

Regional Ambassadors or State Agents? Assessing the Role of Catalan Cabinet Ministers in Spain

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Abstract

This study focuses on Catalan cabinet ministers in democratic Spain with a view to understanding what function they perform in the central government: regional ambassador or state agent? To this end, this analysis draws on a sub-dataset comprised of 22 Catalan cabinet ministers taken from a general pool of 220 cabinet ministers and 371 ministerial appointments from 1977 to 2021. Our findings demonstrate, first, that no Catalan cabinet minister has ever reached the position of Prime Minister and Catalans constitute a kind of ministerial “middle class” occupying intermediate positions in the cabinet. Second, the examination of career paths and publications of Catalan ministers shows that their role varied according to circumstances. Third, in this article we argue that those variations can be best interpreted as a delegation between principal and agent relying on two main variables, namely the type of party they belong to in Catalonia and the parliamentary majority sustaining the party controlling the Spanish cabinet.

Keywords: Spain; Catalonia; elites; ministers; portfolios

Introduction

Just like in France and the United Kingdom, the appointment of peripheral politicians in Spain is widely discussed in the mass media. As in the cases of Breton, Corsican, or Scottish representatives, this debate is especially intense with every inclusion of Catalan minister, who is subject to intense public scrutiny.

Much has been said about the Catalan ministers since the re-establishment of democracy. At least three reasons can be proposed for explaining the interest of this case study. First, in contrast to Quebec in Canada, Catalonia is one of the biggest and wealthiest autonomous communities of Spain, but the country has not been ruled by a Catalan Prime Minister since the nineteenth century. Second, the recent referendum of self-determination in Catalonia held in 2017 demonstrated the persistence of a strong territorial cleavage within Spain. Third, Catalan ministers usually face an uncomfortable situation. They come from a region dominated by ethnonationalist groups, but their official position requires them to serve Spain as a whole. Consequently, on the one hand, Catalan ministers are recurrently seen by Catalan nationalist groups as untrustworthy state agents seeking to dilute regionalist demands. On the other hand, they are sometimes perceived as regional ambassadors appointed to the cabinet to represent the Catalan voice. So, which function do Catalan cabinet ministers perform within the central government? In this article, we assume this role has

been evolving over time, and this change can be best interpreted as the product of two main dimensions, namely: the type of party they belong to in Catalonia and the parliamentary majority sustaining the party controlling the Spanish cabinet.

Methodologically speaking, this article explores the period going from July 4, 1977, to March 1, 2021, that is, from the first Suárez cabinet to the second Sánchez cabinet. Our general dataset includes 220 cabinet ministers (371 ministerial appointments). It classifies Spanish ministers according to their name, year of birth, place of birth, sex, cabinet, party, duration of tenure, and portfolios. Therefore, we use two different pools of ministers for our analysis. The first pool includes 18 Catalan ministers (27 appointments) identified on the basis of their birthplace. However, for a territorial comparison, birthplace may become more problematic than other factors, as many ministers born in rural Spain moved to urban areas such as Madrid and Barcelona (Rodríguez Teruel 2011). To avoid selection biases, we also used a second pool comprising 22 Catalan cabinet ministers (with 31 appointments) following a reputational approach taking into account ministers considered as Catalan by the press). This sub-dataset focuses on the specific details about the political trajectory of these cabinet ministers, their personal relationships, their party profile and their writings.

This article is divided into four sections. The first focuses on the general literature on the territorial origin of political elites and provides a framework for interpreting the role of Catalan ministers in Spain. The second section sketches the main traits of Catalan ministers' recruitment. The third tackles the question of the territorial loyalty of the incumbents while the fourth uses our theoretical approach to understand the changing role of Catalan ministers since the Transition. Finally, the article ends with some concluding remarks.

Framing the Role of Peripheral Elites in Central Cabinets

Selecting cabinet ministers is a fundamental task in representative democracies (Blondel 1985; Dowding and Dumont 2015). As shown by the extensive literature on ministerial recruitment, the academic trajectory is one of the most important factors in selection (Besley and Reynal-Querol 2011). The previous professional experience in politics, public administration, or the private sector is also a relevant element (Neto and Strom 2006). Third, the party bargain (ideology and loyalty with respect to the faction of the premier) must be taken into account (Alexiadou 2016). Finally, Davies (1997) and Annesley et al. (2019) stressed the importance of the representation of gender and ethnic diversity.

In comparison, the territorial origin of cabinet ministers has attracted little academic attention, despite being considered one of the relevant factors of ministerial selection and deselection (Fischer, Dowding, and Dumont 2012). For instance, Bakvis (1991) underlined the role of Canadian regional ministers in federal cabinets by diverting patronage and “pork” into their constituencies. In this respect, asymmetric regional representation may have important implications for the influence exerted by those territories (Tomita, Baervald, and Nakamura 1981). Aiming to avoid such problems, cabinets make efforts to present a territorially balanced list of ministers, as happens in Canada and the United States (Kerby 2009; Mann and Smith 1981). In some countries, keeping ministerial representation of specific regions or local areas is a must (Fischer and Kaiser 2009; O'Malley 2006).

