

**A NEW POLITICAL ELITE IN WESTERN EUROPE?
THE POLITICAL CAREERS OF REGIONAL PRIME MINISTERS
IN SPAIN, FRANCE AND THE UNITED KINGDOM (1980-2009)**

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Paper presented in the ECPR General Conference of Potsdam
(9th-12th September 2009)

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse the effects of decentralization on the political careers of regional elites. We observe on the trajectories of the heads of governments of the regions of Spain, France and United Kingdom, focusing on their political careers through multilevel arenas. We ask what are the main career patterns (national or local) and whether there are differences in these patterns by type and evolution of decentralization process. The data analysis reveals the existence of different career patterns, in which local and national experience tend to dissociate, creating different *cursus honorum*. The institutional structure and timing of the evolution of decentralization also produced differences in the type of careers. In France the regional presidents tend to follow a traditional career pattern, while in Spain are specific territorial trajectories. Furthermore, consolidation of regional institutions seems to contribute to the emergence of distinct political careers for regional leaders.

KEYWORDS

POLITICAL ELITES, MULTI-LEVEL SYSTEM, REGIONS, PRIME MINISTERS, POLITICAL CAREERS, WESTERN EUROPE

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INTRODUCTION ³

Different political decentralisation processes have taken place in recent decades in Western Europe (Harvie, 1994; Keating, 1998; Caciagli, 2003). This has awoken growing academic interest in those spheres in which territorial policy or, more generically, the creation of multilevel political systems have been most relevant. New political institutions have arisen as a result of these decentralisation processes (and also with the creation of a European level). Although the entities are still quite different in different European countries, in general the appearance of new regional institutions has been associated with the consolidation of a greater or lesser widespread level of political autonomy. The consequences of this transformation have affected both the general process of governance (Brzinski and Lancaster, 1999; Marks, 1993; Marks, Hooge and Blank, 1996) and the players, particularly in the parties and party systems (Deschower, 2003, 2006; De Winter and Tursan, 1998; De Winter et al, 2006; Hopkin, 2003; Swenden and Maddens, 2009). Works on political elites has not been left outside the scope of this trend. This is especially true for analyses of parliaments, which have started looking at the social selection of the regional elite and its impact on generating consensus and continuity in regional politics, as well as circulation between political arenas (Coller, 1999, 2002, 2008; Stolz, 2003, 2005). Conversely, the study of leaders who govern the new regional institutions has received very little attention. This gap is even more surprising as it deals with an essential position in the regional scenario. According to what is suggested by literature on parliamentary elites, the central question that also should be studied in this case is what effects decentralisation has had on circulation and the *cursus honorum* of political elites.

While this question surpasses the response capacity of our data, our work does try to make advances in this direction and, more generically, in knowledge on this new regional political elite in Western Europe. Concretely, we are going to analyse the political careers of the heads of the regional governments⁴ of Spain (1980-2009), France (1986-2009) and the United Kingdom (1999-2009), with the aim of defining the impact that the creation of the new regional political area has had on them. Subsequently, the careers of the heads of government will be empirically analysed.

The work is organised as follows. Section 1 theoretically discusses some of the implications connected to the political elite and decentralisation, outlining the hypotheses of our research. Section 2 introduces data on the general decentralisation process in each of the countries and on the term of office of the regional heads of

³ This research has been funded by Project SEJ2006-15076-C03-02, from *Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia*, and Project SEJ-4032, from *Junta de Andalucía*. This paper has been presented before to the IPSA XXIst World Congress of Political Science in Santiago de Chile. The authors appreciate the comments and suggestions received by the members of the panel.

⁴ We use the term ‘regional’ in following the common usage employed in studies on decentralisation in Europe. However, do not forget that this classification can have negative connotations in some of the institutions arising from recent decentralisation, which tend to demand a status as ‘national’ as one of the main reasons for their existence. To make the terms of comparison easier, in the present work we make reference to ‘regional’ or ‘subnational’ entities to refer to the new level between local and state, distinguishing them from other ‘national’ or ‘central’ institutions corresponding to a state level.

government included in the study. Section 3 presents empirical data on political careers as a response to the hypotheses.

1. DECENTRALISATION AND POLITICAL ELITES

We can define the relationship between decentralisation and political elites as a relation of influence that is exercised in both directions. On the one hand, the existence or creation of a new political level influences the selection and circulation of elites. And in the opposite direction, the characteristics of the political elite (their attitudes, their experiences and their aspirations) determine the creation, institutionalisation and evolution of the new institutions (Westlake, 1994; Deschouwer, 2001; Verzichelli and Edinger, 2005; Collier et al, 2007: 5). Our work will be centred on the first direction.

Thinking essentially about the effects that decentralisation can have on regional parliaments, Stolz has distinguished the phenomena of *professionalisation*, derived from social distinctiveness, and of the creation of a new group of regional politicians, the product of territorial distinctiveness between regional politicians and the rest of national politicians (Stolz, 2001a: 84; 2003, 2005). In the last case, the influence of elites on the evolution of decentralisation can turn out to be decisive, given that regional politicians can become the driving engine of regional self-governance or, conversely, become an agent for territorial integration with the state (Stolz, 2001a: 91-2).

The problem with Stolz' territorial distinctiveness of Stolz refers back to a more general debate on the effects that creating multilevel political systems (federal or regional) has on the integration both of political elites and parties and party systems. In this sense, the cases in the United States and Canada appear as paradigmatic examples of integration and bifurcation in their political systems (Moncrief, 1994; Scarrow, 1997: 254). With respect to the US, incentives in the political system to favour ascending careers through different levels (multilayered careers) has favoured the integration of the political elite (Schlesinger, 1958, 1966; Polsby, 1968; Ruchelman, 1970; Shin and Jackson, 1979; Sabato, 1983; Pound, 1992; Francis and Kenny, 2000). A similar model seems to derive from the political careers followed by members of parliament and the *ministerpräsident* in the German *länder* (Stolz, 2003; Schneider, 2001). Conversely, in Canada federalism has tended to weaken the integration of political parties at different levels and also to create differentiated political careers, despite the fact that the regional elites have undergone a professionalisation phenomenon parallel to what has occurred in the state parliaments of the United States (Chandler and Chandler, 1987; Barrie and Gibbins, 1989; Carty, 1991; Moncrief and Thompson, 1992; Moncrief, 1994, 1998).

