that takes the value 1 when a party without seats in the previous election (t-1) wins at least one seat in the election in t, and 0 when there are no new parties with seats in t. In other words, our dependent variable measures the appearance of new viable parties at the district level. Given that these new winners can be new parties, previous losers or splits, our hypotheses are tested for these three possibilities. However, our model should work better for new parties than for previous losers and splits. The latter can have additional incentives for entering the race independently of their electoral expectations. For instance, national parties can be able to win seats in some particular districts within

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[7] Regional elections are held the same day, each four years, except in the Basque Country, Catalonia, Galicia, and Andalusia.
[8] The index is calculated by adding the absolute difference between the percentage of votes received by each party inside each region and the average vote received by it across the 17 Communities, divided by two; see Hearl and Budge (1996, 169).

the country, but not in others. And they might continue competing in those districts where they are not viable given the existence of economies of scale (Cox, 1997, 1999) or to avoid signals of opportunism. Finally, our proxy for electoral market failures is the level of turnout in the previous election. Potential competitors willing to enter the electoral fray in period t need to see an opportunity for entering from the previous election[9].

3. Results

The main results are displayed in Tables 1, 2 and 3. Table 1 shows, surprisingly for explanations based solely on electoral systems or population diversity, that the mean of the variable *Entry* is 0.34: in 34% of the districts or in 116 districts of a total of 343 we find new viable parties after the founding election and in comparison with the previous one. In other words, changes in the number of viable entrants or parties are not at all unusual scenarios. This implies that the phenomenon "actually exists, that it is enough of a regularity to require and to allow explanation" (Merton, 1987, 2).

TABLE **1**: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS*

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Entry	343	0.34	0.47	0	1
Threshold	407	7.40	6.76	3	50
Turnout	407	68,21	7.01	41.5	83.6
Years	407	10.58	7.20	0	26
Volatility	343	15.86	12.30	2.2	70.5
Dif(Spending/GNP)	343	3.07	3.71	-4.07	13.77

*Entry, volatility and Dif(Spending/GNP) have only 343 observations because the first election is used as point of reference.

In Table 2 we can see that most of new viable competitors are previous losers (75 of 116 cases) and, to a less extent, new parties (38 of 116 cases).

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[9] All data we use can be found at www.pre.gva.es/argos/archivo/index.html and www.ine.es.

TABLE 2: NEW VIABLE COMPETITORS

Parties	Number	Percentage
No viable entries	227	66.18
New parties	38	11.08
Split parties	3	0.87
Loser parties	75	21.87
Total	343	100

In the analysis of *Entry*, we run five specifications to test our hypotheses and consider whether new winners are new parties, previous losers or splits. The results are displayed in Table 3. According to the first model, where the type of new winner is not distinguished, turnout in t-1, the number of years passed since the founding regional election and volatility are statistically significant at the 0.01 level. The first two coefficients are negative and the third positive, meaning that the lower the turnout and the number of years passed and the higher the volatility, the higher the probability of finding new viable entrants. Moreover, the insignificant coefficient on spending implies that the degree of political and economic centralization does not influence the number of parties. Finally, the effective threshold is not statistically significant. That is, the electoral system has no impact on the slope of party systems fragmentation. However, in the definition of *Volatility* there is an evident problem of endogeneity: all else equal, when a new viable party appears, volatility increases. For this reason we have re-estimated the model using a different measure of volatility: volatility in the previous election. This implies losing a lot of observations, and given that they correspond to the second election, most of the cases of successful entries are dropped. Model 5 reports regressions results when we use this indicator of volatility. We find that this measure confirms the robustness of our results in model 1: turnout in t-1, the number of years passed since the first regional election and volatility are again statistically significant at the 0.05 level or better.

The second model, which adds to the first an interaction term, *Threshold*Turnout $_{t-1}$*, reduces the coefficient on *Turnout$_{t-1}$* to statistically insignificant values, while producing a statistically significant positive coefficient on *Threshold*, together with a better fit of the model. The interaction term is statistically significant and negative. This supports H$_4$: the higher the effective threshold, the lower the probability of potential competitors to take advantage of market failures.

The third model replicates the second only when new the winners are new parties. The results are very similar, or even better. Finally, the fourth model

replicates again the second, but focused now on previous losers or splits converted into winners. Only the number of years passed after the first election and the regional spending in terms of the GNP are statistically significant, but this second variable has not the expected positive sign.

