



Findings from the Economic and Research Council's
Research Programme on *Devolution and Constitutional Change*

Devolution Briefings

What's Distinctive About Wales? Findings from a Comparison of Wales with Brittany

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Key Points

- In Brittany and Wales there is growing support for strengthening regional institutions, though not for independence.
- In Brittany more people have multiple identities as Breton and French; in Wales Welshness and Britishness are more polarised.
- Support for devolution is uniform across the party spectrum in Brittany, though is highly differentiated by party in Wales. Brittany appears more fully integrated in the French state than Wales in the UK, with a political elite acting in a unified way to promote the material well-being of the region.
- The language issue is a strong component of arguments for stronger regional government in Wales, but not in Brittany. In both regions policies which discriminate in favour of Welsh/Breton speakers (or against non-speakers) are divisive and have only minority support.
- Asymmetrical devolution in the UK fosters territorial distinctiveness in identity and public policy; uniform regionalisation in France acts as a brake on distinctiveness.
- Intergovernmental relations are informal and pragmatic in the UK, formal and codified in France. The latter can provide a stronger unity of purpose between central and regional governments in France, the former greater flexibility (though this may not survive a change of government at UK level).

The Value of Comparison

Why compare Wales and Brittany? For policy-makers, comparison is bound up with practical politics. The most obvious comparators are those within the UK itself, as the Welsh look with some envy on the Scottish Parliament with its primary legislative and tax-varying powers. Outside of the UK, Welsh policy-makers look to regions such as Catalonia, or to nation-states such as Ireland or Denmark as models. These comparisons are sometimes quite unrealistic. Unlike Ireland or Denmark, Wales is not an EU member-state. Apart from Ireland and Scandinavia, our research showed high levels of interest in Catalonia (and Spain more generally), Canada and the German Länder. Such comparisons are broadly aspirational; they present an idealised vision of what Wales might become, and often lack knowledge of political arrangements and policy programmes elsewhere.

The Wales-Brittany comparison is a useful counterweight to these aspirational comparisons. A Wales-Brittany comparison is in many ways strongly justified, founded on solid empirical, historical and linguistic realities. Regional actors in Brittany were more likely to refer to Wales as a model of devolution than were those in Wales to advocate adopting lessons from Brittany. Speaking in Cardiff in March 2003, First Minister Rhodri Morgan evoked a continuum of experiences of regional autonomy, placing Wales in the same camp as Catalonia, the German Länder and other legislative regions, and setting up Wales as a model for Brittany to follow.

We now consider three dimensions of where the comparison worked well, relating to institutions and identities, language and overarching forms of regulation.

Comparing public opinion and political institutions in Wales and Brittany

We conducted a detailed opinion survey in the two regions in June 2001 in order to ascertain similarities and differences across a range of variables (political institutions and identities, policy preferences, attitudes to language, training and education). Representative samples of 1008 in Wales and 1007 in Brittany, selected by quotas of age, gender, socio-economic group and locality, were interviewed in each region.

Table One
Institutional Preferences in Wales and Brittany

Q. There is a debate today in France/Wales on the future of decentralisation/Devolution.	Brittany	Wales
Which one of the following options do you prefer ?	%	%
‘Abolish the Regional Council / National Assembly for Wales’	2	24
‘Retain a Regional Council / National Assembly with limited powers’	44	24
‘Create an elected parliament with tax-raising and legislative powers’	34	38
An independent Brittany / Wales	12	11
Don’t know	8	4

The questions we asked in our comparative surveys were general ones attempting to capture the rather different situations in Wales and Brittany. In Brittany and in Wales, the surveys revealed support for strengthening existing regional institutions. A firm foundation of support exists for more enhanced forms of regional governance in both regions, yet in both the independence solution is confined to the margins of the political spectrum.

Our survey not only indicated strong support for regional political institutions in Wales and Brittany, but also a desire to strengthen the regional over the local, national and European levels in specific areas (notably in training and language, fields in which we did detailed policy analysis).

In both regions, however, public opinion was divided. What did the nature of divisions within Wales and Brittany over regional political institutions tells us about the nature of Welsh and Breton society? We investigated further by exploring identities and intended voting behaviour to draw meaningful comparisons between Welsh and Breton public opinion.