The heads of government of federal and regional entities are also conducive to observing the effects of the creation of multilevel systems, although its analysis has been neglected until the present⁵. It is clear that a part of the problems referring to the area of parliamentary elites (like professionalisation) cannot be automatically

⁵ In federal systems, heads of subnational government has not received systematic and comparative analysis either until the present time. Among the most relevant studies, meriting mention are works devoted to the governors in the United States (Sabato, 1978; Beyle, 2004) and to German *ministerpräsident* (Schneider, 2001). Although the political careers of the Canadian premiers have not been studied as a whole, there are works on their influence on the running and results of provincial governments of Canada (Pal and Taras, 1988; Dunn, 1996; Bernier et al, 2005).

transferred to the area of government elites. In the case of recently decentralised countries, the heads of regional governments belong to institutions that have held the conditions for high professionalisation of their public posts since the outset. But it is relevant to know to what degree regional presidents are fully integrated into the national political elite or if, conversely, they establish or are in the process of establishing a distinctive political elite.

The analysis of the political careers of regional presidents can represent a good strategy for approaching possible integration or bifurcation between regional and national political elites. Through them, the relationships and connections can be directly observed that are established between different political levels, as well as their level of commitment to decentralisation. Thus, they have also been used to study the political careers of legislative elites emerging from European institutions (Cotta, 1984: 126; Scarrow, 1997: 254; Stolz, 2003: 225).

From the viewpoint of political careers, there are two very different situations. On the one hand, the heads of regional governments can come principally from national institutions. The leaders of new regional entities hold one of the top positions on the ladder of political system posts. They manage an executive, head an administration with a public budget and embody the maximum territorial representation of the region that they govern. They are also in a position that is closer to citizens and, therefore, more conducive to exercising influence over their demands (Coller et al, 2008: 114). These resources can become incentives that guide the ambition of national politicians with great experience towards these posts, which would probably make it difficult for outsiders or lower-level politicians or with less experience to reach the forefront of regional governments. On the other hand, the creation of new self-governance institutions may have been used (as suggested by the thesis on territorial distinctiveness) by a new regional or local elite to convert it into their base of power. As a consequence, our first and principal hypothesis aims to verify if the new regional leaders arising from decentralisation have a *cursus honorum* with local-regional predominance (as a reflection of the territorial distinctiveness produced by decentralisation) or with national predominance (by elites that move down to regional levels). To the degree that regional leaders proceed from the centre of the system, one could postulate that the new regional governments could become new power arenas that the national political elite permeate. This could lead to an integration of regional and national politics. Conversely, the emergence of models of territorial careers, which do not need to pass through the centre, could be an indication of the segregation or bifurcation of the regional political elite.

The effects of the aforementioned supposition could vary over time. Recent experiences of territorial decentralisation are also submitted to an institutionalisation process (Huntington, 1968). Due to this, we can predict that progressive institutionalisation of regions could secure specific career patterns and encourage the differentiation of the regional elite. Although the decentralisation process may initially tend to be controlled by the national political elite, we could formulate an hypothesis that the institutionalisation of regional self-governments may lead a tendency favouring the progressive differentiation of regional leaders with predominantly local-regional careers. If this happens, it is likely that models of regional political careers will gain momentum, in detriment to national career models.

To tentatively verify the validity of these hypotheses, the regional presidents of three Western European countries will be analysed that have undergone decentralisation processes since the seventies⁶. This work will deal with the political careers of the heads of regional governments in France, Spain and the United Kingdom. Except for some prior exploratory works (López Nieto, 2003; Bidégaray, 2004), the comparative analysis of the members of regional governments still remains a little-studied field in these countries. Our analysis will include the 164 heads of government⁷ of the 45 regions of France, Spain and the United Kingdom⁸ (table 1). Since the origins of the respective decentralisation processes and until the present, regional heads of government have grown substantially. In Spain 73 *presidentes autonómicos* have been elected between the 1980 and 2009 elections (for a total of 124 terms of office). In France, between the elections of 1986 and 2004, the number has grown to 83 *présidents of conseil régional* (for 103 terms of office). On the contrary, the relatively small geographic size and relatively short time devolution has been in force means that only 6 first ministers have been elected between 1999 and 2007.

2. DECENTRALISATION AND HEADS OF REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS IN SPAIN, FRANCE AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

2.1. Decentralisation processes and the basic components of regional institutions: a panoramic vision.

France, Spain and the United Kingdom all went through processes of decentralisation in the last two decades of the 20th century. Spain started to decentralise in parallel with the transition to democracy and established criteria for its implementation in the 1978 Constitution (Morata, 2001). Seventeen autonomous communities were created with a common institutional model: an assembly with legislative powers, an executive branch and a president elected by the assembly (Aja, 1999; Moreno, 2008). The 1978 Constitution also established two types of regions based on the degree of autonomy, for which a reduced group of communities (Catalonia, the Basque Country, Galicia and Andalusia) enjoy a greater degree of competencies and political attributions than the rest (Morata, 1992). Over time the differences between both groups have diminished and all communities have the same levels of autonomy. Not all communities have elections at the same time. The first elections were held in the Basque Country and Catalonia in 1980. In 1983 autonomous elections were held for the regions with common governance systems. The result has led to a heightened level of political and territorial pluralism, with diverse models of electoral behaviour (Botella, 1989; Vallès, 1992; Alcántara and Martínez, 1995; Pallarès and Keating, 2003).

⁶ Our objective is to extend our study in the near future to compare other cases like Belgium and Italy.

⁷ In this study, we only consider the heads of regional governments who have been appointed by an assembly directly elected by citizenry. Outside of our universe are individuals who held interim posts or those elected by indirect-election assemblies at the beginning of autonomy (such as what happened in France until 1986 or in Spain until the first autonomous region elections).

⁸ Owing to the special features of government evolution in North Ireland, we have not included it in the present study.

In the United Kingdom, devolution was put in motion after the Labour party victory of 1997, with the failed referendum of 1979 as precedent. The British process was characterised by the creation of an asymmetrical decentralisation that only extended to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as the recuperation of London's local authority (Bogdanor, 1999). After the approval of legislation in 1998, the level of autonomy was different in each case, with different types of levels of competencies and financing (Lynch, 2001; Mitchell, 2003; Tonge, 2003; Peele, 2003; Keating, 2005). While the autonomy of Northern Ireland has experienced notable instability in the formation of its governments, in Scotland and Wales the Labour Party held majority, until the Scottish election of 2007, when the Scottish National Party defeated them and came to government power for the first time (Lynch, 2006; McGarvey and Cairney, 2008; Trench, 2008).

