Left- wing regionalist populism in the ‘Celtic’ peripheries: *Plaid Cymru* and the Scottish National Party’s anti- austerity challenge against the British elites

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Abstract The article shows how the main regionalist parties in Scotland and Wales—the Scottish National Party and *Plaid Cymru*—have engaged with a populist discourse in the wake of the Great Recession. Based on a qualitative analysis of party manifestos and party-elite interviews, the article shows that the two parties have adopted a left-wing populist discourse, based on a critique of austerity policies. In this way, albeit from distinctively regionalist perspective, they performed roles very similar to that of other contemporary left-wing populist parties, particularly in Southern Europe. The Scottish National Party and *Plaid Cymru* were able to frame their anti-austerity stances within a populist discourse because all three traditional British parties shared a preference for pro-austerity economic policies. Therefore, in Laclau’s terms, the two ‘Celtic’ parties’ attack on austerity constituted an open challenge to the hegemonic discourse of the British ‘power bloc’. Analogous to the expansion of a right-wing anti-establishment protest in British politics (monopolized by the UKIP), the two parties (particularly the Scottish one) capitalized on the expansion of a left-wing populist area. This strategy has lately become less viable because Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour party broke with the pro-austerity consensus among British elites.

Keywords Left-wing populism · Austerity · Minority nationalism · British politics · Scotland · Wales

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Introduction

The two parties analysed in this article have never been included in comparative studies of populism. Indeed, references to the presence of populist elements in their ideology/discourse have been extremely rare and related to their distant past.¹ This should come as no surprise for a variety of reasons. First, the core ideology of both *Plaid Cymru* (Plaid) and the Scottish National Party (SNP) is regionalism (or minority nationalism), making these two parties classic members of the regionalist party family.² Secondly, until very recently, studies on populism in Western Europe have overwhelmingly focused on right-wing (or radical right) populist parties (Betz 1994; Betz and Immerfall 1998; Rydgren 2005; Mudde 2007). This particular empirical focus has allowed some scholars to identify parties, such as the *Lega Nord* in Italy, *Lega dei Ticinesi* in Switzerland and the *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium, that combine regionalism and populism with right-wing ideological elements, such as nativism and xenophobia (Mazzoleni 2005; De Winter 1998; Albertazzi 2006; McDonnell and Vampa 2016).³ In contrast, parties combining regionalism, populism and left-wing ideological segments have remained largely ignored.⁴ Thirdly, until the start of the Great Recession, the two parties were actually moving in a mainstream direction, both ideologically and organizationally, trying to develop and project an image as responsible parties of government (McAngus 2016).

Indeed, this article does not claim that populism is a stable and core feature within Plaid and the SNP's ideology and discourse. However, by analysing how Plaid and the SNP engaged with populism in the period 2010–2017, it shows that the adoption of a populist discourse is a 'potential option' for minority nationalist/regionalist parties for two main reasons: first, the terms 'nation' and 'people' can be easily used interchangeably due to their partially overlapping meaning, and secondly, the political elites of the state from which the regionalist party aims to gain more autonomy or independence constitute a natural target (Heinisch et al. 2018). As a result, the use of a discourse that pits a homogeneous people (aka the regional nation) against hostile (host state) elites is a constant potential option: an option that becomes more viable/convenient in specific periods and under-specific circumstances.

The empirical evidence presented in this article—based on a qualitative analysis of party manifestos, interviews with party elected representatives, the use of data generated by expert surveys (Polk et al. 2017), and of data concerning leaders' TV debates during the 2015 election campaign (Allen et al. 2017)—shows that Plaid and the SNP have combined their established left-leaning regionalist ideology with

¹ To my knowledge, the only scholar who has used the populist label in relation to the SNP is Keating (1996: 182), while the only author that identified Plaid Cymru as a populist party is Combes (1977).

² For a terminological/conceptual discussion of this party family, see Massetti (2009a). Following the editorial article of this special issue (Heinisch et al. 2018), the terms regionalist and minority nationalist are used interchangeably.

³ See also Mazzoleni and Ruzza (2018) in this special issue.

