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Independence in Europe: Regionalist Party Rhetoric and the EU in a Post-Brexit United Kingdom

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Abstract

In the wake of Brexit, how has the framing of the EU and independence evolved among regionalist parties in the devolved regions of the UK? The effects of a multilevel structure such as the EU on regionalist parties has been examined, yet European disintegration is novel and thus yet to be fully explored. Has the framing of the EU by these parties shifted, and if so, how? In this article, I analyze 19 regionalist party manifestos between 2011 and 2022 through the lens of rational choice and discursive institutionalism to examine the effects of Brexit on the framing of the EU. At a rhetorical level, these parties have engaged in the subsuming of the EU, rhetorically tying their independence or enhanced autonomy to Brexit. Sinn Féin, Scottish Nationalist Party, and Plaid Cymru have used the critical juncture of Brexit to incorporate the EU into their regionalist rhetoric. By examining the effects of European disintegration on regionalist political parties, we can better understand the role that current events play in the fluidity of party positions as presented in manifestos.

Keywords: rhetoric; Brexit; regionalist political parties; European Union

Introduction

Scholars have examined the effects of European integration on regionalist parties (Marks & McAdam 1996; Helbling, Hoedlinger, and Wüest 2010; Jasiewicz 2013), yet European disintegration in the form of Brexit is a relatively recent phenomenon. Due to the novelty of a state choosing to leave the European Union there is little literature on the ways in which regionalist parties rhetorically react to European disintegration. Has the decision of the UK to leave the EU affected the framing of the EU by these parties, and if so, how? To examine this question, I incorporate theories of rational choice and discursive institutionalism to create a framework that offers new insights into the ways in which framing can evolve after critical junctures and, more specifically, on ways that regionalist parties have reacted to the challenge of Brexit to subsume the EU into their regionalist rhetoric.

I evaluate the effects of Brexit on regionalist parties in three devolved regions of the United Kingdom. I engage in manifesto analysis of the primary party in each case: Scottish National Party in Scotland, Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland, and Plaid Cymru in Wales. By analyzing manifestos from every regional and national parliamentary election from 2011 through 2022, I trace the manifestos as these parties move to subsume the EU into their rhetoric in pursuit of their historical goals: Scottish independence, Irish unity, or Welsh autonomy. I find that the critical juncture of Brexit allowed the regionalist parties to deviate from their previous stances on the EU, allowing these parties to reframe their regionalist movements and goals in terms of Brexit as an attempt to

maximize their party's vote share, subsuming the issue of the EU into their regionalist frames. After Brexit, while the urgency of such regionalist framing decelerates, the sentiment linking the EU and independence remains stable.

Regionalist Parties within the United Kingdom and European Union

When European integration began, it presented secessionist actors with the opportunity to be a "Europe of the Regions," with the potential for enhanced regional power and a perceived easier path to statehood (Lynch 1996; DeWinter and Cachafeiro 2002; Massetti and Schakel 2020). Access to both EU regional funding and supranational institutions have played a powerful role in generating regionalist party support for European integration (Elias 2009, 6; Gross and Debus, 2017, 13). Despite these reasons for enthusiasm among regional actors, the concept of Europe of the Regions quickly fell apart because it became clear that the EU was still based on a Europe of states (DeWinter and Cachafeiro 2002; Massetti and Schakel 2020). During the early 2000s, regionalist support for political integration declined because regionalist parties involved in EU affairs realized that they wielded a limited amount of power at the supranational level (Massetti and Schakel 2021, 425). Despite the unfulfilled promise of the EU, most regionalist parties do hold a Europhilic position due to the perceived enhanced viability of regional power in the European framework (Jolly 2015, 88).

Given that most regionalist parties have embraced European integration, however reluctantly, how might regionalist parties react to European disintegration? The exit of a European member state, as in the case of the UK, presents a novel opportunity for these parties to reframe their relationship to the EU. In the UK's 2016 vote to leave the EU, voters within two of the three devolved regions, Scotland and Northern Ireland, voted to remain within the EU, but Wales voted to leave (McEwen and Murphy 2022). Two of these regions have rich histories of secessionist movements. In Scotland, a 2014 referendum narrowly voted to remain within the UK (Bond 2015). In Northern Ireland, the question of Irish unification and independence from Britain led to a 40-year violent conflict, resolved in 1998, known as the Troubles (McEwen and Murphy 2022). The secessionist sentiment that existed before the Brexit referendum has only increased in both regions since 2016. In Northern Ireland, support for independence reached a record 42.5% in February 2020, and support for independence in Scotland reached almost 50% (Baldini, Bressanelli, and Massetti 2023, 136, 132). By way of contrast, support for Welsh secession has traditionally been weaker, though it increased throughout the Brexit process from nearly 17% in 2014 to nearly 27% in 2020 (Baldini, Bressanelli, and Massetti 2023, 135). Instead of overt secessionism, much regionalist sentiment in Wales has been directed at enhanced regional autonomy (Bradbury 2021, 125).

This regionalist sentiment is best embodied in the largest regionalist parties of these regions, the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP), Sinn Féin (SF), and Plaid Cymru (PC). The Scottish Nationalist Party began in the late 19th century through the Scottish Home Rule Movement and transitioned to traditional party politics in the 1960s (Finlay 2009, 24; Bennie 2016). Similarly, Plaid Cymru evolved out of the Welsh nationalist movement of the 1920s and began to espouse a more comprehensive platform in the post-World War I era (Elias 2006, 194). Due to the lower level of secessionist sentiment in Wales than in the other devolved regions, PC has only recently embraced independence as a goal, instead historically focusing on increased autonomy and devolution (Wyn Jones 2009, 141). Whereas PC and SNP evolved out of peaceful movements, SF has a different history with electoral politics. During the Northern Irish Troubles, SF was regarded as the political wing of the Irish Republican Army. Due to this connection, the party was banned in the UK until 1974. The party transitioned to mainstream politics with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (White 2010; Arthur and Cowell-Myers 2021). Despite their differences, all three of these parties embrace a rhetoric of regionalism. Thus, they tend to link other political issues to primary motivation of regional autonomy or independence (Massetti and Schakel 2015). By focusing on the largest party representing secessionist sentiment in each region, we can understand the differing effects of Brexit on this party family within the UK.