In France the decentralisation process had its origins in the 60s and led to the creation of the region as an entity of indirect representation. In 1982, the *loi Defferre* gave a decisive push towards territorial decentralisation by establishing, among other aspects, the direct popular election of the regional councillors, granting them greater competencies in economic planning and promotion, although the law did not transfer legislative competencies to the regional councils (Mabileau, 1991; Dupoirier 1998; Levy, 2001). In the French model, all regions have identical models of institutional organisation and competency levels. Corsica is an exception, since the approval in 1991 of the statute of Territorial Collectivity whose primary features are a Territorial Assembly and an Executive Council. The first French regional elections took place in 1986, and since then have been marked by strong national logic (Perrineau, 1987; Perrineau et al, 1992, 1999). Initially a proportional system was established for the regional councils, but the difficulties encountered after the presidential elections and, in particular, the conflicts arising due to the presence of the National Front in some governing majorities formed in 1998, gave way to the implementation of a majority system that determined the results of the 2004 elections (Dolez et al, 2005).

As a whole, the three countries chosen for our analysis have experienced, in the last thirty years, a process of transformation from a unitary state to a decentralised state through the creation of regional levels with their own representative institutions. In all of them there is an elected assembly that nominates a head of the regional government on the basis of a parliamentary majority for a legislative period (four years for Spain and the United Kingdom and six for France). Nonetheless, in each case there are substantial differences to keep in mind. First, there exists an enormous disparity in the temporal existence of the regional institutions. If we take the holding of the first regional elections as a starting point, Spain initiated its trajectory almost thirty years ago, while the United Kingdom has barely accumulated ten years. Secondly, the degree of decentralisation is diverse in each case. While in France, all of the regions initially enjoyed limited competencies and lacked legislative autonomy, in English and Spanish territories they were much greater. In Spain, as noted, some communities had many more initial competencies than others, but their evolution has tended to equalise them. Third, the territorial extension of decentralisation is not homogenous. While in Spain and France, all of the national territory has been divided into regions (more unequal in geographical size and population in Spain than in France), in the United Kingdom decentralisation has been limited territorially, leaving out the most important region (England). Finally, it is important to note differences in other institutional rules that indirectly determine access to regional presidency, like the electoral system

(proportional for the United Kingdom and Spain, majority system since 2004 in France) or the rules concerning compatibility of political offices (much more restrictive in Spain than in the United Kingdom or France where the tradition of *cumul des mandats* predominates).

2.2. The heads of regional executives and the characteristics of their terms of office

Hereafter, the principal characteristics of the terms of office of heads of regional governments are described: when they reach their post, how long the term is, how they enter and what the process is for leaving the government. We will analyse the data in together, with special attention given to their differences according to national idiosyncrasies.

Age is a useful indicator for locating political posts within the life courses of individuals (Cohen, 1988; Schlesinger, 1966). Heads of government tend to reach this office for the first time over the age of fifty. This age is coherent with ascension to the presidency at an advanced stage of a political career, after years of experience in other institutions, such as occurs with heads of national governments (Müller and Philipp, 1991). Nonetheless, Spanish presidents tend to ascend to office at a significantly younger age than their French and English counterparts. This is a typical model for Spanish political elites of the current democracy that has already been seen both in government positions as well as in national parliaments (Rodríguez, 2006; Linz et al, 2000).

The terms for the heads of government can be considered an indicator of institutional output, sine less duration implies less capacity to decisively influence public policy (Müller and Philipp, 1991: 138; Berlinski et al, 2007: 247). From this point of view, the heads of regional government are characterised by a low political impact at the helm of government, given that the average term is slightly more than two and a half years. The high degree of turnover is clear if we distinguish between those positions that last less than four years, the length of a term of office (close to 40% of the total of individuals), and those that remain more time at the head of government and that can exercise decisive strength in regional governance. Although there are no substantial differences, French governors have longer terms than their Spanish and British counterparts⁹.

One complementary indicator with respect to turnover is the number of actual real terms of office in the government. One observes even more clearly the time restrictions that exist in holding office for regional leaders. Only 42.1% of individuals remain in office for more than one term, the time at which we can begin to identify the regional leaders with the highest degrees of influence. If we count those that have held office for two terms or more, in Spain the leaders can be stressed (34.2), ahead of France (25.8%) and the United Kingdom that only has one case¹⁰.

⁹ The apparent longer terms of regional French presidents is related to the longer length of terms of French regional councils, which are six years. In reality, two of every three French presidents has been in office six years or less, the time of one term of office, which coincides with the number of British first ministers who have been in office four years or less and is higher than Spanish presidents, where the term is four years.

¹⁰ Among those individuals with the longest terms are some of the most relevant territorial leaders. In Spain, J.C. Rodríguez Ibarra (24 years), Jordi Pujol (23), José Bono (21) and Manuel Chaves (19)

The first nomination as head of regional government tends to occur at the beginning of the term of office, although there are a relevant number of individuals who reached the post by replacing an individual of the same party in the middle of term (22%). In contrast, it is very uncommon that a change of leader and a change of party occur simultaneously independent of electoral results, a phenomenon which undoubtedly aids in political stability. The term of office is exercised in a continuous fashion, with only slight interruptions¹¹, until it is ended due to electoral defeat or the resignation of a head of government in anticipation of new elections.

In one of every ten cases, the head of government resigns in order to enter or hold a post in another political arena. This fact can serve as an indirect indicator of the value that the office of head of government has in a political career. The cases of France and Spain in this respect present two different models. While nearly all of the presidents of regional councils in France who resign for this reason, do so in order to keep a term in office obtained in the national parliament, in Spain the autonomous community presidents only leave government in order to become ministers. In Spain and the United Kingdom, some heads of government were separated from their offices after votes of no confidence in the assembly, something that has not happened to date in France¹².

Apart from the motivations inherent in the movements of political careers, there are other more exceptional reasons that abruptly detain the political careers of heads of governments. One of them is a resignation provoked by a political crisis (seven cases) or by personal scandal (ten cases) or due to adverse judicial decisions (two cases). These sorts of endings augur, in the majority of cases, the end of political life¹³. Another cause for the end of a mandate is either the death or illness of the leader (five cases in

represent true noteworthy regional models arising from decentralisation. In France, six presidents have reached 18 years in office: V. Giscard d'Estaing, Jacques Blanc, Robert Savy, René Garrec, Charles Baur and Antoine Karam. Of this group of long-living regional leaders, only Frenchman Karam, president of the regional council of Guyane, continues in his post. The rest have left politics or continue at national institutions as parliamentarians (Bono, Giscard d'Estaing, Blanc and Garrec) or ministers (Chaves).

