

## Beyond exit threats: the politics of vertical power transfers in Spain's decentralized territorial system

Andreu Paneque, Marc Sanjaume-Calvet & Marina Muñoz-Puig

To cite this article: Andreu Paneque, Marc Sanjaume-Calvet & Marina Muñoz-Puig (20 Nov 2025): Beyond exit threats: the politics of vertical power transfers in Spain's decentralized territorial system, *Regional & Federal Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/13597566.2025.2589261](https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2025.2589261)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2025.2589261>



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 20 Nov 2025.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 158



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

## INTRODUCTION



# Beyond exit threats: the politics of vertical power transfers in Spain's decentralized territorial system

Andreu Paneque<sup>a</sup>, Marc Sanjaume-Calvet<sup>b</sup> and Marina Muñoz-Puig<sup>b\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Law and Political Science Department, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain;

<sup>b</sup>Law and Political Science Department, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain

### ABSTRACT

This article investigates the politics of vertical power transfers in Spain's decentralized territorial system using a dataset of transfers of powers granted between 1978 and 2022. The analysis challenges the centrality and understanding of the 'credible exit threat' as suggested by the Siroky et al. (2016, "Center–Periphery Bargaining in the Age of Democracy," *Swiss Political Science Review* 22 (4): 439–453) model, in bargaining, showing that the Spanish government sometimes penalizes regions with high non-state-wide parties' electoral support instead. On the contrary, our analysis highlights economic dependence as a critical determinant, moderating the effect of political distinctiveness. This work offers a contribution to federalism research by identifying unique Spanish decentralization patterns and discussing their implications for other federal or regionalized systems.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 3 March 2025; Accepted 9 November 2025

**KEYWORDS** Federalism; decentralization; intergovernmentalism; centre–periphery; Spain

## Introduction

In February 2022, a meeting of the so-called bilateral commission, formed by the central and the Catalan regional government delegation, reached a comprehensive agreement to transfer further powers to the Catalan authorities. The agreement included the management of primary, secondary, and university scholarships; school insurance; and an improvement in the funding of judicial buildings, plus the ownership of some public properties, such as the Civil Registry building in Barcelona.<sup>1</sup> This was a historical landmark, as no negotiations on power transfers had taken place in Catalonia for a decade, owing to the political tensions of the territorial conflict and its

---

**CONTACT** Andreu Paneque  [apanequem@uoc.edu](mailto:apanequem@uoc.edu)  Law and Political Science Department, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Rambla del poble nou, 156 08018 Barcelona, Spain

\*Present address: Law and Political Science Department, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2025.2589261>.

polarizing effects, which made such negotiations politically unfeasible (López and Sanjaume-Calvet 2020). However, from a historical perspective, the meeting also meant a way back to ‘business as usual’. Since the inception of the Spanish *Estado de las Autonomías*, Catalonia, together with the rest of the Autonomous Communities (ACs), has been periodically negotiating power transfers to its regional government from central authorities for decades. This ‘dynamic federalism’ (Colino 2020; Grau 2011; Hombrado 2011; Maiz, Caamaño, and Azpitarte 2010) allowed, for example, the transfer of fourteen additional powers in six ACs beyond those agreed in Catalonia during the 2019–2023 legislative term. These agreements were led by the Basque Country with a total of seven transfers, including matters related to pension plans or the assignment of ISSN (International Standard Serial Number), among other minor issues.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, since the development of the Spanish territorial system, similar agreements amount to more than six hundred power transfers at different points in time and to all seventeen regions (plus the two autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla).<sup>3</sup> However, we know little about the patterns underlying these numbers. There has been an important number of studies on judicial and qualitative analysis, but few of them took a quantitative perspective on these dynamics in Spain (Falcó-Gimeno 2014; Garmendia Madariaga 2020; Martínez-Cantó and Fernandes 2025; Pérez Castaños 2023). This study aims to address key questions, including: When and how do vertical power transfers<sup>4</sup> occur in Spain? What factors explain the variability of these transfers over time and across regions in Spain? And finally, could the patterns observed in Spain serve as a model for other federal or regionalized territorial systems?

Our contribution to the literature is twofold. First, through an original analysis, we empirically test several determinants of power transfers, including structural and non-structural factors. We follow the Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016) vertical centre–periphery bargaining model based on Riker’s (1964) account of federalism as a point of departure of our inquiry. Second, we offer a quantitative approach built on our original dataset, providing both descriptive and multivariate analyzes. All in all, we identify political-context patterns that shape when and how the Spanish centre grants power transfers.

Our descriptive and multivariate analyzes show solid evidence on the influence of non-state-wide parties (NSWP)<sup>5</sup> and political and economic dependence on granting vertical transfers from the centre. Our results are consistent with previous literature on the Spanish territorial system (Colino 2020; Grau 2011; Hombrado 2011; Orte and Wilson 2009; Sanjaume-Calvet and Grau Creus 2021; Sanjaume-Calvet and Paneque 2023). At the same time, they provide valuable insights for future comparisons with other decentralized territorial models, where power bargaining follows a dynamic and evolving trajectory. Current research agendas in the field continue to focus

on decentralization trends, multilevel bargaining, and governance patterns in peripheral regions (Vampa et al. 2025).

To structure our analysis, we proceed as follows: first, we provide a contextual overview of the dynamic territorial model in Spain. Following this, we discuss the theoretical framework of Spain's decentralization model and introduce our dataset, along with the main hypotheses concerning the centre–periphery bargaining dynamic. Next, we conduct an empirical analysis based on the dataset, which is organized into sections highlighting both descriptive and explanatory results. Afterwards, we examine the key factors influencing decentralization within Spain's institutional context and explore our primary findings. Finally, the article concludes with a summary of our results and conclusions.

## Literature review

Our approach to the Spanish case begins by acknowledging the dynamic nature of Spain's territorial model (Colino 2009). The unique structure of the *Estado de las Autonomías* (State of Autonomies) has, since 1978, established its institutions as a multilevel arena for negotiating a gradual and varied vertical transfer of powers both over time and across regions (Colino 2020; Grau 2019). In this section, we first summarize the main theoretical insights from bargaining frameworks, along with common perspectives on the key factors shaping negotiations in federal and decentralized realities. Second, we briefly outline the Spanish institutional landscape.

### ***Explaining the dynamics of decentralization***

The levels of decentralization across countries vary significantly. Many studies attest to this complex landscape in indices precisely designed for accurate measurement (Baldi 2003; Hooghe et al. 2016; Marks, Hooghe, and Schakel 2008; Rodden 2004). Nonetheless, the determinants of the variability across time and regions remain a controversial issue. We can identify at least two groups of factors in the literature that obviously encapsulate a much more complicated categorization. A first group of determinants of decentralization are the so-called 'structural' characteristics. That is, the existence of a myriad of relatively fixed factors, past and present, that could explain variation, including: geography and land area (Canavire-Bacarreza, Martinez-Vazquez, and Yedgenov 2017; Treisman 2006), economic development and GDP (Beramendi 2007; Treisman 2006), national identities and ethno-national conflict (Amoretti and Bermeo 2004; Gurr 1994; Keating and McGarry 2001; Requejo 2005) and/or infrastructure and history (Ziblatt 2008), and colonial and democratic past (Panizza 1999), among others.

However, as argued by Amat and Falcó-Gimeno (2014) following Rodden's (2004) analysis, these large-*N* approaches usually do not take into account the dynamic nature of the actors and the incentives structure created by the institutional setting. Therefore, we aim to focus our analysis on the actors' behaviour rather than strictly on the more structural variables. We have already described the dynamic nature of the development of the Spanish territorial model. Both the constitutional design and its heterogeneous implementation created clear incentives for bargaining. As described by Maiz, Caamaño, and Azpitarte (2010) and Hombrado (2011), in the case of Spain, both its asymmetry and dynamism help to explain its destabilization and parallel trends of symmetrization, re-symmetrization and 'catching-up' upgrades of autonomy, especially among slower-track Autonomous Communities on the path to autonomy or ACs that reformed their statutes of autonomy in a posterior phase. In a nutshell, we need a robust approach beyond 'static' variables to capture these dynamics.

On these lines, Amat and Falcó-Gimeno suggest the necessity of bringing 'politics into the study of endogenous decentralization processes and going beyond structural explanations' (2014, 824). How is this possible? The literature on parties and decentralization develops an approach inaugurated by Riker (1964) that essentially suggests that party politics shape decentralization (always within the constraints of the respective institutional setting). That is, while ethnic fractionalization and other structural variables are relevant, the dynamics of bargaining power of minority parties vis-à-vis minority cabinets at the centre are of great help in explaining the variability of decentralization across countries.