Framing and Disintegration

To take advantage of Brexit, parties must be able to frame their appeals appropriately. Framing constructs a shared reality and understanding for groups. It serves three functions: first, diagnosis, or identifying the problem, second, prognosis, or identifying the solution, and third, motivation, or giving a call to action (Benford and Snow 2000, 615–617). Frames can be multidimensional through the process of frame bridging, a process that ties together “two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem” (Benford and Snow 2000, 624). By bridging frames, parties can bring two disparate frames into alignment with one another and in line with the prevailing cultural and political environments. The bridging of regionalist frames and secondary frames, known as the subsuming strategy, is common amongst regionalist parties (Elias, Szöcsik, and Zuber 2015, 845).

This strategy, in which parties frame secondary issues in terms of the primary dimension of partisan competition, is popular when considering regionalist parties and European integration (Elias, Szöcsik, and Zuber 2015, 845). As exemplified by the SNP, regionalist parties often subsume economic issues into their primary frame, such as framing Scottish independence in economic terms (Elias 2019, 19). When choosing which economic stance to adopt, parties tend to use the “type of economic discourse [that] arguably suits best the construction of coherent regionalist grievances and claims” (Massetti and Schakel 2015, 873). Parties may choose to adopt a positive subsuming strategy in which their rhetoric on both axes of competition aligns with their established identity or a negative subsuming strategy in which their rhetoric on one of these axes is at odds with this established identity (Wright 2022, 618–619). When considering the three cases at hand, their primary identity is as an advocate for their regions: with the SNP advocating for full independence, SF advocating for Irish unification, and with PC advocating for enhanced autonomy.

Although these parties have similar primary identities, they have unique historical stances toward the EU, having existed at varying points on the Europhile–Eurocritical spectrum at different times (Elias 2008; Evershed and Murphy 2022; Foley 2022). Whereas both PC and SNP have been unabashedly Europhilic since the 1980s (Elias 2006, 201; 2009, 4; Hepburn 2009, 193), SF has historically held a stance of “critical engagement” toward the EU (Maillet 2009, 559). When considering these histories in tandem with the subsuming strategy that can be used by regionalist parties, their previous framing of the EU by these parties has the potential to shift alongside the political climate. Though these parties have held generally Europhilic or Euroambiguous positions and thus Brexit may not have shifted the overall stance of the party toward the EU, Brexit may provide an opportunity for parties to shift their specific rhetoric toward an enhanced subsuming of the EU. Before the introduction of Brexit, the issue of Europe has not been substantially subsumed. Post-Brexit, European issues may be subsumed in service of this overarching frame but will likely not replace the overarching frame of regionalism. To understand the precise mechanics of that framing shift, we must incorporate theories of rational choice and discursive institutionalism.

In rational choice theories of political parties, the goal of a political party is to win elections and attempt to maximize their vote share in future elections (Downs 1957, 137). Correspondingly, the complementary median voter theorem posits that parties will take positions that align with the positions of the median voter (Downs 1957, 142–143). Although strict rational choice theories of political party behavior can be criticized for their lack of context, these concerns can be rectified by integrating institutionalist thought in theories of rational choice institutionalism (Skocpol 1995; Pierson 2000; Aldrich 2011). Using rational choice institutionalism, we can understand rational party behavior within the appropriate cultural and institutional context (Shepsle 2009, 34). Ethnoregionalist parties are not exempt from this rational actor framework; these parties also choose to emphasize issues that they perceive will maximize their vote share (Elias, Szöcsik, and Zuber 2015, 843). Therefore, the framework of rational choice institutionalism is integral to understanding why parties might shift their framing of the EU.

Although rational choice institutionalism might explain why the parties might shift their rhetoric, theories of discursive institutionalism can help to explain when parties might shift their rhetoric. Just as in the case of actors and the state, institutions and rhetoric exist in a mutually constitutive relationship; political rhetoric is both influenced by and influences the state (Finlayson 2004, 541). In discursive institutionalism, institutions are both “structure and construct,” under which we can expect institutional shifts to influence and be influenced by political discourse (Schmidt 2008, 312). In this view, we should expect institutional context, particularly the effects of disintegration or other critical junctures, to heavily influence the rhetoric of regionalist parties.

A critical juncture can be a moment of political upheaval in which political actors can have an outsized influence on outcomes (Capoccia 2016, 91). During these moments of historical openness, ideologies and institutions can break from their path dependence to embark on a new path (Pierson 2004, 39). This theoretical framework of path dependence and critical junctures can be applied to ideas and rhetoric as well as institutions (Blyth, Helgadottir, and Kring 2016, 156). According to the logic of rhetorical path dependence, when an organization takes a stance on an issue, the future rhetorical path narrows. The previous rhetoric of parties and organizations can “take on institutionalized characteristics” by establishing an inflexible rhetorical path for parties (Grube 2016, 541). Political discourse, as well as institutions, can become prone to stickiness as a feedback loop becomes self-reinforcing (Hess et al. 2010). This rhetoric, however, can be changed by critical junctures allowing for new opportunities (Grube 2016, 531–532).

During the Brexit process, there was a potential for a wide range of outcomes, allowing actors within the UK the opportunity to reevaluate their discourse (Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2019). In this way, Brexit functioned as a critical juncture for the UK and an opportunity for a change in the rhetorical path of regionalist parties. When specifically considering regionalist actors, Brexit has recast the relationships between the UK and its regions, reigniting questions of regional independence (Baldini, Bressanelli, and Massetti 2023, 137). To apply this idea of a critical juncture to regionalist party rhetoric, it stands to reason that Brexit opened a range of opportunities for regionalist parties to move in new rhetorical directions. Considering this critical juncture, we can expect that each party will use this opportunity for changed rhetoric on the EU to achieve their own unique regionalist goals, clarifying their general instrumentalist framing of the EU by more clearly subsuming the issue of EU membership into their independence framing.

Considering the different material circumstances and preferences of voters in each region, each party will be affected differently by this shift, yet each should consistently use this event to link Brexit to their own goals. In rational choice theories of party rhetoric, we should expect that these regionalist parties will respond in ways that they perceive will maximize their electoral share; in the cases of SF and SNP, that may be subsuming the issue of EU membership into their regionalist rhetoric, given the popularity of the EU as compared with the regionalist goals of the two parties. Although their previous rhetoric may have emphasized their general support or constructive critiques of the EU, depending on the party their post-Brexit rhetoric may shift to emphasize the relationship between independence and EU membership. In both Scotland and Northern Ireland, support for the EU is higher than support for independence or Irish reunification, respectively (Curtice and Montagu 2019, 19; ARK 2021). In the cases of SF and SNP, these parties may attempt to frame independence in a way that parties perceive may attract voters who are pro-EU but neutral to or against secession by subsuming EU membership into their regionalist frames. In this light, the parties should use the critical juncture of Brexit to fully subsume EU membership into their partisan framework. These realities, viewed through the lenses of discursive and rational choice institutionalism, lead to the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: In their manifestos, SNP and SF will positively subsume the issue of EU membership into their independence framing in the wake of Brexit and specifically will link Brexit to their goals of Scottish independence or Irish reunification, respectively.