¹¹ Only seven heads of government have returned to the post after leaving it the first time, three cases in France (Michel Giraud, Michel Sapin, Jean-Pierre Soisson) and four in Spain (Jaume Matas, Francesc Antich, Jerónimo Saavedra and Juan Hormaechea). French presidents resigned during the term of office, due to accumulation of terms (opting for a national post) or due to political controversy (Soisson). In the case of Spain, presidents have been displaced through votes of no confidence or close political defeats, which gave rise to unstable coalition governments during a period of time of four years or less. All presidents, both French and Spanish, recovered government leadership in the following term of office.

¹² In Spain, six presidents lost a vote of no confidence that removed them from office (E. Eiroa, J. Saavedra, F. Fernández Martín, X. Fernández Albor, J. Espert and J. Hormaechea). Only the last managed to recover presidency in the following term of office. In Wales, Alun Michael lost the house's trust in 2000, a year after his election. In France, this case has never occurred, although there have been forced resignations by government majority, like what happened with B. Harang (UDF) and J.P. Gauzès (RPR), who obtained their appointments from the far right vote, after being rejected by their own parties. Conversely, Charles Millon

¹³ Of the heads of government who resigned due to political crisis, only some of them continued for some time as parliamentarians (Gauzès, Garaikoetxea, Rodríguez Martínez, Gómez de las Rocas). Out of those who resigned due to scandals or accusations of corruption, only Demetrio Madrid continued as a parliamentarian after proving his innocence. In France, two presidents were judicially removed (Charles Millon, due to infraction of parliamentary regulation, and Camilla Sudre, due to annulment of elections; Sudre was replaced by his wife, Margie Sudre). In no case have those who resigned or were removed been able to recover leading roles in regional political life.

France and one in Scotland) that is clearly linked to the pattern of age of ascension. In Spain, where the leaders are younger, to date no leader has ended a term of office in this fashion.

3. THE POLITICAL CAREERS OF THE HEADS OF REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

3.1. Political careers through each political arena

A general and comparative analysis between countries based on the trajectories of the heads of government shows common threads and differences between countries (table 3).

Firstly, a common pattern appears in careers in the three countries, with slight variations (between 54.4% in France and 66.7% in the United Kingdom). Previous regional experience constitutes a very relevant credential in the subsequent ascension to regional leadership¹⁴. It would appear logical that the parliamentary nature of the regional executive would exercise a strong bias in favour of prior parliamentary experience on the part of the maximum leader. Nevertheless, there is a high number of heads of government that did not pass previously through the regional assembly (four of every ten individuals). Additionally, their previous experience in regional institutions, as members of parliament or counsellors, is very short at just seven years. This limits the general scope of the hypothesis on distinctiveness, at least that which is generated by strictly regional careers, and suggests the greater importance of local and national trajectories.

Previous regional experience is similar in Spain and France. In the British case, the low number of regional first ministers in the United Kingdom to date allows for two possible tendencies: either they have to educate themselves in the national British tradition, in which case the head of government requires a previous solid parliamentary career in the political arena or else they would tend to approximately imitate what is observed in Spain or France.

Secondly, experience in local institutions appears as a credential of prime importance, whether in town counsels or in supra-municipal entities (the General Counsel in France and the island and county entities found in some Spanish communities). Not only do these have more weight than regional mandates, but they have also developed over a considerably longer period of time than the others. It is also important to highlight the significant presence of mayors among the heads of regional governments. In this presence one can detect the strong links between regional leadership and local political formation that characterises the figure of territorial *notables* (Bidégaray, 2004).

¹⁴ By prior regional experience, we refer to experience as a regional parliamentarian or minister in a previous term of office in the case of coming into government power at the beginning of a term or experience from the beginning of the present term of office for those who come into power in mid-term. At the time of appointment, all regional heads of government studied are in turn members of the parliamentary assembly, given that in most regions analysed, this is an indispensable requirement to be able to obtain parliament's trust.

The weight of national experience shows important differences between countries. While in France the local experience of regional leaders is very high (nine out of ten individuals held a municipal office and half passed through the general counsels), this is less in the case of Spain (only four of ten) and almost zero in the United Kingdom. The French *cursus honorum* makes it nearly a requirement to have dedicated more than 15 years to local institutions (frequently city hall) in order to later attain regional leadership. A significant number of mayors remain in office while simultaneously exercising the office of president of regional councils. Many others, forced by the limits that exist for the accumulation of terms, resign as mayor but retain adjunct positions as advisors to the mayor during the period of their regional presidency. These facts demonstrate the point to which the creation of regions in France has not been able to avoid the dominance of local elites in detriment to the creation of a true *new* regional elite (Bidégaray, 2004). Additionally, two of every three French presidents have maintained the mayoral post concurrently, although when forced to choose between the two because of the excessive accumulation of terms, they have preferred to resign from local office in favour of regional leadership¹⁵. Finally, in the political career of French leaders, local experience is also acquired with a post to the General Council, although rarely as president of that institution.

Thirdly, the trajectory via the national arena, principally parliamentary, also appears as a relevant credential. Half of the heads of government were national parliamentarians and one in four had a post in the government. Parliamentary responsibilities are primarily found in the lower house¹⁶ (the Congress of Deputies, the National Assembly and the House of Commons). On the other hand, national office occupies less time in the careers than the local posts. This could indicate a lesser weight for this arena, but it probably means the opposite: the national arena allows for an accumulation of political capital sufficient to reach regional leadership in less time than in the local arena.

Experience in national institutions also demonstrates notable differences according to country, varying between the predominance of trajectories via the national arena in the Scottish and Welsh cases (83.3%) and a lesser significance of these in the French (60%) and Spanish cases (49.3). In accordance with this fact, experience in the House of Commons is a common thread to be found in Scottish and Welsh prime ministers. In contrast, this type of credential is not as common in French and Spanish individuals. Additionally, the national parliamentary term is maintained in all instances in the United Kingdom, in half the cases in France and almost in no cases in Spain, where individuals tend to resign from their national seat when they are elected as autonomous community presidents¹⁷. This lesser experience is also reflected in the duration of the parliamentary

¹⁵ Four regional French presidents resigned from mayorship to be able to access regional posts. Some of them had obtained mayorship only a few years earlier (Claude Gewerc, Jean-Luc Harousseau and Pierre Joel Bonté had barely been three years in office). With regard to the opposite situation, the extremely long career path of Georges Frêche stands out as mayor of Montpellier for 27 years.

