# The Bretons in French Politics: Regional Mobilization within and beyond the Central State

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### Abstract

This article revisits the French region of Brittany on the basis of sustained empirical research over a 25-year period. It identifies the twin use of influence and identity as forming a key part of an accepted and largely diffused territorial repertoire, based on affirming distinctiveness for reasons of vertical linkage, as well as horizontal capacity building. This article explores the different facets of this model of territorial influence. The two twin dimensions concern: first, a well-versed mechanism of lobbying central institutions and actors to defend the Breton interest; second, the use of territorial identity markers to forward the regional cause, relying on social movements and a broad capacity for regional mobilization. Within this overarching context, the Breton case demonstrates an intelligent instrumental use of identity and identity markers, but mainstream Breton forces recognize that this only makes sense in the light of the national level of regulation and structure of opportunities. The logic of this position is to integrate the Brittany region into a national model of territorial integration, while playing up identity markers to secure the maximum benefit for the region.

**Keywords:** France; Brittany; regionalism; decentralization; Paris

This article revisits the French region of Bretagne (Brittany in English, henceforth preferred) on the basis of sustained empirical research over a 25-year period. It identifies the twin use of influence and identity as forming a key part of an accepted and largely diffused territorial repertoire, based on affirming distinctiveness for reasons of vertical linkage, as well as horizontal capacity building. Contrary to other "minorities" mobilized against central state hegemony, such as the Catalans in the 2010s, Basques in the 1980s, and Flemish in the 1990s (Goikoetxea 2014; Stefanova 2014; Colomer 2017), the Bretons have long sustained a network linking effectively their territorial interests to French institutions in Paris through a series of personal connections and quasi-institutional norms. There is a delicate balancing of identity-based claims and integration in a national system of regulation.

This article explores the different facets of this model of territorial influence. The two twin dimensions concern: first, a well-versed mechanism of lobbying central institutions and actors to defend the Breton interest; second, the use of territorial identity markers to forward the regional cause, relying on social movements and a broad capacity for regional mobilization. The efficacy of the model relied traditionally on a high degree of trans-partisan advocacy; and a broad-based commitment to decentralization. Support for decentralization lies at the heart of the Breton mix of identity and instrumentalism. In the opinion of one leading official: "We consider that the special nature of Brittany makes it very different from, say, Rhône-Alpes" (Sourdat, 2013). Indeed, this interviewee continued, "the tragedy for Brittany lies in the other 21 regions," most of which had no

regional fiber or desire for enhanced decentralization. Finally, this interviewee continued, "if there is a strong link with decentralization in Brittany, this makes sense because of a broadly diffused sense of territorial identity, without which decentralization is meaningless, a purely technocratic exercise." The Breton mode combines these traits of territorial identity within a structure of political opportunities that remains resolutely national and Paris-centered.

The article is organized sequentially and thematically: section one situates the historical dimension of the Bretons in French politics, the key to understanding the evolution of a specific territorial model. Section two presents the social construction of Brittany as a strong identity region which makes sense and which provides an anchoring in a national, state-centric system of regulation. Section three provides evidence of the dual facetted political model in operation. It discusses classic mechanisms of representing the territorial interest in what remains largely a state-centric system, and offer examples of efficient instrumental uses of territorial identity. The article concludes that, though changes over time have weakened the specificity of the Breton cross-partisan model, the mechanism of Breton influence remains largely intact.

## The Bretons in French Politics: Between Influence and Identity

One of the most distinctive regions of France, Brittany has a strong sense of its specific position within French society (Flatres 1986; McDonald 1989; Favereau 1993; Le Bourdonnec 1996; Le Coadic 1998; Sainclivier 2004; Le Boulanger 2014). Modern Brittany is a French political and administrative region with a strong cultural distinctiveness. Unlike many other French regions, Brittany can look to its past existence as an independent duchy, with its own institutions and founding myths. In the words of one interviewee in 2017: "obviously Brittany is not a region like the others. It continues to display very specific characteristics deriving from its history, its religious identity, and its cultural, colonial and maritime past" (Uguen, 2017). Though the symbols of statehood have long been suppressed, the region retains many distinctive characteristics. The Breton language is the European continent's only Celtic language. The enduring symbolic importance of the Catholic religion is ever present physically in the architecture of Breton villages. The spectacular growth of cultural movements (music, dance, theatre, costume) is testament to a revival of Breton values and self-consciousness.

In historical terms, Brittany corresponds well to one of those regions identified by Rokkan and Urwin (1983), in which the development of regional consciousness is a function of economic dependency and the persistence of a strong cultural identity. By the end of the nineteenth century, Brittany was the poorest mainland French region and also the one with the highest level of emigration. With few natural resources, it missed out on the industrial revolution. It was forced back into subsistence agriculture. There were no large cities and only a few medium-sized towns. There was a weak indigenous bourgeoisie, with no financial or human capital concentration. Brittany became a reservoir of labour for the more industrialized regions. The ideology of republicanism itself favoured emigration away from peripheral areas such as Brittany and drained the most productive forces to Paris – as in the Saint-Denis district with 40 % of Bretons in the 19th century (Le Moal 2013).