⁴ An exception to this tendency has been represented by March and Mudde (2005), who have identified the Scottish Socialist Party and the Eastern German PDS—also a regionalist party before the creation of Die Linke (Hough and Koss 2009)—as cases of left-wing populism.

a left-wing populist discourse, based on anti-austerity arguments. Left-wing populist parties targeting pro-austerity elites have recently emerged in the Southern peripheries of the Eurozone: *Syriza* in Greece, *Podemos* in Spain and, in a more ambiguous form, the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* in Italy (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Mudde 2017; Ramiro and Gomez 2016; Kioupkiolis 2016; Segatti and Capuzzi 2016). This article claims that, in the absence of a British left-wing populist party, Plaid Cymru and the SNP have tried to play the same role in the UK context, though as representatives of the interests of their own 'Celtic' peripheries. Actually, in the run up to the 2015 general election, the SNP has even tried to represent itself as the most reliable party for protecting not only the Scottish but all British ordinary people from the pro-austerity elites, arguably capitalizing on this strategy and achieving its best electoral score ever. However, the rise of Corbyn's Labour in the 2017 general election appears to have considerably reduced the profitability of a left-wing populist strategy for both regionalist parties.

The next session introduces the basic concepts of populism and regionalism, discussing how they can be combined together with other ideological segments. This section also reviews Laclau's definition of (left-wing) populism (2005a, b), which will inform the empirical analysis. The second section provides an overview of the ideological and electoral development of the two regionalist parties, showing how the adoption of a very similar left-leaning ideology and the electoral gap between the two parties predate their engagement with anti-austerity populism in recent years. Section three presents empirical evidence in support of the claim that, between 2010 and 2015, the two regionalist parties have used a left-wing populist discourse targeting pro-austerity political elites, after having outlined the political opportunity structure that led the two parties to adopt this political strategy. The fourth section provides additional empirical evidence, showing how the progressive 'Corbynization' of the Labour party has subtracted political space to the two regionalist parties and, crucially, has deprived them of the possibility to depict the British political elites as indistinctively pro-austerity. The final discussion revolves around the way in which regionalist, populist and leftist ideas and discourses have been combined by Plaid Cymru and the SNP, as well as the political conditions that have made such a strategy possible and, for a few years, electorally profitable.

Political parties and ideological blends: left-wing regionalist populism

As a subtype of nationalism, regionalism (or minority nationalism) can be defined as a thin ideology which politicizes a specific regional identity vis-à-vis the host state, claiming some kind of territorial self-government for the region (Fitjar 2010: 5). Regionalist parties are, indeed, defined by their focus on self-government claims (De Winter 1998; Massetti 2009a), which makes them appear, at least initially, as single issue or niche parties (Meguid 2008). However, empirical research has repeatedly shown that, in fact, they tend to develop a broader ideology by borrowing ideas and discourses from other (thin and macro) ideological traditions (De Winter 1998). In particular, since the thin ideology of regionalism can be linked with (or hosted by) both leftist and rightist ideological traditions, we find regionalist parties positioned

along the whole left–right political spectrum (Massetti 2009a; Massetti and Schakel 2015).

Similar to regionalism, populism has also been conceptualized as a thin ideology (Stanley 2008), amid a certain convergence in the literature on the definition proposed by Cas Mudde: ‘an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the “pure people” versus the “corrupt elites”, and which argues that politics should be the expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde 2004: 543). The ‘thinness’ of populism allows it to adapt to the different contexts in which it develops (Taggart 2000). Therefore, like regionalism, populism does combine with other ideologies and can take both a leftist or rightist colour (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Otjes and Louwerse 2015; March 2017; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017). Political parties can, therefore, create specific blends of regionalism and populism that, combined with (segments of) other ideologies, would take a right-wing or left-wing (or neither left nor right) colour. While several works have already studied right-wing regionalist populist parties, such as the *Lega Nord*, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* and the *Vlaams Belang* (Mazzoleni 2005; De Winter et al. 2006; Albertazzi 2006; McDonnell and Vampa 2016), this article focuses on two cases of left-wing regionalist populism. In order to do that, some specific features of left-wing populism need to be briefly introduced.