¹⁶ Meriting mention is the significant minority of individuals who passed through the upper house in Spain (one of every three presidents who was a national parliamentarian came from the senate), in contrast to the model existing in the Spanish ministerial elite (Rodríguez, 2006).

¹⁷ Unlike the United Kingdom and France, the term of office of autonomous community councillor in Spain is incompatible with being a member of Congress. Conversely, the regional post is compatible with holding a seat in the Senate, which many autonomous community councillors access as nominated members representing the autonomous community parliamentary houses.

post: Spanish presidents barely spend four years on average in the national parliament, while the French presidents triple that number, and the British quadruple it.

Experience as members of the national government shows notable differences between countries. Only one in ten Spanish autonomous presidents were in the government¹⁸, while half of the first ministers of Scotland and Wales were ministers or held other high posts in Whitehall. Also, many of these British ministers were involved in ministries linked to the devolution, from which shortly after they passed into the leadership at new regional institutions. More time will have to pass in order to determine if what is significant in the trajectory of the British first ministers is having been minister (in which case this route will be maintained) or having been linked to the initial process of devolution (in which case the ministerial route could gradually diminish).

Finally, it is worth noting the insignificance of the European credential in the *cursus honorum* of regional leaders. This is in consonance with the pattern of emerging European careers, that is becoming a final destination for a set group of national politicians, and less and less a specific career path (Stolz, 2001b; Scarrow, 1997). In this sense, the French case is unique in that there is a (minority) presence of regional presidents that have passed through the European Parliament. Nevertheless, rules limiting the accumulation of terms of office now also limit access to the European Parliament with concurrent regional terms of office. This has limited in the subsequent years the extension of this credential among French regional leaders..

3.2. Top-down or bottom-up political careers?

The previous point shows us that the regional elite studied are far from presenting patterns of simple and homogeneous careers. We are not seeing political outsiders, but politicians with a wide range of different political experiences and, in many cases, in different arenas of the political system. To be able to respond to our first hypothesis, we must look at the formation of sequences in the trajectories via career patterns.

Arranging political experiences into a single indicator is not easy for individuals who have followed highly varied careers. We can find three broad models (one-level, two-level and multilevel), which are subdivided into eight secondary models, according to the level that has prevailed in the career over time (see table 4). If individuals from these elite come from the centre and are integrated into the national elite, career patterns with a national predominance will have to be detected. Conversely, if we find elite with traits of distinctiveness or bifurcation, the presidents should have had careers with local or regional predominance. The data are set forth in table 6.

¹⁸ Five autonomous community presidents were ministers before holding regional posts: M. Chaves, J.A. Griñán, J. Montilla, E. Aguirre and M. Fraga, who was a minister during the reign of Franco and then was leader of the Popular Alliance during the period of democracy. J. Matas was minister between his first and second terms of office as president of the Balearic Islands.

In France, 67 % of regional presidents start their political careers at local institutions and then move through two, three or even four levels during their political careers¹⁹. After this path, the individuals become regional presidents, holding a local post simultaneously with a regional or national post. Among the main political career models, a large majority have careers with a local predominance local (67.1%). Compared to this figure, careers with national predominance have less weight (20%), although almost all of them are multilevel. Conversely, there are hardly any examples of careers that are specifically or predominantly regional (7.1%).

Despite the important political paths of regional presidents and the predominance of local experience, we cannot extract a clear trend towards differentiation or bifurcation. The majority of careers with local predominance are multilevel (35.3%), which means that they have also moved through the national level, while there are less that are two-level (27.1%), which are the most genuinely territorial and have not passed through the centre, except in a couple cases. Only 40% of presidents have not held national posts, of which the majority are politicians with political careers carved out in municipalities and departments. Consequently, the majority of French regional presidents maintain a pattern of mandate accumulation, similar to the rest of the French political elite, despite attempts by the legislator to establish limits on accumulation with the aim of favouring regionally orientated careers (Knapp, 1991). Everything points to the fact that recourse to power of regional leaders continue to be linked to their positions in other arenas of French politics (Nay, 1997: 185).

In the case of Great Britain, individuals have a type of political career that is concentrated in the Parliament of the United Kingdom in Westminster and the corridors of Whitehall. The political careers of the first ministers of Wales and Scotland have been channelled through the parliament. Almost all of them started their careers as national parliamentarians, to then move on to holding posts as ministers or high-level government functionaries. They then come to power as representatives in regional parliaments and were then later nominated as first ministers²⁰. Due to this, the careers of the few cases available until the present share an identical pattern, with small and circumstantial differences.

Compared to France and the United Kingdom, Spanish presidents hold the greatest traits of political specialisation at regional entities, although they also have high degrees of diversity in their previous political careers. Four of every ten autonomous community presidents started their careers at the municipal level (42.5%), while the rest secured their first post at a national level (28.8 %) or at a regional level (21.9%). The majority only passed through one level, although one in four were in three levels or more. And half accessed autonomous community presidency from a regional post, although one of every four came from a national post. Faced with this scenario, it is not strange to

¹⁹ Adrien Zeller, president of the Alsace Regional Council since 1997, symbolises the culmination of a multilevel career, after having moved through all the political arenas analysed after starting his political career in 1973. Before obtaining regional presidency, Zeller had been mayor of Saverne, general councillor of Bajo-Rin, regional councillor of Alsace, deputy in the National Assembly, Secretary of State of Social Security and a member of European Parliament.

²⁰ The only exception to this model was Jack McConnell, whose career has taken place with eight years as local councillor in Stirling, where he became the leader of the Scottish labour party. In the 90s he ran the party and promoted a Labour party campaign in favour of Scottish autonomy. After being minister of the new Scottish government for two years, he became first minister (2001-2007).

confirm that there is no political career model that leads to autonomous community presidency in Spain. Moreover, there are careers that are totally or predominantly local (35.6%), part of them also moving through national parliament. Secondly, there are careers with national predominance (34.3%) that almost never go through a local level. Nonetheless, the great difference in Spanish regions compared to the French and British is the existence of careers done exclusively or predominantly in the parliament and regional governments (23.2%). This supports the hypothesis of the appearance of distinctive and bifurcated political careers among the regional governmental elite.