According to this hypothesis, the subsummation of EU membership should occur because the critical juncture of Brexit gave parties the opportunity to adopt new issues into their primary identity of regionalism and the parties perceived that such a shift would potentially maximize their vote share.

Whereas both SF and SNP may make strong cases linking their goals to the EU in their post-Brexit regionalist framing, PC will have to balance their own Europhilic rhetoric with the realities of being a Leave region. Although support for remaining in the EU is higher than support for independence (Baldini, Bressanelli, and Massetti 2023, 118, 134) that support is substantially lower than support for either topic in Northern Ireland or Scotland (Baldini, Bressanelli, and Massetti 2023, 118, 132, 137). Although PC's primary modern identity may be as a party seeking independence, its primary historical goal has been Welsh autonomy (Wyn Jones 2009; Bradbury 2021). Although those who identify with the Welsh nationalist movement tend to be Remain voters (Wyn Jones and Lerner 2021), PC does seek regionwide offices and thus must attempt to appeal to a broader, Leave-voting electorate if they wish to maximize their potential vote share. Viewed through a rational choice lens, PC may not perceive that embracing the EU would optimize their electoral chances due to the realities of being in a pro-Brexit region and their own history of promoting autonomy instead of independence.

In Wales, the same critical juncture that pushes SF and SNP toward subsuming EU membership into their independence framing may push PC toward subsuming Brexit itself into their autonomy framing, using this event to push for enhanced Welsh autonomy. Rather than pushing for an independent state in the EU post-Brexit, PC may push for the repatriation of EU competencies and enhanced devolution post-Brexit.

Hypothesis 2: In their manifestos, PC will not engage in subsuming of the issue of EU membership into their independence frame in the wake of Brexit. Instead, they will subsume the issue of Brexit into their Welsh autonomy frame.

Although all three parties might be subsuming EU-focused issues into their framing in the wake of Brexit to appeal to voters, rhetoric will vary by party. Whereas PC and SNP may use the critical juncture of Brexit to subsume the issue of regaining EU membership into their independence lens, PC may use the same critical juncture to subsume the issue of the repatriation of competences and enhanced Welsh devolution. By integrating discursive and rational choice institutionalism, this framework lends the tools necessary to understand the ways in which regionalist parties might incorporate Brexit and the EU in their regionalist rhetoric.

Manifesto Analysis

To examine the various framings of the EU by regionalist parties within the UK, I examine 19 manifestos from the three cases, spanning from 2011 to 2022. These manifestos allow for a comprehensive understanding of how UK regionalist parties present the EU, as they span every regional and national election from a time before the announcement of a Brexit referenda until after the formal exit of the UK from the EU. By examining the largest regionalist party in each region, we can understand the differing effects of Brexit on secessionist parties within the UK.

These elections allow us to consider temporality, as the elections occurred at different points in the Brexit process. The 2011 elections occurred before the announcement of the Brexit referenda, the 2015 and 2016 elections occurred after the announcement of the referenda but before the vote, the 2017 and 2019 elections occurred during the Brexit negotiations, and the 2021 and 2022 elections occurred after the official exit of the UK from the EU. By analyzing manifestos from these elections, published at various points in the Brexit process, we can examine the specific effects of the critical juncture of Brexit.

Manifestos provide an opportunity for scholars to understand official party positions, as aggregated by party leadership. They serve several functions including fostering unity, satisfying

activists, and presenting policy positions (Eder, Jenny, and Muller 2017, 76–83). Examining these documents tells us not only how these organizations viewed and approached the EU but also how they are presenting the EU post-Brexit. It is important to note that this term frequency is not included for statistical purposes but for illustration alone.

Before beginning the qualitative manifesto analysis, I will briefly examine term frequency and content. Term frequency is a common tool of textual analysis and can be used to examine policy positions or to ensure the validity of framing transformation (Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003; Tarasov and Belous 2023). In the term frequencies, I manually code the number of unique sentences that refer to the EU, Brexit, or other EU-related topics. I then code these sentences by topic, using MaxQDA, a computer-based textual analysis software. This software allows for a variety of textual analysis tools, such as term frequency.¹ After coding by sentence, I then determine how many words are used to refer to the EU as a proportion of total words.² After coding the sentences and examining frequency, I have selected excerpts that are emblematic of the topic being studied. Though these excerpts are specifically selected to examine the ways that these parties have subsumed the issue of the EU, they are representative of the overall themes of the manifestos.

Examining the temporality of the manifesto content in Figure 1 above, it is evident that SF and SNP mentioned the EU with notably higher frequency in both 2017 and 2019, whereas Plaid Cymru mentions the EU with higher frequency only in 2019. In 2015 and 2016, after the announcement of the Brexit referendum, there was no noticeable increase in mentions of the EU in these manifestos. It is only in 2017 and 2019, after the Brexit vote but before the exit of the UK from the EU, that we see a marked increase in references to the EU in regionalist party manifestos. In 2021 and 2022, after the exit of the UK from the EU, we see mentions of the EU commensurate with pre-Brexit levels. Though term frequency is a measure of saliency rather than framing, measurement of frequency ensures that we are examining a meaningful shift in rhetoric rather than minor changes in phrasing.