The literature finds evidence of what Meguid (2024) calls meso-level actors, an approach that highlights the importance of endogenous explanations to decentralization (Röth and Kaiser 2019). Amat and Falcó-Gimeno perform a large-*N* analysis comprising 19 parliamentary democracies, including Spain, and conclude that 'the configuration of national parliaments is a decisive determinant of changes in the levels of political decentralization of a country, something that has been largely overlooked in previous research' (2014, 844). Similarly, in their study focused on the implementation of decentralization in Spain, Martínez-Cantó and Fernandes conclude that 'regions whose governments are co-partisan with the national government are more effective in turning *de jure* agreements onto implementation policies' (2025, 23).

Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016) use a different approach, following the peculiar case of the Jura canton in Switzerland and its 'secession' from Bern; they develop a model aiming to predict when the centre grants transfers to the periphery. According to their model, two conditions must be met: (a) a dependence of the centre on the region, mainly due to economic reasons; and (b) a credible exit threat from the given region that these authors

conceptualize as a secession threat in the Jura regional context. The authors suggest that a similar situation occurred in Scotland

when the last opinion polls prior to the September 2014 referendum on the secession of Scotland from the UK indicated that the vote was too close to call, suddenly making Scotland's exit very credible, all three major British political parties "vowed" to offer substantially greater powers to Scotland if it remained within the Union. (Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter 2016, 449)

While in the Catalan case, the economic dependence on the region existed, the *credibility* of the exit threat was very low and did not force transfers from the centre (López and Sanjaume-Calvet 2020). In our research, we use Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016) to analyze the Spanish decentralization dynamics, although we conceptualize and operationalize the 'exit threat' in a larger way to encompass more situations (See Sections 3 and 4).

### ***Dynamic federalism: the case of Spain***

Spain's territorial structure, established by the 1978 Constitution, is distinct from traditional federations and has spurred ongoing debate in Spain's constitutional narratives.<sup>6</sup> Following the ratification of the Constitution, Spain initiated a decentralization process of the formerly centralized structure of the authoritarian regime that gradually empowered ACs to form along provincial boundaries and acquire self-governing authority. Although Spain's system includes two levels of government with regional parliaments, competences, and taxes, as well as intergovernmental relations and a territorial upper chamber (the Senate), several features set it apart from federal models. For instance, regional powers derive from decentralization rather than being inherent or constitutionally embedded, and the Senate represents state-wide party lines by province rather than by AC. Additionally, the power structure remains weighted towards the central government, with regions lacking fiscal autonomy and only possessing powers explicitly assigned to them in the Constitution. In a nutshell, Spain's formerly centralized and authoritarian regime, after four decades of dictatorship, fostered a strong preference for self-rule over shared rule in its decentralization process (Bossacoma Busquets and Sanjaume-Calvet 2019; Sanjaume-Calvet, Grau Creus, and Barbet 2022).

Therefore, the Spanish case is an interesting one from the perspective of territorial powers bargaining, since it can be described as a 'dynamic model' (Benz 1999; Colino 2013), in which the share of self-rule has been subject to all sorts of asymmetries and negotiations over time among the seventeen ACs. This dynamic and heterogeneous nature of the *Estado de las Autonomías* can be further explained by several characteristics that are almost unique to the Spanish model. Asymmetries in this decentralization process reflect a path dependency since the seventeen ACs were 'created'

out of provincial powers in the late 70s and the early 80s in a peculiar bottom-up procedure at different points in time for each territory. The so-called *principio dispositivo* was somehow ‘chaotically’<sup>7</sup> applied first to the historical communities<sup>8</sup> (Catalonia, Basque Country and Galicia) and then to a generalized petition of autonomy from the rest of the territory. As a consequence, the Spanish Constitution does not contain a list of AC; it only distinguishes between powers belonging to the state, listed in Article 149 SC, and powers that can be devolved to the ACs, listed in Article 148 SC (Bossacoma Busquets and Sanjaume-Calvet 2019). This dynamic of decentralization governed by the *principio dispositivo* is what makes the Spanish territorial system peculiar when compared to other decentralized models (Fossas Espadaler 2008).

The statute of autonomy is the basic institutional law for each AC in Spain. Typically, the process to approve or amend these statutes follows two primary steps. First, the statutes must be passed by the legislatures of the respective ACs. Second, the Spanish parliament must debate and approve these statutes and any amendments, reflecting their dual status as both basic laws of the ACs and organic laws of Spain. However, the statutes of autonomy for Catalonia, the Basque Country, Galicia, and Andalusia require an additional step in this process. After being approved by the ACs’ legislatures and the Spanish parliament, these statutes and any modifications must also be ratified by a referendum within the relevant AC’s territory. (Sanjaume-Calvet, Grau Creus, and Barbet 2022).

A statute of autonomy serves a dual purpose: it sets up self-governing institutions for each region and, most importantly to our study, defines their powers. In addition to the powers outlined in each statute, the Constitution (Article 150.2) allows certain central powers to be transferred to ACs through organic laws. Unlike the powers embedded in a statute of autonomy, powers granted through Article 150.2 are easier for the state to retract, as they do not require amending the statutes. While statutes reflect an agreement between each region and the central government, Article 150.2 laws are state-wide decisions, giving the central government more flexibility in granting and potentially withdrawing powers (Bossacoma Busquets and Sanjaume-Calvet 2019).

In short, in parallel to its democratization and the first years of the Spanish Third wave of democracy (Huntington 1991), the 1980s and 1990s saw a rapid and evolving decentralization process in Spain in a ‘territorial transition’ besides the ‘democratic transition’ (Aragón Reyes 2006). This began with the approval of statutes of autonomy for various ACs, mostly in the early 1980s, which laid the foundation for transferring powers from the central government to the regions. However, this gradual process began by implementing the autonomous powers of Catalonia, Basque Country and Galicia, through a ‘fast-track’, the regions that before the dictatorship had self-rule



institutions (Article 151.2 SC and the second Transitional Provision SC). Later, Andalusia also accessed autonomy and joined the ‘fast-track’, in this case through an alternative legal way (Article 151.1 SC). Finally, the ‘slow-track’ ACs accessed autonomy (through Article 143 SC) after 1981. These two steps of accession to territorial autonomy obviously created initial imbalances between territories and inaugurated a long-lasting dynamic of ‘catching-up’ powers among the slow-track ACs while the fast-track ACs obtained increasingly more powers.

Later, state-wide parties established policies (through the autonomy agreements of 1981 and 1992) to promote harmonization and symmetry, aiming to ensure a similar level of regional authority across all ACs. By this time, all of Spain was divided into regions based on provinces, with some ACs covering one province and others multiple. In practice, decentralization followed a top-down approach, driven by central government decisions rather than regional demands. Importantly, Spain’s territorial model remains open and adaptable, with power transfers to the regions continuing to this day (Sanjaume-Calvet, Grau Creus, and Barbet 2022). How are additional powers transferred to ACs? A given AC establishes its autonomous powers in its statute of autonomy. However, their implementation, resources and potential improvements are always subject to further negotiations with central powers. Therefore, a first way to achieve a power transfer for a given AC is a statutory reform which must always be approved as an organic law in the Spanish central parliament (as well as the regional parliament). Other than statutory reforms, ACs can achieve more powers through Article 150 SC with an organic law of the central parliament. In short, the initial distribution of powers between central and regional governments is, and has always been, subject to a certain flexibility either through a statutory reform or through an ‘extra-statutory’ power transfer. In both cases, there are specific commissions to formally negotiate the legal changes and, in parallel, there is a necessity of building political coalitions to achieve majorities in regional and, most importantly, central parliaments.

Since the beginning of this decentralization process, NSWP have leveraged party politics to gain influence over shared rule, particularly in Catalonia and the Basque Country. Alliances between minority national governments, NSWP (such as Convergència i Unió (CiU) and Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV-EAJ)) and state-wide parties (Unión de Centro Democrático (UCD), Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and Partido Popular (PP)) led to transfers that extended to other ACs as well (Hombrado 2011; Verge 2013). At the same time, political and legal disputes between the central government and the regions have often been resolved by the Constitutional Court, resulting in significant judicialisation of these issues since the 1980s. The whole process of decentralization has to be understood in the context of a very heterogeneous and multinational state (Bossacoma Busquets and

Sanjaume-Calvet 2019). That is, structural differences in terms of economic issues, policy demands, and territorial identities have been translated into a peculiar political dynamic with a constant multilevel bargain often led by Catalonia and the Basque Country and followed by the rest of ACs. In other words, structural differences (encompassing economic factors, policy demands, and distinct territorial identities) have shaped a unique political dynamic characterized by ongoing multilevel negotiations. This process is frequently driven by Catalonia and the Basque Country, whose distinct priorities and demands often set the agenda for the remaining ACs to follow. This dynamic has fostered a pattern of continuous bargaining, where regional aspirations and national cohesion are balanced through a complex interplay of regional and central interests.

