Regional Assertiveness in Western Europe

A Statistical Exploration

Pieter van Houten
Faculty of Social and Political Sciences & Churchill College
University of Cambridge
pjv24@cam.ac.uk

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Introduction

In this paper, I explore patterns and variation in regional assertiveness in Western Europe. Regional assertiveness occurs when regional political actors demand changes in the distribution of competencies between the national and regional level of government, in favour of the regional level. This phenomenon has become increasingly salient in recent years in Western Europe, and is one aspect of regional responses to developments such as economic globalisation and European integration (Keating, 1998). Understanding regional assertiveness in Western Europe is important because it is part of the larger puzzle of the alleged transformation of the traditional “nation-states” in Europe. The distribution of powers between various (subnational, national, and supranational) levels of government in Europe is much debated, and appears to be subject to recalibration. This paper focuses on one aspect of these developments, the “subnational demand side” for state restructuring.

Most existing accounts focus on the apparent secular rise in autonomy movements and demands, and only few studies have addressed questions of variation between regions. Why are some regions assertive and others not? Equally relevant, why do political actors in some assertive regions make stronger demands than in others? For example, why do the main political actors in some regions (e.g., Basque Country, Flanders) demand the power to raise their own taxes, while in other regions (e.g., Wales, Bavaria, Catalonia) such actors restrict their demands to more control over resources obtained from the national state? This latter question is especially important if we want to evaluate the challenge that regional autonomy demands pose for the organisation of existing states.

This paper begins to address these questions. It derives hypotheses from the existing literature on the relevance of cultural, economic and political factors in inducing regional political activity. Since existing contributions tend to ignore the observed variation in the type of demands, I present the main results of an argument I have developed in earlier work (Van Houten, 2000), which links the nature of party competition in a region to the expected level of regional assertiveness. More specifically, I hypothesise that demands will be strongest (and include demands for the power to tax) if several regionally organised parties compete in a region, and more restrained if a dominant regional party competes against national parties.

Most empirical research on regional autonomy demands in Western Europe consists of single case studies or qualitative comparative analyses. It appears that no previous attempts have been made to evaluate the variation in autonomy demands through a quantitative analysis. Although certainly less comprehensive than national data, sufficient regional level data exist to make such an analysis worthwhile. The main challenge for a quantitative analysis is the construction of an indicator for regional autonomy demands. In

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1 Keating argues that regionalism is no longer a zero-sum game between regions and the central state about the distribution of competencies. This is a valid point. However, it is hard to see how this new form of regionalism will not have implications for the intergovernmental distribution of powers. Thus, a focus on debates about this distribution, as I do in this paper, provides an assessment of an important manifestation of contemporary regionalism.

2 Surprisingly few studies in political science have tried to take advantage of the existence of such data. Some exceptions are Armstrong and Read (1995), Hearl et al (1996), Marks et al (1996), Schmidberger (1997), and Rodríguez-Pose (1998). Emizet and Hesli (1995), Treisman (1997), and Hale (2000) present studies similar to this paper’s analysis for the Soviet Union and Russia.
this paper, I try to develop such an indicator, and use it to assess the factors influencing the variation in demands. The main results of the analysis are, first, that several factors seem to have an impact on the occurrence of autonomy demands in a region: the presence of a distinct regional language, a relatively high regional income per capita, a large regional share of national GDP, and the structure of the regional party system. Second, none of the cultural and economic factors seem to be able to account for variation in the particular nature of demands in assertive regions. Only the structure of the regional party system has a significant impact on this variation. This lends preliminary support for my main argument.

The next section presents various hypotheses. The third section discusses the data and the construction of several indicators. The subsequent section presents the main results of the analysis. The conclusion summarises the main points, and suggests how case studies can complement these results.

**Hypotheses**

It is possible to derive a number of hypotheses from the existing literature that address the issue of variation in regional assertiveness. I list these hypotheses here, with a brief explanation of their logic.

**H1**: Regional politicians are more likely to demand autonomy in regions that are culturally distinct from the rest of the country.

This hypothesis follows from three different lines of argument. First, a “primordial” view states that ethnic and cultural distinctions between a region and the rest of the state are a sufficient condition for regional mobilisation and demands for autonomy or secession (e.g., Connor, 1994). Second, a more extensive literature takes such distinctions only as a necessary condition for autonomist or secessionist activity, while the actual occurrence and strength of such activity depends on other (typically socio-economic) factors (e.g., Hechter, 1975; Esman, 1977; Gourevitch, 1979; De Winter and Türsan, 1998). Thus, not all “ethnic” regions are expected to exhibit regional assertiveness, but they are certainly perceived to be more likely to do so than non-ethnic regions. Finally, the process of European integration may have opened new channels and provided a new rhetoric for regions to express ethnic and cultural grievances vis-à-vis national states (Sharpe, 1993; Laitin, 1997; see also the discussion under H4 below), thus inducing or reinforcing regional assertiveness among ethnic regions.