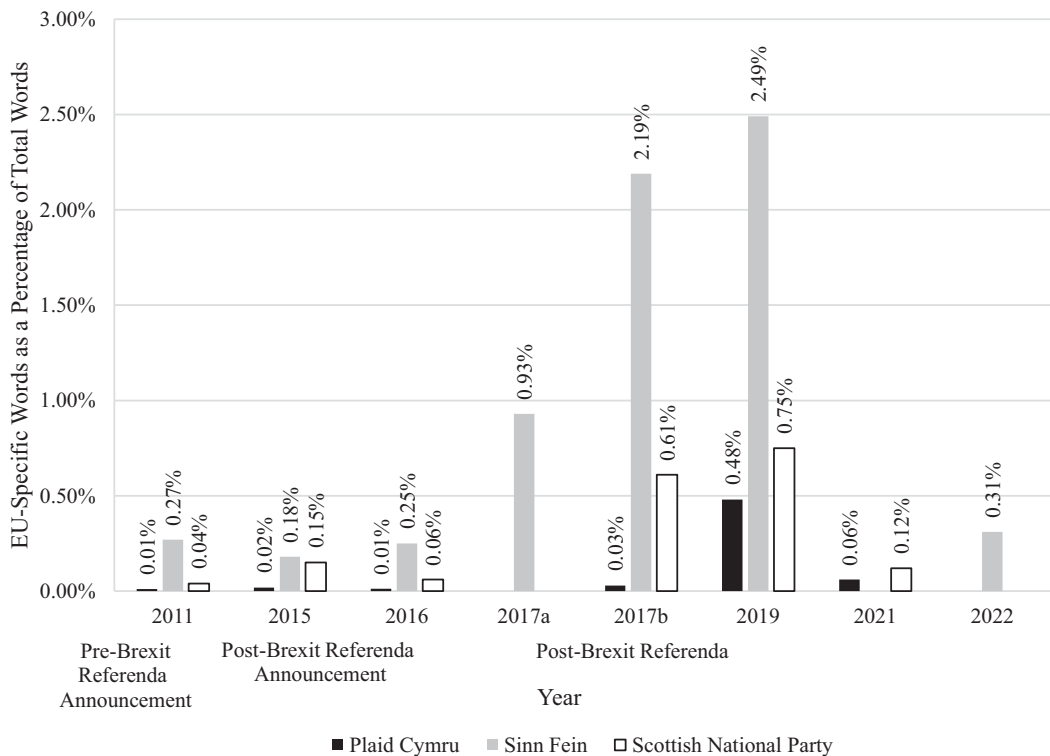


Figure 1. The European Union in Regionalist Manifestos, 2011–2022.

One potential explanation for this drop in frequency is the emergence of post-Brexit crises. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the various economic crises constitute significant space in the 2021 and 2022 manifestos. As manifestos situate the party within the current political environment, it appears that the more recent crises overwhelmed Brexit as the most salient factors leading into the 2021 and 2022 regional elections. The pandemic beginning in March 2020 is difficult to disentangle from the formal exit of the UK from the EU in January 2020. Given this drop in mentions, along with the overall low frequency of EU mentions within the manifestos, it is essential to examine the specific manifesto content. How do these individual parties place the EU in their manifestos, and within what context are they mentioning the EU or Brexit?

To begin the specific breakdown of themes in party manifestos, [Table 1](#) shows SF mentions of the EU, separated by code. Mentions of the EU peak in 2017 and 2019, similarly to the SNP. Whereas their manifestos consisted of about 0.27% EU content in 2011, about 2.19% of the words in their Westminster 2017 manifesto mention the EU or Brexit. It appears that Brexit is downgraded in importance in 2022, with 0.13% of the manifesto words mentioning the EU. Though the frequency of the EU is diminished in 2022, the content remains similar, with SF still tying their independence to EU membership. Even though term frequency diminishes in 2022, this movement toward

Table 1. Total Mentions of the EU in Sinn Féin Manifesto

	SF, 2011 Assembly	SF, 2015 Westminster	SF, 2016 Assembly	SF, 2017 Assembly	SF, 2017 Westminster	SF, 2019 Westminster	SF, 2022 Assembly
Explicit Reunification Link	0	2	0	2	12	14	2
Northern Irish Special Status	0	1	0	7	12	6	2
Good Friday Agreement	0	0	0	3	3	4	0
EU Funding / Regulations / Trade	15	1	4	3	33	0	11
Subsidiarity	0	0	2	0	1	0	0
Anti-Brexit Statement	0	3	2	8	32	34	3
Neutral Mention of Brexit	0	1	0	0	1	1	0
Repatriation of EU Competences	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Maintenance of EU Funding / Regulations / Trade	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Miscellaneous	0	2	0	0	1	2	0
Total mentions	15	10	8	23	95	61	18
Coverage percentage	0.27%	0.18%	0.25%	0.93%	2.19%	2.49%	0.31%
Total words	5,607	5,633	3,123	2,482	4,343	2,444	5,896

rhetoric supporting the EU in 2017 and 2019 is in accordance with the hypothesis that SF will subsume EU membership into their independence framing.

The perception that movement toward the EU would be beneficial for SF is supported by public opinion data, with only 16% of respondents saying that Brexit enhanced their support for a United Ireland in 2016 but 36% of respondents saying that Brexit enhanced their support for a united Ireland in 2021 (ARK 2021). The continued support for a united Ireland in the face of a drop in term frequency confirms that although the EU constitutes less space within the manifesto, the sentiment remains stable. When examining the topics that are covered within the manifestos, SF begins to make explicit links between the EU and Irish reunification in 2017 and continues to make these explicit links despite the drop in frequency in 2022. This framing of Irish unification through the lens of the EU confirms that the topic was subsumed by SF in the wake of Brexit.

To begin a qualitative analysis of SF's manifestos, the EU is neglected in their 2011 Assembly manifesto. That year, SF mentioned the EU solely in reference to research and enterprise funding, material benefits to the region (SF 2011, Assembly, 10, 22, 23). They mention "partition," "unity," or "independence" 13 times in this manifesto yet do not link any of these mentions of Irish unity to the EU. At this point, SF was inconsistent toward the EU in their other policy dealings (Evershed and Murphy 2022), which aligns with their instrumental approach toward the EU in the manifesto. The EU is seen as a source of regional funding but not as a driving force for Irish independence or as an important factor in Northern Irish politics.

Although they addressed the EU in terms of funding and regional policy before 2015, unconnected to independence, that rhetoric shifted toward the subsummation of the EU into their regionalist rhetoric after the possibility of a Brexit vote was announced. In their 2015 Westminster manifesto, SF takes a markedly Europhilic stance. They state that

[t]he Tory party is advocating a vote on future membership of Europe. There is no consideration of the needs of the people of the Six Counties and the consequences of leaving the EU on this part of Ireland. If there is a referendum on European membership then there must be a separate and binding referendum here so our people can be masters of our own destiny. (SF 2015, Westminster, 9)

In this quote, SF state that if there were to be a Brexit vote, then there must be a separate referendum as well, presumably on Irish unification. This is a clear rhetorical link between Brexit and the unification of Ireland. In this excerpt, SF begins to link independence and EU membership but does not give EU membership as a primary reason for Irish unification. This excerpt gives little in the way of motivation to activists yet sets the stage for the further subsuming of the EU into independence rhetoric after the Brexit vote in 2016.