In light of this, it is essential to acknowledge the dual nature of vertical power transfers in Spain, not merely as unilateral concessions from the central government, but as the outcome of complex, negotiated processes embedded in both political and legal structures. While transfers are often interpreted as politically motivated responses to regional demands or bargaining outcomes, many of them are in fact the technical implementation of pre-established constitutional provisions or statutory agreements. The already mentioned *principio dispositivo* underscores this procedural dimension and highlights the formal capacity of regions to shape the trajectory of decentralization. Moreover, regional governments are not passive recipients of authority; they typically possess the power to demand or restrain new powers and to have the capacity for implementation, including budgetary necessities also transferred by the central government (see Martínez-Cantó and Fernandes 2025). Thus, the dynamics of decentralization in Spain cannot be reduced to a binary logic of central concessions versus regional gains, and our analysis should not be regarded under this simplified perspective. Instead, they reflect an ongoing interaction between institutional constraints, political negotiation, and legal entitlements.

## Hypotheses

When defining their model based on the Jura case, Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016) point out that the vertical centre–periphery bargaining only occurs when the periphery has a credible exit threat, and the centre is somehow dependent on that periphery. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the authors exemplified such an argument in the Catalan case. They argued that, even though the central government is economically dependent on Catalonia (a richer region that accounts for one-fifth of the total Spanish GDP and almost one-fourth of Spanish total exports), the reason behind the refusal to grant the Catalan people the right to vote on independence was the absence of a credible threat to exit from Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016, 441).

Despite this, since the Spanish constituent legislature (1977), not only Catalonia but all Spanish regions have been able to extract political transfers (see [Figure 1](#)). In this way, the necessary condition underlined by Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016) – a credible exit threat as a credible secession threat – does not seem to apply in the Spanish case as happened in the Jura canton. In Spain, the institutional setting was explicitly designed with the expectation that these vertical transfers would occur, although it did not provide a template on when and how they should happen, nor which potential powers would be transferred. That is, the centre was reluctant to concede powers to the newly formed regions but at the same time was eager to complete the decentralization process partly due to the pressure from regional elites, mainly (but not only) in Catalonia and the Basque Country. Therefore, what explains the central government's decision to devolve power to the Spanish regions? Is it the periphery's cultural, political, and economic distinctiveness, or the centre's dependence on the periphery, that acts as the main driver in the Spanish case?

Considering the literature reviewed in the last section on the particularities of the Spanish context, our intuition points in two alternative directions. On the one hand, we should not expect a relevant variation in the influence of periphery distinctiveness and centre-dependence influence described by Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016). In any case, dependence could operate



**Figure 1.** Transfers by Autonomous Communities from 1978.

through political support from the periphery to central minority governments. On the other hand, regarding the second condition, we expect a different (indeed, reverse) version of the credible threat condition in Spain. Precisely, our expectation is that, due to the Spanish institutional and political context, the credible threat (understood as potential secessionist pressures) will negatively affect the probability of extracting a concession from the centre.

As the existing literature suggests, specific elements of a group's peripheral identity that distinguish it from the centre (such as religion, language, race, or even the economic performance of the region) provides the region with the greatest leverage in extracting transfers from the centre (Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter 2016, 440). In the case of Spain, the unique identity of its historical regions should provide these regions with better leverage in extracting transfers from the centre (Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter 2016, 440). As Bossacoma Busquets and Sanjaume-Calvet (2019) pointed out, the persistence of territorial asymmetries in Spain is due to strong sub-state identities, communities, and institutions. A complementary causal mechanism giving more leverage to historical communities would be that these regions began their own 'decentralisation' earlier, thanks to the fast-track (art.151.1 SC) designed in the Constitution. Therefore, our first hypothesis is:

H1: *Ceteris paribus*, historical autonomous communities' status (Catalonia, Basque Country and Galicia) is expected to be associated with higher rates of extracting transfers from the centre.

Spanish historical communities are distinct not only in terms of culture and economics but also in terms of politics. The presence of NSWP has been more prominent in the Spanish minority nations, especially in Catalonia and the Basque Country, as well as in Navarre, Galicia, and other territories with distinctive historical sub-state (regional or national) identities such as Asturias, the Canary Islands, the Valencian Community, and the Balearic Islands (Sanjaume-Calvet and Paneque 2023). Consequently, we suggest that the presence of NSWP should influence the demands for increased self-rule or independence. In fact, as literature has observed (Sanjaume-Calvet and Grau Creus 2021), NSWP often act as kingmakers in minority parliaments and have traditionally leveraged their support in national legislatures to negotiate political transfers, particularly in the form of greater regional autonomy or fiscal advantages. Thus, our second hypothesis posits:

H2: *Ceteris paribus*, the presence of NSWP in the central parliament is expected to be associated with higher rates of extracting transfers from the centre.

Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016) underlined that another determinant of the vertical bargaining process is the material (not political) dependence between the centre and periphery. The authors argue that without such

political, material, or economic dependence, the centre would ignore the region's demands (Hechter 1992). Focusing on the Spanish context, Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016) highlighted the cases of Catalonia and the Basque Country as examples of wealthy regions on which the Spanish government is economically dependent. Thus, our third hypothesis is:

H3a: *Ceteris paribus*, the higher the centre's economic dependence on regions, the higher the probability of extracting transfers from the centre.

This dependence will also be politically relevant when there is a minority government at the centre, that is, a government dependent on parliamentary support from NSWP, as previous research has shown (Grau 2019; Meguid 2024; Röth and Kaiser 2019; Sanjaume-Calvet and Panque 2023). In their recent research, Martínez-Cantó and Fernandes find strong evidence that when 'state-wide parties do not need regional parties in the national parliament, they will forestall the implementation of decentralisation reforms' (2025, 19). Therefore:

H3b: *Ceteris paribus*, central governments in parliamentary minority are expected to be associated with higher rates of extracting transfers from the centre.

Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter's (2016) theoretical framework implies that the centre is willing to grant transfers only when it is dependent on a periphery. Yet, as we highlighted in the last section, such conditions are not sufficient. In fact, the necessary condition that forces the centre to grant transfers to the periphery is based on the credible exit options. Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016) defined a credible threat based on the credible alternatives that such periphery has in terms of politics, economic viability of independence, or integration into another political community. But as we mentioned before, the institutional context in Spain (characterized by constitutional rigidity, the absence of a clear framework for when and how vertical transfers should occur, and the nature of centre-periphery power relations) differs significantly from the Jura Cantons case analyzed by Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016). Despite the formal expectation of vertical transfers, the Spanish central government was motivated to complete the decentralization process largely due to pressure from regional elites, particularly in Catalonia and the Basque Country, but secession was (and still is) hardly a realistic option.

Therefore, the concept of a credible threat is constrained by Spain's constitutional rigidity and its position as a veto player within the European Union. These factors significantly limit the effectiveness of any peripheral threat to secede. For instance, as Griffiths, Guillen Alvarez, and Martinez i Coma (2015) underlined, although the economic crisis in 2013 created a window of opportunity for Catalonia's secessionist movement, Spain's

constitutional constraints, economic interdependence, and European Union veto power undermined the viability of the periphery threat to exit.

As a result, the Spanish central government maintains a strong position in vertical bargaining and can easily resist any negotiation to change the status quo. Therefore, and alternatively to Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter's (2016) model, we expect that due to the limited capacity of the Spanish regions to present a credible threat, any demands are likely to be perceived simply as threats to national unity, and in turn, may provoke a negative response from the centre:

H4: *Ceteris paribus*, a high percentage of the vote for NSWP in central parliaments is expected to be associated with lower rates of extracting transfers from the centre.

Finally, our last expectation is that there is an interaction effect between the centre-dependence and the credible threat of the periphery. Economic or material dependence gives selective incentives to the central government to accept the periphery's demands. In other words, centre-dependence modulates the negative effect of the periphery's threat to exit. Thus, our last hypothesis is:

H5: *Ceteris paribus*, the higher the centre's economic dependence on the periphery, the lower the negative effect of the credible threat.