In Spain, the geographical origin of political elites has been a central concern for observers (especially when the incumbents are Catalan), but only from a descriptive viewpoint. Despite the brief leadership of Joan Prim as Prime Minister from 1869 to 1870 and the appointment of some cabinet ministers like Francesc Cambó under Alfonso XIII, Lluís Companys under Azaña, or Laureano López Rodó under Franco, Catalan politicians have been historically excluded from Spanish core institutions, as Ainaud de Lasarte (1996) and Linz, Jerez Mir, and Corzo (2002) have shown. The trajectories of Catalan political elites since the Transition have also been investigated by Genieys (2004), while Villena-Oliver and Aldeguer-Cerdà (2017) recently pointed out the existence

of territorial networks in Spanish politics. Last, the patterns of territorial recruitment of Catalan cabinet ministers in democratic Spain were set out in detail by Rodríguez Teruel (2011), who stressed the political domination by Madrid and its hinterland (Castile and Leon), and the different areas of recruitment of the Social Democrats (the Mediterranean arc and Northern Spain) and Conservatives (the center of the peninsula).

But despite those conclusions, the question of causal mechanisms remains unresolved. For this reason, our investigation asks if Catalan ministers can be considered as Trojan horses of regional vested interests or Jacobin executors of central government. As shown by Andeweg (2000), the question of ministerial roles can be handled from the principal-agent viewpoint. In some cases, the delegation process between the cabinet led by the Premier can leave a large amount of autonomy to ministers, while in others the hierarchical link is much stronger. In the case of Catalan cabinet ministers, the incumbents represent the agents appointed by a principal—mainly the Spanish Prime Minister and the party leadership. Drawing on the previous analysis by Blondel (1996) stressing the importance of partisan and institutional factors on ministerial autonomy, we identified two main variables affecting the role of Catalan cabinet ministers, namely, the type of party they belong to in Catalonia and the parliamentary majority sustaining the party controlling the Spanish cabinet (Table 1):

For what regards the party of the incumbents, the political formation of Catalan ministers in Catalonia can be more or less autonomous vis-à-vis the leading party in Spain. We argue that a very autonomous Catalan party—like the PSC (Socialists' Party of Catalonia)—aims to send regional ambassadors to Madrid to defend Catalan interests, while regional branches from centralist parties—like the PPC (People's Party of Catalonia)—prefer to promote state agents subject to strong party discipline. Second, we argue that the majority at the Congress of deputies can also shape the role of Catalan ministers. When the party ruling the Spanish cabinet is backed by an absolute majority (like the PSOE—Spanish Socialist Party—in 1982, 1986, and 1989 or the Conservative Popular Party PP in 2000 and 2011), it tries to include state agents avoiding unnecessary bargaining with peripheries. In turn, relative majorities tend to boost the appointment of regional ambassadors to support the leading party at any cost.

Two pure cases appear in Table 1. The first one (cell B) relates with cases of absolute majority at the Congress and a low degree of autonomy for the party of the incumbents. In such a situation, we expect Catalan ministers to act as state agents. In contrast, in cases of simple majority and high degree of autonomy (cell C), Catalan ministers should logically have more room to represent regional interests in Madrid. In the rest of configurations, we assume that the combination of a high degree of autonomy and an absolute majority (cell A) favor the hiring of political brokers able to soften the relationship between the Catalan and the Spanish executives under the strict rules defined by central government. Last, cell D (relative majority and low degree of autonomy) represents a problematic combination that is usually solved by the appointment of independent candidates not belonging to the party structure.

Table 1. Variables Affecting the Role of Catalan Ministers

Principal-Agent Delegation Affected by		Party of the Incumbent	
		High Degree of Autonomy	Low Degree of Autonomy
Majority at the parliament	<i>Absolute</i>	A. Transactional representatives (PSOE 1982, 1986, and 1989:	B. State agents PP 2000 and 2011)
	<i>Simple</i>	C. Regional ambassadors (PSOE 1993, 2004, and 2018)	D. Independent candidates (PP 1996)

Source: Our own elaboration.

Obviously, political science is not an exact science, and we do not expect the principal-agency theory to provide an infallible framework to analyze the role of Catalan ministers. Additionally, we are aware the concept of role depends on two main dimensions: the internal (individual preferences) and external (opportunity structure). But we believe the two variables of our framework provide enough incentives to principals and agents for acting in a given way according to the circumstances.

The Limited Presence of Catalan Ministers

An Underrepresented Region

As previously mentioned, the Catalan ministerial elite in the national cabinet is formed by 22 individuals (Table 2). There has always been at least one Catalan minister—a phenomenon sometimes depicted as the “Catalan quota” (El Mundo 2016)—although their relative weight in each cabinet has fluctuated between 4% and 14%. Although left-wing cabinets tended to include a higher proportion, their recruitment has been quite balanced in terms of political parties. The Socialist governments appointed 13 ministers (one of them proposed by Podemos in the second

Table 2. Spanish Cabinets Since the Transition (1977–2021)