Table 2. Sinn Féin's Views on Brexit and Independence, Post-Brexit Vote

<i>Excerpt 1</i>	Sinn Féin believes there should be a referendum vote on Irish unity within the next five years. A strong vote for Sinn Féin in this election will strengthen that demand and advance the imperative of ending partition and for reunification ... Ending partition has now taken on a new dynamic following the Brexit referendum. Brexit and the imposition of an EU frontier across Ireland has the potential to further entrench partition.... The European Council has acknowledged that in the event of a vote in support of Irish Unity all of Ireland would be part of the European Union (2017, Westminster, 5).
<i>Excerpt 2</i>	Partition has been a disaster for Ireland. It has failed the people of the north and south. It has failed unionists. It has failed nationalists. It has divided our people, our economies and our systems of government. Ending partition has now taken on a new imperative following the EU referendum. Brexit is a game changer (2017, Assembly, 11).
<i>Excerpt 3</i>	The ultimate answer to Brexit is the Unity poll set out in the Good Friday Agreement which can give us automatic re-entry into the European Union (2019, Westminster, 3).

After the Brexit vote, SF presents a similar view of their independence in their manifestos. In their 2017 and 2019 manifestos, they make a variety of statements that tie the Brexit referendum to a renewed need for their secession from the UK and unification of Ireland.

In these excerpts, SF explicitly ties the partition of Ireland to Brexit, thus tying independence to the EU. Between their 2017 and 2019 Westminster and Assembly manifestos, SF clearly establish a rhetorical link between Brexit and a new opportunity for Northern Irish reunification. They clearly state that “Brexit is a game changer” (SF 2017, Assembly, 11) in terms of the push for reunification. These manifestos follow a clear frame: placing Brexit as the problem, offering the solution of Irish unity, and then calling for a Unity poll. Though SF has had an inconsistent EU policy in the past (Evershed and Murphy 2022), the critical juncture of Brexit opened a new path for their framing to incorporate Brexit as an impetus for Irish unity. In the above excerpts, SF clearly subsumes the issue of EU membership into their reunification framing, instrumentalizing Brexit as an additional rationale for a unity poll.

Although these manifestos mention the EU and Brexit frequently, mentions dropped in SF’s 2022 manifesto. If a critical juncture allowed SF to bring the EU into their independence framing, then what caused this drop in frequency? First, we must evaluate the rhetoric. Is the substantial rhetoric shifting, or just the saliency of Brexit? In their 2022 manifesto, SF only makes one explicit tie between Brexit and independence, stating,

[d]emand for change is sweeping across Ireland. People want to see an Ireland of diversity, equality and respect. That change needs properly planned through discussion, dialogue, and negotiation. We must avoid any repeat of the Brexit debacle. This will require a democratic process that will allow everyone, north and south, to participate in planning and preparation for constitutional change. This will facilitate a peaceful, smooth transition to a new and united Ireland—one that belongs to us all, including our unionist neighbours and where we can govern ourselves.... European Union leaders have guaranteed that the north will resume full membership of the EU as part of a United Ireland. (9)

In this segment, SF still refers to their future EU membership as a benefit of reunification with the Republic of Ireland, reminding voters that they would not have to go through the accession process. Though saliency has declined, their rhetorical subsummation of the EU remains. Though SF chooses to shift focus onto other issues in the wake of Brexit, there is still an explicit link between independence and membership within the EU. Interestingly, other post-Brexit crises were also rhetorically linked to Irish unification (SF 2022, 4–6), showing the generalized importance of current events in fostering new frames to support Irish unification and pointing to the larger trend of current event subsummation in manifestos.

Although SF maintained an inconsistent attitude toward the EU before Brexit (Evershed and Murphy 2022), as exemplified in their 2011 manifesto, this rhetoric shifted after the possibility of leaving the EU was announced. By linking Brexit to future Irish unification, SF significantly shifted their rhetoric on the EU, fully subsuming EU membership into their reunification framework. To support their goal of Irish unification, SF is embracing the EU and rejecting Brexit, a shift from their previous rhetoric of Euro-ambivalence. Through the critical juncture of Brexit, SF was given an opportunity to subsume the issue of the EU into their primary goal: a united Ireland.

Having explored the relationship between SF and the EU, how does the SNP approach their rhetoric toward the EU? Scotland is operating in a different context than Northern Ireland, as SNP has historically embraced the EU (Hepburn 2009). This difference in context is reflected in how the parties refer to the EU throughout the Brexit process.

As with the SF manifestos, it is evident in Table 3 that mentions of the EU in SNP manifestos peak in 2017 and 2019. In 2011, before the beginnings of the Brexit process, only 0.04% of the words in the manifesto refer to the EU, whereas between 0.61% and 0.75% of all of the manifesto words refer to the EU in 2017 and 2019. This enhanced attention to the EU in their manifestos suggests

Table 3. Total Mentions of the EU in SNP Manifestos

	SNP, 2011 Holyrood	SNP, 2015 Westminster	SNP, 2016 Holyrood	SNP, 2017 Westminster	SNP, 2019 Westminster	SNP, 2021 Holyrood
Explicit Independence Link	1	0	2	6	11	5
Implicit Independence Link	0	0	0	2	4	11
EU Funding / Regulations / Trade	12	18	14	34	37	11
Devolution	3	3	0	6	0	0
Anti-Brexit Statement	0	8	2	58	81	9
Neutral Mentions of Brexit	0	0	0	8	2	2
Repatriation of EU Competences	0	0	0	6	8	0
Maintenance of EU Funding / Regulations / Trade	0	0	0	9	23	5
Miscellaneous	2	0	0	2	4	0
Total mentions	18	29	18	131	170	43
Coverage percentage	0.04%	0.15%	0.06%	0.61%	0.75%	0.12%
Total words	42,057	18,889	28,155	21,342	22,642	36,205

that EU is more salient in the post-Brexit referendum environment. Although the SNP has held a stance of “independence in Europe” since 1988 (Hepburn 2009, 192), it appears this strategy was enhanced after the Brexit vote. This strategy is supported by public opinion data; in 2016, support for independence was split evenly between Remain and Leave voters, at 44% and 45%, respectively. By 2019, however, 57% of Remain voters supported independence, whereas only 29% of Leave voters did so (Curtice and Montagu 2019, 19). This shift in public opinion suggests that Europhilic voters were perhaps persuaded by the arguments of independence.

Although mentions of the EU are pronounced in the 2017 and 2019 manifestos, it is apparent that they descend again in the 2021 manifesto, suggesting that the EU and Brexit became less salient in a post-Brexit environment, perhaps due to COVID-19 and the economic crisis. Despite this downfall in frequency, content appears similar, with the EU still being referred to in conjunction with independence in their 2021 manifesto. This heightened saliency of the EU during the Brexit process conforms to the hypothesis that the regionalist parties in pro-European regions would seek to subsume the issue of EU membership, using current events to promote their predominant frame.