**H2**: Regional politicians are most likely to be assertive in regions that are economically better off than the other regions in the country.

This hypothesis finds support in one strand of the literature on minority nationalism, where it is asserted that among ethnic regions, those that are economically relatively well off but lack political power will give rise to autonomy movements and demands (e.g., Gourevitch, 1979; Bookman, 1992; Harvie, 1994). Alternatively, it can perhaps also be derived from the literature on the regional impact of economic globalisation (see the discussion under H4 below). Richer regions will be more competitive in a globalised economy, and can possibly use this to demand more autonomous competencies.

**H3**: Regional politicians are more likely to demand regional autonomy in relatively
In direct opposition to the contributions mentioned above, some scholars of minority nationalism argue that disadvantaged regions are most likely to rebel against their states (e.g., Hechter, 1975; Rokkan and Urwin, 1983; Horowitz, 1985). Furthermore, some accounts argue that European integration has a direct effect on regional politics and regional attitudes towards national states by providing subsidies to regions and directly involving them in the design and implementation of European regional policies (e.g., Hooghe, 1996). To the extent that this will indeed induce regions to demand more competencies from the national level, the implication is that poorer regions will be more assertive, since these European policies are targeted at these regions.

**H4:** Regions most exposed to globalisation and/or regions with the internationally most competitive economies are more likely to give rise to regional autonomy demands.

A link between economic globalisation and regional autonomy demands is regularly asserted. The logic behind this claim, however, varies, and is not always stated explicitly. It seems possible to distinguish three alleged mechanisms linking regional assertiveness to globalisation and European integration (Van Houten, 2001).

First, territorial protests can emerge as part of a ‘backlash’ against globalisation (e.g., Friedman, 2000; Castells, 1997), and give rise to demands for more autonomous powers to insulate regions from its effects. This dynamic may be less applicable to Western Europe, although Keating (1998: 163) mentions the possibility of “rejectionist regionalism” in response to European integration.

Second, globalisation and European integration can provide new opportunity structures for regional political actors to push for more autonomy. Several variants of this argument can be found in the literature: regional movements can use changing global circumstances to carve out more opportunities for self-government (e.g., Keating 1997, 1998; Williams, 1997); globalisation can reduce the “costs” of being a separate state and thus induce autonomy and secessionist demands (e.g., Alesina and Spolaore, 1997; Bolton and Roland, 1997; Fearon and Van Houten, 1998); and European integration can lead to an increase in regional mobilisation through the involvement of regions in the planning and implementation of regional policies (e.g., Hooghe, 1996; Ansell, et al, 1997), the provision of institutional channels for direct regional participation at the European level (e.g., Hooghe and Marks, 1996), and the provision of a new forum and rhetoric for regional movements to express cultural and ethnic grievances (e.g., Sharpe 1993; Keating, 1995; Laitin 1997). These claims suggest that there is a positive relationship between regional autonomy demands and regional exposure to globalisation and European integration. A third mechanism can be inferred from the literatures on the regional impact of economic globalisation (e.g., Scharpf, 1994; Ohmae, 1995).

Some recent work in political economy (e.g., Bolton and Roland, 1997; Fearon and Van Houten, 1998) provides a unified framework in which both hypotheses on the role of economic factors (either richer or poorer regions being more assertive) can be derived. In this framework, richer regions will mobilise for greater autonomy under a variety of conditions. Poorer regions, on the other hand, will only demand more autonomy if the income distribution in the region differs significantly from the income distribution in the country as a whole. Due to a lack of data on regional income distribution, I do not include this factor as a separate hypothesis here.

4 An important theme in the international political economy literature is the distinction and relation between globalisation and regional integration (‘supranational regionalism’). From a global perspective, there are certainly differences between these two processes. However, from a subnational perspective this distinction begins to fade, since both processes involve the formation of a larger economic space and the reduced relevance of the national state as a regulatory regime. In fact, it can be argued that in the case of Western Europe, European integration is the most important manifestation of globalisation for subnational units.
Both developments are said to reduce the economic relevance of national boundaries. This increases economic competition between regions and the pressure on regional political institutions to supply policies (e.g., industrial stimulation policies and investments in infrastructure) to increase the chance of success in this competition. To do this effectively, regions generally need competencies currently controlled by the national level. Regions with the best prospects in the international economy (i.e., the most competitive regions) are in the best situation to effectively utilise such competencies, and thus more likely to demand these competencies from the national level.

It should be noted that it may be hard to empirically distinguish effects due to globalisation from other economic effects. Relatively rich or poor regions may experience political mobilisation for domestic reasons (e.g., to decrease or increase transfers to other regions), or as a result of processes of globalisation (e.g., to take advantage of its strength in the international economy, or to protest against further economic marginalisation). The empirical analysis attempts to sort out these different effects, but this is not an easy task.