The study of left-wing populism has been greatly influenced by the work of Ernesto Laclau (1977, 2005a, b), who can well be considered as both a theorist and an engaged ideologue of left-wing radical politics. He conceptualizes populism as a patterned discourse that uses ‘empty signifiers’ (Laclau 1977, 2005b). Building on Gramsci (1999), Laclau has particularly insisted on two aspects of left-wing populist politics. First, drawing on the concept of ‘national-popular collective will’, he advocated the building of broad coalitions by linking diverse malcontent communities that, under the common label of ‘people’ (rather than the more sectarian ‘proletariat’ or ‘working class’), would antagonize the ‘power bloc’ (Laclau 2005a: 34–40). Secondly, building on Gramsci’s concepts of ‘cultural hegemony’, he identified a key characteristic of populist movements in their staging an open challenge to the dominant discourse of the elites (Laclau 2005a: 42–47). In other words, the essence of left-wing populism, and its distinction from classic socialism or Communism, lies in its attempt to mobilize all popular classes, including small capitalists, within an indistinct and purportedly homogenous category (‘the people’) against the ideological mainstream which protects the interests of national and/or international elites. This specific understanding of (left-wing) populism has been particularly suitable to explain anti-imperialist discourses of Bolivarianist leaders in Latin America, such as Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales, who have openly challenged not only the national elites but also the so-called Washington consensus (Hawkins 2003; Brading 2013; Harten 2011). Similarly, Laclau’s approach has proved suitable for understanding the discourse and the success of left-wing populist parties, such as *Syriza* in Greece and *Podemos* in Spain, which have challenged the pro-austerity consensus in the European Union (both at EU and at national level) in the wake of the Great Recession (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Kioupkiolis 2016; Ramiro and Gomez 2016). The empirical analysis will, therefore, focus on some key elements of the discourse adopted by Plaid and the SNP: a representation of opposing and contrasting

Table 1 Plaid and the SNP’s electoral results in general elections before devolution

Election year	SNP’s votes (%) in Scotland	Plaid’s votes (%) in Wales	SNP’s number of seats in Scotland	Plaid’s number of seats in Wales
1964	2.4	4.8	0	0
1966	5	4.3	0	0
1970	11.4	11.5	1	0
1974 (F)	21.9	10.7	7	2
1974 (O)	30.4	10.8	11	3
1979	17.3	8.1	2	2
1983	11.7	7.8	2	2
1987	14	7.3	3	3
1992	21.5	8.8	3	4
1997	22.1	9.9	6	4

interests/views between an indistinctive ‘people’ and the British power bloc, as well as the centrality of the challenge to the elites’ pro-austerity discourse.

Plaid Cymru and the SNP: similar ideologies but different electoral success

Plaid Cymru and the SNP have developed as political organizations following very similar ideological and, until the mid-1970s, electoral trajectories. Both parties originated in the inter-war period and had a very long formative phase, breaking the threshold of representation in a general election only in the 1970s. The sharp rise in electoral support for the SNP in the mid-1970s, and then again in the 1990s (Table 1), led two Labour governments to propose legislation for devolution, subject to approval by regional referendums. At the second attempt, in 1997, a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly were finally established by the first Blair government, opening-up new opportunities for the two regionalist parties.

Ideologically, both parties had put little effort in elaborating broad policy platforms during their long formative phase (Lynch 2002; McAllister 2001). They rather preferred to focus on their self-government claims, with the SNP pursuing a clear pro-independence project, while Plaid remaining more ambiguous and more linked to their original concern of protecting the Welsh language. However, starting from the 1970s and then, more markedly, during the Thatcher governments, they developed a clear leftist ideological profile, supporting all industrial actions of the 1980s (Masseti 2009a). They gradually softened their position during the 1990s, with a shift of emphasis from socio-economic to sociocultural issues, such as environment, peace, multiculturalism, gender equality (Lynch 1995). By the time of devolution, they had adjusted to the new post-Thatcher consensus (Hay 1994), pointing to the ‘Irish tiger’ as an example for a future independent Scotland or Wales. In the early 2000s, they completed their process of mainstreaming by undertaking organizational reforms aimed at limiting the power

of local activists at the advantage of the leadership and the (regional) parliamentary groups (Lynch 2011; Elias 2011). The mainstreaming process was clearly aimed at gaining a profile of responsible party of government, in a view to seize the opportunities opened up by devolution (McAngus 2016). Indeed, both parties went in office at regional level in 2007. However, the gap in electoral success between the two parties remained evident, with the SNP leading a single-party minority government in Scotland, while Plaid joining a Labour-led government as a junior partner.