Table Two
The ‘Moreno’ Identity Scale for Brittany and Wales

Brittany	%	Wales	%
Breton, not French	2	Welsh, not British	20
More Breton than French	15	More Welsh than British	17
Equally Breton and French	57	Equally Welsh and British	35
More French than Breton	17	More British than Welsh	22
French, not Breton	8	British, not Welsh	6
Don't know	2		0.1

Does identity matter? Table Two presents the results of the so-called ‘Moreno’ identity question applied to Wales and Brittany, which allows mixed identity preferences. The table is highly revealing. A far higher proportion of the Welsh survey – over one-third - considered itself to be exclusively or primarily Welsh than was the case in Brittany. A sense of Welshness as being essentially opposed to Britishness is firmly rooted in a sizeable minority of Welsh people.

In Brittany, by contrast, the sense of regional identity is strong, but this is not considered as being in opposition to an overarching French nationhood. Multiple identities are more easily assumed in Brittany than in Wales. These figures suggest a more harmonious relationship between identity, institutions and territory in the case of Brittany than in Wales, though this process is dynamic and subject to change. Devolution was contested at its birth, with barely one-quarter of the Welsh electorate voting in favour in the 1997 referendum. On the other hand, findings from our survey confirmed that the Welsh public’s attitude to the devolution process in Wales had become more positive, a majority (51 per cent) were in favour or strongly in favour of devolution, with only 32 per cent against. The emphasis on the temporal dimension is vital. Relationships need to be developed over time, a scarce resource for new institutions such as the National Assembly for Wales.

Do partisan preferences matter? In our survey, there was much less cross-partisan consensus in the Welsh electorate than in Brittany. In Brittany, we observed surprisingly few differences according to expected voting intention in a regional election. PS voters were scarcely more in favour of enhanced regional autonomy than RPR voters. Within the Welsh electorate, we identified three distinct positions, ranging from a residual Conservative hostility to the principle of devolution, to overwhelming support from Plaid voters for (at least) a Scottish-style parliament, with Labour and Liberal Democrats occupying a middle position favourable to going beyond the current form of executive devolution.

The figures for Wales are set out in Table Three. The principle of an elected Assembly is now accepted overwhelmingly in each grouping of party identifiers, except that of the Conservatives. While divisions remain in each party, the centre of gravity amongst Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters (the governing coalition at the time of the survey) had shifted beyond accepting devolution towards advocating a Scottish-style parliament. Plaid Cymru supporters were the most cohesive, in their large majority dissatisfied with the limited devolution introduced by the Government of Wales Act. Devolution has encouraged all parties to undertake a territorial adjustment of their core political message.

Table Three
Voting intentions in an Assembly election and institutional preferences in Wales

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Plaid Cymru
	(n. 111)	(n. 329)	(n. 74)	(n. 172)
Wales should become independent	5	7	1	28
Remain part of the UK, with elected parliament	24	44	43	51
Remain part of the UK, with elected assembly	17	30	27	12
Remain part of the UK without an elected assembly	54	15	27	6
Don't know	-	4	1	2

The respective party systems thus reinforce substantive differences between Wales and Brittany. While Brittany is a region with a strong identity, its elites have become accustomed to operating in a united fashion in the broader French State (and European Union) context. The model of influence is a traditional one of bringing pressure to bear in Paris (raising the spectre of a powerful regionalist movement), in order to promote the material well-being of the region. In the case of Wales, territorial divisions, identity, partisan affiliation and, to a lesser extent, language have traditionally prevented the Welsh political elite from acting in such a unified manner. Let us look in rather more detail at the role of language as a critical identity marker.

