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Devolution Briefings

Devolution in Wales: What Does the Public Think?

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Key Points

- Public support for devolution has grown substantially in Wales since 1997, though there is still a strong sense that government in Westminster has too much influence in Wales.
- The National Assembly is not felt to have made much of a difference in policy terms.
- There has been modest change in national identities with more Welsh people claiming a stronger sense of Welsh identity – and a weaker sense of British identity – since devolution. Younger people are more likely to have a strong Welsh identity.
- Many people vote differently in Westminster compared to National Assembly elections, systematically favouring Labour in Westminster elections and Plaid Cymru in Welsh elections
- There is little evidence of widespread public radicalism underpinning a policy agenda committed to ‘Clear Red Water’ between Wales and England.

In September 1997, devolution received a much more lukewarm public endorsement in Wales than Scotland. The establishment of a National Assembly for Wales (NAW) was approved by a referendum majority of only 6721 votes. This short paper explores how public attitudes in Wales have changed in the ensuing seven years.

Constitutional Preferences

In a series of surveys since 1997, Welsh preferences across four broad constitutional options have been gauged and, as can be seen from Table 1, have moved significantly. By 2003, a more powerful Parliament for Wales was the most popular option, while support for the pre-devolution situation has steadily declined and now attracts barely more than one in five Welsh voters. With independence attracting only modest support, almost two-thirds of Welsh people now favour some form of devolution within the UK.

TABLE 1: CONSTITUTIONAL PREFERENCES (%) IN WALES, 1997-2003

<i>Constitutional Preference</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2003</i>
Independence	14.1	9.6	12.3	13.9
Parliament	19.6	29.9	38.8	37.8
Assembly	26.8	35.3	25.5	27.1
No elected body	39.5	25.3	24.0	21.2

Another way of probing voters' views on devolution is to ask about the relative degree of influence that different levels of government enjoy. Responses to this question in our 2003 survey show a majority of voters believing UK government in Westminster to have most influence in running Wales, but desiring the National Assembly to be the most powerful body.

TABLE 2: MOST INFLUENCE OVER 'THE WAY WALES IS RUN' (%), 2003

<i>Response</i>	<i>Does Influence</i>	<i>Ought to Influence</i>
NAW	22.4	56.0
UK Government	57.9	29.1
Local Councils	15.0	13.8
European Union	4.7	1.2

Finally, in 2003, we also asked voters what their reactions would be to a hypothetical event: the abolition of devolution. The biggest single response was one of indifference. But among those expressing a definite view, those saying they would be 'pleased' are outnumbered more than two-to-one by those who would regret any such step.

TABLE 3: OPINIONS IN EVENT OF ABOLITION OF ASSEMBLY, 2003

<i>Response</i>	<i>%</i>
Pleased	17.9
Sorry	39.5
Neither Pleased nor Sorry	42.6

The obvious question that is raised by our evidence is why public opinion in Wales has become more favourable to devolution. Is it because the National Assembly is perceived as having 'delivered the good' in terms of policy outputs? Not really. The evidence of public perceptions about major policy areas indicates only a limited degree of satisfaction with the impact of devolution. Table 4 presents data on public evaluations of performance in three central areas of public policy: the economy, education and health. (The 1997 and 1999 surveys asked people whether they *expected* the NAW to deliver improvements in these areas; the 2001 and 2003 surveys asked whether people believed that the NAW *had* improved things in these areas).

TABLE 4A: IMPACT OF THE ASSEMBLY ON THE STANDARD OF LIVING (%)

<i>Response</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2003</i>
Improve	31.0	28.3	34.7	37.8
No Difference	56.3	66.2	57.4	54.5
Reduce	12.7	5.5	7.9	7.7

TABLE 4B: IMPACT OF THE ASSEMBLY ON EDUCATION (%)

<i>Response</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2003</i>
Improve	54.9	45.4	25.0	31.4
No Difference	39.7	51.2	71.4	61.8
Reduce	5.4	3.4	3.5	6.7

TABLE 4C: IMPACT OF THE ASSEMBLY ON HEALTH (%)

<i>Response</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2003</i>
Improve	31.0	43.3
No Difference	63.6	47.7
Reduce	5.4	9.0

By 2003, relatively few people in Wales believed that devolution had made things worse. But despite some apparent progress between 2001 and 2003,¹ in all three areas the biggest proportion believed that the NAW had made no difference – and for the economy and education, a clear majority are in this camp.