**H5:** Regional assertiveness is more likely to occur, and likely to be stronger, in countries with a particular style of democratic decision-making (e.g., majoritarian or consociational), or as a result of other country-specific factors (e.g., electoral systems, or territorial organisation of the state).

Claims about the importance of political factors in inducing and channeling regional autonomy demands are widespread. However, the exact predictions following from these discussions are generally not clear. For example, both Newman (1996) and Meadwell (1991) point to the importance of the particularities of majoritarian and consociational decision-making processes for an understanding of regional autonomy movements, but do not provide clear-cut hypotheses. Similarly, it seems reasonable to assume that factors such as the electoral system in a country or region and the territorial organisation of a state have an impact on regional assertiveness, but more theorising is necessary to specify hypotheses. Therefore, these general claims can only be tentatively tested here. The indicated factors typically vary only between, not within, countries, so can be crudely grouped together as country-specific factors, and captured by country dummies. Testing for the significance of these country dummies will give an indication whether more theorising about these political factors is called for.

A general characteristic of the existing literature summarised so far is that it focuses primarily on the variation between assertive and non-assertive regions (that is, on whether autonomy demands occur at all). There is an, at least implicit, assumption that if regional politicians make autonomy demands, these demands will always be as strong as possible, subject only to “external” constraints, such as the strength of the centre or limits to popular identification with regional interests. However, as we will see, considerable variation exists in the nature of demands observed in assertive regions with similar economic and cultural characteristics. To explain this variation, I have formulated a novel and distinctly political explanation, focusing on the role of particular configurations of regional party systems (Van

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5 A typical statement is: “The fate of specific ethnoregional movements emerges from the interactions among the sources of these ethnoregional conflicts and existing political institutions” (Newman, 1996: 4). Newman, however, never clearly specifies how certain political institutions give rise to particular outcomes.
The following hypothesis can be derived from this argument.

**H6**: Regional autonomy demands will be stronger (and include demands for tax powers) if several regionally organised parties compete against each other, and more restrained if a dominant regional party competes against national parties.

Regional politicians demanding increases in regional autonomy attempt to introduce or maintain a territorial cleavage in politics. That is, they attempt to obtain “inclusive” voter support (in terms of socio-economic and other interests) by appealing to regional interests, in opposition to the “centre” (Newman, 1996; Keating, 1998). Demands for more fiscal powers and such (i.e., demands that significantly challenge the existing organisation of the state), which, if granted, would force regional politicians to take positions on socio-economic matters, can be detrimental to such an electoral strategy. I argue that the impact of this dilemma of demanding such powers is conditional on the nature of party competition in a region. If a regional politician competes against nationally organised parties, incentives to mobilize heterogeneous voter support are large, and demands for tax powers less likely. On the other hand, if a regional politician competes mostly against regionally organised parties, such incentives are smaller (presenting oneself as the primary representative of the region is less likely to distinguish oneself from other parties). However, a territorial cleavage has now been institutionalised in the political system, increasing its salience for the population and framing many issues in territorial terms. Making strong demands can then become a necessity for most parties, if they want to avoid being seen as non-credible political forces in the region.

**Data and coding**

To subject these hypotheses to a preliminary test, I collected information on regions in six Western European countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. These countries have well-established administrative units between the national and local level of government with elected legislative bodies, and are member states of the European Union. Moreover, all these states have experienced regional autonomy demands of some sort in the post-war period (for an indication, see Table 1), suggesting that the territorial organisation of these states is more than just an administrative convenience. I define a region as the administrative level immediately below the national state. This gives a total of 89 regions. In the statistical analysis, I exclude the 6 regions in which the country capitals are located (the “centres”). In this section, I first describe the construction of the indicator for the dependent variable, demands for an increase in regional autonomy. Then, I describe the sources and coding schemes for the independent variables used in the analysis.

**Dependent variable: Levels of regional assertiveness**

To my knowledge, no systematic data on regional autonomy demands have previously been collected. The task of collecting such data is complex, especially if the objective is to code not only whether demands as such occur but also their particular nature. The latter is

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6 With the exception of the English regions in the UK, which only have administrative bodies.
7 In a different paper, we use as indicator for autonomist activity such a binary variable, the existence of regional parties (Fearon and Van Houten, 1998). This indicator can obviously not be used here, since the regional party
imperative for this paper, which explicitly addresses and theorises about the type of demands in assertive regions. The indicator described here should be seen as a first cut at defining a satisfactory measure. It is based on a variety of sources: party and government declarations, newspaper articles, secondary literature, and personal conversations and interviews during my field work.\(^8\)

The underlying criterion for coding demands is the extent to which they constitute a challenge or threat to the existing organisation of a state. For each region in the sample, I try to find out if certain politicians or parties (with at least some political credibility and electoral support) advocate the transfer of powers and autonomy to the region. The time period is the 1990s, with an emphasis on the mid-1990s (for which the economic variables described below are defined). Given the presence of such demands, I try to answer the following questions:

1. Are the demands made by regional politicians affiliated with parties that participate in the regional government (“governing” politicians), or by politicians from parties in the regional opposition (“oppositional” politicians)?
2. Do the demands include demands for the power to tax and related competencies, or are they restricted to demands for more autonomy to spend resources obtained from the centre?