This legacy of impoverishment and internal colonization remains very present in the minds of the Bretons today (especially the Paris-based diaspora), as illustrated by the following testimony in 2002 from a former (Breton) President of a Parisian higher education institute:

> Brittany has a strong sense of its identity, which is by no means dead. It is a region that was for long despised and mocked from outside (the region of "Bécassine," the stupid domestic help). It gave the impression of being a backward zone, a place where half of the people were always drunk and the other half were suffering from hangovers. Back then Brittany was a poor region, marked by an exodus from rural areas to Paris. Bretons would enter into domestic service for Paris households. This gave a very unfavorable image of Brittany, an image whose

inhabitants had great difficulty in understanding French and were in thrall to the Catholic Church. (Lancelot, 2002)

In immediate post-war Brittany, there was a strong political consensus among the regional elites in favor of enhanced regionalization. Entering into a dialogue with the French State was, for most regionally minded politicians, the only way forward after the bitter divisions of the inter-war and wartime period. Breton-style identity politics were discredited by the collaborationist activities of a minority of Breton activists during the war. From 1950 onwards, Breton actors co-operated closely in the CELIB (*Comité d'étude et de liaison des intérêts bretons*, Breton Liaison Committee) which brought together politicians from all parties, along with professional and economic interests to promote the interests of the region. The CELIB could claim the credit for many of the improvements in transport infrastructure obtained by Brittany in the 1960s and 1970s and remains a powerful reference point today. An interview with one of the movement's founders (Martray, 2001) and published works (Cressat 2000) suggest that policy ends coexisted within the CELIB with a high degree of regional consciousness and a desire for powerful regional political institutions. The prevailing post-war model of political activism in the five decades following the end of the Second World War was thus one of territorial solidarity aimed at procuring material advantages for Brittany, namely through raising living standards in what had been France's poorest region in 1945.

The rapid demographic and economic expansion of Brittany during the post-war has been remarkable. The post-war period has been marked by heavy national investment into the region, from the French State from the 1950s and 1960s onwards, and more recently, from foreign direct investment. Brittany has enjoyed strong rates of economic growth, witnessed by the modernization of its agricultural sector, external investment in high technology sectors such as telecommunications, defense and health and a specific pattern of multipolar spatial development, consisting of a vibrant network of small and medium sized towns across the region, rather than a single strong metropolis (Phlipponeau 1996). These developments have been facilitated by the reputation for seriousness of a well-trained workforce and by the Brittany region regularly obtaining the highest educational standards in France at age 18. The Breton miracle has turned a little sour since the mid-1990s. Heavy investments in telecommunications or defense have produced excess capacity; cutbacks from the early 1990s onwards hit towns such as Brest, Lannion, and Lorient hard. The core farming communities in central and west Brittany have suffered from reforms imposed by the Common Agricultural Policy and the reduction of EU subsidies. And yet, the picture presented by Brittany in 2021 is starkly different from that in the 1950s.

The article is centred on mainly qualitative findings, in the form of face-to-face interviews in four periods of French history: in 1995 (76 interviews, during the late Mitterrand and early Chirac presidencies); in 2001–02 (69 interviews, mainly carried out during the plural left government); in 2013 (29 interviews, during the Hollande presidency) and in 2017–18 (18 interviews, bridging the late Hollande and early Macron presidencies). Only a small selection is referred to in this article, but most interviews have been deposited in anonymized format in data archives (Cole 2004; Cole, Harguindéguy, Pasquier, Stafford and De Visscher 2016). All cited interviews were taped and transcribed and lasted an average of one hour. The sample used for the NVivo analysis below is based on a subset of 94 anonymized interviews, the transcripts of which are available on request. The sample thus constituted is mainly qualitative, derived through a mix of snowball and purposive sampling with politicians, civil servants, and practitioners. In each of the periods of empirical investigation, three sub-groups were identified: party political actors (the main party families of the time), public administration actors (generally working for the region, the regional state, or public agencies) and the policy community (especially representatives of employers, trade unions, business groups, and cultural associations). Comparing dynamics across four periods of interview-based research provides some consistency across time, as well as identifying elements of transformation and resilience, a theme we now address.

## The Social Construction of the Breton Model

Brittany, one of France's most distinctive regions, can lay a very strong claim for historical pertinence (Pasquier 2004). The pervasive and usually rather under-specified influence of a Breton model is a constant that is often asserted in written accounts and interviews (for example Créhange 2019; Lucas 2011). We use the term Breton model as an account derived from actor-based experiences and interviews. Rather than a model, *stricto sensu*, understood in a nomothetic or mechanistic sense, the *modèle Breton* captures a sense of territorial distinctiveness which is shared by common idiographic representations within the policy community, reflected in public opinion and commonly attributed as forming part of the distinctiveness of this particular region.

In some important respects, the Breton model of territorial political capacity is a pure social construction. Political capacity is, at least in part, a process of mediation in which elites and social groups produce a vision of the world that allows them at once to structure relations among themselves and to define the "interests" that they are pursuing collectively. It involves a sociopolitical process rooted in an on-going social construction of territories and center-periphery relationships. It is rooted, too, in identities, understood as a set of socially constructed practices, beliefs, and visions of the world which shape and guide the strategies of regional actors. The advantage with such an approach is that it breaks down the hard distinction between identity and instrumentalist versions of territorial identity: actors construct their own interests, mainly through interaction. Ways of understanding the world might not be susceptible to statistical measurement, but they can be induced by longer-term empirical investigation (using the latest qualitative techniques such as NVivo, see below).