Before the Brexit referenda was announced, the EU was generally referenced in positive instrumental terms. In 2011, the SNP (Holyrood) mentioned the EU in reference to digital connectivity (13), universities (25), independence (28), carbon reduction (35), Common Agricultural Policy (39), and aquaculture (39). These are all benefits that go to the region, but they are not connected to independence. Though the general rhetoric toward the EU was regarding EU policy, they did once discuss the possibility of Scottish independence within the EU. The SNP state,

[i]ndependence will mean a strong, new relationship between Scotland and the rest of the UK. It will create a partnership of equals—a social union to replace the current political union. As members of the EU there will continue to be open borders, shared rights, free trade and extensive cooperation. The big difference will be that instead of only deciding some issues

Table 4. SNP's Views on Brexit and Independence, Mid-Brexit Campaign

<i>Excerpt 1</i>	We believe that the Scottish Parliament should have the right to hold another referendum if there is clear and sustained evidence that independence has become the preferred option of a majority of the Scottish people—or if there is a significant and material change in the circumstances that prevailed in 2014, such as Scotland being taken out of the EU against our will (2016, Holyrood, 24).
<i>Excerpt 2</i>	Scotland's place in Europe matters to us as a nation and being part of a wider European family of nations has brought us benefits. The SNP always has and always will fight strongly for a fair deal for Scotland in Europe—not least on matters like the Common Fisheries Policy and reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. We hope and believe that people in Scotland and across the UK will vote decisively to stay part of the EU. But we take nothing for granted. So we will campaign passionately and positively for an “in” vote, to remain in the EU (2016, Holyrood, 41).

here in Scotland, independence will allow us to take decisions on all the major issues. That is the reality of independence in this independent world. (SNP 2011, Holyrood, 28)

In this excerpt, the SNP discuss the potential reality of independence in Europe but do not explicitly link independence to the EU. The EU is mentioned as a facilitator of postindependence relations with the UK but not as a source of identity or as a driving force for the independence movement. In the 46 mentions of Scottish independence in their 2011 Holyrood manifesto, only the above excerpt links Scottish independence to the EU.

After the Brexit referendum was announced, the SNP make clear links between Brexit and a Scottish independence referendum. In the excerpts presented below, the SNP begins to subsume the issue of EU membership, tying independence to the material benefits that they gain from the EU.

In the above excerpts, the SNP explicitly state that Brexit without the support of Scotland should be cause for a second independence referendum, despite the independence referendum only two years before these documents. In Excerpt 1, they engage in a bridging of the independence and regionalist EU frames through calling for a referendum if Brexit passes. In Excerpt 2, they engage in diagnosis, outlining the material and symbolic benefits that the EU provides to Scotland and what they would lose were Scotland to leave the EU. Both excerpts come from the 2016 regional parliamentary election in which they clearly frame the EU as beneficial to Scotland and give independence as a solution to losing the benefits of EU membership. This is in marked contrast to their previous manifestos in which the issue of the EU is not fully subsumed into the independence frame.

After the Brexit vote in June 2016, rhetoric surrounding the EU continued to shift along the hypothesized lines. In their 2019 Westminster Manifesto, the SNP explicitly tie the ability to remain within the EU to Scottish independence, fully subsuming the EU into their independence frame. They state,

[w]e believe that the best future for Scotland is to be an independent, European nation.... Brexit has destroyed the idea of the United Kingdom as a partnership of equals. Wales and England both voted to leave and under the Boris Johnson deal will leave. Northern Ireland is to get a special deal and the right to choose its future. Scotland—the nation of the UK with the highest remain vote—is to get nothing.... [Brexit] will make Scotland poorer, cost jobs, hit living standards and threaten environmental standards and workers' rights.... Scotland has the right to choose a better future. (4–6).

In the above excerpt, SNP engages in all three types of framing. They engage in diagnosis, stating that Brexit “will make Scotland poorer, cost jobs, hit living standards and threaten environmental standards and workers' rights” (SNP 2019, Westminster, 4). They engage in prognosis, stating that “Scotland deserves a better future” (6) and, furthermore, that this future is as “an independent, European nation” (4). In these excerpts, SNP is attempting to use Brexit to their strategic advantage,

relying on frames that will resonate with potential allies. They do note their differences from Northern Ireland, pointing to Northern Irish special status and the potential of automatic accession under the unity poll. Overall, they comprehensively subsume the EU into their independence framing, outlining the benefits of EU membership, the deficits of leaving the EU, and the possibility that an independent Scotland could regain these benefits. This is not a drastic tonal shift from their previous Europhilic rhetoric but reflects the expected subsummation of European issues into their independence framing.

SNP refers less to the EU in 2021, making only four explicit links between independence and the EU. Nevertheless, these links are a continuation of their subsummation of the EU frame. They state,

[t]he people of Scotland voted decisively to remain within the European Union and we firmly believe that EU membership is the best option for Scotland.

Brexit undoubtedly changes the way that Scotland engages with the EU, but it will not change the EU's importance to Scotland, nor our commitment to rejoining the EU as soon as possible.

By rejoining the EU we will create jobs and regain full access to the European Single Market, which is seven times the size of the UK. (Holyrood, 72)

In this excerpt, SNP establishes the pro-European nature of Scotland, their commitment to rejoining the EU, and the benefits of rejoining the EU as opposed to remaining within the UK. Although frequency, as in the case of SF, diminishes, the rhetoric itself does not. When the UK left the EU in January 2020, it ended any chance of the parties being able to stop the Brexit process. Instead of focusing on stopping Brexit, these parties are now choosing to focus on other programmatic issues while maintaining the explicit link between independence and the EU. Rather than diverting from the rhetorical path laid out by Brexit, these parties are instead continuing down the path, albeit at a decreased velocity.

Table 5. Total Mentions of the EU in Plaid Cymru Manifestos

	PC, 2011 Senedd	PC, 2015 Westminster	PC, 2016 Senedd	PC, 2017 Westminster	PC, 2019 Westminster	PC, 2021 Senedd
Explicit Independence Link	1	6	3	0	2	0
Implicit Independence Link	0	0	0	0	0	1
EU Funding / Regulations / Trade	9	15	15	2	23	4
Subsidiarity and Devolution	9	5	12	4	1	7
Anti-Brexit	0	4	2	7	45	7
Freedom from the EU	0	0	0	0	0	1
Neutral Mention of Brexit	0	3	0	2	4	0
Repatriation of EU Competences	0	0	0	0	0	1
Maintenance of EU Funding / Regulations / Trade	0	0	0	4	7	1
Miscellaneous	0	3	4	0	8	0
Total mentions	19	36	36	19	90	21
Coverage percentage	0.11%	0.19%	0.12%	0.29%	0.48%	0.06%
Total words	17,286	19,293	29,732	6,555	18,598	36,704

The SNP used the critical juncture of Brexit to deviate from their previously minimal yet positive EU framing toward a comprehensive subsummation of the issue. They did so by rhetorically tying the EU to their independence, subsuming the EU into their primary independence frame after the opportunity presented by Brexit. Sinn Féin behaved similarly, using Brexit to make the case for Irish unity. If these two Remain regions used Brexit to promote their goals of independence, how did PC represent the EU within their manifestos, and why?