As we discuss in section 8, the analysis of these hypotheses and our findings led us to revisit Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter's (2016) framework from a more theoretical perspective, together with recent findings in the literature devoted to decentralization (Grau 2019; Martínez-Cantó and Fernandes 2025; Meguid 2024; Röth and Kaiser 2019; Sanjaume-Calvet and Paneque 2023).

## Research design

The original dataset on vertical transfers of power in Spain presented in this article was built using the official database of the *Administración General del Estado* as the main source of information. The scope of the dataset ranges from 1978 to 2022, including fourteen legislative terms. We focus on vertical bargaining between the political centre (central government) and a subordinate administrative entity (autonomous community) in a territorially divided democratic system (State of Autonomies). More precisely, we collect data on transfers of power in 17 ACs between 1978 and 2022, including regional characteristics such as population size, the specific issues involved in the transfers, political majorities, the presence of NSWP, central political dependence, and the periphery's credible exit options,<sup>9</sup> and a more complete set of variables as shown in Table 1. To perform an in-depth analysis of our

**Table 1.** Dataset main variables.

	Variables	Characteristics
Transfers	Transfers	Yes, No
	Year	1978–2022
	Region	Andalusia; Aragon; Asturias; Cantabria; Castilla-León; Castilla-La-Mancha; Canary Islands; Catalonia; Extremadura; Galicia; Balearic Islands; Madrid; Navarre; Basque Country; Valencian Community; Ceuta and Melilla
	Issue	Agriculture, livestock and fishing; Culture; Industry, energy and mines; Healthcare; Public works, harbour and transport; Trade; Work; Planning of the territory and Housing; Justice; Natural environment; Education; Game, Defence; Social Care; Treasury; Sports, Youth; Insurances
Political variables	Historical Region	Catalonia; Galicia; Basque Country
	% NSWP	Percentage of votes of NSWP in the central parliament (Spanish national assembly)
	PP majority (in central parliament)	Yes, No
	Same colour government(in regional parliament)	Same colour, Different party rules in regional government, NSWP rules in regional government.
	% GDP AC	[AC GDP*100]/ Spanish GDP
	NSWP in central parliament	NSWP in central parliament
	Population	Population
	Central parliamentary majority	Central parliamentary minority, central parliamentary majority, Majority and single-party control.
	RAI	Regional Authority Index
	No transfers year before	Number of transfers held by the AC in the previous year

Note: We introduce this political variable as a dummy, a parliamentary PP majority, since the Spanish conservative party has traditionally been reluctant to engage in the decentralization process.

dataset, we first run a descriptive analysis and later a multivariate statistical analysis.

Regarding our dependent variable, *transfers from the centre*, the article uses a dichotomous variable where '0' indicates no transfers to the AC, and '1' indicates that the AC has received a concession. In this regard, while the dataset used for describing the characteristics of transfers includes all the 2013 transfers of power from the centre to the AC and its characteristics, the multivariate statistical analysis, because of the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, is based on 531 units. In other words, the dichotomous variable does not consider if in a year, there is more than one concession per AC. Our dependent variable works on the assumption that vertical power transfers (a) correspond to a similar political power transfer and (b) are the result of a 'concession' by the centre. While these strong assumptions simplify the complex legal reality of each power transfer, they enable us to conduct a large-*N* analysis of these negotiations.<sup>10</sup>

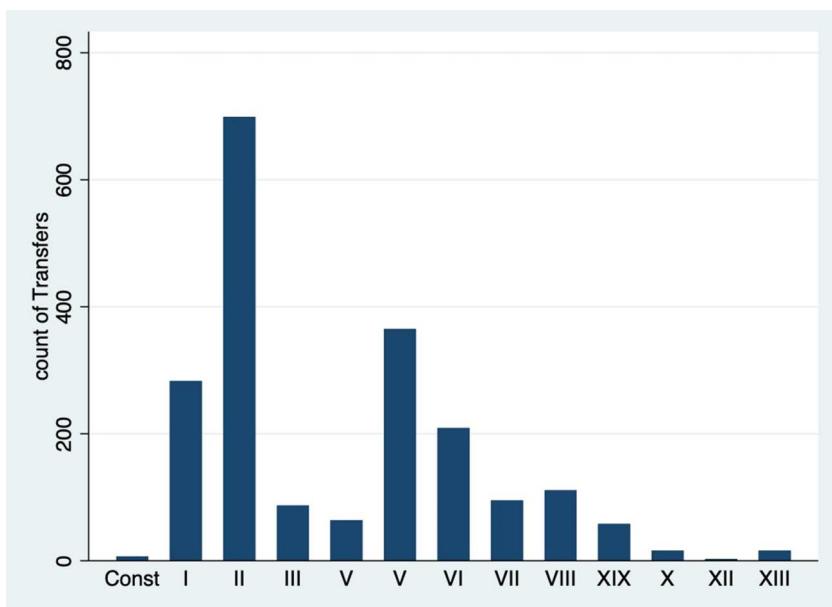
To test the article's hypotheses, the key independent variables of the statistical analysis are based on factors that emerged from our literature review as affecting the observed variability in the use and success of territorial power-sharing. We aim to capture the extent to which the vertical centre–periphery

bargaining in Spain is based on structural and non-structural factors. Moreover, we aim to test centre–periphery dependence (Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter 2016). Thus, the analysis includes the Spanish territorial asymmetries (Bossacoma Busquets and Sanjaume-Calvet 2019), both *de facto* and *de jure*, that might shape and explain the centre’s willingness to devolve power to the periphery. We include additional control variables that the literature has argued influence vertical centre–periphery bargaining (Amat and Falcó-Gimeno 2014), such as the political orientation of the governments at central and regional levels or ACs’ sociodemographic characteristics, which the literature on intergovernmental relations and decentralization highlights as important (Colino 2020).

## Descriptive analysis

As Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016) describe, the conditions and possibilities under which the periphery can extract transfers from the centre are diverse. In the Spanish context, the first important observation is the extremely heterogeneous number of transfers made over time by the Spanish government (see Figure 2).

Despite this, the heterogeneity of such transfers does not stem solely from the number of transfers per legislature. As Table 2 indicates, there is a clear imbalance in the transfers extracted from the centre. Transfers regarding



**Figure 2.** Vertical transfers of powers over legislative terms.

**Table 2.** Vertical transfers of powers by issues.

Issue	N	Percentage
Agriculture	310	15.4
Labour	220	10.93
Justice	193	9.59
Public works, ports and transport	146	7.25
Education	134	6.66
Health	133	6.61
Land planning and housing	131	6.51
Commerce	130	6.46
Culture	119	5.91
Environment	119	5.91
Industry, energy and mining	81	4.02
Social services	81	4.02
Treasury	34	1.69
Sports	28	1.39
Local government	28	1.39
Tourism	24	1.19
Gambling	22	1.09
Media	18	0.89
Youth	14	0.7
Heritage	11	0.55
Insurances	10	0.5
Others	9	0.45
Home affairs	7	0.35
Taxes	4	0.2
Traffic	4	0.2
Social welfare	2	0.1
Research	1	0.05
<b>Total</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>100</b>

agriculture (15.4%), labour (10.93%), and justice (9.6%) are the main subjects of transfers made by the Spanish central government. On the other hand, transfers regarding social welfare (0.1%), taxes (0.2%), and home affairs (0.35%) are the ones where the periphery has faced greater difficulties in extracting any transfers. Despite the diverse distribution of competences across issues, these patterns may indicate structural boundaries or institutional inertia that make transfers in these areas less feasible or subject to political contention. Furthermore, the centre may be hesitant to transfer competences in relation to these issues in order to avoid the perception of differential treatment between regions, which could lead to grievances among the population. However, regarding key areas of the welfare state, the results indicate a certain degree of decentralization, with the ACs securing transfers in labour (10.93%), education (6.66%), health (6.61%), and social services (4.02%). While these numbers suggest an increased level of autonomy for the ACs in these areas, it is important to note that the transferred competences are subject to common principles, such as basic equality in access to public services, the establishment of minimum service standards, and the need for coordination with state-level frameworks that the ACs must adhere to, thus limiting their legislative powers in these fields. As a result, a

certain degree of homogenization exists in the services provided by the ACs in these areas.

In fact, and based on the previous work of Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016), three main parameters could influence such an outcome: distinctiveness from the centre, exit credibility, and the centre's dependence on the periphery. [Table 3](#) underlines significant differences between those Spanish regions that fulfil such categories and the others.