That support for devolution should have grown since 1999 despite a limited sense that the Assembly has delivered in policy terms appears at first sight paradoxical. Why should support have grown for an institution that is seen by many as failing to deliver clear benefits? But this paradox may be more apparent than real. People are quite capable of maintaining (or even increasing) their ‘diffuse’ support for political institutions while believing that specific policies and actions of those institutions are unwise or ineffectual. In the Welsh case, while the policy outputs of devolution receive a mixed reception, the National Assembly is now far more trusted by people to ‘act in Wales’ best interests’ than government in London (Table 5).

TABLE 5: TRUST UK GOVERNMENT/NAW TO ‘ACT IN WALES’ BEST INTERESTS’, 2003 (%)

<i>Response</i>	<i>UKGovt</i>	<i>NAW</i>
Just about always	2.1	12.1
Most of the time	21.0	55.5
Trust at least most of the time	23.1	67.6
Only some of the time	57.9	26.3
Almost never	19.0	6.0

To summarise, support for devolution has grown substantially in Wales since 1997. Despite some disappointment with what the NAW has actually achieved thus far, support for reversing devolution has declined to barely one in five. Devolution increasingly looks like the ‘settled will’ of the Welsh people; although it is by no means settled exactly what form that devolution should take.

National Identity

¹ We would, however, urge caution in comparing the 2001 and 2003 figures on policy delivery. The minor differences observed here may reflect little more than a ‘contextual’ effect: i.e., more favourable evaluations of the NAW’s performance may simply reflect greater public awareness of the institution in the wake of the parties’ election campaigns and also pre-election efforts by the Electoral Commission in Wales to raise awareness of the Assembly.

Wales has long been renowned for internal differences. Differences in national identities undoubtedly played a large role in influencing how people voted in the 1997 Referendum and the 1999 NAW election. What about since then? Devolution has been variously suggested to:

- Strengthen the sense of Welsh national identity;
- Help develop a more civic (rather than ethnic) Welsh identity; or
- Strengthen Wales' affinity with Britain.

Table 6 shows responses on national identity which allow people to indicate degrees of both British and Welsh identity. As we can see, Welsh identity appears to have strengthened somewhat, and Britishness declined a little. However, the trends are modest, and Wales continues to differ significantly from Scotland, where the proportion of the electorate proclaiming a British identity is now rather small.²

TABLE 6: NATIONAL IDENTITIES (%) IN WALES, 1997-2003

<i>National Identity</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2003</i>
Welsh, Not British	17.2	17.7	24.6	22.7
More Welsh than British	25.7	20.7	23.5	28.1
Equally Welsh and British	34.3	38.3	29.4	30.2
More British than Welsh	10.4	7.8	11.2	8.9
British, Not Welsh	12.4	15.5	11.3	10.0

An examination of generational patterns of national identification confirms that there may be long-term, if modest, trends of change in national identities in Wales. Table 7 reports 2003 data that disaggregate national identity by age group. As is clear, an exclusive sense of 'Welsh' identity is strongest amongst younger voters, amongst whom British identity (and particularly shared British and Welsh identity) is correspondingly weaker.

TABLE 7: NATION IDENTITY BY AGE COHORT, 2003 (%)

<i>National Identity</i>	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-59	60-64	65+
Welsh, Not British	27.4	22.3	25.9	23.1	20.0	20.0	20.8
More Welsh than British	36.9	32.5	30.7	24.5	25.0	28.8	21.9
Equally Welsh and British	17.9	26.8	27.0	32.0	32.5	37.5	37.7
More British than Welsh	8.3	10.2	6.9	8.8	10.0	8.8	9.8
British, Not Welsh	9.5	8.3	9.5	11.6	12.5	5.0	9.8

Furthermore, as Table 8 demonstrates, when we examine continuing levels of opposition to devolution, we find not only that such opposition has (as one would expect from the evidence in Table 1) declined amongst all identity groups; opposition has declined most amongst those with a stronger British identity, who were initially the least supportive of self-government for Wales.

² The 2003 Scottish Social Attitudes survey reported 68.0% of their sample claiming either exclusively or mainly Scottish identity, and only 8.9% claiming to be exclusively or mainly British.

TABLE 8: OPPOSITION TO DEVOLUTION, 2003 (%)

<i>National Identity</i>	1997	1999	2001	2003
Welsh/More Welsh	25.2	13.2	14.9	13.6
Equal Welsh/British	44.3	27.3	30.4	28.8
British/More British	57.4	38.1	36.4	30.1

To summarise, devolution has not produced any substantial changes in patterns of national identity in Wales. Welsh identity has strengthened somewhat, and is strongest amongst younger cohorts, but British identity remains much more prevalent in Wales than Scotland. Attitudes towards devolution have become more uniform across identity groups.