The rationale for the first question is that demands made by governing politicians are more challenging to the state organisation than demands by oppositional politicians. Also, governing politicians have more political responsibilities and accountability, so their demands are more meaningful than those of oppositional politicians. The rationale for the second question is that demands for “spending powers” do not necessarily challenge the existing organisation of a state (they may even strengthen the centre); only demands for “taxing powers” unambiguously do so.

Based on the answers to these questions, I construct the following 4-category indicator of regional assertiveness:

- HIGH: Governing politicians demanding taxing powers.
- MEDIUM: Oppositional politicians demanding taxing powers, or governing politicians demanding spending powers.
- LOW: Oppositional politicians demanding spending powers.
- NONE: No autonomy demands.

The medium category groups together two different scenarios, because it is ambiguous which of the two outcomes constitutes a larger challenge to a state. It should also be noted that I take the region as a whole as a unit. In the case of differences between parties and politicians in a region, I code for the maximum level of assertiveness in the region. Table 1 lists the regions with low, medium, and high levels of assertiveness. The other 48 regions are not assertive.

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\(^8\) A complete list of sources for each case will eventually be available upon request from the author.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOW</th>
<th>MEDIUM</th>
<th>HIGH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aquitane (F)</td>
<td>Wallonia (B)</td>
<td>Flanders (B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany (F)</td>
<td>Alsace (F)</td>
<td>Basque Country (S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Languedoc-Roussillon (F)</td>
<td>Corsica (F)</td>
<td>Northern Ireland (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provence-Alpes-Cote d’Azur (F)</td>
<td>Rhône-Alpes (F)</td>
<td>Scotland (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Rhine-Westphalia (G)</td>
<td>Baden-Württemberg (G)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sardinia (I)</td>
<td>Bavaria (G)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuscany (I)</td>
<td>Hessen (G)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balearic Islands (S)</td>
<td>Emilia-Romagna (I)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canary Islands (S)</td>
<td>Friuli-Venezia Giulia (I)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valencia (S)</td>
<td>Liguria (I)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North-West (UK)</td>
<td>Lombardy (I)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Piedmont (I)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trentino-Alto Adige (I)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Val d’Aosta (I)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Veneto (I)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catalonia (S)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Galicia (S)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Navarra (S)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Northern (UK)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wales (UK)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1  Regions with various levels of regional assertiveness

Independent variables

*Ethnicity, language and religion.* A good measure of cultural difference needs to be independent of the outcome to be explained, in this case regionalist and secessionist activity. Many existing measures fail this test. Due to either direct coding bias or the fact that regional movements politicise and enhance the salience of cultural differences, regions tend to be more likely to be coded as culturally different if regional autonomy demands are present (Fearon and Van Houten, 1998). The indicator used here is the presence or absence of a (historical) language in the region that differs from the language spoken at the centre. Moreover, the more distinct the language of the region and the language at the centre (based on linguistic criteria), the larger the cultural difference is coded to be. Although this indicator only partially captures cultural or ethnic differences, its main advantage is that it is unlikely to be contaminated by the dependent variable. As an alternative indicator, I also include religious differences between a region and the centre. However, since four of the six countries included in the sample (Belgium, France, Spain and Italy) are almost entirely Catholic, this variable is a priori unlikely to be a useful explanatory factor.

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10 This variable is coded 1 if the religion with the most regional adherents differs from the one with the most adherents in the capital region of the country, and 0 otherwise. Sources: Barrett (1982), Lane and Ersson (1999).
11 A possible alternative indicator is a measure of regional identities or “feelings of belonging,” as indicated by public survey data. For example, some Eurobarometer surveys have included questions on regional and national
**Economic variables.** Socio-economic regional data for Western Europe are quite extensive. The main sources are European Union publications and databases, such as Eurostat (1996) and Eurostat’s REGIO-database.\(^{12}\) I use the following data from these sources: regional GDP, regional population, regional unemployment rates, regional employment by sectors, gross value added by sectors, received EU subsidies, and regional expenditure on research and development. Most data are for 1995. To allow a test of H2 and H3, I construct the following two indicators for the relative economic position of a region: regional GDP per capita relative to the national average, and the regional share of national GDP. I also calculate an indicator for the productivity of a regional economy (based on gross value added per employed person in the various economic sectors). Since productivity is a crucial element of international economic competitiveness (Porter, 1998), this measure can provide a test for one aspect of H4. A straightforward measure of regional exposure to economic globalisation is the volume of foreign trade. Thus, the other aspect of H4 can be tested by including the volume of exports of a region, measured as percentage of regional GDP.\(^{13}\)

**Political variables and country dummies.** As mentioned in the previous section, some arguments about the relevance of political factors for regional assertiveness can be summarised as hypotheses on “country-specific” effects. To test for this, I include country dummies in the analysis. I also include a variable for the territorial organisation of a state (Lane and Ersson, 1999), which distinguishes between federal (Belgium, Germany), strongly regionalised (Spain), weakly regionalised (Italy, France), and unitary (UK) states.