The degree of statistical correlation between the different arenas confirms the solidity of some of the relationships between arenas (table 5). Firstly, a negative relationship appears between regional experience and the national parliamentary arena, which indicates that a part of those who move through regional posts tend to not pass through the national parliament. It also shows the relationship between the two local arenas on the one hand and between the two national arenas on the other. Thus, those who pass through supra-municipal entities (general council in France, municipal councils in the Canary Islands, general council in the Basque Country) also tend to move through the municipalities. Similarly, those who have held posts in the national government tend to have also held posts in the national parliament (which points towards the hypothesis that many of them have top-down careers and perhaps in retreat). Finally, those who hold supra-municipal posts tend to move through national posts, which makes the French *cursus honorum* model clear once again that was traditional in the years prior to decentralisation, in which a part of the political elite started their career paths in general councils.

As a whole, there are noteworthy differences in political careers depending on the country, owing to the different structure of opportunities. The careers of British leaders follow the *national two-level* pattern, which has allowed national politicians to be recruited to the front lines of the new regional governments. In France, on the other hand, presidents have followed the traditional pattern of the accumulation of municipal and national posts, to which leadership in regional governments have been added in the end. Finally, in Spain presidencies are distributed between those who have followed bottom-up careers with local predominance, those who have developed top-down careers with national predominance and those who have focused primarily on regional entities, whose number establishes a difference with respect to France and the United Kingdom.

These data suggest that more profound decentralisation, combined with a broader structure of opportunities, favours the territorial distinctiveness of regional political leaders up to a certain point. This differentiation arises from careers that are exclusively regional or local-regional, in which regional leaders separate from the traditional channels that take place in the national arena. Nonetheless, if this relationship were correct, we would have to note the positive evolution of these differentiated careers as regional levels are institutionalised.

3.3 Differences between careers over time?

Our second hypothesis asks whether regional and local careers increase over time and as regional institutions are established. Data in table 7 provides proof in the sense of what

our hypothesis states. In the case of Spain, national political careers are more important during the first years of decentralisation than later. Without reaching equal ranking, the image of the first regional Spanish presidents approaches the scenario presented with British first ministers and French presidents. Conversely, the characteristics of the presidents elected in the last term of office already have very differentiated traits with respect to their predecessors. The majority of autonomous community presidents in 2007 have passed through town councils and autonomous entities, while a difference is revealed between those who held national posts and those that have not. The evolution of experience by the different levels of Spanish presidents can be seen more clearly through the movement in terms of office (graph 1). Regional experience becomes a basic requirement for accessing the frontlines of the government, in parallel to municipal experience. Conversely, the number of presidents who have been in the national parliament has constantly decreased over time. By contrast, the presence of ex-minister presidents has not stopped growing, especially in the most recent terms of office. This suggests a progressive increase in the political value of autonomous community presidencies. As a political career pattern starts to be shaped that is typical for becoming an autonomous community president, only national leaders who have been in the government find themselves in positions to compete for running autonomous community governments, while the national parliamentarians no longer follow this route.

The French case apparently shows a similar evolution. However, the increase affects all levels equally, unlike in Spain. French presidents elected since 2004 have in all cases held a municipal post in the past and have been, in almost all cases, mayors. Both in Spain and in France, the institutionalisation of regional governments has entailed an increase in the number of areas through which their heads of government move. However, this has a different meaning in each individual case. In France, decentralisation has simply contributed to expanding the number of levels through which the national elite pass, while in Spain, it has contributed to the emergence of political careers with regional predominance.

The longitudinal vision of the careers of Spanish and French presidents blurs some differences between countries, but makes others emerge. While in France it seems like the evolution of regional presidents contributes to integrating the regional level into the national circuit of available posts, in Spain, two phenomena can be distinguished more clearly. On the one hand, the appearance of individuals who access regional presidencies from territorial careers (local and/or regional). On the other hand, the increase in national leaders who have passed through the central government and decided to transfer to autonomous politics to compete for the government. In both cases, the institutionalisation of autonomous communities seems to have generated its own and specific value for regional leadership.

We do not have a long enough time perspective to include the British case. But the different evolutions of the French and Spanish cases open a question about what evolution the selection of regional British leaders will experience as time goes on.

CONCLUSIONS

The recent decentralisation of some countries in Western Europe opens up a query about the effects that can be generated among the political elite and, in particular, on the emergence of regional political elite that is distanced or bifurcated. This hypothesis, which has been pointed out in the study of regional parliamentarians, could be suitably outlined to regional government leaders. The appearance of new regional elite rulers should be able to be empirically detected in the political careers of the heads of regional governments through career patterns with regional predominance or with courses that are local-regional. Nonetheless, the profiles of political careers are highly dependent on the structure of opportunities in each political system, as well as the degree of consolidation of their institutions. Due to this, we must also expect differences in career patterns between countries and over time.

The data collected on heads of regional government in Spain, France and the United Kingdom partly corroborate both hypotheses, but also introduce some unexpected results. Thus, the majority of regional heads of government have had political careers in many different political arenas. The diversity of these routes makes the objective of *measuring* possible differences with respect to national political elite difficult. The political value that the region has acquired has raised the price of the *cursus honorum* necessary to reach leadership and the individuals who do attain it are professional politicians with long careers. However, it is possible to identify some models that point towards the appearance of a typical trajectory of said leaders. The growing importance of previous experience in the government or parliament of the region seems to be parallel to the drop in experience in national parliamentary posts. At the same time, local entities are seen as good playing fields that are conducive to starting out the political careers of future regional presidents. A career pattern is in question that is strengthened over time, so that regional institutionalisation seems to favour political careers that are increasingly more centred on the territory and less dependent on the centre.

Nonetheless, this general panorama is highly determined by the structure of opportunities and the political decentralisation model of each country. In the case of the United Kingdom, the political weakness of its local government and the weight of Westminster as a recruitment centre for political elites are clearly reflected in the political careers of its first ministers. However, the development of devolved entities could strengthen the territorial profile of its leaders, following the evolution of Spanish autonomous community presidents. Their point of commonality is the political attractive of a high level of regional decentralisation. Thus, in Spain a growing distinctiveness is seen in the political careers of autonomous community presidents who come from the national arena and those who have not held posts there. Conversely, in France the long political trajectories of its regional presidents does not seem to establish any difference, but rather contributes to making the phenomenon more intense of the accrual of posts in French politics. However, French regional presidencies seem to increasingly be a destination point and not just an intermediate transit point. This could end up introducing changes in the value of regions in the *cursus honorum* of the French elite.