Regional Governance and Lesser-Used Languages in Wales and Brittany: a Case Study

As regions with closely related minority Celtic languages, Wales and Brittany face directly comparable problems of regional language policy. Our survey (and the interviews we conducted with policy-makers) revealed very important differences between Welsh and Breton, relating both to their distinctive regulatory environments

and to their level of penetration amongst the population. But both languages face similar challenges due to the concentration of speakers in particular areas, their differential comprehension across generations and (in the case of Wales at least) the partisan connotations of the language. The Welsh Language is still viewed through the conceptual lens of enhanced regional governance. No such relationship exists in Brittany, where language appears to be dissociated from regional political institutional preferences

Table Four
Attitudes to the Welsh Language

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>
The Welsh Language is an important part of Welsh identity	37	47	13	2	1
We need to train more people who speak Welsh to take up posts in the public sector	16	51	22	6	5
Certain jobs in Wales should be reserved to bilingual speakers	7	39	39	12	3
There should be restrictions on in-migrants buying property in mainly Welsh-speaking areas	8	16	48	21	7

Table Five
Attitudes to the Breton Language

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>
The Breton Language is an important part of Breton identity	61	23	8	7	1
We need to train more people who speak Breton to take up posts in the public sector	17	20	22	36	5
Certain jobs in Brittany should be reserved to bilingual speakers, that is, people able to speak French and Breton	20	22	19	36	3
Public grants should be given to Breton-language media	30	37	12	16	5
Public grants should be given to Breton associations	37	36	12	11	4

There are similarities and differences between the Welsh and Breton samples. In both Wales and Brittany, there is strong symbolic support for the cultural heritage represented by the regional language (as expressed by the general question on identity). In both cases also, opinion becomes far more polarised as soon as specific public policy options to support the language are mentioned.

In Brittany, if there is widescale general support for the Breton language as a symbol of the region's past, interventionist public policies to sustain Breton are not widely advocated. There is only minority support for policy solutions that have been introduced experimentally or openly envisaged in Wales, such as reserving employment for bilingual speakers or training more Breton speakers to take up new employment opportunities. On the other hand, measures perceived to assist the Breton cultural movement are widely approved, with strong majorities agreeing that Breton-medium cultural associations and media should be part-financed from public funds.

The evidence for Wales is rather more mixed. If anything, support for the symbolic role of Welsh is rather less deeply rooted than in Brittany. The role of Welsh is more divisive because active public policies have been pursued vigorously since the passage of the Welsh Language Act in 1993 and have been given new momentum since the creation of the National Assembly. The rise in the numbers of Welsh speakers in the 2003 census is arguably testament to the efficacy of active public policy in Wales. The Welsh population generally accepts that the Welsh language should be seen as a symbol of Welsh identity.

But again, public opinion is far more polarised in relation to specific policy options. A majority accepts that Wales needs to train more Welsh-language speakers to occupy new posts, this demonstrating public awareness of the employment opportunities that have resulted from a decade of vigorous bilingualism. On the other hand, a majority is opposed to the two most controversial policy options: namely that certain jobs in Wales should be reserved to bilingual speakers and there should be restrictions on immigrants buying property in mainly Welsh-speaking areas.

We observe many differences (and some similarities) at the level of policy communities. In Wales, as language issues have become mainstreamed, it is difficult to identify a specific language policy community. In the case of Brittany, the embattled status of the Breton language gave the language 'policy community' an extraordinary cohesion in adversity, but there is no comparable mainstreaming of the Breton language. Policy actors operate within distinctive institutional and political contexts. For most Bretons, the Welsh model is beyond the pale in the French context.

Comparing Wales and Brittany Contextual constraints and opportunities

Understanding regional governance in Wales, Brittany or any other region requires a recognition of the overarching context within which regional institutions operate. We now compare briefly the legal-constitutional order, provisions for asymmetry and the type of inter-governmental relations.

The legal/constitutional order

The British and French governments have devolved powers to regional assemblies but have not transformed themselves into federal states. The British unwritten constitution, by definition, does not embed federalism in a series of constitutionally entrenched rules. The French constitution explicitly rejects federalism in its Article 72, though it refers to subsidiarity. In both instances, legal-constitutional frameworks impose constraints and create opportunities.

In the UK, First Minister Morgan has expressed his belief in the advantages for Wales of the British unwritten constitution. Pragmatic, negotiated and flexible responses have underpinned an innovative and dynamic role for Wales, which would have been more difficult in a codified context. On the other hand, the current piecemeal approach is a source of fragility, especially in the event of different political majorities in Cardiff and London. In the case of France, where all 22 regions are in theory treated exactly the same, there is a greater appearance of consistency, though this is rather misleading. Constitutional provisions for equality have served as a brake on the development of forms of regional distinctiveness, in a manner that would be unacceptable in the context of the UK as a Union State.