The changing nature of the Breton model is discussed in the next section. It is mapped onto a diffuse, if rather imprecise, sense of regional consciousness. The Breton case is relatively rare in the French context, insofar as extant surveys indicate a hybrid regional and national identity, which has been demonstrated nowhere else in mainland France (Cole 2004; Henderson et al. 2014). Existing accounts identify a regionalized mode of regulation and public policy making (Cole and Pasquier 2015). Survey evidence over the couple of decades that coincided with the empirical work provides support for this framing of the Breton region as distinctive. Dargent (2001) revealed that Brittany was the only mainland French region with a sense of regional identity as strong as that of its national state (i.e. French). Cole and Evans (2007) concluded, on the basis of survey evidence carried out in 2001 using the Moreno scale, that Bretons combined a strong sense of regional (Breton) and national (French) identity. The Citizenship after the Nation-State (CANS) project, finally, provided a fuller comparative framing of Breton identity. The vast majority – 87.9% – of the Bretons interviewed declared themselves to varying degrees, to be both Breton and French, with one-half (50 percent) feeling as Breton as French (Henderson et al. 2014). These representations were very frequently proposed in interviews throughout the four periods. For example, in the 2017 round, one actor identified himself as "European, French and Breton," stating "I am very happy with these three identities: I think one can be a regionalist in Europe, a Breton in a modern Republic and a convinced European who is also proud of his nationality" (Chesnais Girard, 2017).

Thus understood, the model is not a static device and has a certain elastic quality. However, though at each stage of the empirical investigation the definitions offered by actors varied, the consistency of representations across the twenty-five-year period substantiates a genuine regional *habitus*, which we interpret as informing the behaviour of Bretons in "higher" arenas.

Most of the article draws on the interview corpus to sustain evidence of influence, in effect adopting an individual level of interpretative analysis; this is the most appropriate approach, given the object of the special issue. At a more aggregate level of analysis, figure 1 presents a word map from NVivo, derived from the interview data analysis of a subset of 94 transcribed interviews from 1995–2017. The Breton word cloud, 1995–2017, presented in figure 1, might be interpreted in terms of its top ten words that overwhelmingly suggested a region-centric mode of operation. These are *région* (region), *bretagne* (Brittany), *politique* (politics/policy), *niveau* (level) *Breton* (Breton)

**Figure 1.** Making Sense of the Region in Brittany: the Breton Word Cloud, 1995–2017

*politiques* (policies), *régions* (regions), *régional* (regional), *territoire* (territory), and *Rennes* (city of Rennes).

We do not engage in explicit lexical analysis, as we need to make sense of the varying contexts that accompany each set of interviews. Taking the period as a whole, the five core word clusters identified in NVivo centre on the pertinence of the region as a level of public administration; on metropolitan political dynamics and the polycentric Breton model; on territorial capacity and economic development; on Breton culture and language and, finally, on Brittany within the broader French and European context. We cannot read too much about territorial lobbying from such a lexical overview (providing more precise examples is more valuable), but it contributes to the underlying sense of region.

## A Hybrid Model of Political and Policy Influence

In this long section, we discuss Brittany in terms of the hybrid model of political and policy influence it represents. The three main sub-sections provide: first, an actor-based overview of the changing meaning given to the Breton model; second, evidence of vertical and horizontal networking; and, third, mobilization of identity markers in pursuit of regional policy aims.

### An Evolving Framework

There are various dimensions to the Breton model, understood as an idiographic construction rather than a causal mechanism. First, a Breton *political* model was commonly identified in the interviews as being based on cross-partisan consensus and regional advocacy, a post-war model of public action that was built upon inter-war failure of a more assertively nationalist movement. The prevalent post-war political tradition was, and still is, best described as one of political centrism. In the immediate post-war period, Brittany was the birthplace and one of the bastions of French Christian democracy and it proved fertile ground for the central (central, occupying the center of gravity, though not necessarily centrist, equidistant between left and right) parties successively represented by the Christian Democrats, the Gaullists, the Socialists, and *La République en Marche*

(President Macron's party). Second, the Breton *spatial* model has referred to perspectives on the public management of the challenges facing Brittany (a peripheral region at the far-western tip of the European continent), and claims for the legitimate delivery of public goods by the French state and by the European Union. Thus, in the most recent interview round, one interlocutor reminded the team that "we are on a peninsula on the far-West of Europe" and that this justified the continual lobbying for resources. [1] For several decades after the Second World War, a Breton *economic* model referred to a mode of economic production that is diffused across the Breton small and medium sized towns throughout the Breton peninsula, a well-integrated ecosystem that ensured the preservation of territorial solidarity (Phlipponeau 1996; Ollivro 2005). All three dimensions of this model have been challenged in important respects, yet reference to a model as a form of territorial political capacity continues to make sense to Breton actors as captured in interviews since 1995.

In the 1995 and 2001–02 rounds, the Breton model was taken to represent a specific mode of spatial organisation: one interlocutor, for example, described the Breton model in terms of the existence of a diffuse network of small and medium sized towns across the Breton peninsula, a well-integrated ecosystem that ensured the preservation of territorial solidarity (Fréville, 1995). It was also commonly understood as representing the desire for Breton actors from all political sides to unite and defend the regional interest in negotiations with the State. For one powerful voice "Brittany knows what an enormous debt it owes to the French state." On the other hand, "Breton identity is a reality: we need to be united in front of the State or else the State will decide everything" (Appéré, 2013). The main understanding of the Breton model in 1995 (Méhaignérie, 1995) and 2001–02 was as a form of cross-partisan collaboration and advocacy. Hence, for one key interlocutor, "The Breton partisan model represents an old Christian democratic tradition that was embodied in the economic policy advocated by the CELIB, which brought together most politicians, mainly Christian Democrats, with business people, trade unionists and others" (Morvan, 1995). Breton politicians of all parties, however divided internally, will tend to close ranks against threats from the outside. The leader of the Breton Socialists, later President of the Regional Council, expressed it thus in 2001: "In Brittany, we all believe in the merits of the Breton compromise. Left and right are perfectly capable of coming together and agreeing on the big questions that concern the region" (Le Drian, 2001). The (then) Gaullist President of the Brittany region shared this analysis (De Rohan, 2002). Several examples of this mechanism were provided in interviews, notably concerning the common cause of all Breton parties to obtain central government investment in the high-speed train (Ligne à Grande Vitesse project) or in relation to the role of Breton language teaching as part of the normal school curriculum[2].