The long-standing gap in electoral success—notwithstanding the adoption of very similar strategies and ideological profiles—has owed to both structural and party competition factors. The structural conditions are of a historical, geographical, ethno-demographic and economic nature. Wales was annexed into England in the middle ages and, sharing a very long ‘border’ (vis-à-vis the westward depth of the country), it has undergone massive demographic and cultural penetration by the English. However, the more remote areas of West and North-West Wales have preserved the use of a ‘Celtic’ language (Cymreig), creating an internal divide between Welsh-speaking and English-speaking Welsh. The emphasis put by the early Welsh nationalists on the protection of the Welsh language has de facto produced a protracted perception of Plaid as a party of the Welsh-speaking minority, thus confining its electoral support to the Welsh-speaking areas of Wales (McAllister 2001). In contrast, Scotland had existed as an independent state until 1707, maintaining some institutional specificities after the Act of Union. This has helped the preservation of a strong national identity. In addition, Scotland shares with England a short border (vis-à-vis the northward depth of the country), which limits English demographic penetration. Moreover, the old Celtic language of Scotland (Gaelic) has virtually disappeared and has never been a major concern of the SNP, allowing this party to be potentially perceived as a party of all Scots. Finally, the discovery of important oil fields in the Northern Sea in 1969 has provided confidence for the nationalist cause, strengthening the economic case for Scotland’s independence (Fitjar 2010).

After devolution, one crucial (non-structural) factor added up to maintain the gap between the electoral fortunes of the two parties: the different fate of the regional branches of the dominant and main competitor party in both regions: Labour. Initially, the Blairite leadership of New Labour managed to get control of both regional branches in Scotland and Wales. This allowed Plaid to capitalize on the first election to the Welsh Assembly, reaching its best electoral result ever (Scully et al. 2003). However, the electoral shock brought Welsh Labour immediately back to a leadership more linked to the values of Old Labour and, crucially, more sensitive to the claims of Welsh nationalism. As a consequence of this critical event, Plaid Cymru had to take on a much more competitive and resilient Labour party vis-à-vis the Scottish Labour that the SNP had to face. Finally, the choice of Plaid Cymru to enter a (regional) government coalition under the leadership of Labour, thus giving up its role of first opposition party, has contributed to structure the Welsh party system around a left–right divide (with Labour and Plaid representing the left and the Tories and Liberal Democrats representing the right) (Massetti 2009b). In contrast, the Scottish party system has been gradually structured, especially since 2007, around the divide between pro-independence parties (SNP, Scottish Greens and

Table 2 Plaid and SNP’s electoral results in their respective regional elections

Year	SNP vote (%)	Plaid vote (%)	SNP seats/total	Plaid seats/ total	SNP in office	Plaid in office
1999	28.7	28.4	35/129	17/60	No	No
2003	23.7	21.2	27/129	12/60	No	No
2007	32.9	22.4	47/129	15/60	Yes—single-party minority	Yes—coalition (junior partner)
2011	45.4	19.3	69/129	11/60	Yes—single-party majority	No
2016	46.5	20.5	63/129	12/60	Yes—single-party minority	No

Table 3 Plaid and SNP’s electoral results in general elections after devolution

Year	SNP vote (%) in Scotland	Plaid vote (%) in Wales	SNP seats/total	Plaid seats/total
2001	20.1	14.3	5/72	4/40
2005	17.7	12.6	6/59	2/40
2010	19.9	11.3	6/59	3/40
2015	50.0	12.1	56/59	3/40
2017	36.9	10.4	35/59	4/40

Scottish Socialist Party/Solidarity) and unionist parties (the three traditional British parties). This testifies to SNP’s success in imposing his agenda (Tables 2, 3).

The following analysis shows how both parties, building on their left-of-centre regionalist ideology, have engaged with a populist discourse that challenged the pro-austerity consensus in British politics since the 2010 general election. Due to the above-outlined different conditions, and due to new intervening events, the similar engagement with this populist strategy has electorally rewarded the Scottish party much more than the Welsh one.