For both SF and SNP, mentions of the EU peaked in both 2017 and 2019. As seen in Table 5, mentions of the EU in PC's manifestos peaks in their 2019 Senedd manifesto, but to a smaller extent than seen for SF or SNP. In addition to their lower level of EU content, the sentences that do mention the EU focus on different topics; whereas SF and SNP explicitly tied the EU to independence 26 and 17 times, respectively, in their 2017 and 2019 manifestos, Plaid Cymru only tied the EU to independence twice in the same time span, perhaps due to the historical goals of Welsh autonomy rather than independence (Wyn Jones 2009; Bradbury 2021). Combined, there were 10 explicit links between the EU and independence in their three manifestos before the Brexit vote in 2016 but only two afterwards. Instead, they engage in a higher level of rhetoric surrounding devolution and subsidiarity. Although their later manifestos do take anti-Brexit stances, these stances are not explicitly linked to independence. These enhanced anti-Brexit stances in 2019 could be potentially attributed to the success of pro-European parties in the 2019 European Parliament election (Morgan 2019). Overall, however, the lack of a bridge between the EU and independence framing in Plaid Cymru manifestos is in alignment with what we might expect from a party operating in a pro-Brexit region with low support for independence. Though they present themselves as a pro-European party, they understand that their autonomy is not tied to the prospect of membership in the European Union. Instead, they attempt to use Brexit to attain their goal of enhanced regional autonomy.

In their 2011 manifesto, Plaid Cymru refers to the EU in reference to MEP proportionality (18) and cohesion funding (23), both regionalist benefits. Like the SNP, Plaid Cymru does make a tie between independence and the EU in their 2011 Assembly manifesto, stating,

[w]e remain committed to an independent Wales as a full member of the European Union. We understand that this longer-term constitutional step is a decision that will rest ultimately in the hands of the people of Wales. (16)

The question being debated in this excerpt is not membership in the EU per se but rather membership in the EU as a full, independent member state. It is not EU membership being considered but Welsh independence. As in the example of the SNP, it is taken for granted that if Wales were to become independent, they would become a member of the EU. European Union membership is not a primary driver in the Welsh independence movement but is implicitly presented as the assumed default for a postindependence Wales in the pre-Brexit political environment. Though PC has only recently shifted to campaigning for full independence as opposed to enhanced devolution, this independence rhetoric is present in this excerpt.

After the Brexit vote was announced, PC took a decidedly pro-European stance, just as the other two parties did. Where they diverge, however, is on the specifics of their rhetoric.

In contrast to the quotes from SF or the SNP, PC does not tie their independence as explicitly to the EU. Instead, they ask for a “special agreement” (2016, Assembly, 183) to remain in the parts of the EU that benefit Wales and enhance their regional autonomy but state that a “debate is needed about its future” (PC 2015, Westminster, 37). In 2011, the EU was seen as a constant by PC (2011, Assembly, 16), yet they were stating the need for a “debate” (2015, Westminster, 37) in 2015. They simultaneously point out the benefits of EU membership while supporting a debate on its future. Instead of engaging in independence linkages, they support a special status for Wales, enhancing the potential for Welsh autonomy. Whereas both SNP and SF tie the Brexit referendum to

Table 6. Plaid Cymru's Views on Brexit and Independence, Mid-Brexit Campaign

<i>Excerpt 1</i>	Plaid Cymru supports Wales remaining within the European Union and will campaign to remain so in the forthcoming referendum. Wales is a net beneficiary of European funds.... If the UK Government opts out once again from the Social Chapter, we will propose a special agreement between the European Commission and the Welsh Government to ensure that Wales can opt in and remain covered (2016, Assembly, 183).
<i>Excerpt 2</i>	Plaid Cymru is a pro-European party but we are critical of many aspects of the European Union and that is why a debate is needed about its future (2015, Westminster, 37).

Table 7. Plaid Cymru's Views on Brexit and Independence, Post-Brexit Vote

<i>Excerpt 1</i>	Where we are: A debilitating trade deal with the EU where Wales's interests are last on the agenda. Businesses moving from Wales and jobs at risk. Plaid Cymru's answer: We will fight to get the best possible Brexit deal for Welsh industry and agriculture. Where we can be: Welsh interests at the heart of Brexit negotiations, with Welsh industry and agriculture protected (2017, Westminster, 11).
<i>Excerpt 2</i>	Plaid Cymru believes that Wales should be an independent member of the European Union (2019, Westminster, 55).
<i>Excerpt 3</i>	The Welsh Labour Government intend phasing out direct payments if we leave the EU, which would have a devastating impact on the rural economy and the fabric of rural communities. A Plaid Cymru government will retain a direct payment scheme. We can also protect this funding for Welsh farmers by remaining in the EU. This general election has added more uncertainty around Brexit, since before it was called the UK government had guaranteed payments until the notional end of the Parliament, that is until 2022 (2019, Westminster, 35).

Table 8. Plaid Cymru's Views on Brexit and Independence, Post-Brexit

<i>Excerpt 1</i>	The current devolution settlement cannot cope with the economics of COVID-19 nor the ongoing impact of Brexit. We need an expansion of economic powers for Wales (2021, Senedd, 18).
<i>Excerpt 2</i>	Following Brexit the prospects of the UK rejoining the EU in the medium term are remote. Nevertheless, we will make the case for the advantages for Wales and the UK as a whole, of closer regulatory alignment with the EU. Plaid Cymru's longer-term aspiration is for an independent Wales to join the European Union, subject to a future referendum after the achievement of independence (2021, Senedd, 123).

independence referenda, PC is more restrained in their support of the EU, perhaps due to the lack of perceived public support for both independence and the EU.