Concerning the distinctiveness criterion applied by the central authority, within the Spanish context, it is imperative to focus on the impact of being classified as 'historical communities'. Notably, after the enactment of the 1978 Constitution, these regions were accorded precedence in obtaining executive and legislative autonomy, a prerogative attributed to their cultural distinctiveness. Indeed, as [Table 3](#) points out, the status of being designated a historical territory influences the ability to secure transfers from the central authority. Historical territories succeed in obtaining transfers in 59.3% of their requests, whereas other regions achieve such transfers at a notably lower rate of 38.2%.

In territories where NSWP are present, the probability of receiving a vertical transfer from the central government increases by 13 percentage points ([Table 3](#)). This finding supports the argument made by Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016) that the cultural, political, and economic distinctiveness of the periphery from the centre shapes the centre's willingness to devolve power.<sup>11</sup> [Table 3](#) also sheds light on another dimension of vertical bargaining in Spain. As Hechter (1992) argued, the central state is more likely to grant transfers when it is dependent on the periphery. This dependence can be of a political nature, as mentioned in earlier sections, NSWP often serve as kingmakers in minority parliaments and have traditionally leveraged their support in national legislatures to negotiate political transfers. But this leverage can also be purely economic. Consistent with this, our data shows that regions contributing a higher share to Spanish GDP tend to have a greater likelihood of obtaining transfers from the central government.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 3.** Descriptive data of our dependent variable.

Vertical transfers of powers	No historical community	Historical community	Diff. Sig
	0.382	0.593	$t = -4.61, p = 0.000$
No PP majority		PP majority	$t = 4.83, p = 0.0000$
	0.477	0.329	
No NSWP		NSWP	
	0.386	0.517	$t = -3.092, p = 0.0026$
Low-GDP% ACs		High-GDP% ACs	
	0.384	0.592	$t = -4.466, p = 0.0000$

\*Except for Historical Territories and the PP majority, with equal variances, the differences have been calculated with Welch's t-test due to their unequal variances.

Finally, [Table 3](#) also suggests that political factors, specifically, the partisan composition of the national government, shape vertical bargaining dynamics. The existence of PP majorities in the national cabinet reduces the probability of granting transfers to the periphery by nearly 15 percentage points, pointing to a more restrictive approach towards decentralization under right-leaning governments.

Therefore, distinctiveness from the centre, the characteristics of cabinet majority and the centre's dependence on the periphery seem to affect the capacity to extract transfers from the centre. But we cannot conclude, as Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter ([2016](#)) did, that the centre grants transfers only when the periphery has a credible exit threat and is somehow dependent on that periphery. Moreover, it seems that the Spanish institutional and constitutional context introduces other relevant determinants that may have an effect. In sum, it is necessary to introduce controls in quantitative analysis to unravel the influence of such variables.

## Multivariate analysis

In the statistical analysis, the unit of analysis is the region-year. The dataset includes 531 region-year observations covering 17 ACs between 1978 and 2022. For each region-year, we record whether the AC obtained a concession (transfer) from the centre. We then estimate random-effects panel logistic regression models to test the probability of extracting a transfer. The dependent variable is dichotomous, coded 1 when a region receives a concession in a given year and 0 otherwise. Standard errors are clustered by region to account for repeated observations over time.

Although [Table 3](#) highlights significant differences favouring historical territories in extracting transfers from the central authority, models 1 and 2 in [Table 4](#) do not confirm that historical community status positively affects the likelihood of extracting transfers from the centre. Therefore, contrary to what the literature suggests (Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter [2016](#)), we cannot confirm our  $H_1$ , which posited that regions with a peripheral identity distinct from the centre should have better leverage in extracting transfers from the central authority.

Despite this, the models in [Table 4](#) confirm that political distinctiveness is a determinant in extracting transfers from the centre. In other words, our  $H_2$  is confirmed: the presence of NSWP in the central parliament positively influences the rate of extracting transfers from the central authority. This result aligns with previous literature findings (Amat and Falcó-Gimeno [2014](#); Sanjaume-Calvet and Panque [2023](#)), which underscore the relevance of NSWP as a crucial element in understanding the dynamics of Spanish decentralization.

Another interesting result concerns our proxy for economic dependence between the centre and periphery. As highlighted by the results of the

**Table 4.** Determinants of the centre's vertical power transfers.

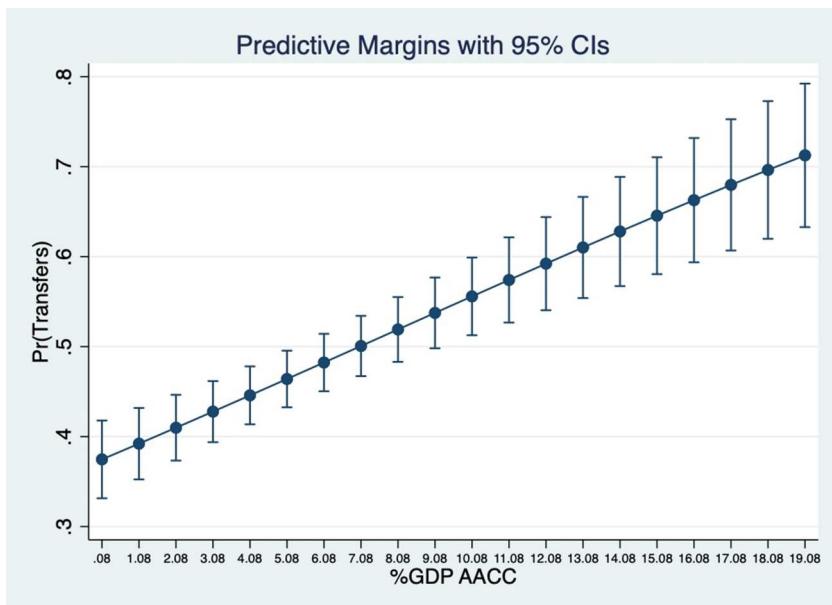
	(1) Centre's vertical power transfer	(2) Centre's vertical power transfer
NSWP	1.497* (0.642)	1.742* (0.687)
Historical ACs	1.375 (0.764)	0.854 (0.825)
%Vote NSWP	-0.0674* (0.0323)	-0.0927* (0.0396)
%GDP AC	0.105** (0.0333)	0.0871* (0.0347)
PP majority	-1.644 (1.475)	-1.807 (1.481)
Central parliamentary minority	Ref. Category	Ref. Category
Majority + single-party control	0.409 (1.453)	0.568 (1.456)
RAI	-0.105 (0.157)	-0.0961 (0.157)
Number of transfers the year before	0.0578 (0.0402)	0.0562 (0.0402)
Population	-0.000000177* (8.55e-08)	-0.000000153 (8.33e-08)
Same colour	Ref. Category	Ref. Category
No same colour	-0.312 (0.271)	-0.298 (0.271)
NSWP in government	-0.562 (0.408)	-0.650 (0.415)
% GDP AC#% vote NSWP	-	0.00302 (0.00256)
Year dummy	Yes	Yes
_cons	2.715 (3.866)	2.545 (3.855)
/		
Insig2u	-1.509 (0.862)	-1.680 (0.953)
N	531	531

Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

models, the greater the centre's economic dependence on the periphery, the higher the probability of extracting transfers (see Figure 3). In other words, these results confirm Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter's (2016) argument that economic dependence forces the centre to address regions' demands. We can therefore confirm our H<sub>3a</sub>.

In addition, the results of model 1 interestingly confirm the existence of a negative effect where NSWPs have high electoral support. The higher the electoral support of NSWPs in the central parliament, the lower the probability of these regions extracting transfers.<sup>13</sup> This finding shows that, due to the strong position of the Spanish government, the demands of regions with a credible threat, rooted in the electoral strength of NSWPs, have not been ignored but penalized.



**Figure 3.** The effect of economic dependence on the probability of centre–periphery transfers.

Political dependence, related to the presence of a minority in the national parliament, cannot be confirmed as a relevant factor ( $H_{3b}$ ). Our models do not confirm that minority governments grant more transfers to the periphery. Models 1 and 2 also highlight that the presence of a conservative majority appears to reduce the probability of the centre granting any transfer of power to the periphery. However, these results are not statistically significant.

Finally, and going one step further, model 2 (Table 4) includes an interaction effect between the centre-dependence and the credible threat of the periphery. The results do not support our expectation that economic dependence moderates the negative effect of the periphery threat ( $H_5$ ).

At last, to increase confidence in our findings, we conducted two additional robustness checks. First, given the dichotomous nature of the variable in our initial models, we acknowledge that it may oversimplify variation in the data. To address this, while the models in Table 4 were estimated using logistic regression, we also ran two panel data regressions using a continuous dependent variable. Specifically, in that case, we counted the number of transfers by each region per year, treating each transfer as a distinct event. Therefore, this approach yielded 106 additional transfer cases.