**Regional party system.** A test of H6 requires indicators for the configuration of regional party systems, reflecting the electoral importance of regional and national parties. A regional party is here defined as a party that nominates candidates for elections in a strict subset of the regions of a state (often just one), and explicitly, albeit not necessarily primarily, appeals to this subset.\(^{14}\) This includes explicitly “regionalist” parties such as SNP in Scotland or PNV in Basque Country, regionally organised parties such as CSU in Bavaria and CVP or VLD in Flanders, and also the Northern League, which operates in a number of Northern Italian regions. It would exclude parties that aim to be national (e.g., CDU in Germany or the Conservative party in Britain) but may occasionally fail to run a candidate in a particular district or region. Ideally, this variable would be continuous, based on the average vote share of parties in (regional, national and European) elections in the 1990s.\(^{15}\) Lacking such

identities. Although these indicators may be endogenous to the dependent variable, it may be useful to include them in future analyses.

\(^{12}\) I am grateful to Michèle Knodt and Franz Kraus (University of Mannheim) for giving me access to this database.

\(^{13}\) These data are taken from (online) publications of the statistical agencies of Germany (http://www.statistik-bund.de), Italy (http://www.istat.it), the UK (http://www.statistics.gov.uk), and Basque Country http://www.eustat.es; the French Ministry of Foreign Trade (http://www.commerce-exterieur.gouv.fr); and the Belgian National Bank (http://www.nbb.be).

\(^{14}\) See Müller-Rommel (1998) for an alternative definition, which requires regionalist issues to be the primary aspect of a party’s platform. De Winter (1998) provides a comparative, mostly qualitative assessment of a number of such parties. According to my criterion, a party does not need to see itself as “regionalist” to be coded as regional, but it does need to be self-consciously “non-nationally” organised.

\(^{15}\) Hearl et al (1996) uses a continuous variable, although for a different classification of party types and time period. However, it is not clear what the sources of this article’s electoral data are. In future data collection efforts, I will attempt to create such a continuous variable for my definition of regional and national parties.
comprehensive data, I code the party systems as follows, based on a sample of election results and some secondary material:16

1. Only national parties – regional party systems in which nationally organised parties generally receive more than 95% of the vote in elections [N=45].
2. National parties are more prominent than regional parties – nationally organised parties generally receive the majority of regional votes (between 50 and 95%) in elections, regionally organised parties the minority (5-50%) [N=29].
3. Regional parties are more prominent than national parties – regionally organised parties receive the majority (50-95%) of votes, nationally organised parties the minority (5-50%) [N=6].
4. Only regional parties – regionally organised parties receive more than 95% of the regional vote [N=3].

Note that this coding scheme is independent of the number of regional parties in the party system. Empirically, however, the (relatively few) cases in category 4 appear to consist of a large number of such parties, distinguished by their position on non-territorial issues. On the other hand, the cases in category 3 (and some of those in category 2) tend to have dominant regional parties. Thus, H6 can be restated as: the “higher” the category, the stronger the expected demands. Finally, it should be emphasised that there is definitely not a perfect correspondence between regional assertiveness and regional party systems. Some cases of high assertiveness (e.g., Basque Country) do not entirely consist of regional parties, while a number of regions have regional parties that do not make autonomy demands. To give one example, in Andalucia, a poor region in the south of Spain, a regional party has been participating in the regional coalition government, but only focuses on getting the national government to initiate more central investments and employment programs in the region.17

Table 2 provides summary statistics of the various variables. The next section discusses the results of the statistical analysis of these variables.

Results

Table 3 presents the main results of the statistical analysis. The used estimation technique is ordered probit, with the indicator of levels of assertiveness as dependent variable. Model (1) contains the variables that are consistently statistically significant in analyses of the whole sample (83 regions and four levels of assertiveness). Given the increasing attention to the impact of globalisation on subnational politics, model (2) shows the results if an indicator of regional export volume is added. Finally, model (3) is an analysis of only the assertive regions, that is, those regions with a low, medium, or high level of assertiveness (35 regions). This latter analysis investigates which factors can account for variation in particular types of demands in assertive regions. Table 4 provides some comparative statics results for model (1). Note that only 3 of the 4 significant variables vary; relative regional income per capita is held constant at a value near its mean.