Left- wing populism in the wake of the Great Recession (2010–2015)

With the start of the global financial crisis and the following great recession, new opportunities opened up for the two regionalist/leftist parties (especially for the SNP), particularly after the 2010 general election. They benefited from the results and the immediate consequences of that election in several ways. First, the defeat of Labour and the Scotsman Gordon Brown’s departure from active politics, coupled by the Tories’ return to office in Westminster, represented a rupture between the UK

political establishment and large segments of the electorate in the two Celtic^{E. Massetti}
regions'. Second, the 'suicidal' decision of the Liberal Democrats to enter

a government coalition with the Conservatives allowed the two regionalist parties to partially capitalize on the LibDems' subsequent electoral debacles, starting with the 2011 regional elections. Without the dramatic electoral losses of the LibDems, the SNP would not have been able to gain a full majority in the Scottish parliament and, without that majority, it would have not been able to call (and pass regional legislation) for the independence referendum that was held in September 2014. In turn, the prolonged campaign for the referendum on Scottish independence provided the SNP with more than two years of unprecedented exposure in the media, not only in Scotland but also UK-wide and beyond (Keating 2017). Third, the new Con-LibDem government adopted a clear pro-austerity approach (Lee and Beech 2011), with important consequences on the capacity of the British welfare system (Grimshaw and Rubery 2012). This created an incentive for both Plaid and the SNP to strengthen their leftist profile, denouncing the damages made to welfare services. Fourth, although the new UK Labour leader, Ed Miliband, initially deployed an anti-Blairite rhetoric, by the time he led Labour into the 2015 general election, he had not been able to clearly differentiate its party's macroeconomic approach from that of the governing coalition (Bale 2015). This gave the two regionalist parties the opportunity to link their minority nationalist and leftist rhetoric with a populist discourse which targeted the whole British political elites by presenting the latter all as detached from the needs of the common citizens. This strategy was particularly easy for the SNP, which had been running a prolonged referendum campaign on Scottish independence (2012–2014), in which the Labour party had been part of a common unionist front together with the Conservatives and the LibDems. Finally, the strategy of the two parties, and particularly of the SNP, was favoured by the fact that the few and tiny left-wing populist parties in Britain, i.e. Respect and the Scottish Socialist Party/Solidarity (March and Mudde 2005; March 2017), had been in a course of evident electoral decline since 2007. In short, the left-populist space was completely free in British politics.

The anti-austerity reputation of the two regionalist parties has been gradually built starting with the very electoral campaign of 2010. The SNP's manifesto explicitly asked Scottish voters to send as many minority nationalist MPs to Westminster as possible, in order to protect Scotland from cuts to public spending: 'The London parties all offer the same thing... At this election, more votes means more Nats, and more Nats means less cuts. Local services and recovery can and must be protected' (SNP 2010: 4–5). Plaid Cymru was even bolder in attacking the British political establishment and their common macroeconomic approach: 'Labour has slavishly followed Tory policies for 13 years and Cameron has modelled himself and his politics on Tony Blair... neither Labour nor the Tories can be allowed to continue to wreak havoc on the Welsh economy and undermine our welfare state' (Plaid Cymru 2010: 4). The same anti-austerity discourse was used by both parties in the 2011 regional elections: 'Wales continues to reel in the wake of Labour's financial and economic crises and the most savage cuts in public services since the 1930s inflicted on us by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats... Drastic cuts to benefits will unfairly target the poorest in society...' (Plaid Cymru 2011: 3). In addition, the SNP had an opportunity to target the 'London parties' during the long independence referendum campaign, as well as to present a social-democratic

Fig. 1 British parties' positions in 2014*. Author's elaboration on the bases of the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data—Polk et al. (2017)

vision for an independent Scotland. The document produced by the SNP Scottish Government in favour of independence clearly contains harsh attacks on the growing (social and territorial) inequality caused by the policies of both Labour and Con-LibDem governments. It also includes a series of counter-austerity measures that would be implemented in an independent Scotland, such as abolishing measures of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, boosting housing benefits, linking minimum wage to inflation, re-nationalizing the Royal Mail, and adopting special measures to improve women's opportunities to join the workforce (Scottish Government 2013). Given the positive reaction of many traditional Labour voters in Scotland to the pro-independence/leftist vision of the SNP (Ivan McKee MSP, interview conducted on 24/11/2016, Edinburgh), the minority nationalists kept emphasizing even more their anti-austerity populist discourse after the loss of the 2014 referendum took Scottish independence (temporarily) off the table as an agenda. As shown in Fig. 1, by 2014, the two regionalist parties were occupying, together with the Greens, the left portion of the anti-establishment ground in British politics: a ground that was going to be ever more appealing to British voters (Flinders 2015).