In the 2001–2002 round, the prevalent framing also included another dimension, derived from the "Christian-Democratic" heritage. Several interviewees linked the pro-European sentiment in Brittany with the peripheral location of Brittany at one of the western-most points of continental Europe. Bretons looked to the European Union, as much in faith as in expectation, as the best guarantor of their future prosperity. Along with Alsace and Lorraine, Brittany was the strongest pro-Maastricht region in France, with these three regions securing the victory of the "yes" vote in the 1992 referendum. Brittany was one of the only regions to vote "yes" in the 2005 constitutional treaty referendum. The region has been a key French beneficiary of EU structural funds and the Common Agricultural Policy. Several examples emerged during fieldwork of Bretons for maintaining networks in Brussels that allowed local and regional politicians to side-step the French state. One Breton mayor celebrated obtaining European Union funds to co-finance the creation of a Science Park, using direct contact in the EU Commission to override the initial objections of the French State.[3] In the latest round of interviews, one associative stakeholder celebrated the "ease of access" to European civil servants, compared favourably to those of the state field services (Huet, 2017).

By 2013, the celebration of the Breton consensual model was waning. There were doubts expressed about the continued efficacy of cross-party collaboration, as well as blind faith in the European Union. Interviewees in 2013 voiced a certain skepticism about the continuing pertinence

of this cross-partisan model. In the view of one such interviewee, "The Breton partisan model is an old Christian democratic tradition, which manifested itself in economic terms around the CELIB. But this old Christian Democratic tradition says nothing today to those who are under 50" (De Legge, 2013). Another interviewee feared that the legendary Breton solidarity was being shattered by competition between parties (the Socialist Party – PS – against the rest) and undermined by party factionalism within the PS itself: "It makes no sense today to talk of a strengthening of Breton consensus, rather the reverse, including in the case of policies that were previously unanimous, such as the Fast Speed Train (*TGV*)" (Sourdat, 2013). The collapse of the Socialists in 2017 was almost as marked in Brittany as elsewhere, marked by a seismic shift to *La République en Marche*, the new version of Breton centrism.

The last round of interviews took place during or shortly after the 2017 presidential election campaign. By 2017, the consensual basis of the Breton model had been severely shaken, as Macron's En Marche! (La République En Marche – LREM) emerged out of the rubble of the old party system. The Macron presidency has shown itself to be paradoxical for the Brittany region. In the 2017 French presidential election, Brittany was the region that supported Macron the most fervently, along with Ile-de- France. This enthusiasm for Macron was confirmed in the 2017 legislative elections, at which LREM captured 21 out of 27 seats in the region. Macronism appeared to correspond well to Brittany' s traditional centrism, explicitly presenting itself as beyond left and right and above the traditional political cleavages. Moreover, key Breton personalities played a major role in the early success of Macron's political career, movement, and subsequent presidency. Jean Yves le Drian, President of the Brittany region and Minister of Defense under Hollande, rallied to Macron in the 2017 campaign; Richard Ferrand, former PS deputy representing the Finistère, also performed a key role in the construction of the new presidential party, LREM. Both Le Drian and Ferrand have occupied first rank roles since 2017, the former as Foreign Affairs minister; the latter as President of the National Assembly.

However, the support of the Breton notables was not enough to allow Macronism to develop firm roots in Brittany. President Macron's top-down, vertical style and his natural "Jacobin" propensity to steer territorial affairs from Paris fell foul of the "Girondin" pact he had promised in his presidential platform (Cole and Pasquier 2021). Macron's ambivalent positions on questions of decentralization produced misunderstanding and disillusionment in a Brittany region attached to the core tenets of decentralization and local autonomy. In June 2018, Emmanuel Macron announced in a speech in Quimper that would transform the Brittany region into a "laboratory of decentralization" (Ouest France 2018). The Regional Council made detailed propositions (Région de Bretagne 2018) but these came to nothing. The initiative then faded as the Covid-19 health crisis not only swept ideas of decentralization off the political agenda, but also revealed a highly vertical, top-down form of crisis management. During the first lockdown, from March to May 2020, the Breton coast was entirely closed. In spite of intense lobbying by Le Drian and Ferrand, trust was shattered between the Brittany region and President Macron. Logically, the municipal election of June 2020 witnessed a heavy defeat for En Marche, unable to capture a single large or medium sized town or city.

In summary, interviewees converged across all four periods to identify a cohesive territorial model; we observe the widely diffused belief in interviews that the model "works well and is gaining traction from year to year" (Fortin, 2017). There was a strong belief amongst interviewees across the period that the historic region (B5) should be restored, or, at the very least, that the existing region (B4) should be maintained, and not merged into a vast Western France identity.[4] Reference to Brittany as a historic, meaningful region permeated the interviews at all phases: "The Brittany region means something because it has a strong identity and a history" (Marboeuf, 2017) and it "represents a reality wherein collective ideas persist" (Le Mevel, 2017) to the point that several interlocutors evoked a Breton people and a Breton political project, based on a territory that "means something historically" but can also look to the future (Couet, 2017).