After the Brexit referenda, the links that PC establishes between the EU and independence shift markedly between 2017 and 2019. Although their 2017 manifesto includes no links between independence and the EU, their rhetoric shifts in the 2019 Westminster manifesto. One potential explanation for this shift is that the upcoming general election of 2019 provided an opportunity to reverse Brexit, at a time when PC perceived Welsh voters had shifted their position on Brexit. As PC leader, Adam Price, said after the 2019 European Parliament elections, "Wales, which voted Leave three years ago, is now a Remain nation again, if you tally up the votes for the avowedly pro-Remain parties versus the pro-Brexit parties" (Morgan 2019). Just as SF and SNP chose to link their independence to the EU due to the perception that this subsummation would prove popular amongst their potential voters, PC engaged in the subsuming of the EU when they perceived that it might become advantageous to them. Indeed, rather than delegitimizing the idea that parties choose to link independence to the EU based on the perceived position of their electorate toward the EU, this temporal shift between 2017 and 2019 within PC provides additional support to the theory.

In addition to bringing their independence framing briefly into the conversation on Brexit, PC continued to use Brexit as a cause for enhanced autonomy, calling for a direct payment scheme for farmers led by the Welsh government (2019, 35). This rhetoric is in line with their previous rhetoric and exemplifies the differing goals of PC as opposed to SF and SNP. Whereas both SNP and SF have been secessionist parties throughout their history, PC has historically focused on enhanced autonomy (Wyn Jones 2009).

In their 2021 manifesto, PC did present themselves as anti-Brexit and tied the potential for increased autonomy to Brexit.

These excerpts establish both the need for increased Welsh autonomy in response to Brexit and the potential for a European future. By stating that they will call for a future referendum postindependence, they are distancing themselves from the EU, presenting it as an option rather than a *raison d'être*. Instead of framing their independence in terms of Brexit, they instead call for “an expansion of economic powers” (PC 2021, Senedd, 18) in response to Brexit, furthering their goals of autonomy. Plaid Cymru used the EU and Brexit vote to take advantage of the goals for Welsh autonomy inherent in their platform. Given the history of PC as a party that predominantly fights for autonomy and the relatively recent nature of their fight for complete Welsh independence (Wyn Jones 2009), it confirms the hypothesis that PC is using the critical juncture of Brexit not to subsume EU membership into their independence framing but to subsume disintegration into their autonomy framing.

Discussion

By integrating theories of discursive and rational choice institutionalism, we can see how critical junctures can elevate an issue that was previously framed in completely instrumentalist terms, such as the economic and symbolic importance of the EU to UK regions, to an important frame for their unique regionalist goals. After the critical juncture of Brexit, both SF and the SNP saw a political opportunity to subsume EU membership into their independence framing, whereas PC used the same critical juncture to subsume EU disintegration into their autonomy framing. In the changing domestic and international arena, a political opportunity for regionalist movements opened.

By outlining the benefits that would be lost from the EU, then calling for independence referendums to remain within the EU, SF and SNP were able to rhetorically capitalize on Brexit for their goal of independence from the UK (SF 2017, Westminster, 5; SNP 2019, 4–6; 2021, 72). Likewise, PC was able to use Brexit to call for their goal of enhanced autonomy (PC 2019, 35; 2021, 123). As the vote to remain in the EU outpaced support for either Scottish or Irish independence (Daniels and Kuo 2021; McEwen and Murphy 2022; Baldini, Bressanelli, and Massetti 2023, 118, 132, 137), both SF and SNP perceived that subsuming the issue of EU membership could assist in attracting voters to their independence rhetoric. On the other hand, PC used Brexit to not necessarily call for independence but to call for enhanced devolution. Most importantly, these regionalist parties continued to prioritize their regionalist rhetoric, subsuming the EU into this primary frame. These findings confirm the hypothesis that these parties should use the critical juncture to positively subsume the EU into their unique regionalist goals.

Brexit gave regionalist parties in Scotland and Northern Ireland the ability to frame the EU as beneficial for the regions and then subsume that frame into their preexisting independence framing. By way of contrast, although PC made an explicit tie between the EU and independence in 2011 (Assembly, 16), they explicitly call for enhanced autonomy in response to Brexit in 2021 (2021, Senedd, 18). Though this rhetoric declines in frequency for SF and SNP post-Brexit, the overall rhetorical trend points toward the importance of Brexit as a critical juncture for regionalist party rhetoric toward the EU and the subsummation of the EU and Brexit into regionalist framing.

Although this article works to link the subsuming of the EU into regionalist frames to the 2016 Brexit vote, there are factors beyond the scope of this project to be considered. Both the Scottish and Northern Irish independence movements have higher levels of support than the Welsh

independence movement (Daniels and Kuo 2021; McEwen and Murphy 2022; Parker 2022, 7), leading to a generally higher salience of independence framing in the SNP and SF manifestos. For future research, the connections between rhetoric, the subsuming of current events, and overall regionalist sentiment could be examined.

In addition to the differing levels of regionalist support, the effects of the European accession process on the three parties are an interesting avenue for further exploration. The conditions of these three regions differ in terms of accession to the EU; whereas Northern Ireland would gain automatic accession with Irish unity, as in the case of German reunification in 1990, Scotland and Wales receive no such automatic admission (Lock 2022; McEwen and Murphy 2022, 384–385). Instead, these regions would be required to go through the formal accession process. On average, accession has taken nine years for current member states, with the shortest accession process taking just under three years (Leppert 2022). During the candidacy period, Scotland or Wales would be small independent states without the protection of a larger supranational alliance. The potential of a lengthy period of complete autonomy from any larger actor may affect the way that Scottish and Welsh parties discuss their independence and the European Union, whereas parties in Northern Ireland do not share this consideration. The realities of the politics of accession may be shaping party rhetoric toward the EU, and the politics of European accession should be explored in later research.

Ultimately, the effects of Brexit on the political rhetoric of UK regionalist parties can be best understood by examining the ways that these parties have subsumed current events. By using the critical juncture of Brexit to change their existing political rhetoric, these parties have moved to maximize their perceived electoral rewards. Although frame bridging and regionalist party issue subsummation have been outlined in the previous literature (Masseti and Schakel 2015; Elias 2019; Benford and Snow 2000; Wright 2022), this project works to connect the theoretical lenses of rational choice and discursive institutionalism to these issues. This project demonstrates that when a critical juncture occurs, movements make the choice to subsume the new cultural and political context into an existing frame in an attempt to maximize vote share. By applying this theoretical stance to the manifestos of regionalist parties within the EU, a new framework emerges through which to examine the effects of European disintegration on regionalist movement party rhetorical processes.

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Notes

- 1 For data transparency, the manifestos and coding are archived at the author's website.
- 2 Methods used to obtain total manifesto word counts vary by document due to file variability; more information can be found in Appendix A.

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