As shown in Table A1 (in Online Appendix A), the results remain largely consistent. On one hand, the presence of NSWP positively influences the likelihood of extracting transfers from the central authority. On the other hand,

the greater the central government's economic dependence on the periphery, the higher the probability of transfers being granted. Furthermore, the models highlight that higher electoral support for the NSWP is associated with a lower likelihood of the region extracting transfers.

An interesting divergence from [Table 1](#) is the positive effect of being a historical community. This suggests that regions with a strong peripheral identity, distinct from that of the central authority, have greater leverage in extracting transfers. Therefore, we believe there may be additional political factors contributing to the frequency of vertical bargaining. Future research should explore these factors to better understand what drives the variation in such bargaining processes.

## Issue-Driven bargaining?

Our descriptive and multivariate analyzes show solid evidence of the influence of NSWP and political and economic dependence on granting vertical transfers from the centre. However, our data points to an unexplained variability in the issue transfers that we aim to explore. Existing literature has shown the importance of issue-driven explanations to understanding the dynamics of decentralization ([Bonafont, Baumgartner, and Palau 2015](#); [Martínez-Cantó and Fernandes 2025](#)).

In this section, we analyze the existing patterns and intensity of transfers on certain issues. In [Table 5](#), we show that historical communities display distinctive patterns and intensities of transfers across policy areas.

The results illustrate the weight of the historical ACs in the transfers made by the central government. As shown earlier in [Table 2](#), agriculture, labour, and justice are the main subject areas of power transfers. [Table 5](#) shows that within these areas, the historical ACs account for only 25.48% of the total in agriculture, 24.09% in labour, and 30.05% in justice. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that the historical ACs already had powers over certain matters in their statutes of autonomy, along with their leadership in seeking to enhance their competences. As a result, other ACs have sought to catch up with the historical ACs, thereby also demanding extensions of their own competences. This finding reinforces our initial hypothesis ( $H_1$ ) that historical communities are a driver of vertical power transfers due to their leading role and initial experience negotiating agreements. Besides the presence of NSWP in these territories, we also capture what appears to be a distinct 'historical community' effect.

We also analyzed the transfers granted under conditions of majority or minority control in the national parliament. [Table 6](#) illustrates that ACs receive more transfers when there is a majority and single-party control of parliament, particularly in social welfare (100%), local government (96%), and land planning and housing (85.09%).

**Table 5.** Vertical transfers of powers by ACs (historical and non-historical).

Issue	Historical	Others	Total
Agriculture	79	25.48%	231
Justice	58	30.05%	135
Labour	53	24.09%	
Education	41	30.6%	93
Public works, ports and transport	41	28.08%	105
Health	31	23.31%	102
Culture	29	24.37%	90
Land planning and housing	27	20.61%	104
Environment	22	18.49%	97
Commerce	16	12.31%	114
Industry, energy and mining	14	17.28%	67
Social services	7	8.64%	74
Sports	6	21.43%	22
Others	5	55.56%	4
Tourism	5	20.83%	19
Treasury	4	11.76%	30
Traffic	4	100%	0
Insurances	3	30%	7
Gambling	3	13.64%	19
Youth	3	21.43%	11
Media	3	16.67%	15
Local government	3	10.71%	25
Home affairs	1	14.29%	6
Research	1	100%	0
Heritage	1	9.09%	10
Social welfare	0	0%	2
Taxes	0	0%	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>460</b>	<b>22.85%</b>	<b>1553</b>
			<b>77.15 2013</b>

The fact that a greater number of transfers occur under majority and single-party control of parliament could be explained by the government's incentive to remain in power and keep ACs satisfied, since concessions may help sustain parliamentary support. However, this seems to contradict the results presented in the previous section, where Table 3 shows that PP majorities in the national cabinet reduce the likelihood of granting transfers to the periphery. To clarify this apparent tension, we examine whether the pattern varies across different issue areas. To this end, we estimate eight logistic regression models by issue area. As in the main analysis, the unit of analysis is the region-year, and each model uses a dichotomous dependent variable coded 1 when a region receives a concession (transfer) in a given year, and 0 otherwise. Random-effects panel logistic regression is applied. Standard errors are clustered by region to account for repeated observations over time. The models are estimated only for issue areas in which historical communities account for more than 20 per cent of all transfers.

The multivariate models suggest that there are no issue-specific effects (See Online Appendix B: Table B2 and B3). Even though Tables B2 and B3 highlight certain differences in patterns by issue, particularly regarding centre (i.e. dependence determinants, cultural and political distinctiveness

**Table 6.** Vertical transfers of powers by the majority or minority in parliament.

Issue		Minority	Majority		Majority and Single-party control
Agriculture	132	49.25%	0	0%	136 50.75%
Insurances	8	80%	1	10%	1 10%
Social welfare	0	0%	0	0%	2 100%
Commerce	29	23.97%	0	0%	92 76.03%
Culture	43	39.81%	0	0%	65 60.19%
Education	65	49.62%	0	0%	66 50.38%
Sports	22	81.48%	0	0%	5 18.52%
Treasury	8	25%	0	0%	24 75%
Industry, energy and mining	34	45.33%	0	0%	41 54.67%
Home affairs	1	25%	0	0%	3 75%
Research	1	100%	0	0%	0 0%
Gambling	14	63.64%	0	0%	8 36.36%
Youth	8	61.54%	0	0%	5 38.46%
Justice	95	50%	3	1.58%	92 48.42%
Others	5	55.56%	1	11.11%	3 33.33%
Environment	49	42.61%	1	0.87%	65 56.52%
Media	15	83.33%	0	0%	3 16.67%
Public works, ports and transport	33	26.19%	4	3.17%	89 70.63%
Land planning and housing	16	14.04%	1	0.88%	97 85.09%
Heritage	5	45.45%	0	0%	6 54.55%
Local government	1	4%	0	0%	24 96.00%
Health	48	37.50%	3	2.34%	77 60.16%
Social services	33	40.74%	2	2.47%	46 56.79%
Taxes	2	50%	0	0%	2 50%
Labour	87	40.85%	1	0.47%	125 58.69%
Traffic	2	50%	0	0%	2 50%
Tourism	5	20.83%	0	0%	19 58.53%
<b>Total</b>	<b>761</b>	<b>40.57%</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>0.91%</b>	<b>1098 58.53%</b>

and credible threats), these patterns cannot be confirmed because the results are not statistically significant. Therefore, these findings highlight the relevance of future research in examining the diverse patterns of vertical bargaining across specific policy areas. This need is particularly evident given the variation in how different regions negotiate and implement transfers, as highlighted by Martínez-Cantó and Fernandes (2025) in their comparative analysis on transfers' implementation across regions.

## Discussion and concluding remarks

Our findings provide new evidence for the dynamics of vertical bargaining between the Spanish central government and its regions, offering important contributions to the decentralization literature. While Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter (2016) suggested that credible exit threats, combined with the centre's dependence on the periphery, are crucial for extracting transfers, our analysis highlights notable differences in how this model applies within the Spanish context. In Spain, historical territories, despite their cultural distinctiveness, do not appear to be a determinant of greater leverage in

extracting transfers from the centre. Instead, the role of economic dependence emerges as the primary explanatory factor, alongside the influence of NSWP.

Therefore, our statistical models underscore the relevance of economic factors over political or cultural distinctiveness in determining the centre's willingness to cede power. High GDP-contributing regions enjoy a stronger position, significantly influencing transfer probabilities, even in the presence of NSWP. A notable paradox arises in the relationship between regional political dynamics and central transfers. On one hand, the presence of NSWP from a specific region in the central parliament tends to enhance that region's ability to secure transfers from the central government. On the other hand, regions with strong electoral support for NSWP often experience a reduction in transfers, implying a strategic penalty imposed by the central authority. In fact, this duality highlights the complex interaction between political threats and economic dependency. Additionally, at the same time, the nature of political negotiations between a statewide party (SWP) and NSWP at the central level plays a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of the vertical bargaining.

Ultimately, our findings reveal differences in the patterns and intensity of transfers across specific issues. Notably, the results underscore how existing asymmetries in these patterns can be attributed to variations in the powers granted by the statutes of autonomy of historical ACs and the types of governing majorities. These results call for a more comprehensive theoretical model that integrates economic, political, and institutional factors to capture the multifaceted nature of vertical bargaining in decentralized states.