The central focus of the article now moves to the influence of Breton actors on processes of public administration. In the ensuing two sub-sections, we consider first the prevailing narrative of regional territorial adaptation and linkage, and second, the pursuit of territorial coalitions that only incidentally involve lobbying central institutions. In the conclusion we revisit the transformation and resilience of the Breton model and the consequences of a transient situation on established territorial modes.

## *Regional Territorial Influence*

A number of interviewees spontaneously volunteered the information that, in the words of one, "in Brittany we do things differently" (Fréville, 1995). They referred to a Brittany effect, particularly in relation to the outside world. Though conflicts within Brittany could be fierce, there was a common front presented to the outside, whether the French state, the European Union or other regions and countries. At a more abstract level, actors noted the capacity of Bretons to join forces to promote their common interests and to defend Brittany against attacks from the outside world (Méhaignérie, 1995). Breton solidarity can also be gauged more intuitively by the effectiveness of Breton elite-level networks in Paris and Brussels, and by the importance of the Breton diaspora in retaining a sense of distinctiveness. In order to defend Breton interests in a hostile environment, Bretons of all persuasions had developed powerful codes to recognize each other across formal divides. More than one interviewee spoke of a Breton "network" in Paris, linking key positions in the ministries with the defence of Breton interests. Hence, for one interviewee (Uguen, 2017), "Brittany is a central reference: when I am in Paris, I always define myself as primarily Breton."

The argument appears as slightly counter-intuitive. The French case could not be much further away from the consociational model (agreement or arrangement) outlined in the introduction. There is no formal pillar organization and no recognition that France is, in any case, a multi-national state. On the contrary, Article 1 of the 1958 constitution states explicitly the contrary. Formal consociational arrangements would go against the grain and rules of the constitution. However, the role performed by Breton ministers falls somewhat into the logic of specific territorial representation. There is a territorial and a state-centric dimension to this: the recruitment of Breton ministers has been a constant since the Fourth Republic (Morvan 2017) and the broader national context is one which encourages the circulation of elites from local to national areas (and vice versa). All French cabinets include at least one Breton minister. In the classic Page and Goldsmith model (1987), France forms a part of the Napoleonic model (where a centralized central state accommodates local interests through mechanisms such as multiple office holding) rather than North European one (where there is a strict separation between local and central government).

The above paragraph raises the question: is Brittany any different from anywhere else? The classic approach of center-periphery relations in France emphasized generic mechanisms and methods of influence, such as the *cumul des mandats* (multiple office-holding), which ensured the representation of small and medium sized towns, with the office holder combining the role as a parliamentarian (deputy or senator) with that of President of a departmental council or mayor. This mechanism was not so much an indicator of territorial capacity as an indication that the "provinces" needed networks in central government to be able to defend their interests. The theory of cross-regulation of Crozier and Friedberg (1977) was centered on the belief that territorial interests needed to be accommodated in central government, but also their capacity be strictly limited. A series of reforms has gradually emptied *cumul* of its efficiency as a vector of local interests (most particularly in 2013, when a law was passed severely curtailing the practice).

Such mechanisms were firmly rooted in Brittany, as they were in other French localities and regions. This practice was described in the interview in 2002 of the then President of the Brittany regional council:

I am President of the Brittany region, but not all of the time. I spend 48 hours a week in the Senate, sometimes longer when there are important debates. I spent four days a week in

Brittany and two in Paris. The function of head of a parliamentary group is not that bureaucratic, but it is a question of exercising influence. Most of the heads of parliamentary groups are also mayors of large cities, such as Mr [X] in Nantes for the PS, or Presidents of departmental councils, like Mr [X] in the Haute Loire, who is president of the Conservative group in the Assembly. I am the President of a Regional Council. (De Rohan, 2002)

From this perspective, Breton practices (that is lobbying within parties and institutions) are rather similar to those of other localities and regions, with the significant exception that the *cumulard* in the Breton case was President of the regional council. There is a weak separation between region-oriented elected officials and their national counterparts. Access to national politics is rather easier than in the hermetically sealed Nordic countries, where there is little interchange of personnel between central and local government (Wolman 2008). Practices in Brittany arguably represented a regionally tinted version of an accepted mode of representing the periphery. Such practices were ultimately inherited from the pre-democratic period: Tudesq (1964) illustrated how centralized countries like France and Italy permitted central-local linkages, as shown by in his study on the *grands notables* (political barons) under the July Monarchy.

The regional basis of the Breton case nonetheless is a distinctive feature. Fabre's (2008) concept of influence indicates the level of involvement of regional party elites in state-wide decision-making arenas. Promoting the regional interest through lobbying national parties or national parliamentary institutions is a classic mechanism of defending a territorial interest at the higher level. Our case revealed many examples of such influence, in each of our periods of investigation. A constant of interviews carried out in 2001, 2013, and 2017 lay in the importance of Breton parliamentarians acting as a coherent group. The best example of this mechanism was that of 2013, in the run-up to what became known as the *Bonnets rouges* (red caps) movements. By 2013, a novel situation had occurred, insofar as a Socialist majority held both the regional and the governmental power in Paris. One PS deputy interviewed in 2013 observed, "In the National Assembly today, the Breton deputies represent 10 percent of the entire Socialist group. Until a few weeks ago, we saw ourselves as 21 PS deputies, but in the last few weeks we have become conscious of our influence. We meet the Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian often and we are combining our forces with the Breton Senators. Together we have made it clear that we will not vote certain texts if they do not take our viewpoint into account" (Urvoas, 2013). During the Macron presidency, there were several examples of Breton parliamentarians (deputies and senators) joining forces to promote the regional cause: such as the declarations in favor of re-opening the beaches during the first Covid 19 lockdown (2020) or in support of the Law on Regional Languages, voted on April 8, 2021, when all Breton parliamentarians sang the Breton hymn outside the National Assembly in Paris.