Government	Time in Office	Duration (months)	Type of Majority	Parties	Ministers	Catalan Ministers	
						N	Percentage
Suarez 2	7/1977–4/1979	22	Minority	UCD	24	1	4.2
Suarez 3	4/1979–1/1981	22	Minority	UCD	36	2	5.6
Calvo Sotelo	2/1981–10/1982	21	Minority	UCD	24	1	4.2
González 1	12/1982–6/1986	43	Majority	PSOE-PSC	21	3	14.3
González 2	7/1986–10/1989	40	Majority	PSOE-PSC	22	1	4.5
González 3	12/1989–6/1993	43	Majority	PSOE-PSC	27	3	11.1
González 4	7/1993–3/1996	33	Minority	PSOE-PSC	21	2	9.5
Aznar 1	5/1996–1/2000	45	Minority	PP	18	1	5.6
Aznar 2	4/2000–3/2004	46	Majority	PP	25	3	12.0
Zapatero 1	4/2004–3/2008	48	Minority	PSOE-PSC	23	3	13.0
Zapatero 2	4/2008–11/2011	43	Minority	PSOE-PSC	28	2	7.1
Rajoy 1	12/2011–11/2015	48	Majority	PP	17	1	5.9
Rajoy (caretaker)	12/2015–10/2016	11	Minority	PP	13	1	7.7
Rajoy 2	10/2016–06/2018	20	Minority	PP	14	1	7.1
Sánchez 1	06/2018–04/2019	10	Minority	PSOE-PSC	19	2	10.5
Sánchez (caretaker)	04/2019–01/2020	8	Minority	PSOE-PSC	19	2	10.5
Sánchez 2	01/2020–x	–	Minority	PSOE-PSC Podemos United Left	22	2	9.1

Source: Our own elaboration.

Sánchez cabinet, the left-wing coalition cabinet in power since 2020) while the Conservatives nominated nine (four for the UCD—Union of the Democratic Center—and five for the PP—People’s Party). The presence of Catalan ministers at Moncloa can be assessed in different ways: through the relative proportion of ministers or appointments and the importance of their portfolios.

At first glance, Catalonia has been historically one of the best represented regions of Spain in absolute terms under the democracy. Nevertheless, the presence of Catalan ministers does not match the weight of the Catalan population in Spain. Hence, the Index of Territorial Representation (ITR) of Spanish Ministers created by Cuenca Toribio, and Miranda García (1987) gives a more adjusted portrait of the Catalan representation in the cabinet (Table 3). This instrument weighs the number of ministers according to the population of each Spanish region.¹ The ITR confirms the underrepresentation of Catalan ministers vis-à-vis other autonomous communities. Indeed, the proportion of ministers born in Catalonia (0.5) is proportionally lower with respect to Madrid (2.0) and some low-populated regions in the center and the North, like La Rioja (2.6), Castile and Leon (2.0), the Basque Country (1.8), or Galicia (1.3). In this respect, Catalonia follows the path of the other Eastern and Mediterranean regions that have been traditionally underrepresented in the

Table 3. Index of Territorial Representation of Spanish Ministers (1977–2021).

	Number of Ministers	%	Percentage of Total Population (average 1977–2021)	ITR of Ministers
Andalusia	28	12.7	18.0	0.7 –
Aragon	5	2.3	2.8	0.8 –
Asturias	5	2.3	2.2	1.0 +
Balearic Islands	3	1.4	2.5	0.5 –
Basque Country	18	8.2	4.6	1.8 +
Canary Islands	5	2.3	4.7	0.5 –
Cantabria	2	0.9	1.2	0.8 –
Castile and Leon	23	10.5	5.1	2.0 +
Castile-La Mancha	5	2.3	4.3	0.5 –
Catalonia	17	7.7	16.1	0.5 –
Ceuta/Melilla	1	0.5	0.4	1.0 +
Extremadura	5	2.3	2.3	1.0 +
Galicia	16	7.3	5.8	1.3 +
La Rioja	4	1.8	0.7	2.6 +
Madrid	61	27.7	14.1	2.0 +
Murcia	2	0.9	3.2	0.3 –
Navarre	1	0.5	1.4	0.3 –
Valencian Community	15	6.8	10.6	0.6 –
Foreign countries	3	1.4		
Total	220	100	100	

Source: Our own elaboration and Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2018).

Spanish cabinets, like Andalusia (0.7), the Valencian Community (0.6), Aragon (0.8), the Balearic Islands (0.5), and Murcia (0.3). As stated above, these Mediterranean regions are usually better represented in PSOE's cabinets, while the central and Northern regions have more ministers in Conservative cabinets (Rodríguez Teruel 2011).

A Ministerial Middle-class

Can we talk about a comparative grievance with respect to Catalonia? Actually, the examination of the portfolios managed by Catalan ministers softens this impression. Drawing on the ranking of portfolio salience by Druckman and Warwick (2005), we tried to assess the relative positions obtained by Catalan ministers within the Spanish government (Table 4). The first observation is obvious: No Catalan has reached the top of the ranking. The absence of a Catalan Prime Minister is surprising if we consider the demographic and economic relevance of Catalonia in Spain (Elliott 2018).² In fact, this region constitutes the second most populated region of the country (16% of the total population in 2018), and it enjoys one of the highest gross domestic products per capita (30,769 euros) along with Madrid (34,916 euros), the Basque Country (34,079 euros), and Navarre (31,809 euros) (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas 2018). Table 4 also demonstrates that three sets of Catalan ministers can be identified.