A look at the variables that are consistently significant in the analysis suggests the

16 Used sources include Fitzmaurice (1996), Hartmann (1997), De Winter and Türsan (1998), Dupoirier (1998), various individual election results, and a number of interviews and personal conversations during my field work.
Table 2  Descriptive statistics for the analyzed variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Std. dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regional assertiveness  (0=none, 3=high)</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language difference  (0.1=none, 1=most distinct)</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative regional GPD/cap in 1995  (nat avg = 100)</td>
<td>93.8</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional share of national population in 1995  (%)</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>57.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional share of national GDP in 1995  (%)</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>59.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional unemployment rate in 1996  (%)</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional exports  (% of regional GDP)</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average regional productivity  (sample avg = 100)</td>
<td>96.9</td>
<td>97.9</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>171.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional employment in industry in 1995  (%)</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional employment in services in 1995  (%)</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU subsidies in 1993-6  (% of regional GDP)</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>4.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R&amp;D expenditures in 1995  (% of regional GDP)</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.094</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of the state  (3=federal, 0=unitary)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional party system  (1=only nat., 4=only reg.)</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

following conclusions about the hypotheses formulated above. First, according to model (1) in Table 3, the variable indicating the presence of a regionally distinct language explains a significant part of the variation in regional assertiveness. An illustration of the effect of this variable can be seen in Table 4. Assume a region with a relative GDP per capita of 94% of the national average, a regional GDP share of 5%, and only national parties. If this region does not have a distinct language, the predicted likelihood of no assertiveness, a low level of assertiveness, and a medium level is respectively 82%, 12%, and 6%. If this region were to have a highly distinct language, these odds are 41%, 25%, and 34%. It is clear that a higher level of assertiveness is considerably more likely in this latter case.

Thus, the analysis supports H1. However, it should be pointed out that cultural differences are neither necessary nor sufficient to explain variation in regional assertiveness. Some assertive regions do not have a distinct language (e.g., Baden-Württemberg, Rhône-Alpes, Veneto), while some regions with distinct historical languages, such as Sicily and South-West in England (which includes Cornwall) do not show much regionalist activity. Moreover, as model (1) in Table 3 shows, other, non-cultural factors are needed to better account for the variation in regional assertiveness. Moreover, model (3) shows that language differences cannot account for the variation in demands among assertive regions. Thus, it appears not to be the case that the more culturally (i.e., linguistically) distinct a region, the stronger the demands by regional political actors are. Explanations based on cultural differences between a region and the centre seem to be of little help in explaining why politicians in some regions make stronger demands than in others.

Second, two economic variables are consistently significant in the analysis: relative regional income per capita, and the regional share of national GDP. Relative regional income per capita is positively related to higher levels of assertiveness. In other words, relatively rich regions are more likely to be assertive than relatively poor regions, confirming what now seems to be conventional wisdom (e.g., Newhouse, 1997). Thus, H2 seems more plausible
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>(1)a</th>
<th>(2)a</th>
<th>(3)b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language difference</td>
<td>2.88 *</td>
<td>3.14 *</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.78)</td>
<td>(0.82)</td>
<td>(0.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative GDP per capita</td>
<td>0.016 *</td>
<td>0.020 *</td>
<td>0.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0068)</td>
<td>(0.0074)</td>
<td>(0.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional share of GDP</td>
<td>0.089 *</td>
<td>0.10 *</td>
<td>0.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional party system</td>
<td>0.77 *</td>
<td>0.73 *</td>
<td>0.74 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
<td>(0.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional exports</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.022</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.018)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threshold 1</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>2.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.76)</td>
<td>(0.75)</td>
<td>(1.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threshold 2</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>5.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.80)</td>
<td>(0.79)</td>
<td>(1.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threshold 3</td>
<td>6.99</td>
<td>6.91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.10)</td>
<td>(1.08)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>log L</td>
<td>-57.95</td>
<td>-57.20</td>
<td>-24.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\chi^2(4)$</td>
<td>62.31</td>
<td>63.82</td>
<td>17.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage correctly predicted$^c$</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^*$: Significant at .05 level  
$^a$: Models (1)-(2): 4 levels of assertiveness (none, low, medium, high).  
$^b$: Model (3): 3 levels of assertiveness (low, medium, high).  
$^c$: For each observation, the category for which the model predicts the highest probability is the predicted level of assertiveness.

Model (1): 4 levels of assertiveness (none, low, medium, high).  
Model (2): 3 levels of assertiveness (low, medium, high).  

**Table 3** Ordered probit estimations for regional assertiveness

than H3 for this sample. Regional share of national GDP is also positively related to higher levels of assertiveness. This is an indicator of the relative “economic size” of a region, not necessarily the wealth of its population. The existing literature does not directly indicate why this variable would be a significant determinant of autonomy demands. Its relevance becomes plausible, however, when one considers it a measure of the bargaining power of a region vis-à-vis the national state. If this bargaining power is large, it is more likely that political entrepreneurs in the region will be able to mobilise voters by arguing that autonomy demands will lead to concessions from the centre that are valued by the regional population (Fearon and Van Houten, 1998).
Based on the estimated coefficients for model (1) in Table 3; in each scenario, relative regional GDP per capita is 94%.