These initial conclusions spotlight future questions that we must bear in mind during our research agenda. On the one hand, it is advisable to expand the field of comparison with other countries with similar levels of decentralisation to some of those included in the present study (Belgium, Italy). On the other hand, we should expand the perspective of the position of the heads of regional governments in the entirety of individuals' political careers, analysing subsequent routes after they leave the government. Both procedures let us check the conclusions of our first hypothesis, in order to see how far possible differentiation extends also to other decentralised systems and if differentiation necessary means bifurcation and the separation of elites in different arenas. Finally, it would also be advisable to be able to use other types of data that are more qualitative, such as interviews with political leaders, in order to verify whether the results of our second hypothesis, lacking greater longitudinal perspectives, brings about the shaping of specific political outlooks in the regional leaders analysed.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Regional prime ministers in Spain, France and United Kingdom

	Spain	France	United Kingdom	All
Regions	17	26	2	45
Regionals Prime Ministers	73	85	6	164
Legislative terms	124	103	6	233

Source: Authors' elaboration from official sources.

Table 2. The term of regional prime ministers

	Spain	France	United Kingdom	All
<i>Age of access in the first term</i>				
Less 40 years	26,0	3,5	0	13,4
40-49 years	45,2	15,3	16,7	28,7
50-59 years	20,5	44,7	50,0	34,1
60 years and more	8,3	36,5	33,3	23,8
<i>Average age</i>	46,1	56,3	54,2	51,7
<i>Std. Dev.</i>	8,2	8,2	7,6	9,5
<i>Years in office</i>				
1 year or less	11,0	3,5	50,0	8,5
> 1 y < 4 years	39,7	23,5	16,7	30,5
> 4 years	49,3	72,9	33,3	61,0
<i>Average (years)</i>	2,4	2,7	1,8	2,5
<i>Std. Dev.</i>	0,7	0,5	1,0	0,6
<i>Number of legislative terms¹</i>				
1 legislative term	50,7	63,5	66,7	57,9
2 legislative terms	24,7	28,2	16,7	26,2
3 legislative terms	11,0	8,2	16,7	9,8
4 or more legislative terms	13,7	0	-	6,1
<i>Moment of appointment</i>				
Start of legislative term	72,6	76,5	50,0	73,8
Substitution during legislative term (same party)	19,2	22,4	50,0	22,0
Substitution during legislative term (other party, after failing a no confidence vote)	8,2	1,2	0	4,3
<i>Interruption in office</i>				
Yes	5,5	3,5	0	4,3
No	94,5	96,5	100	95,7
	(n)			
	73	85	6	164
<i>Cause of office's end²</i>				
Failing reelection	37,5	37,3	25,0	37,0
Leaving office and no running for reelection	21,4	30,5	0	25,2
Resignation for another political appointment	8,9	15,3	0	11,8
Resignation after political scandal	16,1	0	25,0	8,4
Resignation after party conflict	7,1	5,1	0	5,9
Failing a no confidence vote	8,9	0	25,0	5,0
Death or illness	0	8,5	25,0	5,0
Judicial dismissal	0	3,4	0	1,7
	(n)			
	59	56	4	119

Source: Authors' elaboration from official sources.

Notes: 1. Number of different terms during office (not necessarily completed). 2. Incumbent prime ministers are not included.

Table 3. Regional Primer Minister's experience through political arenas

	Spain	France	United Kingdom	All
Local level				
He had a local post...	42,5	90,6	16,7	66,5
... but he already leaved it	28,8	16,5	16,7	22,0
... until the PM appointment and then leave	13,7	9,4	0	11,0
... and he keep it after been appointed PM	0	64,7	0	33,5
Mayor	19,2	63,5	0	41,5
Years in local posts (average)	9,5	17,2	8,0	14,9
Years as Mayor (average)	11,2	15,2	0	14,3
Supra-municipal level ¹				
Supra-municipal post	33,3	54,1	-	51,1
President of a supra-municipal executive	20,0	9,4	-	
Years in supra-municipal posts (average)	8,4	12,8	-	12,3
(n)	15	85	-	100
Regional level				
Regional post (any)	58,9	54,1	66,7	56,7
Regional MP	50,7	51,8	66,7	51,8
Regional minister	30,1	16,5	50,0	23,8
Years in regional posts	6,6	7,8	1,5	7,0
National Parliament				
He was an MP...	47,9	56,5	83,3	53,7
... but he already leaved it	16,4	17,6	0	16,5
... until the PM appointment and then leave	26,0	4,7	0	14,
... and he keep it after been appointed PM	5,5	34,1	83,3	23,2
Low chamber	13,7	12,9	0	12,8
High chamber	35,6	48,2	83,3	43,9
Years as MP (average)	4,6	12,7	16,0	9,7
National executive				
He had an office in national executive...	12,3	31,8	50,0	23,8
... but he already leaved it	8,2	28,2	16,7	18,9
... until the PM appointment and then leave	4,1	0	33,3	3,0
... and he keep it after been appointed PM	0	3,5	0	1,8
Head of State or Prime Minister	0	3,7	0	1,8
Cabinet Minister	6,8	28,2	33,3	12,2
Junior Minister and other executive posts	5,5	12,9	16,7	9,8
Years in executive posts (average)	4,7	4,8	2,0	4,5
European Union				
MEP	1,4	7,1	0	4,3
Years as MEP (average)	2,0	4,2	-	3,9
(n)	73	85	6	164

Source: Authors' elaboration from official sources. Notes: 1. Supra-municipal offices included here are *Conséil Général* (France) and *Cabildos* and *Diputación General* (Spain, in Canary islands and Basque Country).

Table 4. Definition of political careers types

Type of career	Number of political levels ¹	Offices included
National one-level	One	Only national posts (MP or executive)
Regional one-level	One	Only regional posts
Local one-level	One	Only local posts (local or supra-municipal)
National two-level	Two	Started always in national level (parliament or executive) and extended through regional level
Local two-level	Two	Started always in local level and extended through regional level
Multilevel with national predominance	Three	Started in national level, most of time in national posts
Multilevel with local predominance	Three	Started in local level, most of time in local posts
Regional Predominance	Two or three	Most of time in regional posts

Source: Authors' elaboration from official sources.

Notes: 1. We distinguish three levels: local (municipal and supramunicipal arenas), regional and nacional (parliamentarian and executive arenas). Because of little weight of European posts in political careers, it is not included in this typology).