It is also worth noting that in the light of the relative irrelevance of the right-wing populist UKIP in Scotland and the fact that the SNP had incorporated several themes of Scottish left-wing populist parties, such as the Scottish Socialist Party (March and Mudde 2005), the Scottish minority nationalists acquired a quasi monopoly on anti-establishment politics in Scotland, particularly in the context of a general election.

In the absence of a UK-wide anti-austerity party, the two regionalist parties entered the 2015 general election campaign attacking immediately the 'London parties' as indistinguishable defenders of austerity (The Independent, 11/02/2015). This strategy was clearly reflected again in their manifestos: 'All three Westminster parties are committed to slash and bum economics' (Plaid Cymru 2015: 3); 'We propose a real alternative to the pain of austerity... we will then use our influence to demand that Labour delivers the real change that people want and need—instead of just being a carbon copy of the Tories' (SNP 2015: 3). In the TV debates among party leaders during the campaign, the leaders of the SNP and Plaid Cymru were the ones who distinguished themselves for stigmatizing austerity policies more often and more openly than any other party leader.

As shown in Fig. 2a, b, the time dedicated to austerity by the SNP's leader Nicola Sturgeon and Plaid's leader Leanne Wood was, respectively, 43% and 100% higher than the average of all leaders in the first TV debate, held on ITV on the 2nd of April 2015; and 33% and 50% higher than the average in the following debate, held on the BBC on the 16th of April 2015. It is worth pointing out that austerity was the only issue, besides that of constitutional/territorial reforms, which clearly set the SNP and Plaid's leaders apart from the leaders of the all the other parties that took part in the debates (Allen et al. 2017).

In spite of adopting very similar discourses, the two regionalist parties diverged in terms of the space dedicated to issues specific to their respective region. In contrast to Plaid Cymru's focus on the constitutional question (i.e. more powers to the Welsh Assembly), the SNP's manifesto was rather concerned with a wider range of general Westminster policies (Meyer and Miller 2015). The SNP's relative inattention to constitutional matters was partially due to the fact that a referendum had just rejected the party long-term claim for independence. However, it was also due to the possibility of a hung Parliament, which would have given the Scottish regionalists a potential role in the game of coalition government formation in London.⁵ In this context, the party was pushed to show attention to general British issues, beyond narrow Scottish interests—'The SNP will use our influence at Westminster to help deliver positive change for the benefit of ordinary people, not just in Scotland, but across the UK' (Scottish National Party 2015: 3). The party managed to attract a lot of media attention also thanks to the Tory strategy aimed at representing a possible Lab-SNP government as a 'coalition of chaos', stigmatizing the SNP not only for its anti-Britishness but also for its rejection of strict fiscal discipline (The Guardian, 08/05/2015).

⁵ Plaid Cymru did try to increase its visibility by playing the card of a possible post-election anti-Tory coalition, also in virtue of its long relationship with the SNP: "It is likely that there will be another hung parliament after the election. In that scenario, Plaid Cymru could hold the balance of power alongside our colleagues in the SNP. Should that happen, Plaid Cymru will seek a rebalancing of power and wealth in the UK. If the people of Wales return a strong team of Plaid Cymru MPs in May, then Wales will be best placed to secure an outcome to improve the prospects of our people and communities" (Plaid Cymru 2015: p. 3). However, in contrast to the SNP, Plaid Cymru remained largely ignored in the UK-wide election debate.

Fig. 2 Relative salience of austerity (percentage above or below the average) in leaders' TV debates on ITV (a) and BBC (b) during the 2015 electoral campaign. *Source* Author's elaboration on the basis of data from Allen et al. (2017)

Occupying the anti-austerity niche in the British debate was the best way to reconcile the potentially contrasting needs of remaining the champion of Scottish interests and, at the same time, winning UK-wide sympathies. An experienced MSP acknowledge that, during the campaign, the SNP were very aware that they had become the main anti-austerity party in British politics and that there were some

disgruntled Labour voters south of the border that would have considered voting for them, if they had fielded candidates outside Scotland (Linda Fabiani MSP, interview conducted on 23 November 2016, Edinburgh). This explains why Nicola Sturgeon emerged as the most appreciated leader UK-wide after the first TV debate (YouGov’s survey for *The Guardian*, 03/04/2015). She kept adopting the same strategy during the second debate, where she offered Labour’s leader Ed Miliband the support of the SNP for a possible anti-Tory government, while attacking him for his lack of courage in offering a clear alternative to the Tories’ policies (BBC, 16/04/2015). It was in this context and following this strategy that the SNP achieved, by far, its best electoral result ever in a general election (56 out of 59 seats won), virtually wiping out the three traditional British parties from Scotland (Mitchell 2015). In contrast, Plaid only managed to keep its 3 seats out of 40, thus failing to substantively increase its vote share.