From a more theoretical perspective, Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter's (2016) framework of vertical centre–periphery bargaining can potentially be reformulated as a general approach beyond the Spanish context. The dynamic between the factors of *dependence* and credible *exit threat* from a given region appears to be misleading in the case of Spain. We observe a more complex dynamic, since in line with previous research (Martínez-Cantó and Fernandes 2025), the role of political dependence appears to be a crucial factor (rather than an exit threat), softened by economic dependence. Therefore, a future framework should take into account this complex interaction of factors rather than replicate Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter's (2016) vertical bargaining model which seems more context-specific (e.g. Jura canton) compared to other multilevel governance realities such as Spain.

Indeed, future research must dig deeper into the current research agenda on federalism and territorial governance (Vampa et al. 2025). For example, on the interaction between economic dependence and credible threats to better understand decentralization dynamics in multi-layered states, as well as the interaction of ideological alignment between regional and central authorities regarding power transfers. Investigating additional variables, such as the role

of international pressures, evolving legal frameworks, and public opinion within the regions, could offer further clarity. Moreover, comparative studies across different nations with asymmetrical federal systems may shed light on whether the Spanish case reflects broader trends or remains a unique outcome of its historical and constitutional circumstances. Italy and the UK emerge as potential candidates for a comparative approach in the European context as both follow a ‘devolution’ territorial model that resembles Spain’s territorial evolution over time.

## Notes

1. See: [https://presidencia.gencat.cat/ca/ambits\\_d\\_actuacio/relacions-institucionals/organs-bilaterals-generalitat-estat/comissio-bilateral-generalitat-estat-reunions-i-acords/](https://presidencia.gencat.cat/ca/ambits_d_actuacio/relacions-institucionals/organs-bilaterals-generalitat-estat/comissio-bilateral-generalitat-estat-reunions-i-acords/)
2. See: [https://mpt.gob.es/politica-territorial/autonomica/traspasos/datos\\_basicos\\_xiv.html](https://mpt.gob.es/politica-territorial/autonomica/traspasos/datos_basicos_xiv.html)
3. Most of them over shared rather than maintained exclusive competences given the complex structure of the Spanish territorial system. See: [https://mpt.gob.es/politica-territorial/autonomica/traspasos/est\\_traspasos.html](https://mpt.gob.es/politica-territorial/autonomica/traspasos/est_traspasos.html)
4. By ‘vertical power transfer’ we mean the reassignment of legislative and/or executive powers from the central authority to a regional authority (Autonomous Community level). A power transfer is generally regarded as a ‘concession’ from the centre, since the centre is normally reluctant to lose power (as any other government). However, we agree with an anonymous reviewer that further research should consider when these transfers are ‘demanded’, or not, by a given region.
5. A non-state-wide party (NSWP) is a political party that operates and fields candidates only in a specific region or subnational territory within a country, rather than across the entire territory.
6. On the debates on the nature of the Spanish territorial model see for example: Aja (2003), Requejo (2005), Burgess and Gagnon (2010), Burgess (2006), Elazar (1987), Grau Creus (2000), Poirier, Saunders, and Kincaid (2015), Moreno (2010), Watts (1996).
7. By ‘principio dispositivo’ we refer to the constitutional principle that grants territorial entities the capacity to propose and co-decide on the creation and modification of their self-government. By ‘chaotically’ we mean that the decentralization process was carried out in an asymmetrical, case-by-case manner, rather than following a coordinated or centrally planned approach. Instead of applying a uniform framework across all regions or sectors, decisions were made reactively and inconsistently, often influenced by specific local circumstances, political pressures, or ad hoc agreements. This lack of strategic planning led to uneven outcomes and varying degrees of autonomy across different areas.
8. In the Spanish context, the term ‘historical communities (or nationalities)’ refers to regions that are recognized by the Constitution as having a constitutional right to autonomy, and the constitutional text refers to the right to autonomy of ‘regions and nationalities’. Specifically, ‘historical communities (or nationalities)’ are those regions that had already achieved a degree of self-government

during the Second Spanish Republic (1931–1939), such as Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galicia. This historical precedent was acknowledged during Spain's transition to democracy, granting these regions a faster path to autonomy (article 151) under the 1978 Constitution together with Andalucía.

9. We acknowledge, as suggested by an anonymous reviewer, that the vote of NSWP does not always translate into a 'credible threat' of exit since party goals vary a lot. However, given the Spanish institutional characteristics and the central government's strong position in vertical transfer bargaining, we argue that electoral support for NSWP can constitute a political threat to the central government. In any case, we use it as a proxy of a threat to central powers overstretching its meaning in Siroky, Mueller, and Hechter's (2016) model.
10. For a detailed legal analysis of regional powers see for example: Anglès Juanpere and Bossacoma Busquets (2024).
11. We calculated the probability of receiving a concession from the central government in cases where there is a credible threat – operationalized in this article as a situation in which there is a high percentage of votes for NSWP in the Spanish national assembly, as previously explained. The results indicate that there is no statistically significant difference between regions with more than 50% of the vote for NSWP in general elections (mean = 0.44) and those with less than 50% (mean = 0.41), with a t-value of  $-0.2481$  and a p-value of 0.8041.
12. Given the potential relationship between % GDP and the support or presence of NSWP, we calculated Pearson correlation coefficients to examine the association between NSWP presence and %GDP AC, and % vote NSWP party and % GDP AC. The results showed a weak-moderate positive correlation between NSWP presence and %GDP AC,  $r(758) = 0.28$ ,  $p < .001$ , and between % NSWP party and % GDP AC,  $r(758) = 0.30$ ,  $p < .001$ .
13. To determine whether there is a concrete effect of the historical ACs on this result, we ran four different models in which the Catalan, Galician and Basque cases were removed. The results confirm that there are no differences in the negative effect of electoral support on the probability of transfers (See Appendix B – Table B1).

## Acknowledgments

We want to express our sincere gratitude to the Direcció General de Coordinació Interdepartamental of the Departament de la Presidència of the Government of Catalonia for providing part of the data related to power transfers. Their support and collaboration were invaluable to this work. We are also grateful to the IPA (UPF) and GADE (UOC) research groups for their ideas and constructive feedback, and we thank the editors and anonymous reviewers of Regional and Federal Studies for their insightful comments and suggestions.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## References

- Aja, Eliseo. 2003. *El Estado autonómico: federalismo y hechos diferenciales* (Vol. 216). Alianza Editorial.

- Amat, Francesc, and Albert Falcó-Gimeno. 2014. "The Legislative Dynamics of Political Decentralization in Parliamentary Democracies." *Comparative Political Studies* 47 (6): 820–850. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414013488550>.
- Amoretti, Ugo M., and Nancy Gina Bermeo. 2004. *Federalism and Territorial Cleavages*. Baltimore: JHU Press.
- Anglès Juanpere, Benjamí, and Pau Bossacoma Busquets. 2024. "Un finançament singular per a Catalunya? Regulació del finançament autonòmic (CA-ES)." *Revista Catalana de Dret Públic*, December, 217–238. <https://doi.org/10.58992/rcdn.i69.2024.4355>.
- Aragón Reyes, Manuel. 2006. "La construcción del Estado autonómico." *Cuadernos constitucionales de la Cátedra Fadrique Furió Ceriol*, no. 54, 75–95.
- Baldi, Brunetta. 2003. *Stato e territorio. Federalismo e decentramento nelle democrazie contemporanee*. Roma: Laterza Editorial.
- Benz, Arthur. 1999. "From Unitary to Asymmetric Federalism in Germany: Taking Stock after 50 Years." *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 29 (4): 55–78. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.pubjof.a030052>.
- Beramendi, Pablo. 2007. "Inequality and the Territorial Fragmentation of Solidarity." *International Organization* 61 (4): 783–820. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818307070270>.
- Bonafont, Laura. C., Frank R. Baumgartner, and Anna M. Palau. 2015. *Agenda Dynamics in Spain*. Basingstoke: Springer.
- Bossacoma Busquets, Pau, and Marc Sanjaume-Calvet. 2019. "Asymmetry as a Device for Equal Recognition and Reasonable Accommodation of Majority and Minority Nations. A Country Study on Constitutional Asymmetry in Spain." In *Constitutional Asymmetry in Multinational Federalism: Managing Multinationalism in Multi-Tiered Systems*, edited by Patricia Popelier and Maja Sahadžić, 429–460. Federalism and Internal Conflicts. Cham: Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-11701-6\\_16](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-11701-6_16)
- Burgess, Michael. 2006. *Comparative federalism: Theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Burgess, Michael and Alain-G. Gagnon, eds. 2010. *Federal Democracies*. Routledge.
- Canavire-Bacarreza, Gustavo, Jorge Martínez-Vázquez, and Bauyrzhan Yedgenov. 2017. "Reexamining the Determinants of Fiscal Decentralisation: What is the Role of Geography?" *Journal of Economic Geography* 17 (6): 1209–1249. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbw032>.
- Colino, César. 2009. "Constitutional Change without Constitutional Reform: Spanish Federalism and the Revision of Catalonia's Statute of Autonomy." *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 39 (2): 262–288. <https://doi.org/10.1093/publius/pjn037>.
- Colino, César. 2013. "Intergovernmental Relations in the Spanish Federal System: In Search of a Model." In *The Ways of Federalism in Western Countries and the Horizons of Territorial Autonomy in Spain*, edited by Alberto López- Basaguren and Leire Escajedo San Epifanio, 111–124. Berlin: Springer Berlin Heidelberg. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-27717-7\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-27717-7_7)
- Colino, César. 2020. "Decentralisation in Spain: Federal Evolution and Performance of the Estado Autonómico." In *The Oxford Handbook of Spanish Politics*, edited by Diego Muro and Ignacio Lago. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198826934.013.5>
- Elazar, Daniel J. 1987. *Exploring Federalism*. University of Alabama Press.
- Falcó-Gimeno, Albert. 2014. "Portfolio Allocation under Decentralisation." *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 44 (1, Winter): 205–225. <https://doi.org/10.1093/publius/pjt027>.