Voting in General and Devolved Elections

A good starting point for understanding voting behaviour under devolution is the supposition common in electoral studies research that voting behaviour should not systematically differ between the two arenas of Westminster and NAW elections. In this section we draw on survey data to examine the relationship between electoral preferences at the Westminster and Wales levels.

1999: In 1999, the Labour party in Wales experienced a severe electoral shock, failing against almost all expectations to win a majority in the new Assembly, and losing heartland seats like Rhondda and Islwyn. Nonetheless, 1999 did not see a *general* rejection of the Labour party, and an adoption of an alternative like Plaid Cymru, by a large section of the Welsh electorate. Table 9 shows that while many voters did desert Labour for the NAW election, when asked how they would have behaved in a Westminster election held in May 1999, the majority of Welsh voters remained loyal to Labour. Whatever mistakes Labour made prior to May 1999, these were not enough to lose it significant support for a Westminster election. These figures for the hypothetical 1999 Westminster election also show that while Plaid Cymru was doing better than it did in 1997, in a Westminster context these gains were of a substantially smaller magnitude.

TABLE 9: ACTUAL NAW AND HYPOTHETICAL WESTMINSTER VOTE SHARE, 1999

<i>Party</i>	<i>NAW Vote (first vote)</i>	<i>Hypothetical Westminster Vote</i>
Labour	37.5%	53.3%
Conservative	14.0%	18.4%
Lib-Dem.	12.4%	11.6%
Plaid Cymru	30.8%	14.9%

2001: In Table 10 we report data from our 2001 survey to compare how people actually voted in the Westminster election of that year with how they state they would have voted in a NAW election – the reverse of the comparison conducted for our 1999 data. Two key findings are immediately apparent. First, we again see considerable differences in behaviour across the two electoral arenas. Second, these differences are in the same direction as before. That is, we see both the Labour party and the Conservatives (as well as, this time, the Liberal Democrats) doing better in Westminster elections (although the differential for Labour is smaller in 2001 than for 1999, perhaps suggesting that the party had become more effective at winning support

for a specifically ‘Welsh’ electoral contest); Plaid Cymru gets much higher levels of support for a NAW poll.

TABLE 10: ACTUAL WESTMINSTER AND HYPOTHETICAL NAW VOTE SHARE, 2001

<i>Party</i>	<i>Westminster</i>	<i>Hypothetical NAW Vote (first vote)</i>
Labour	51.9%	49.4%
Conservative	16.7%	10.6%
Lib-Dem.	15.6%	11.9%
Plaid Cymru	14.3%	26.2%

2003: Finally, we can draw on data from the most recent contest in Wales, the second election to the National Assembly, to see whether the previously observed patterns persist. The answer, quite clearly, is that they do (Table 11). Once again, we see the Labour and Conservative parties (and, to a lesser extent, the Lib-Dems) gaining much higher levels of support for a hypothetical Westminster election. And, yet again, Plaid Cymru’s support for Westminster contests is less than half the level attained for an NAW election. Plaid Cymru’s main problem in 2003 was simply a general decline in support. They continue to do considerably better in NAW elections than Westminster ones in both good and bad years, but 2003 was definitely a bad year.

TABLE 11: ACTUAL NAW AND HYPOTHETICAL WESTMINSTER VOTE SHARE, 2003

<i>Party</i>	<i>NAW Vote (First Vote)</i>	<i>Hyp. Westminster Vote</i>
Labour	42.7%	50.0
Conservative	17.4%	23.0
Lib-Dem.	12.1%	14.8
Plaid Cymru	23.8%	10.1

The overall lesson to draw from this section is that the supposition that voting behaviour does not differ across arenas can be decisively rejected. Welsh voters do not have identical political preferences for Westminster and NAW elections. Rather, the pattern we see is one of systematic differences: the major UK-level parties, Labour and the Conservatives, gain higher support levels in actual or hypothetical UK-level elections. Plaid Cymru, a party based solely in Wales, gains substantially more support for Wales-only elections. In further work (Trystan et al 2003) we have shown how this pattern appears to reflect a widespread perception of the greater relevance of Plaid Cymru to a specifically ‘Welsh’ election.

Clear Red Water?