At the top of the table, a group of frontrunners with core competencies of the central state can be observed (Narcís Serra, Josep Borrell, Josep Piqué, Jorge Fernández Díaz, and Eduard Punset). This cluster is followed by a peloton including intermediary portfolios such as Industry and Health, the two most frequent ones (Federico Mayor Oreja, Anna Birulés, Landelino Lavilla, Joan Rovira, Ernest Lluch, Dolors Montserrat, Joan Clos, José Montilla, Salvador Illa, and Carme Chacón). Finally, a third group of ministers comprised of Celestino Corbacho, Jordi Solé Tura, Meritxell Batet, Ana Birulés, Manuel Castells, Miquel Iceta, and Julia García Valdecasas occupies a set of secondary portfolios. As a partial conclusion, it can be stated that, with some exceptions, Catalan ministers have provided a sort of “middle class” to the Spanish central state, close to absolute power, but at the same time excluded from its core.

The Two Roles of Catalan Ministers in Spanish Governments

Spanish and Catalan-oriented Political Careers

The first way to assess the territorial orientation of Catalan cabinet ministers consisted in observing their political trajectories (see Appendix). At least three patterns can be observed, and only the third one (“integrated career”) can be considered as a Catalan-oriented path while the former tended to produce state agents. Indeed, a first set of ministers has followed what Stolz (2010) calls the “classical springboard,” that is, the accumulation of elected positions leading from local and regional tiers of government to the central state. After a period in the local and/or regional administration, some of those ministers opted for a state-oriented political career. For example, Josep Borrell, Eduard Punset, Carme Chacón, Joan Clos, and Dolors Montserrat started their trajectory as members of a municipal council before taking responsibilities at the national level.

Second, another group of incumbents followed what Stolz (2010) defined as an “alternative career,” which corresponds to a succession of positions at a single territorial level. Meritxell Batet, Federico Mayor Zaragoza, Juan Rovira, Landelino Lavilla, Ernest Lluch, Julia García Valdecasas, Josep Piqué, and Anna Birulés fit pretty well into this category, because none of them had exerted functions in a local or regional government before being appointed as ministers. All of them share a common characteristic: they had already developed previous successful professional careers before running for a public office at the state level. Regardless of their political preferences, those ministers were generally coopted by political parties with a view to increasing the legitimacy and technical skills of their cabinets. Once again, it must be stressed that those individuals were principally

Table 4. Ranking of Portfolio Saliency Obtained by Catalan Ministers (1977–2021)

	Suárez 2	Suárez 3	Calvo Sotelo	González 1	González 2	González 3	González 4	Aznar 1	Aznar 2	Zapatero 1	Zapatero 2	Rajoy 1	Rajoy 2	Sánchez 1	Sánchez 2
Prime minister															
Finance															
Foreign affairs		Punset							Piqué						Borrell
Interior												Fdez Díaz			
Vice presidency						Serra	Serra								
Budget															
Economic															
Education			Mayor Zgza												
Social welfare															
Justice	Lavilla														
Labor											Corbacho				
Health		Rovira		Lluch									Montserrat		Illa
Industry				Majó				Piqué		Montilla	Clos				
Public works						Borrell	Borrell								
Trade															
Agriculture															
Defense				Serra	Serra	Serra					Chacón				

Continued

Table 4 *Continued*

	Suárez 2	Suárez 3	Calvo Sotelo	González 1	González 2	González 3	González 4	Aznar 1	Aznar 2	Zapatero 1	Zapatero 2	Rajoy 1	Rajoy 2	Sánchez 1	Sánchez 2
Energy															
Transport															
Foreign trade															
Environment															
Housing										Chacón					
Science/university										Birulés/ Piqué					Castells
Administration										Valdecasas				Batet	Iceta
Culture				Solé											
Development															

Source: Our own elaboration drawing on Druckman and Warwick (2005).

recruited by the UCD and PP to reinforce their executives with Catalan appointees, probably because of the problems faced by their own regional recruitment branch.

The third kind of political trajectory includes politicians like Jordi Solé Tura, Joan Majó, Narcís Serra, Celestino Corbacho, José Montilla, Miquel Iceta, Salvador Illa, and Jorge Fernández Díaz. Termed “integrated career” by Stolz (2010), this category comprises the Catalan ministers who switched from a substate to a national position and vice versa throughout their political career. It is worth noting that those professional politicians belong mainly to the PSC-PSOE, which may be interpreted as a demonstration of the difficulties faced by Spanish Conservatives in training and retaining reliable candidates in Catalonia. A peculiar trajectory in this sense was Salvador Illa’s political career: he had been mayor of a small town for 20 years before entering the cabinet, and since then he has developed a major party career without ever running for a representative office at the regional or national parliaments.

A Divergent Territorial Loyalty

The second approach for assessing the territorial orientation of Catalan ministers consisted in studying their own representations. The problem is that interviewing this set of political actors directly is complex, not to say impossible. But it is always possible to read the writings of those elected officials. We created a short bibliography for that purpose, comprising their complete autobiographies, essays, articles, and interviews published in newspapers.³ At this point, it is important to consider the limits of this exercise. On the one hand, it provides a fine-grained observation of the opinion of Catalan ministers about their relationship with Spain and Catalonia. On the other hand, it is also constrained by the historical context of each minister, since those who participated in the Transition, like Rovira and Lavilla, had a different experience than those who dealt with the crisis of the independence referendum in 2017 (Lavilla 2017).⁴

In general, all Catalan cabinet ministers share a double allegiance to Spain and Catalonia. Most of them expressed in different ways that what is good for Catalonia is good for Spain, and vice versa. Consequently, they usually accept and favor the current system of a state of autonomies (*Estado de las autonomías*) launched during the Transition and modified by the two *pactos autonómicos* (state-region compacts) in 1981 and 1992 and the Statutes’ reforms in 2005–2008. All agree with the rules of the game: Catalonia is a Spanish region with a high level of home rule. Accordingly, all Catalan ministers have criticized the questioning of the Constitution by Catalan nationalism at different moments, particularly since the rise of secessionism after 2010. The sole exception has been Manuel Castells (La Vanguardia 2017), who supported the organization of a referendum on independence launched by the Catalan government in the 2010s before being selected as minister. However, once in the executive, he acknowledged that, as Spanish minister, he was committed to defend the State’s interest in the face of Catalan separatists’ demands and declared his loyalty to the Constitution.⁵ Beyond this isolated case, the examination of the literary production of Catalan ministers shows that they are only divided in the extent of support for the status quo.