Table 5. Correlation between experiences in different arenas

	France	Spain	United Kingdom	All
Municipal – Supra-municipal	,188	,472	-	,282**
Regional – Municipal	,188	,154	,316	,109
Regional – Supra-municipal	-,185	,000	-	-,163
Regional – Parliament	-,142	-,257*	-,316	-,195*
Regional – Executive	-,031	,307**	-,707	-,061
Parliament – Municipal	,205	-,048	-1,000**	,039
Parliament – Supra-municipal	,287**	,289	-	,299**
Parliament – Executive	,446**	,307**	,447	,404**
Executive – Municipal	,133	,015	-,447	,124
Executive – Supra-municipal	,223*	-	-	,236*

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 6. The political career of regional Prime Ministers: start and itinerary

	Spain	France	United Kingdom	All
<i>First post</i>				
Municipal	42,5	58,8	16,7	50,0
Supra-municipal	0	8,2	0	4,3
Regional	21,9	5,9	0	12,8
MP	24,7	16,5	83,3	19,5
National Executive	4,1	4,7	0	7,3
No post	6,8	5,9	0	6,1
<i>Last post before regional PM</i>				
Municipal	8,2	24,7	0	16,5
Supra-municipal	1,4	10,6	0	6,1
Regional	50,7	29,4	50,0	39,6
MP	24,7	16,5	16,7	18,3
National Executive	6,8	11,8	33,3	12,2
MEP	1,4	1,2	0	1,2
No posts	6,8	5,9	0	6,1
<i>Reached political arenas</i>				
Una arena	46,6	8,2	0	25,0
Dos arenas	23,3	23,5	66,7	25,0
Tres niveles	19,2	30,6	33,3	25,6
Cuatro niveles	4,1	20,0	0	12,2
Cinco o seis niveles	0	11,8	0	6,1
<i>Type of political careers</i>				
National one-level	17,8	0	0	7,9
Regional one-level	20,5	1,2	0	9,8
Local one-level	8,2	4,7	0	6,1
National two-level	11,0	1,2	83,3	8,5
Local two-level	16,4	27,1	16,7	22,0
Multilevel with national predominance	5,5	18,8	0	12,2
Multilevel with local predominance	11,0	35,3	0	23,2
Regional Predominance	2,7	5,9	0	4,3
Without political background	6,8	5,9	0	6,1
(n)	73	85	6	164

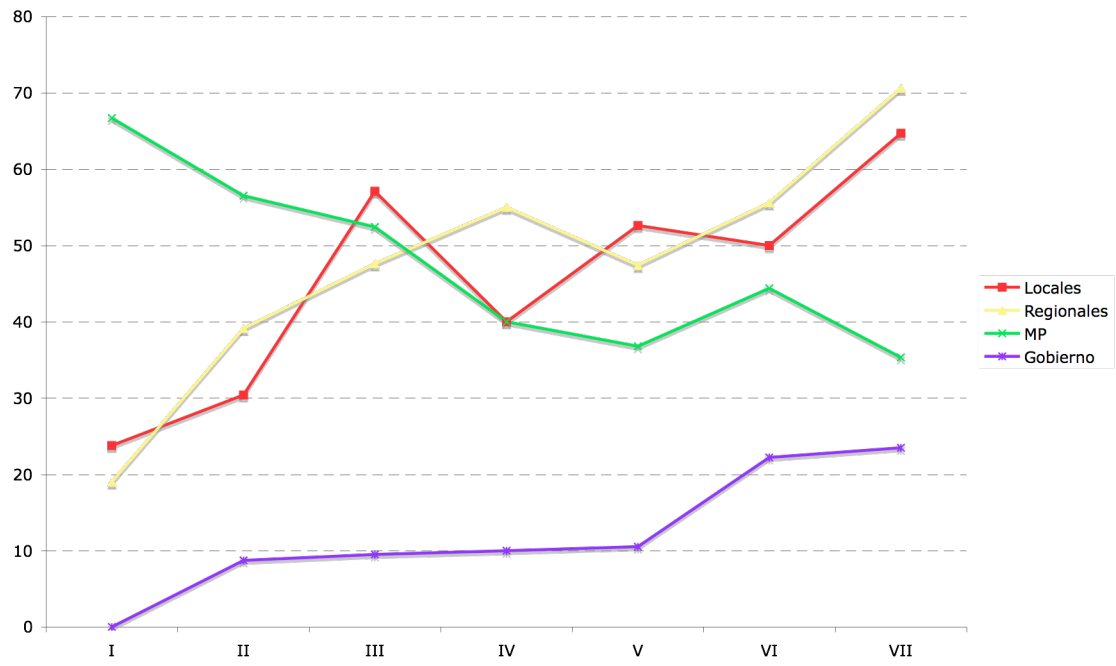
Source: Authors' elaboration from official sources.

Table 7. Differences between political careers depending on legislative terms

	First plus Second terms				Last term		
	<i>All</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>France</i>
<i>Posts</i>							
Municipal	59,0	28,1	84,8	20,0	81,6	57,1	100
Alcalde	33,7	6,2	56,5	0	61,2	38,1	78,6
Supra-municipal	57,7	33,3	60,9	-	53,1	50,0	53,6
Regional	34,9	34,4	32,6	60,0	75,5	71,4	78,6
MP	59,0	59,4	56,5	80,0	55,1	42,9	64,3
National Executive	22,9	6,2	30,4	60,0	36,7	28,6	42,9
<i>Number of political arenas</i>							
One arena	28,9	56,2	13,0	0	16,3	38,1	0
Two arenas	21,7	21,9	15,2	80,0	24,5	23,8	25,0
Tree arenas	22,9	6,2	34,8	20,0	30,6	33,3	28,6
Four arenas	9,6	3,1	15,2	0	16,3	4,8	25,0
Five or six arenas	6,0	0	10,9	0	12,2	0	21,5
<i>Type of political careers</i>							
National one-level	14,5	37,5	0	0	0	0	0
Regional one-level	3,6	9,4	0	0	10,2	23,8	0
Local one-level	8,4	9,4	8,7	0	6,1	14,3	0
National two-level	9,6	12,5	0	0	8,2	14,3	3,6
Local two-level	19,3	9,4	26,1	0	22,4	19,0	25,0
Multilevel with national predominance	15,7	6,2	23,9	80,0	14,3	9,5	17,9
Multilevel with local predominance	18,1	3,1	30,4	20,0	34,7	14,3	50,0
Regional Predominance	0	0	0	0	4,1	4,8	3,6
Without political background	10,8	12,5	10,9	0	0	0	0
<i>(n)</i>	83	32	46	5	49	21	28

Source: Authors' elaboration from official sources.

Figure 1. Experience through different arenas of Spanish regional PM



Source: Authors' elaboration from official sources.