Left- wing populism in Britain: an increasingly crowded political area (2015–2017)

The anti-austerity populist strategy of Plaid and the SNP continued after the 2015 general election, in spite of the Brexit referendum taking centre stage in the political debate. In addition, the SNP could exploit the increased media attention due to the fact that it had become the third party in Westminster. In order to avoid any chance of getting identified as just another ‘London party’, the SNP’s group adopted different strategies that can be observed in many different populist parties (especially new ones) Europe-wide.⁶ For instance, the party resisted as much as possible symbolic forms of socialization and institutionalization within the Westminster’s customs and traditions, such as the ‘Yah-Boo’ and ‘bobbing up and down’ during debates (Thompson 2018). In addition, they circulated pictures in social media that showed a virtually empty House of Commons in which the SNP group is the only one massively present in the room (Cowley 2015), thus implying that they are the only party respectful of tax-payers money and democratic institutions. At the same time, a marked over-representation of present MPs in parliamentary debates, especially in those that were particularly important for Scotland, such as the Scotland Bill, the Trident and ‘English-votes-for-English-laws’ (Thompson 2018), gave the SNP the opportunity to remain highly visible also in the UK media.

Yet, with the election of Jermy Corbyn as leader of the Labour party in September 2015, and even more after his re-election a year later, anti-Austerity populism was not anymore an empty hunting ground for the two nationalist parties. As Corbyn’s Labour closes in by advancing a more radical critique of the post-Thatcherite and post-Blairite consensus, negative electoral consequences for the two parties—especially for the SNP that had mostly benefited in the pre-Corbyn context—have started to show. To be sure, the Corbyn effect did not manifest

⁶ The Five Stars Movement in Italy and Syriza in Greece are two classic examples of populist parties who engage in this kind of strategies (Segatti and Capuzzi 2016).

itself in the 2016 regional elections, where the Labour party lost votes both in Wales and (heavily so) in Scotland. Arguably few months of unsettled leadership (with an overall negative media coverage) were not enough to have a positive impact. An SNP member of the Scottish Parliament who had previously been a member of the Scottish Labour party proposed the following explanation:

Labour has voted with the Conservatives for austerity policies many times in the last [2010–2015] Parliament, so that perception carries on. When Corbyn was elected as leader of the Labour party I was personally curious about possible consequences for Scottish politics too. But so far, the effects of Corbyn's leadership have been virtually null in Scotland for three reasons: first, he has a reputation of being a leftist but also of being incompetent; secondly, the Labour party is very divided and people don't vote for divided parties; thirdly, in Scotland the party is not only divided but, amongst the Scottish leadership, it is more anti-Corbyn than pro-Corbyn, so people know that if they vote Labour in Scottish elections they actually vote for anti-Corbyn people. (Ivan McKee MSP, interview conducted on 24/11/2016, Edinburgh).

However, the campaign for the (snap) general election of June 2017 clearly marked the re-appearance of a more radical Labour party, potentially capable of re-attracting voters sensitive to left-populist appeals. The two regionalist parties kept using a strong anti-austerity rhetoric—‘A vote for the SNP will strengthen Scotland's hand against further Tory cuts’ (SNP 2017: 3); ‘Our economy, our communities and even our very identity as a nation is under threat from the cruel and reckless Tories’ (Plaid Cymru 2017: 2)—but this time they could not accuse the Labour party of complicity or convergence with the Conservative government. Quite the opposite, it was the SNP's credentials as a genuine anti-austerity party that became a target. Indeed, Scottish Labour and the Scottish Greens started to criticize the SNP's Scottish executive for not using its new fiscal powers to increase taxes on the wealthy and fund more social services (New State-ment, 10/02/2016); a criticism that was also used by Jeremy Corbyn himself (BBC, 23/08/2017).

