5
A Framework for Analysis

5.1 Understanding multi-level party politics

The aim of this study is to understand better the dynamics of multi-level party politics in Western Europe. In general terms, party research looks at its subject from two different angles. One angle is to analyse individual party organizations, that is, their internal structures and power balances, their social bases and their programmatic stances. Scholars have tried to use these criteria in order to distinguish between different party types which have evolved over time. Other approaches have been to search for similarities and differences between parties according to their belonging to a specific ideological party family or according to their historic origins (for an overview, see von Beyme 1985).

The other angle is to explore party systems, that is, ‘the system of interactions resulting from inter-party competition’ (Sartori 1976, 44). To varying intensities, parties compete with each other in electoral and parliamentary arenas. Parties compete for votes, offices and policies (Strøm 1990b). In doing so, parties can move closer to one another, stay at some distance or pull apart in centrifugal ways. Systemness derives from patterned interactions of the component parties. In other words, to speak of a party system implies some degree of structure and continuity in competition. While parties have some freedom of manoeuvre, their choice of competitive strategies – in terms of programmatic placement, appeal to voters or coalition alternatives – is bounded. When looking at continuities and changes in the formats and mechanics of party systems, we study the outcome of inter-party competition (Bardi and Mair 2008, 152–55).

The two perspectives on party politics enrich each other. As we learn more about individual parties when studying their systemic context, we
will get a clearer picture of inter-party competition when knowing about the single parties that make up for the system. Very clearly then, the combination of both perspectives should also constitute the basis for any analysis of multi-level party politics.

In this respect, William Riker (1964) provides an optimal point of departure. As discussed in Chapter 2, Riker proposed to look at two indicators when studying the political role of parties in federal systems: the partisan harmony of governments and intra-party discipline. I will use an elaborated version of the Rikerian indicators to explore the territorial dimension of multi-level party politics (for a similar approach, see Smiley 1980; Deschouwer 2003; Thorlakson 2007):

(a) the degree of territorial symmetry (or, congruence) of party competition across jurisdictions
(b) the degree of vertical integration and substate party autonomy in statewide party organizations

5.1.1 Multi-level party competition

Focusing on the national level, party scholars have traditionally discussed the interplay of cleavage structures, institutional factors (in particular, electoral systems) and party strategies to explain the genesis and development of party systems (see Ware 1996, 184–202). In multi-level systems, however, competitive dynamics will be influenced additionally by the fact that the strategic interaction of parties in electoral and parliamentary arenas not only takes place at the statewide level but also takes place simultaneously in the substate regions. Thus, there is need for analysis at multiple territorial levels. The concept of territorial symmetry of party systems refers to similarities in the processes and outcomes of party competition at various political levels (Deschouwer 2000, 24–25).

In establishing the degree of symmetry in multi-level party competition, both vertical and horizontal perspectives are important. Studying vertical relations between statewide and substate levels of party competition will show how voters and parties act within one territorial unit, say Scotland, at different political levels. Horizontal interactions between the constituent units of a multi-layered system, say Scotland and Wales, will tell us how much substate variation there is in multi-level party systems. Multi-level party dynamics result from a configuration of both horizontal and vertical interactions.

The degree of party system symmetry is likely to be different across countries. In cases of *asymmetrical multi-level party competition*, a