Asymmetry or uniformity?

The UK model of asymmetrical devolution has produced variable outcomes across the Kingdom: full legislative devolution in Scotland, a (suspended) devolution process in Northern Ireland, secondary legislative, or 'executive' devolution in Wales and a commitment to regional referendums in England. From the start, there has been an explicit distinction between the four nations forming the United Kingdom. In the French unitary context, such distinctions are less acceptable.

In France, there is less disparity in outcomes across the national territory. The lack of asymmetry in mainland France has limited the extent to which regions with strong identities can pursue distinctive institutional paths. Is this about to change? The 'special statute' clause of the 2003 constitutional reform provides potentially for a radical break with the past. The constitutional reform bill enables the creation of authorities with a 'special statute'. There have been calls, from traditional regionalists and others, for the Brittany region to recover the Loire-Atlantique *département* (including Nantes, the historic capital of Brittany) and to restore Brittany in its historic boundaries.

With the left now in control both of the Brittany administrative region and the Loire-Atlantique departmental council (for the first time ever) this issue is at the forefront of regional concerns. Alongside support for the unification of historic regions such as Brittany, Normandy and Savoie, there have also been arguments, notably by former President Giscard d'Estaing as former President of the European Convention, for the creation of a few large regions to be comparable with German Länder.

Types of intergovernmentalism

The approach to intergovernmental relations in post-devolution Britain is one of informality, secrecy and incremental adjustments. Concordats, departmental guidance

notes, party meetings and unwritten understandings form the core of post-devolution IGR, along with the Joint Ministerial Committee. Whether this approach will be able to survive a change in political majority in London is a moot point.

In the case of France, inter-governmental relations are more formalised and codified. In the Breton case, the regional council operates alongside (and generally co-operates with) the French State, which deeply penetrates civil society in a manner that has no British equivalent. Decentralisation in France can in some respects be interpreted as a central response to governing complexity through ‘steering at a distance’.

The State-Region plans provide powerful evidence for this. The elected regions are tied into five-year contracts negotiated with the regional prefectures. Typically, the state puts pressure on the regions to allocate a proportion of regional finances to joint projects in areas such as road building or university construction that do not fall within their official responsibilities. On the other hand, stronger state partners have vested the new regional authorities with credibility in areas such as transport, education, training and economic development. In the French context, a strong, decentred state might even be a pre-condition for the emergence of strategic regional authorities capable of assuming their responsibilities.

The development of enhanced regional capacity has had an impact upon intergovernmental relations in both countries. The responses adopted to deal with increased complexity - codified and formal, in the one case, informal and irregular in the other – represent distinctive types of intergovernmentalism that are embedded in specific politico-administrative traditions, but which pose challenges to and are gradually reshaping these traditions.

Conclusion

Devolution and decentralisation in Wales and Brittany are best understood as two alternative forms of territorial institution building. Each needs to be evaluated first within its own specific terms of reference, though we can draw more general lessons as well.

Wales falls on the identity side of the identity/instrumental spectrum. The real achievements of devolution in Wales are obscured by an over-complex and intransparent settlement. The evidence we have presented, however, suggests that the first term of devolution has provided the mobilising project necessary to legitimise the idea of a Welsh polity and to build a Welsh civil society.

The French region appears more tied in to an overarching system of state-centric, national regulation than its Welsh counterpart. Regional capacity in Brittany has prospered because the prevalent mode of regional advocacy has proved to be very effective. Though Bretons are conscious of the limits of regional capacity building within the context of French republicanism, they are more supportive of forms of regional autonomy than in other French regions.

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Loughlin, J. (2003) Beyond the Unitary State? Public Opinion, Political Institutions and Public Policy in Brittany. *Regional Studies* 37:3, 265-276; Cole, A. and Baudewyns, P. (2004) Devolution, Decentralization and Public Opinion in Wales and Brittany. *Comparative European Politics* 2:1, 1-24; Cole, A. (2004) 'Devolution and Decentralisation in Wales and Brittany. A Framework for Evaluation', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 354-68; Cole, A., Jones, J. B., and Storer, A. (2003) 'Inside the National Assembly for Wales: the Welsh Civil Service under Devolution', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 74, no. 2, pp. 223-232.

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