These examples clearly demonstrate the willingness and capacity of the Bretons to act as a cohesive territorial lobby within parliament and to use their networks in the executive to the maximum. Other examples were also provided in the interviews: of direct links to the Finance and Interior Ministries (Hamon, 2013),[5] of information emerging from the (confidential) Council of Ministers testifying to Breton influence and of direct linkages to the European Commission.[6] The most convincing example of all related to the reform of the regional map in 2015: direct linkages to the Breton minister Le Drian were forwarded as one reason why Brittany resisted being integrated into a much broader western region.[7] The modes of action were both formal (acting as a cohesive group within the National Assembly) and informal (especially by influence of the Breton ministers in government) (Urvoas, 2013).

From largely inauspicious beginnings, the French regions have become a key part of the politico-institutional landscape, with the office of President of one of France's 13 regions a highly coveted prize, at least as valued as the traditional mayorship of a large city. In the four decades since the 1982 decentralization reform, the regions have become key institutional venues, with forms of visible and personified leadership. In the case of Brittany, throughout the whole period, the powerful links to central government have remained intact. The most emblematic recent case of such leadership is

that of Jean Yves Le Drian, Foreign Affairs Minister in the Philippe and Castex governments, and previously Minister of Defense under President Hollande. Serving a pivotal role in successive governments, Le Drian has been a consistent advocate of Breton interests at the highest level of state. Combining the role of State Minister and President of the Brittany region, Le Drian was a powerful *notable* during the Hollande presidency, during which he obtained several decisions favorable to Brittany's interests, especially in 2015 when he threatened to resign if the Bretagne region was merged against its will with the neighboring Pay de la Loire region. Victorious against incumbent premier Manuel Valls on this occasion, Le Drian was easily re-elected as President of the Brittany region in December 2015, supported by Bretons on the center- left and center-right (Pasquier 2016). However, his support for Macron in 2017 divided opinion. He has remained close to the regional majority of Loïg Chesnais-Girard, but an important fraction of the Breton Socialists, allied with the Greens, henceforth oppose his influence in Brittany, especially in the large cities of Rennes and Brest.

These various examples drawn from all stages of the interviews all point to a proven repertory of representing Breton interests in central government. In the next sub-section, we consider the alternative position that is less centered on central lobbying activities, more on the mobilization of social movements.

### Collective Action and the Instrumental-Identity Mix

The twin faces of the Breton repertoire are comprised by the exercise of forms of multi-level influence, and by the mobilization of territorial identity markers, which gives Brittany a special place amongst the French regions. While this sense of territorial identity was sometimes mobilized in pursuit of policy objectives that required national-level decisions, in other fields identity markers were primarily realized at the territorial level of the Brittany region itself. Even in areas of core Breton identity such as education and language, however, the greatest successes of the Breton cause have been consolidated as a result of developments at the national (French) level. The focal remains Paris-centric and lobbying activities in Paris usually unblock static situations.

Collective mobilization has been an important dimension of exercising influence. Brittany appears in some important respects as a land of contentious politics. There is certainly a large spectrum of movements, a complex range of associations, microparties, and fronts that sometimes take on the appearance of a counter-community, resolutely opposed to any engagement with central government (in a model typical of regions such as Catalonia or Scotland). There was an aspect of the "counter-society" amongst the most fervent supporters of the association Diwan (association managing a network of immersive schools in Breton language), for example, whereby one wing of the Breton medium education movement rejected the principle of contact with the French State. The point was made in an interview with Andrew Lincoln, then President of the DIWAN association, though Lincoln himself was the architect of the agreement with the French education ministry.

Two rather different examples are now presented that demonstrate how the cocktail of social movements, contentious politics and successful forms of lobbying central government can make a difference. These concern the role of language schools and the activities of pan-Breton territorial coalitions.

The Breton language represents the most powerful symbolic cause, capable of mobilizing Breton actors of all political persuasions, while it has also given rise to some of the most effective social movements. We identify elsewhere (Cole 2006a) a language advocacy coalition that draws its strength from a shared belief in the need to safeguard the patrimony represented by the Breton language and from the capacity to mobilize the powerful Breton cultural movement. This advocacy coalition includes actors within local and regional authorities, semi-autonomous agencies such as the Breton Language Office (*Ofis ar Brezhonneg*), and the cultural federations regrouped in the Brittany Cultural Institute and the Brittany Cultural Council. Such a coalition extends to

incorporate politicians from across the political spectrum, who converge to identify the added-value of a strong culture for the pursuit of political and policy objectives. In the expression of one right-wing deputy, 'I am from the Breton-speaking part of Brittany and I speak Breton. But I have also learnt Gallo, Brittany's other lesser-used language. A strong culture is essential to ensure the attachment of the citizens. We live in a world where people feel alienated; they need to be able to identify with symbols of cohesion; these are very positive. The Bretons are very attached to their strong identity" (Le Fur, 2013).