Table 4 Comparative statics for language difference, regional share of GDP, and regional party system

The impact of the regional share of GDP on levels of assertiveness, as illustrated in Table 4, is considerable. A region with a relative GDP per capita of 94%, no distinct language, only national parties, and a 5% share of national GDP is predicted to be 82% likely to be non-assertive, 12% likely to have a low level of assertiveness, and 6% likely to have a medium level. With a 15% share of national GDP, these odds would be 51%, 24%, and 25%, respectively. For purposes of presentation, relative regional GDP per capita is held constant in Table 4. To see its (relatively modest) impact on levels of assertiveness, consider the
following example, in which we assume a region with a GDP share of 5%, only national parties, and a moderately distinct language (“medium”). If this region is relatively poor (a relative GDP per capita of 80% of the national average), the predicted likelihood of no assertiveness, a low level of assertiveness, and a medium level is respectively 83%, 11%, and 5%. On the other hand, if the region is relatively rich (a relative GDP per capita of 120%), these odds are 62%, 21%, and 17%.

As in the case of language differences, these economic variables seem less useful in accounting for variation in the particular nature of demands. Model (3) in Table 3 shows that the coefficients for these variables are not statistically significant for the sample of assertive regions. Thus, the “structural” (i.e., non-political) factors in the analysis appear to be much better at accounting for the differences between assertive and non-assertive regions than the differences among assertive regions.

Third, H4 seems to find no support in this analysis. Model (2) in Table 3 shows that regional export volume has no statistically significant impact on levels of regional assertiveness, once other economic, cultural, and political variables are controlled for. A similar result (not shown in Table 3) applies to the indicator of regional economic competitiveness. These results raise doubts about the argument that economic globalisation has an important effect on subnational autonomy demands (Van Houten, 2001). However, as mentioned earlier, it is not easy to disentangle the influence of globalisation and other economic factors. It may be possible to interpret the statistically significant results for relative GPD per capita and regional share of GPD as indicators that economically strong and viable regions seek more autonomy to compete in the international economy (which is consistent with H4). More research is necessary to reach more definitive conclusions on this question.

Fourth, country dummies and the territorial organisation of a state do not seem to be relevant factors. As mentioned before, this provides only an indirect test of the relevance of certain political factors, but it at least suggests that H5 finds no support. For example, it indicates that a factor such as the electoral system in a region is not likely to be a relevant explanatory factor for regional assertiveness, since regional electoral systems are typically uniform within countries (with the exception now of the UK).

Finally, and most relevant for my larger project, the results support H6. First, model (1) in Table 3 shows that, even when controlling for cultural and economic variables, the composition of the regional party system has a significant impact on regional assertiveness. As Table 4 illustrates, only when the regional party system consists mostly or entirely of regionally organised parties is a high level of assertiveness likely. A region with facilitating cultural and economic characteristics (relative GDP per capita of 94%, a highly distinct language, and a GDP share of 15%, i.e., the last column in Table 4) is still predicted to have only a 3% chance of being highly assertive if there are only national parties, and only 12% if national parties dominate regional ones. In these cases, the most likely level of assertiveness is medium (66%, and 77%). However, if the party system consists only of regional parties, a high level of assertiveness is now more likely (64%) than a medium level (35%). Second, and most importantly, the regional party system variable can account for (some of) the variation in the nature of demands in assertive regions. In model (3) of Table 3, it is the only statistically significant variable. This result suggests that the argument captured by H6 can considerably improve existing explanations of regionalism.
The other variables mentioned in the previous section were not statistically significant. As expected, the indicator for religious differences between a region and the centre cannot account for any of the variation in autonomy demands in these six Western European countries. The same applies to socio-economic variables such as regional unemployment rates, regional employment by sectors, and research and development expenditures. Furthermore, the amount of European subsidies to a region is not significantly correlated with autonomy demands. This is a bit surprising, since poorer regions are assumed to receive larger subsidies, and one would therefore, based on the evaluation of H2 and H3, expect this variable to be negatively correlated with regional assertiveness. Perhaps richer regions, as a result of their larger lobbying power, receive more EU subsidies than often assumed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actual level</th>
<th>Predicted level</th>
<th>Regions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>■ Model (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>Hamburg (G); South-West (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Bretagne, Languedoc-Roussillon, Provence-Alpes-Cote d’Azur (F); Sardinia, Tuscany (I); Balearic Islands, Canary Islands (S); North-West (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>Aquitane (F); North Rhine-Westphalia (G); Valencia (S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>medium</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Alsace, Corsica, Rhône-Alpes (F); Friuli-Venezia-Giulia (I); Galicia (S); Northern (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>medium</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>Navarra (S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>Northern Ireland, Scotland (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Model (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>Aquitane (F); North Rhine-Westphalia (G); Sardinia (I); Balearic Islands, Canary Islands, Valencia (S)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>medium</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>Rhône-Alpes (F); Northern (UK)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>Northern Ireland, Scotland (UK)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 Incorrectly predicted cases