TABLE 3: THE DETERMINANTS OF SUCCESSFUL ENTRIES
(LOGIT REGRESSION ESTIMATES)[a]

Independent Variables	Model 1 (all parties)	Model 2 (all parties)	Model 3 (only new parties)	Model 4 (losers or splits)	Model 5 (all parties)
Threshold	-0.0262 (0.0279)	1.07*** (0.40)	1.13** (0.47)	0.72 (0.74)	0.0019 (0.0229)
Turnout$_{t-1}$	-0.0289*** (0.0216)	0.0615 (0.0385)	0.0329 (0.0480)	0.0505 (0.0645)	-0.0467** (0.0228)
(log)Years	-1.70*** (0.28)	-1,83*** (0.28)	-1.59*** (0.62)	-2.16*** (0.33)	-1.36*** (0.44)
Volatility	0.0510*** (0.0148)	-0.0436*** (0.0148)	0.0795*** (0.0199)	-0.0074 (0.0165)	
Dif(Spending/GNP)	-0.0684 (0.0466)	-0.0803 (0.0463)	-0.0538 (0.0780)	-0.1057** (0.0491)	-0.022 (0.0442)
Threshold*Turnout$_{t-1}$		-0.0157*** (0.0057)	-0.0160** (0.0067)	-0.0119 (0.0108)	
Volatility $_{t-1}$					0.0327*** (0.0109)
Constant	4.74*** (1.68)	-1.03 (2.64)	-2.29 (3.03)	1.36 (4.36)	4.92** (2.04)
Number of Observations	343	343	265	305	279
Wald chi^2	65.59***	79.28***	64.32***	51.57***	26.60***
Pseudo R^2	0.22	0.24	0.42	0.20	0.10

[a]Estimation is by maximum-likelihood; Robust Standard Errors in parentheses. The levels of statistical significance are ***$p<0.01$; **$p<0.05$.

As is well known, the parameters of the logit model cannot be interpreted directly, since the model is nonlinear and the effect of a given variable on the probability of entry depends on the values of the other independent variables. Based on the results of model 1 in Table 3, Table 4 simulates the probability of a successful entry for different combinations of the three statistically significant variables: *Turnout $_{t-1}$*, *(log)Years* and *Volatility*[10]. Holding constant the remaining variables, with a turnout of 50%, the probability of a successful

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[10] For the simulation, *Threshold* and *Dif(Spending/GNP)*, as well as the variables not included in the particular simulation, were set at their mean values.

entry is 11%. With a volatility level of 5 points, the probability of a successful entry is 4.1%. And five years (one election) after the first election, the probability of a successful entry reaches its highest level: 25.7%.

TABLE 4: SIMULATING THE ENTRY OF A VIABLE PARTY*.

Values	Probability of a successful entry (%)		
	Abstention	Years after first election	Volatility
5	3.3	25.7	4.1
10	3.8	9.6	5.2
15	4.3	5.1	6.6
20	5.0	3.2	8.4
25	5.7	2.2	10.6
30	6.5		
40	8.5		
50	11.0		

*Results are derived from Table 3, model 1. *Threshold, Turnout $_{t-1}$, (log)Years, Volatility* and *Dif(Spending/GNP)* are set at their mean values.

Conclusions

In this article we have argued that the slope of party systems fragmentation is not necessarily negative in the short-term. For this reason, in accounting for changes in the number of parties within countries, explanations based on electoral coordination or the degree of economic and political centralization are not compelling. They argue that entry is an unusual phenomenon, particularly in the short-term. Using empirical evidence from sub-national elections in Spain, where the democratic transition and consolidation has taken shape around a dual process of democratization and decentralization, we have shown that party system change is quite a frequent occurrence: in a third of the 343 districts analyzed we found changes in the viable parties.

There are two key variables explaining successful entries in the short term, particularly for new parties. First, electoral market failures or the existence of unsatisfied political demands shared by a significant number of individuals. Second, the number of (perfectly) elastic voters, available to change their partisan preference if they receive a better offer or, in other words, the degree of institutionalization of party systems. Therefore, the higher the level of abstention and the lower the number of years passed since the founding election, the higher the probability of a successful entry. We have found no evidence supporting the role played by political and economic decentralization in explaining changes in the number of parties.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that this paper is not enough to provide a robust theory of the causes of changes in the party system. Future studies could aim to support our findings in different countries and institutional arrangements. In sum, in analyzing party systems, we suggest that the slope of party systems fragmentation deserves the attention of electoral systems scholarship.

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