Hence, if we observe more carefully their discourse regarding the relationship between Spain and Catalonia during their ministerial tenure, we can identify at least four ideological clusters. First of all, some ministers act purely as a representative of the central government regarding Catalonia. Given the state orientation of their parties, most of the UCD and PP ministers have shown a stronger preference than the rest for the territorial model defined by the 1978 Constitution. This preference for the status quo appears in several publications. It constitutes an important strand of the recent autobiography of Jorge Fernández Díaz (2019). Fernández Díaz was Minister of the Interior in the Rajoy cabinet until 2016, before the organization of the 2017 referendum. The Conservative arguments for defending the current territorial organization of power are usually

related to the defense of the Transition agreements (El País 2001). For those politicians, the Spanish state is made up of a Spanish nation with some regional diversity that is sufficiently guaranteed by the Constitution. After 40 years of Francoism, political stability is necessary, and it must be protected to avoid a situation of anarchy (El Mundo 2017).

In contrast, a second cluster forms around the pragmatic approach of those Catalan ministers who were reluctant to accept the Catalan separatist arguments (as well as those expressed by Spanish nationalists), while advocating for the renegotiation of some aspects of the Spanish-Catalan relationship (La Vanguardia 1996). That was the case of Narcís Serra (El País 1986; Serra, Rajoy, and Leguina 1993), Ernest Lluch (La Vanguardia 2000), Josep Borrell with Joan Llorach (2015), Anna Birulés (El Mundo 2002), or Josep Piqué (Borrell et al. 2017), and Federico Mayor Zaragoza (Público 2018). This approach entails supporting the evolution of the system of regional funding as well as the political competences managed by the *Generalitat*, always within the legal framework of the 1978 Constitution. This approach was characteristic of the Catalanist discourse of the PSC in the 1980s, when the Spanish model of territorial decentralization was still in a process of implementation (Rodríguez Teruel 2008). From this perspective, those former ministers did not insist on the existence of a national minority in Catalonia, which is a question of an individual feeling of belonging according to them, but instead argued for a particularistic institutional arrangement to integrate Catalonia within Spain. Drawing on Lluch's arguments about the two traditional conflicting souls of Catalonia—the romantic and the rational—those ministers have put the social consensus above everything and have collaborated actively as intermediaries between Spain and Catalonia (La Vanguardia 1989).

The third cluster is an evolution of the second, and it is specifically related to the evolution of PSC's pragmatic approach over the 1990s toward a more explicit demand for a federalization of Spain with a "differential" status for Catalonia (Lluch 2000). Accordingly, Miquel Iceta (2007), Esther Nuibo, Meritxell Batet, and Joan Majó (Niubó, Batet, Meritxell, and Majó 2012), José Montilla (Iborra 2006), Salvador Illa (El País 2021) and Carme Chacón (with González in El País 2010), have on several occasions stressed the need to achieve the current Spanish territorial system through the creation of an explicit federation. According to them, this reform would ensure the efficient representation of Catalonia through a series of bilateral and multilateral fora following the German model. This reform, largely present in the regional constitution adopted in 2006, would have consisted in decentralizing competences such as tax raising, justice, and the management of some infrastructures. For these ministers, in a European context of shared sovereignties, Spain is conceived as a plurinational state where the Catalan nation should be recognized. Despite the official line of the PSC, those statements are not shared by all its members. For instance, minister Celestino Corbacho decided to leave the party in 2018 because of the ambiguous policy of the PSC vis-à-vis the independence referendum (La Vanguardia 2018).

Probably the most original contribution to this debate was produced by Jordi Solé Tura, who was one of the founding fathers of the 1978 Spanish Constitution. Drawing on his Marxist background, the former Minister of Culture in the Felipe González cabinet refused to choose between Spain and Catalonia. Solé i Tura (1970) considered that the Catalan nationalist ideology is mainly an illusion strategically promoted by the petit bourgeoisie to justify its claims with respect to the Spanish establishment. Fifteen years later, Solé i Tura (1985) insisted on his initial argument and reasserted his opposition to the right of self-determination because it was contrary to the decentralization model developed by the Constitution. Its destructive potential could break up the fragile equilibrium between unionists and separatists. For this reason, it is essential to create spaces of communication between the central government and the *Generalitat*. Since then, when the Catalan ministers have opposed to the demands of self-determination expressed by the Catalan nationalist movement, they have usually borrowed Solé Tura's arguments.