The statistical performance of the models is acceptable, as both models easily pass the likelihood ratio test. In terms of predicting the observations in this sample, the models perform satisfactorily. Both models improve considerably on the “null model” (in this case, predicting no assertiveness for every region). Moreover, of the cases incorrectly predicted by the models, most are not very far off, while almost all the correctly predicted observations are
unambiguous.\textsuperscript{18} Table 5 lists those regions for which the models make incorrect predictions. The regions for which the models over-predict the level of assertiveness include regions in which cultural differences with the centre have not been extensively politicised (e.g., Navarra, Valencia, Aquitane), and rich (e.g., Hamburg) or economically powerful (e.g., North Rhine-Westphalia) regions that are perhaps too closely tied to national politics for autonomy demands to take root. Under-predicted regions include culturally distinct regions without a large number of regional parties (e.g., Sardinia, Balearic Islands, Scotland), and some non-ethnic regions with a modest share of GDP (e.g., Rhône-Alpes, Northern).

It is necessary to conclude with some qualifications and unresolved issues raised by this statistical analysis. First, the tentative nature of some of the data needs to be emphasised again. Especially the indicator for regional autonomy demands is an ongoing “work in progress,” which has considerable room for improvement in future analyses. Second, a statistical problem needs to be pointed out. Table 3 shows that in all models, but especially in model (1), some of the categories do not separate clearly (i.e., thresholds 1 and 2 are not unambiguously distinct). This can be a result of the relatively small number of observations in some of the categories, but it may also indicate that the coding scheme for the dependent variable needs to be reconsidered.

However, despite these problems and unresolved issues, this analysis provides interesting insights, and seems to be able to complement and improve existing (often single-case or small-\textit{n}) accounts of regional autonomy movements and demands in Western Europe.

**Conclusion**

This paper quantitatively explores the phenomenon of regional assertiveness in Western Europe. It suggests that some of the existing explanations (focusing on cultural and economic factors) can indeed account for part of the variation across regions in autonomy demands. Culturally distinct regions and regions that are economically better off than most other regions in their state are most likely to give rise to demands for state restructuring. However, the analysis also suggests that these explanations are incomplete. A large part of the variation, especially with respect to the nature and strength of observed demands, remains unexplained. A focus on political factors appears necessary to complement existing accounts.

A political factor that appears to have a significant impact on regional assertiveness is the configuration of the regional party system.\textsuperscript{19} This lends support to the argument that electoral considerations and the nature of party competition in a region influence the nature of regional politicians’ demands. When a regional party competes against nationally organised parties, the inclusive voter support that a regional party strives to mobilise can put constraints on the type of competencies it claims for the region, and, thus, for the challenge it poses for the centre. This is a potentially important finding, because it suggests that there are forces endogenous to regional politics that can moderate the pressures on states exercised by

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\textsuperscript{18} For each observation, the model predicts the probabilities that any of the four categories of assertiveness will occur. As “predicted value,” the category with the highest probability is selected. “Not very far off” means that the highest predicted probability is very close to the predicted probabilities for one or more other categories, including the actually observed value.

\textsuperscript{19} Elsewhere, I defend this claim against the charge that regional party systems are themselves endogenous to cultural and economic factors (Van Houten, 2000: ch. 3). For one thing, the statistical analysis controls for such factors, and still finds a positive result for the indicator of regional party competition.
regional autonomy movements and demands. Thus, contrary to what is often claimed, regional assertiveness as such does not necessarily weaken existing states. A closer look at the politics of regional assertiveness is necessary to assess its likely impact on the evolution of European states.

To strengthen these claims, it is necessary to turn again to case studies. Even besides the statistical problems and the preliminary nature of some of the data, the statistical analysis is (as most quantitative analyses are) vulnerable to the claim that it merely establishes a correlation between autonomy demands and regional party systems. Do electoral considerations and party competition really provide the mechanisms that make regional politicians moderate or exacerbate their demands for state restructuring? For example, is the escalation of autonomy demands in a region such as Flanders due to party competition, or to other factors? Does regional party competition constrain autonomy demands in regions such as Catalonia and Bavaria? Detailed case studies are necessary to answer these questions (for a first attempt, see Van Houten, 2000: chs. 5-6).

References


Van Houten, Pieter. 2000. Regional Assertiveness in Western Europe: Political Constraints and the Role of Party Competition. Dissertation, Department of Political Science, University of Chicago