An important justification made for Welsh devolution was that it would allow for a distinctive policy agenda to be developed. The aspiration of Ron Davies, the former Secretary of State for Wales who introduced devolution, was that ‘through the Welsh National Assembly we can create a country that more fully embodies the values of social justice and equality which have long animated the people of Wales’. Such rhetoric draws on a long-standing theme in Welsh political discourse: the idea that the Welsh are more radical than their fellow Britons. Such themes provided a strong subtext when, on 11 December 2002, Rhodri Morgan called for the creation of ‘Clear Red Water’ between the new Labour government in Westminster and the agenda of the party in Wales. To what degree is there public support for a distinctive Welsh policy agenda?

In Table 12, we report responses on two questions concerning policy differences between London and Cardiff. As can be seen, the Welsh innovation of bringing in free public transport for all citizens over 60 wins widespread public support. However, Wales' distinctive line on the issue of Foundation hospitals wins a more mixed public reaction – although this may reflect widespread public uncertainty over the details of the issue.

TABLE 12: ATTITUDES ON TWO PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES, 2003 (%)

<i>Response</i>	<i>Free Bus Passes Right[#]</i>	<i>Foundational Hospitals Wrong</i>
Agree Strongly	24.3	9.3
Agree	53.4	30.0
Neither Agree nor Disagree	5.8	25.2
Disagree	14.7	31.9
Strongly Disagree	1.8	3.5

Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement/disagreement with the statements that 'Free Bus Passes should be given to everyone over 60 even though lots of older people can afford to pay' and 'Semi-independent Foundation hospitals should not be introduced into the NHS in Wales, even if they are in England'.

But what evidence is there that the Welsh population are actually more left wing in general terms than people in other parts of these islands? In Table 13, we report mean average figures for England, Scotland and Wales on two scales: one concerned with economic left-right opinions, and the second with libertarian-authoritarian stances. The differences between the territories are not great, but Wales actually appears as the least 'radical' of the three on both measures!

TABLE 13: MEAN AVERAGE SCORES ON TWO ATTITUDINAL SCALES

<i>Scale[#]</i>	<i>Wales</i>	<i>England</i>	<i>Scotland</i>
Economic Left-Right	2.58	2.53	2.41
Libertarian-Authoritarian	3.81	3.70	3.67

Data from the British Social Attitudes Survey 2003 & 2003 Wales Life and Times Survey. Note that scales are scored from 1 (the most left-wing and libertarian points possible, to 5, as the most right-wing points possible).

So does this mean that the supposed radicalism of the Welsh needs to be regarded as simply mythical, or at least as part of the country's past rather than its present or future? Our data suggests that the situation is somewhat more complex. Witness, for example, the interesting difference between the Welsh and the English in terms of their attitudes towards class identification. Table 14 displays two measures of social class for both England and Wales: an objective (occupation-related) measure of those fitting into the working class (and other manual workers) category, and a subjective one – the latter being the proportion of respondents indicating that they consider themselves 'working class'. As can be seen, the differences on the objective measure are small. But on the subjective measure, things look different: the Welsh are significantly more likely to claim an identity with the 'working class'.

TABLE 14: OBJECTIVE WORKING CLASS (OTHER MANUAL WORKERS) AND SUBJECTIVE CLASS IDENTITY, 2003, %

	<i>Objective W. Class (Other Manual Workers)</i>	<i>Subjective 'Working Class'</i>
Wales	29.4 (11.9)	69.9
England	28.0 (10.3)	59.2

This subject requires further investigation. There are several possible explanations for the apparent paradox of a Welsh population claiming a strong working class identity and the absence of strong left wing social values. It may be, for example, that the social values characteristic of the radical tradition in Welsh politics are best characterised as communitarian rather than ‘left wing’ and that the scales that we utilise in analysing the survey data are not accessing the correct traits. Another possible reading is that the discourse of ‘radicalism’ has become in some way constitutive of Welsh identity; and this to such an extent that it enjoys a significance well above and beyond support for particular policies traditionally associated with the left.

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The Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme was set up by ESRC in 2000 to explore the series of devolution reforms which have established new political institutions in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London and the other English regions since 1997. It has commissioned 35 projects around the UK to carry out top-class academic research and to contribute to the policy debates surrounding devolution.

For more information see the Programme website at www.devolution.ac.uk or contact the Programme Director, Professor Charlie Jeffery at ESRC Devolution Programme, Institute for German Studies, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT. Tel 0121 414 2992, fax 0121 414 2992, email devolution@bham.ac.uk



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