State Agents or Regional Ambassadors? Advancing the Debate

The Importance of Regional Party

As stated in this section, the first driver influencing the territorial orientation of Catalan ministers is their political party of reference. A clear cut separates Social Democratic and Conservative incumbents: while the ones belonging to the PSC—the sister party of the PSOE in Catalonia—have enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy, the ministers pertaining to the regional branch of PPC—highly dependent on the Madrid’s central party—have tended to act as state agents. But experience demonstrates that (even in the case of the PPC), external political forces have exerted some kind of pressure to shape the choice of Catalan ministers present at Moncloa.

Of interest, Catalan ministers have usually had a strong political and party profile. Drawing on the concept of “two routes to ministry” identified by Rodríguez Teruel (2011), Spanish ministers usually come from the national parliament or from the high ranks of the central public administration. This duality between the “parliamentarian way” (Blondel 1985) and the “mandarin trampoline” (Dogan 1989) is important because it demonstrates the limited opportunities of becoming part of the Spanish cabinet. However, Catalan ministers are less likely to be recruited to the national elites through these routes. Only 10 of them have previously been Members of Parliament (MPs) in the national legislature (45.5%, six points fewer than other cabinet ministers), nine have had executive posts below the cabinet (40.9%, eight points fewer than non-Catalan ministers), and only four were recruited among the top ranks of civil servants (21.1%). In contrast, 12 had held a political office in subnational institutions, almost all of them at the local level. This means 54.5% of Catalan ministers had political experience in subnational institutions, 25 points higher than the rest of the ministerial elite.

This specific subnational route to the national core executive is essentially related to their party background. The four ministers appointed by the UCD during the transition had bureaucratic experience or an international background. Conversely, since 1982 Catalan ministers have been representatives of the regional party branch of the ruling party, or have come from the Catalan economic elite. The former is the main route for the Socialist ministers. All but one of the 11 ministers were members of the PSC. The only exception was Josep Borrell, who had already developed his professional and political careers in Madrid. However, after his ministerial appointment in 1991, he also became one of the main leaders of the PSC. This shows the relevance of this Catalan party, which is formally independent of the PSOE and had usually come first in the national and local elections in Catalonia (until 2011, when it was surpassed by the emerging secessionist forces).

In this respect, PSC’s ministers have always enjoyed a particular position as regional representatives within the cabinet, although this informal role has neither always been easy nor politically clear. This situation has evolved over time. In the 1980s and 1990s, Felipe González, PSOE’s Secretary General and Prime Minister, did not consult the PSC when choosing his ministers. To preserve political autonomy between the two organizations, the main regional leaders of the PSC were not appointed in the national cabinet, as they preferred to consider their party fellows as ambassadors of the organization. But the strengthening of the political value of the ministerial position in the *cursus honorum* of the Spanish political elite has altered this pattern. Hence, the PSC’s leaders have become less reluctant to accept ministerial responsibility. Therefore, José Montilla was the first PSC Secretary General simultaneously to become a cabinet minister in 2004. More recently Salvador Illa has become the first secretary of the party organization to enter the cabinet, to be replaced one year later by the PSC’s Secretary General, Miquel Iceta.

The five Catalan Conservative ministers appointed to the PP’s cabinets have followed a less homogeneous pattern. Both the PP’s Prime Ministers, José María Aznar and Mariano Rajoy, have tended to dismiss the regional branch when selecting cabinet ministers, which reflects the generally weak position of the Catalan branch of the PP in the Catalan party system. Aznar tended to recruit outsiders to strengthen the regional organization and facilitate the parliamentary support from the

Catalan nationalist CiU (Convergence and Union, the main party of Catalonia from the 1980s to the 2010s). This strategic goal favored the appointment of Josep Piqué, an independent politician who had previously worked for the Catalan government as a General Director of Industry. This nomination was initially perceived as a “convergent quota” (*cuota convergente*), that is, a minister imposed by CiU (La Vanguardia 2007).⁶ In contrast, Rajoy preferred to select personally reliable ministers, like Jorge Fernández Díaz or Dolors Montserrat, to guarantee internal cohesion in the cabinet.

The Influence of Parliamentary Equilibriums

The examination of the influence played by the majority backing the executive at the Congress demonstrates that the parties leading the Spanish cabinet have included Catalan ministers with different profiles according to their strategic needs. In governments with an absolute majority, the choice of Catalan ministers was mostly oriented to facilitate the acceptance of central decisions in Catalonia. In turn, simple majorities have tended to facilitate the incorporation of Catalan ministers able to strengthen electoral support in this region for the executive. By way of illustration, we have selected those cases of ministers with policy relevance in their portfolio and simultaneously with a significant role in the relationship with the Catalan administration during periods of absolute and simple majority.

Indeed, at the end of the Transition, the ministerial mandate of Narcís Serra aimed to create bridges between the regional and state tiers of government. Serra, as Minister of Defense in the González cabinet from 1982 to 1991, and as Vice President from 1991 to 1995, was in charge of the relationship with the leaders of the CiU at the head of the Catalan executive. His friendship in his youth with Miquel Roca, Vice Secretary General of *Convergència* from 1989 to 1996, particularly favored the rapprochement between their political groups in 1993, when the PSOE failed to obtain an absolute majority at the general election.⁷ This allowed Serra to play an important role during the 1993–1995 negotiations between the central government and the regional administration on the transfer of new powers to Catalonia. Other ministers of this period (as Lluç or Borrell) exerted an important policy influence in specific portfolios, but without playing any relevant role in the relationship with the regional administration.