The Diwan Breton-medium schools offer a textbook example of successful collective mobilization. The first Breton language school was opened in the Finistère department in 1977 by a group of language activists, determined to provide a Breton-medium education for their own children. These parents created the DIWAN association. The first few DIWAN schools were concentrated in the nursery and primary sector, with one, then several lower secondary schools (*collèges*), and, finally, an upper secondary school (*lycée*) in the town of Carhaix. By 2019, Diwan was in charge of the education of 4307 pupils (3062 in primary and maternal schools, 926 in the lower second schools, and 349 in the sole Upper secondary school) (Ofis ar Brezhoneg 2019). From its origins, Diwan was at the center of a tightly knit Breton cultural network. It drew its support not only from the dedication of its activists, but from their involvement in a series of interlocking cultural networks, centered around the revival of traditional Breton music and dance, and the renewed interest in Breton language and history. Each of the critical junctures of Diwan's history was marked by the social mobilization of this cultural network (Le Troadec, 2001). In 1999, for example, when the regional prefect (the administrative representative of the French government in the regions) attempted to prevent the opening of the first Diwan lycée in Carhaix, there were mass demonstrations followed by a discrete climb-down by the state's representative. The Diwan movement split in 2002, however, over whether or not to support the integration of the Breton-medium schools into the public education system.

Rather paradoxically, the key episode in the 2001–2002 round of interviews (whether or not to join the public education system) revealed a classic mode of operation of regional interest. With all due methodological precautions taken, the following citation demonstrates the determination of one individual to promote regional languages, the Education minister Jack Lang, roundly opposed by civil servants and other leading politicians of the day. The window of opportunity was created by a particular combination of circumstances: a Socialist-led government (historically more inclined to accept territorial experimentation) and a national-level political entrepreneur:

> The situation is urgent. Jack Lang is very isolated, within his ministry and office, on this question: the leading civil servants are not convinced and neither are his own advisors. The meetings of Rectors (regional superintendent of education) are unfavorable, they simply do not understand. In essence, he is all alone in favor of this measure. And we are not at the end of the road, as there is bound to be an appeal to the Council of State. (Lincoln, 2001)

The case of Diwan is revealing of the dual nature of the Breton repertoire; it stimulated mobilization on a trans-partisan basis and obtained linkage to central government via a sympathetic advocate. Still, the central link was key for unblocking the situation and creating the political opportunity. Ultimately, these efforts were in vain, as the Council of State ruled against the integration of the Diwan schools into the public education system.

A second more recent example of successful mobilization concerned the social movement of the *Bonnets rouges*, which in October–November 2013 illustrated the singularity of the Breton model of collective action. Using identity symbols such the Breton flag (*Gwen ha du*) and the red caps that symbolized the Breton revolt at the end of 17th century against a new tax imposed by the King Louis XIV, this regional coalition composed of different groups (business owners, employees, cultural associations and regionalist leaders) forced the central government to stop the implementation of a new environmental tax and to pledge to negotiate a new economic model for the Brittany region.

The movement organized large and mediatized events, such as that of November 2$^{nd}$ 2013 in Quimper, where 25,000 red caps protesters urged the cancellation of the new tax and the granting of more regional power for Brittany. The success of the movement was also built on a dual political repertoire: not just elite-level lobbying based on personal contacts, but the mobilization of a cross-partisan movement, mixing direct action tactics and central lobbying (and making an instrumental use of identity markers). The movement, also, was crowned in success, insofar as the environmental tax was withdrawn, with Breton deputies actively maneuvering behind the scenes to ensure that the offending tax was removed.

The violence of the *bonnets rouges* (red bonnets) in 2013 bore some resemblance with that of the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) in 2018 and 2019. There was an essential difference between the two movements, however: while the *bonnets rouges* brought together social and cultural, activists, community leaders, and business interests in promotion of specific territorial demands, the anger of the yellow vests was explicitly directed against the national political elites and their policy choices increasing social injustice between urban and rural way of life (Tran 2021). In their own way, both of these movements represented a substantive weakening of the Breton post-war consensus model, undermined by a deep-seated economic crisis and the pervasive mistrust towards politicians. Indeed, the *gilets jaunes* was one symbol of a territorial cleavage that had previously been less in evidence in Brittany than elsewhere: that separating the dynamic metropolitan centers from the forgotten, peripheral France.

The question of peripheral linkage also needs to accommodate counter-factual perspectives. If Brittany is a strong identity region, the question naturally arises as to why it does not pursue more autonomous forms of regional expression, along the lines of nationalist movements in Scotland, Wales, Catalonia, Northern Italy, and so on. The weight of ethno-territorial parties or regionalist parties is not the fundamental dynamic in Brittany (Kernalegenn and Pasquier 2014). Bretons have refused to support in meaningful numbers any pro-independence or pro-autonomist parties that call into question Brittany's belonging to the French Republic. One expert explains the weakness of the autonomist Breton political movement as a consequence of the deeply rooted legitimist strand within Breton public opinion (Le Coadic 1998). The main answer, however, lies in the resolutely Paris-centric political opportunity structure of the French Fifth Republic that has strongly influenced territorial strategies (even in identity focused areas such as education and language). Regional interests have traditionally best been defended by demonstrating cross-partisan solidarity in Paris, rather than by supporting autonomist parties in Brittany. One Breton autonomist interviewed in 2013 estimated the audience for the main autonomist party, the Democratic Breton Union (Union démocratique bretonne, UDB) at around ten percent in a good year and in a good election, on condition of an alliance with the Greens. Standing on its own, the autonomist audience was reduced to three to five percent (Guyonvarc'h, 2013). Interestingly, the sole UDB deputy elected in alliance with the left in 2012 was re-elected in 2017 for the Macron's party *La République en marche.* Thus far, there has been no need to pursue more autonomous politics – which would change the entire framing of the representation of peripheral elites in central machinery, in a way that might be observed in Catalonia or Scotland.