The new polarization between the main British parties—interacting with the divisive issue of Brexit—determined a significant comeback of both the Conservatives and Labour in Scotland and Wales. Plaid and the SNP lost, respectively, more than 14% and more than 26% of their 2015 vote share. To be sure, the SNP still remains, by far, the biggest party in Scotland. However, Labour much-better-than-expected UK-wide results have consolidated Corbyn's leadership and, with it, the party capacity to re-attract many voters that had switched from Labour to the SNP since 2010. In addition, the election of pro-Corbyn Richard Leonard as leader of Scottish Labour might increase Labour's electoral pressure on the SNP in future elections (Guardian, 18/11/2017). Competition on the leftist/populist quadrant of the British political space is, therefore, likely to increase further, with potential damages for the two ‘Celtic’ regionalist parties.

Discussion

The article sets out to investigate why and how, in the aftermath of the Great Recession and in the context of an austerity agenda brought forth by the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition, Plaid Cymru and the SNP managed to pursue a synthesis between regionalist, leftist, and populist ideologies/discourses. It argues that this context offered the two 'Celtic' parties the opportunity to take up, from a minority nationalist perspective, the role that in other countries has been covered by state-wide parties, such as *Syriza* and *Podemos* in Southern Europe. The main difference between left-wing populist mobilization in the Celtic peripheries of Britain and in the Southern peripheries of the EU is that it is played at different levels: regional/ national (without a Euroskeptic component) in the former case vs. national/EU (with a strong Euroskeptic component) in the latter. Plaid and the SNP merged their established left-leaning regionalism, which provided a consolidated platform for antagonizing the British state, with a populist discourse that openly challenged the consensus of British elites, including all British parties, on austerity policies. Since these two parties only compete in elections in their respective region, their strategy aimed at delegitimizing the regional branches of all state-wide parties as accomplices (or even servants) of the British elites, leaving them as the only 'champions' of the regional people's interests. This process is very similar to the way in which left-wing Latin American populists have traditionally represented national elites as subservient of foreign interests—*Vendepatria* ('sellers of the fatherland')—and how Syriza has presented Greek mainstream parties' elites as subservient of EU's interests and 'enemies of the people' (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014: 130).

Between the two 'Celtic' parties, the SNP is the one that has mostly capitalized on this strategy, coming from two years of grassroots campaigning on the Scottish independence referendum in which all three British parties were together in the unionist front. Riding the wave, they obtained their best result ever in the 2015 general election. In addition, profiting from new visibility given by its new role as third parliamentary party in Westminster, the SNP also started using some classic tactics that have distinguished populist parties in other parliaments, such as resisting symbolic forms of socialization and institutionalization within the parliamentary customs and traditions.

The left-wing populist strategy adopted by the two regionalist parties was feasible because both parties had already developed, since at least the 1980s, a left-leaning ideological profile which accompanied their minority nationalist ideological core. It was also feasible (and profitable) because, until 2015, all the three traditional British parties shared the broad macroeconomic approach that underpins pro-austerity policies. In addition, other regional/local parties that had established themselves as left-wing populist forces, such as the SSP/Solidarity and Respect, were experiencing a phase of marked electoral decline and were not able to seize the opportunities open by austerity policies. Moreover, the two 'Celtic' regions (particularly Scotland) have remained virtually immune from the appeal of the right-wing populist UKIP. In other words, particularly for the SNP, their expansion into populist politics faced virtually no competition at all.

However, the consolidation of Corbyn's leadership in the Labour party between 2015 and 2017 appears to have considerably reduced the political space available for a left-wing populist strategy. From the launch of Labour's manifesto for the 2017 general election, it became impossible for both regionalist parties to tarnish the whole British elite (the 'London parties') as adopting a pro-austerity consensus against the interests of the common citizens. Corbyn's Labour seems to have regained the capacity to compete for the votes it had lost in Scotland and Wales since 2010. This means that the chances for Plaid Cymru to regain some centrality in Welsh politics are becoming slimmer. The SNP, however, has managed to confirm itself as the dominant party in Scotland, ceding relatively little ground. Therefore, in the northern 'Celtic' periphery, competition on the left of the political spectrum between the SNP and Scottish Labour is likely to increase in the next years.

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