The victory of the PP in 1996 followed a similar dynamic. As previously mentioned, the Prime Minister candidate José María Aznar needed the support of other parties to enable his investiture, and an agreement was finally reached with CiU. In those conditions, CiU pressure and the irrelevance of the PP in Catalonia favored the nomination of an independent candidate: Josep Piqué. As a former top-level civil servant of the *Generalitat*, Piqué symbolized Aznar’s aim of obtaining long-standing support from CiU to guarantee the stability of his majority in the legislature. As Minister of Industry, Foreign Affairs, and Science and Technology, Piqué became the nexus between the Catalan government and Moncloa. His personal connections with the inner circle of *Convergència* were supposed to facilitate the contacts between the PP and CiU in Spain and in Catalonia, where he led the Conservative list at the regional elections of 2003.⁸

The Zapatero governments exerted a different pattern of influence among Catalan ministers. The Socialist victory in Spain (2004) and in Catalonia (2003, in coalition with the Republican Left of Catalonia and Initiative for Catalonia-The Greens) eased the relations between the executives of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Pasqual Maragall. The “Catalan quota” was personified by no less than four Catalan ministers: José Montilla, Joan Clos, Celestino Corbacho, and Carme Chacón. The inclusion of a high number of Catalan incumbents was motivated by the large number of votes secured by the PSC at the general elections and by the need to establish a bilateral dialogue with the *Generalitat* during the reform of the regional constitution of Catalonia (known as the *Estatut de Catalunya*), initially backed by Zapatero. In this context, Montilla played a fundamental role in coordinating the process of Statute reform in Catalonia through his double responsibility as cabinet-level Minister of Energy and as PSC’s Secretary General. However, the balance between

advocating the central government perspective and, simultaneously, representing the Catalan party's interest in the reform eventually became hard to sustain. Hence, he was finally chosen to replace Pasqual Maragall in 2006 to improve the relationship between the PSOE and the PSC. In contrast, Chacón seized upon her tenure as Minister of Housing (2007–2008) and as the first woman occupying the position of Minister of Defense (2008–2011), to strengthen her political future in Madrid, representing the progressive turn in the Spanish government.

The return of the Conservatives under the leadership of Mariano Rajoy in 2011 with a consistent absolute majority and the previous victory of Artur Mas' CiU in Catalonia in 2010 initiated a tense period between these two tiers of government. Rajoy initially appointed Jorge Fernández Díaz as minister to open a communication channel with the Catalan nationalists. Fernández Díaz was the leader of the moderate wing of the PPC, and he was well-known for his opposition to the hardliner Alejo Vidal Quadras at the head of the party. But the massive protests against the decision of the Constitutional Court about the *Estatut* along with the budget cuts and several scandals of corruption incited CiU to embrace separatism (Barrio and Teruel 2017). In this context, Fernández Díaz spearheaded the central opposition to secessionism. The PP started to counter the rise of secessionists through a secret police squad: the *policía patriótica* (patriotic police). Run by Jorge Fernández Díaz, this brigade aimed to discredit the main actors of the sovereigntist process led by the Catalan nationalist forces (La Vanguardia 2019). The "Catalonia Operation" consisted of finding evidence of corruption among Catalan nationalist leaders, such as Jordi Pujol, who was investigated for diverting public money to tax havens.

The 2018 vote of no confidence that led Pedro Sánchez to the premiership stopped the "dirty war" between the two executives, but the tensions continued. In this period, the PSC had become one of the main territorial branches supporting Sánchez in intra-party fights. Therefore, Sánchez appointed two Catalan ministers, Josep Borrell and Meritxell Batet, who occupied, respectively, the positions of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Territorial Policy and Civil Service. This choice was interpreted also as a way of giving room to Catalonia within the central cabinet through a political tandem symbolizing the opposition to the *procès* (Borrell) and, simultaneously, the ability to negotiate with Catalan nationalists (Batet). Accordingly, Borrell, already known for his reluctance with respect to separatism, played an active role for counteracting the media policy of the *Generalitat* and closing Catalan regional embassies in Berlin, London, and Geneva (El País 2019). Batet's role basically consisted in reinitiating the relationship between the Spanish and Catalan cabinets through a series of bilateral commissions and sectorial conferences after the activation of Article 155 by the Rajoy government (El Confidencial 2018).⁹

Finally, after the 2019 elections, the progressive coalition cabinet led by Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) and Pablo Iglesias (Podemos) replaced Borrell and Batet with two new Catalan ministers: Salvador Illa and Manuel Castells. While Castells, as a prestigious researcher in social sciences recruited by Podemos, had a second-order position in the Ministry of Universities, Illa was expected to play a key role in the relationship with Catalonia. For health policy is highly decentralized in Spain, he became Minister of Health to be less concerned with the ministerial duties and focusing on the matter of Catalonia, acting as the new nexus between Moncloa and the *Generalitat*. However, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic transformed the scenario, which paradoxically expanded his influence and authority in Catalonia. Consequently, Sánchez finally decided to seize upon his popularity by putting himself forward as a Socialist candidate at the 2021 Catalan elections. Consequently, Miquel Iceta replaced Salvador Illa.