- Fossas Espadaler, Enric. 2008. "El Principio Dispositivo En El Estado autonómico." *Revista De Derecho Político* 71–72, 151–173. <https://doi.org/10.5944/rdp.71-72.2008.9042>.
- Garmendia Madariaga, Amuitz. 2020. "El poder político territorial." *Nueva revista de política, cultura y arte*, no. 173, 98–113.
- Grau, Mireia. 2011. "Self-Government Reforms and Public Support for Spain's Territorial Model: Changes and Stability (1992–2010)." *Revista d'estudis Autònòmics i Federaus*, no. 13, 186–214.
- Grau, Mireia. 2019. "Checkmate to the Spanish Decentralisation? The Decline of Public Support for Spain's Autonomous Communities." In *Identities, Trust, and Cohesion in Federal Systems: Public Perspectives*, edited by Jack Jedwab and John Kincaid, 57–84. Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP.
- Grau, Mireia. 2000. "Spain: Incomplete Federalism." In *Federalism and Political Performance*, edited by U. Wachendorfer-Schmidt, 56–76. London: Routledge.
- Griffiths, Ryan D., Pablo Guillen Alvarez, and Ferran Martinez i Coma. 2015. "Between the Sword and the Wall: Spain's Limited Options for Catalan Secessionism." *Nations and Nationalism* 21 (1): 43–61. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12102>.
- Gurr, Ted Robert. 1994. "Peoples against States: Ethnopolitical Conflict and the Changing World System: 1994 Presidential Address." *International Studies Quarterly* 38 (3): 347–377. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600737>.
- Hechter, Michael. 1992. "The Dynamics of Secession." *Acta Sociologica* 35 (4): 267–283. doi:10.1177/0001699392023500401.
- Hombrado, Angustias. 2011. "Learning to Catch the Wave? Regional Demands for Constitutional Change in Contexts of Asymmetrical Arrangements." *Regional & Federal Studies* 21 (4–5): 479–501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2011.578943>.
- Hooghe, Liesbet, Gary Marks, Arjan H. Schakel, Sandra Chapman Osterkatz, Sara Niedzwiecki, and Sarah Shair-Rosenfield. 2016. *Measuring Regional Authority: A Postfunctionalist Theory of Governance, Volume I. Transformations in Governance*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 1991. "Democracy's Third Wave." *Journal of Democracy* 2 (2): 12–34. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0016>.
- Keating, Michael, and John McGarry. 2001. *Minority Nationalism and the Changing International Order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199242143.001.0001>
- López, Jaume, and Marc Sanjaume-Calvet. 2020. "The Political Use of de facto Referendums of Independence the Case of Catalonia." *Representation* 56: 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2020.1720790>.
- Maiz, Ramon, Francisco Caamaño, and Miguel Azpitarte. 2010. "The Hidden Counterpoint of Spanish Federalism: Recentralization and Resymmetrization in Spain (1978–2008)." *Regional & Federal Studies* 20 (1): 63–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597560903174923>.
- Marks, Gary, Liesbet Hooghe, and Arjan H Schakel. 2008. "Regional Authority in 42 Countries, 1950–2006: A Measure and Five Hypotheses." *Regional and Federal Studies* 18 (2 & 3): 111–181.
- Martínez-Cantó, Javier, and Jorge M. Fernandes. 2025. "The Implementation of Decentralisation Reforms in Multi-Level Systems'." *Journal of European Public Policy* 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2448513>.
- Meguid, Bonnie M. 2024. "Transferring Power to Maintain Control: Decentralisation as a National-Level Electoral Strategy in Western Europe." *World Politics* 76 (1): 1–37. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2024.a916340>.

- Moreno, Luis. 2010. "Federal Democracy in Plural Spain." In *Federal Democracies*, edited by M. Burgess and A. G. Gagnon, 160–177. London: Routledge.
- Orte, Andreu, and Alex Wilson. 2009. "Multi-Level Coalitions and Statute Reform in Spain." *Regional & Federal Studies* 19 (3): 415–436. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597560902957500>.
- Panizza, Ugo. 1999. "On the Determinants of Fiscal Centralization: Theory and Evidence." *Journal of Public Economics* 74 (1): 97–139. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0047-2727\(99\)00020-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0047-2727(99)00020-1).
- Pérez Castaños, Sergio. 2023. *Repartiendo el café: 40 años de descentralización política en España*. Granada: Editorial Comares.
- Poirier, Johanne, Cheryl Saunders, and John Kincaid, eds. 2015. *Intergovernmental Relations in Federal Systems: Comparative Structures and Dynamics*. Oxford University Press; Forum of Federations and IACFS.
- Requejo, Ferran. 2005. *Multinational Federalism and Value Pluralism: The Spanish Case*. London: Routledge.
- Riker, William H. 1964. *Federalism: Origin, Operation, Significance*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Rodden, Jonathan. 2004. "Comparative Federalism and Decentralisation: On Meaning and Measurement." *Comparative Politics* 36 (4): 481–500. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4150172>.
- Röth, Leonce, and Andre Kaiser. 2019. "Why Accommodate Minorities Asymmetrically? A Theory of Ideological Authority Insulation." *European Journal of Political Research* 58 (2): 557–581. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejpr.2019.58.issue-2>.
- Sanjaume-Calvet, Marc, and Mireia Grau Creus. 2021. "Multinationalism in the Spanish Territorial Debate during the COVID-19 Crisis. The Case of Catalonia and Intergovernmental Relations." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 27 (3): 273–292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2021.1954296>.
- Sanjaume-Calvet, Marc, Mireia Grau Creus, and Berta Barbet. 2022. *Catalan Self-Government: From Autonomy to Self-Determination?* Bolzano/Bozen (Italy): EURAC. <https://doi.org/10.57749/WAX4-H342>.
- Sanjaume-Calvet, Marc, and Andreu Paneque. 2023. "Shared or Self-Rule? Regional Legislative Initiatives in Multi-Level Spain, 1979–2021." *South European Society and Politics* 28 (1): 75–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2023.2228099>.
- Siroky, David S., Sean Mueller, and Michael Hechter. 2016. "Center-Periphery Bargaining in the Age of Democracy." *Swiss Political Science Review* 22 (4): 439–453. doi:10.1111/spsr.12235.
- Treisman, Daniel. 2006. "Fiscal Decentralisation, Governance, and Economic Performance: A Reconsideration." *Economics & Politics* 18 (2): 219–235. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0343.2006.00169.x>.
- Vampa, Davide, Filippo Boni, Assefa Fiseha, Meryl Kenny, Mariely López-Santana, and Mattia Zulianello. 2025. "Emerging Issues and New Frontiers in Federalism, Regionalism and Territorial Governance: The Role of Regional & Federal Studies in Shaping Future Research Agendas." *Regional & Federal Studies* 35 (4): 493–510. doi:10.1080/13597566.2025.2518752.
- Verge, Tània. 2013. "Party Strategies on Territorial Reform: State-Wide Parties and the State of Autonomies in Spain." *West European Politics* 36 (2): 317–337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2013.749658>.
- Watts, Ronald L. 1999. *Comparing Federal Systems* (2nd ed.). Washington: Queen's University by McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Ziblatt, Daniel. 2008. *Structuring the State: The Formation of Italy and Germany and the Puzzle of Federalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.