The Breton case confirms that French decentralization cannot be equated with UK -style devolution or other forms of asymmetrical territorial arrangements such as in Spain or Belgium. There has been no fundamental adaptation of a unitary state model to take into account territorial specificities. Decentralization in France remains caught between the three under-defined logics of the reform of the State, institutional capacity building, and the recognition of territorial identities (Cole, 2006b). Within this overarching context, the Breton model makes an intelligent instrumental use of identity and identity markers, but mainstream Breton forces recognize that this only makes sense in the light of the national level of regulation and structure of opportunities. The mainstream view has been to lobby for increased state and EU resources to rescue Brittany from its isolated geographical position and to assure its integration with the rest of France (and Europe). Looking to the State to guarantee resource transfers has been a favored position, one pursued on a

cross-partisan basis. The logic of this position is to integrate the Brittany region into a national model of territorial integration, while playing up identity markers to secure the maximum benefit for the region.

Interview evidence demonstrated various forms of lobbying the EU and by-passing Paris, but the EU has not replaced the State, at least not in the field of territorial relations. There is a delicate balancing of identity-based claims and integration in a national system of regulation. Hence, understanding the *modus operandi* lies more with the French central state than the Brittany region itself. Resources are determined mainly at the central state level and it is at this level that the main levers of state capacity are exercised (much more so, in any case, than in comparable democracies such as the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy or even Germany). In the French case, decentralization has been narrowly framed as an exercise in policy adaptation, but has explicitly rejected legislative divergence. Brittany's mode of collective action makes sense within this broader framework, where instrumental uses of identity can produce policy gains, but do not challenge the foundations of the State, unlike in the UK (Scotland), Spain (Catalonia) or Belgium.

## Conclusion

Brittany is sometimes taken as a litmus test for the health of regional identity within France. It combines a robust regional territorial capacity with an accepted operating mode that preserves territorial interests in a resolutely national and Paris-centered structure of political opportunities. Breton distinctiveness lay not only in the effectiveness of vertical lobbying efforts, but also in the sometimes-instrumental use made of social mobilization to forward the regional cause. Such collective mobilization forms part of a more diffuse regional milieu, which appears borne out by comparative surveys such as Citizenship after the Nation-state (CANS, which nonetheless also emphasized how modest ethno-territorial politics are in France). Even in the most identity focused issues such as education and language, however, the successful capacity for regional mobilization dependent on linkage with government and parliament.

Changes over time have weakened the specificity of the Breton model, and the Brittany region has not been insulated from broader movements and trends, such as the rise of mistrust, the growing popularity of the National Rally in small town and rural France, the prevalent mood of mistrust in politics, or the changing demographic composition of the region. The Euro-enthusiasm identified with early manifestations of the Breton model has been waning; there was no substantial difference in our 2016 survey in relation to the European dimension by comparison with other regions (Cole and Pasquier 2017). If Brittany is becoming rather less specific, it does not follow that the particular mechanisms for representing this region's interests are also losing their force. So far, it is difficult to identify any corresponding diminishing capacity to influence outcomes at the national level. The classic mechanism of the Breton minister, highly receptive to messages from Breton deputies and willing to advocate specific causes, appears as robust as it ever has been. However, there might be a question as to its sustainability. The original Breton model of peripheral representation required a measure of party-political stability, but times have moved on and the party system has become too fluid to make precise predictions.

Discussions of the uses of Breton identity are pertinent, because they are part of the function of what we labelled a second order strong identity region: namely to use place-specific arguments to advocate a broader cause. But the Breton case recognizes the inherent limits to identity framing. Unlike regions such as Scotland and Catalonia, there is much less temptation to mobilize around nationalist or separatist parties, coupled with a recognition that statehood would be neither feasible nor desirable. On the other hand, the Brittany region has fought hard (and successfully) to maintain its institutional form, on the basis that it represents a historic entity. Identity-based arguments proved valuable for Brittany in 2015-2016, as it resisted a move to merge it into a more diffuse western region. The danger for regions such as Brittany is that they fall between the Scylla of central state modernization and the Charybdis of not being large enough to compete and survive in the

European context. Their median position makes them vulnerable to state-led rationalization at some future date.

## Notes

1. Interview by Jeanne Chauvel. Interviewee's identity withheld by request.
2. Providing regular scheduled hours for Breton classes was hailed as a major advance in several 2013 interviews
3. Interview carried out by Alistair Cole, November 2001. Interviewee's identity withheld by request.
4. B5 refers to the historic region, with Nantes as its capital and including the department of Loire Atlantique. B4 refers to the region consisting of four departments – Ille-et-Vilaine, Cotes d'Armor, Morbihan and Finistère – but without the 5$^{th}$ missing region and the historic capital. Marshall Petain had removed Nantes and the Loire Atlantique as part of historic Brittany in 1941.
5. "In Brittany, we have some very good networks, very good contacts that allow us to have a direct relationship with the Finance Ministry or with the Interior Ministry. We usually share the ideas of our region in an informal sense; the formal lobbying is left to the Association of French Regions."
6. One interviewee, whose identity is withheld on request, gave the following account of his time working for one of the Breton cities: "I used to go to Brussels to obtain European funds. I had an ally in the European Commission, a high civil servant representing Luxembourg (but of French nationality), who told me: It is because I am French that I know the damage that Jacobinism can do for France itself."
7. The opposition to merging Brittany into a larger Western France region was forcefully articulated by participants in the colloquium "Les Régions européennes face a la crise. Quelles leçons pour la Bretagne," Rennes, May 23, 2014.

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