Conclusion

This study aimed to consider whether Catalan cabinet ministers should be considered as regional ambassadors or as state agents? Drawing on two pools of Catalan ministers appointed in national cabinets between 1977 and 2021, this study has considered the role of Catalan cabinet ministers, bringing to the fore three main conclusions. First, in terms of politics of presence, all the Spanish

cabinets have included Catalan ministers (the so-called “Catalan quota”). But this presence has been historically inferior to that of other regions in Spain. Moreover, the Catalan incumbents have been present at different levels within the Spanish cabinet but they never reached the position of Premier. Under those conditions, we assume Catalan ministers represent a kind of ministerial middle-class in Spanish politics, often influential but rarely decisive.

Second, the territorial orientation of Catalan ministers diverges from one case to the other. From a political career perspective, Conservative Catalan ministers usually buy a one-way ticket to Madrid, while many Socialists often come back to Catalonia after their experience with central government. Neither pure Jacobins nor Catalan separatists, their literary production also demonstrates that the majority aim to soften Spanish-Catalan relations through personal connections, but that Conservatives Catalan ministers are more likely to defend the interests of central state than their Progressive counterparts.

Third, we tried to demonstrate that the role performed by Catalan cabinet ministers can be best interpreted as a delegation between principal and agents relying on two main criteria. On the one hand, the regional political party of reference of the incumbents shape the function of Catalan ministerial elites. Autonomous organizations like the PSC tend to provide regional ambassadors to the executive, while the appointees from the regional branch of the PP are clearly state-oriented. But this trend must be understood in the light of the political balance in the Congress. Periods of absolute majority allow the Spanish executive to select loyal agents, while relative majorities favor the recruitment of strong regional leaders able to bolster the cabinet’s supports. Moreover, as we have shown, on some occasions, region-wide parties like CiU have interfered in the selection of Conservative candidates, favoring the recruitment of independent candidates. In sum, the function of state agent or regional ambassador of Catalan ministers is the product of a double-logic involving party bargain and parliamentary equilibriums.

We believe that this study makes a significant contribution to the study of peripheral elites in two ways. First of all, this article provides a method for studying the territorial dimension of political elites. The grouping of a general dataset based on a “hard” variable like birthplace along with a “reputational” roster of Catalan cabinet ministers could be replicated in other case studies. Moreover, the analytical framework used for understanding the logic of delegation of Catalan ministers can be used with other minorities to understand the role played by regional elites in central institutions. Nevertheless, this article also suffers two limitations. The first one is the low number of Catalan politicians who have been appointed as cabinet ministers in Spain since the Transition. In those conditions, it is obviously complicated to generalize their main features. Second, our conclusions should be contrasted with other case studies to improve their robustness (like Galician, Basque, or Flemish or Scottish cabinet ministers for instance). Overall, further research could take into account this research agenda.

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Notes

- 1 The ITR is calculated by dividing the percentage of cabinet ministers from a given region within the Spanish cabinet, by the percentage of inhabitants from the same region within the whole Spanish population. The closer to 1, the more balanced; if less than 1, then the region is underrepresented, if more than 1, the region is overrepresented.

- 2 At the beginning of the 1990s, Prime Minister González considered selecting Serra as one of the potential substitutes to inherit the premiership, although he also would have admitted that being Catalan could be a negative aspect for his candidacy (Rodríguez Teruel 2011, 169).
- 3 This specific bibliography was created using the Dialnet Spanish academic browser for books and journals. Newspaper articles were found through the *Toda la Prensa* website. The opinions of Catalan ministers about the Spanish territorial system were classified in an axis going from pure centralization to Catalan secession through intermediate positions (e.g., incremental reforms within the current institutional framework, recognition of a Catalan nation or right to organize a referendum).
- 4 We did not find any statement by Joan Clos on this topic.
- 5 The former minister Eduard Punset also supported the claim for a referendum on secession many decades after having left the cabinet. Despite not supporting independence, Punset argued that this was a part of the democratic evolution of Spain (Público 2017).
- 6 Despite the insistence of the PP on nominating the Catalan nationalist Miquel Roca as Minister of Foreign Affairs, members of CiU have always refused to participate in the Spanish central government (El País 2002). This does not mean that Catalan nationalists have rejected the opportunity to play a role at the national level. For instance, in 1983, the Democratic Reformist Party was launched in Spain to run in the 1986 general elections. This new political formation was led by Miquel Roca. It was mainly promoted by the business milieu along with members of CiU. The so-called *Operación Roca* failed to gain any seats at the Congress. According to public opinion, the Reformist Party was seen as an attempt to “Catalanize” Spain through the creation of a national pivotal party favoring the interests of Catalonia (Magaldi Fernández 2019).
- 7 Born into the circle of well-off families in Barcelona, Serra and Roca worked together in the *Front Obrer de Catalunya* (Workers’ Front of Catalonia) and started a law firm in 1967 (Crític 2017).
- 8 Josep Piqué, along with his university friend Anna Birulés, constituted what journalists called the “clan de Urús,” from the name of a small town in the Pyrenean Cerdanya where Barcelona’s jet set used to spend their vacations near the Pujol family who retained regional power at the *Generalitat* for 23 years (ABC 2014).
- 9 Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution was activated by the Rajoy government in October 2018 after the referendum on self-determination and the unilateral declaration of independence organized by the Catalan separatist parties. Article 155 recentralized the devolved regional powers in the hands of the Spanish cabinet, who used this article to hold new elections in Catalonia.

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