



Devolution Briefings

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

The Elections in Scotland and Wales: What's at Stake?

Briefing No. 1, April 2003

Key Points:

- **Both the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales have introduced significant new policies which diverge from those of the Westminster Parliament**
- **New devolved policies have injected movement into UK-wide policy debates**
- **Public support for the principle of devolution is strong in Scotland and Wales**
- **There is some disappointment about the achievements of devolution so far, largely because voters feel Westminster still has too much influence in Scotland and Wales**
- **The election results in Scotland and Wales will not be commentaries on the mid-term performance of the Blair government in Westminster and should not be compared with Scottish and Welsh results in the last Westminster election in 2001**
- **The devolved elections will be about devolved policy agendas, about Scottish and Welsh relationships to the rest of the UK, and, in sum, about the performance of Jack McConnell's and Rhodri Morgan's governments**

The devolution reforms since 1997 add up to the most far-reaching change to the fabric of the British political system for well over a century. But the traditions of Westminster government and the disproportionate focus those traditions bring on politics *as seen from London* can all too easily obscure the extent of change. The elections to the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales on 1 May 2003 are an opportunity to look beyond Westminster to see just what is at stake in Scottish and Welsh politics in post-devolution UK.

Does devolution make a difference?

Despite a critical press, and the public sense that they have not made much difference, the devolved assemblies have started to make a significant difference in policy terms.

The main policy differences from Westminster are set out in the two boxes below.

Different public policies in Scotland 1999-2003

- Free long term personal care for the elderly
- Abolition of up-front tuition fees for students in higher education
- Three year settlement for teachers pay & conditions
- Less restrictive freedom of information Act
- Abolition of fox hunting, by the Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Act 2002
- 'One stop shop' for Public Sector Ombudsman (2002)
- Abolition of the ban on 'promoting homosexuality' in schools by repeal of Section 2A of the Local Government Act (known as 'section 28' in England)

Abolition of fox hunting, and of 'section 28', are commitments which have eluded the Blair government in London, but on which Labour has delivered in Scotland.

Wales has fewer policy differences. When Alun Michael was First Minister there was little desire to be different. But when Rhodri Morgan became First Minister some distinctive policies began to emerge (described by Morgan as putting 'clear red water' between the Welsh and UK governments' policy agendas). Under his 'partnership' (i.e. coalition) agreement with the Liberal Democrats he has delivered free school milk for all children under seven, a freezing of prescription charges, and free bus travel for pensioners from 2002. A fuller list of distinctive Welsh policies appears in the box below.

Different public policies in Wales in Assembly's first term

- UK's first Children's Commissioner
- Creation of 22 Local Health Boards, to work alongside Wales' 22 local authorities
- Homelessness Commission, and extending support for the homeless
- Abolition of school league tables
- Free medical prescriptions for those under 25 and over 60
- Free bus travel for pensioners
- Free school milk for children under seven
- Piloting a new Welsh Baccalaureate in 19 schools and colleges
- Six weeks free home care for the elderly after discharge from hospital.
- Finance Wales established as a 'user-friendly bank' for small business.

Wales has less capacity to be different from Westminster, because it has no powers of primary legislation, and a smaller per capita budget than Scotland. But Wales and Scotland show both how devolution has made a real difference, and the knock-on effects new devolved policies can have in the wider UK.

The abolition of up-front tuition fees, but the levying of graduate contributions afterwards, is a policy first adopted in Scotland, which now appears in Charles Clarke's higher education White Paper for England. The Children's Commissioner, first introduced in Wales, has since been legislated for in Scotland, and proposed in Northern Ireland. Other issues like free long

term care in Scotland, though not (yet) emulated, have set the terms of policy debates throughout the UK.

Devolution in these ways creates policy ‘laboratories’ which enable policy experiments in different parts of the UK. The costs of failure of introducing new policies are less great when they are restricted to one part of the UK, and the marker of success is imitation elsewhere.

Public Attitudes to Devolution

The introduction of devolution in Scotland and Wales was of course about finding new ways of expressing differences of identity and policy preference. So are the Scottish and Welsh publics happy with what they have got? So far as the public is concerned, devolution is here to stay. A half of Scots, and six in ten in Wales favour the constitutional option of devolution, with support for either a return to the pre-devolution situation or for independence much lower.

Since 1997 support for devolution has increased in Wales, and remained largely stable in Scotland. In both nations there has been a fall in the proportion who would rather there were no devolution at all. Support for independence seems to be falling in Scotland, and remains at a much lower level in Wales

Table 1: Constitutional Choices

	Scotland 1997 %	Scotland 2002 %	Wales 1997 %	Wales 2001 %
Become independent from the UK	26	30	13	12
Remain in UK, with a devolved parliament	51	52	43	61
Remain in UK, without a devolved parliament	17	13	37	23

Even in England, the most popular view is that devolution for Scotland and Wales is the best way forward

Table 2: English views on Scottish and Welsh devolution

<i>Scotland/Wales should...</i>	Scotland 2002 %	Wales 2001 %
Become independent from the UK	19	17
Remain in UK, with a devolved parliament	51	59
Remain in UK, without a devolved parliament	15	14

But so far – and despite the new policies listed above – the Parliament and Assembly are seen to have had only a limited impact. When asked about changes since 1997 in areas such as

education, the NHS and the general standard of living, only a minority think things have improved.

Table 3: Changing standards since 1997

<i>% saying standards have improved</i>	Scotland 2001	Wales 2001
In the NHS	23	24
In education	27	30
In general standard of living	30	31

Only a quarter think the parliament has made a ‘real positive difference to life in Scotland and been a success so far’; fewer though think the parliament has made things worse.

Table 4: Attitudes to Scottish devolution

	2003 %
The parliament has made a real positive difference to life in Scotland, been a success so far	24
The parliament has made little positive difference to life in Scotland, been a disappointment so far	48
The parliament has made no positive difference to life in Scotland, been a failure so far	12
The parliament has had a negative impact on life in Scotland, should be scrapped	12

(Source: Populus/The Times, Feb 2003)

The relatively small proportions who think things have improved since 1997 partly reflect a view that it is the UK government that continues to pull the strings in Scotland and Wales. Despite devolution, around six in ten in both countries think it is Westminster has the most influence over the way in which their countries are run.

Table 5 Which has the most influence over the way Scotland/Wales is run

	Scotland 2001 %	Wales 2001 %
Scottish Parliament	15	-
Welsh Assembly	-	16
UK government	66	61
Local councils	9	15

In contrast, the public’s preference would be for their own devolved body to have the most say over the way in which their country is run. This is particularly true in Scotland, where three-quarters would rather the parliament exerted the most influence (compared with just over a half in Wales)

Table 6 Which should have the most influence over the way Scotland/Wales is run ...

	Scotland 2001 %	Wales 2001 %
Scottish Parliament	74	-
Welsh Assembly	-	54
UK government	14	25
Local councils	8	16

Interpreting the Scottish and Welsh Election Results

How, against this background, should we interpret the results of the devolved elections in Scotland and Wales on 1 May 2003? The easy way would be to compare them with the 2001 Westminster election results in Scotland and Wales. That is most likely the wrong way.

There are different policy agendas at stake for voters in Scotland and Wales, and public attitudes about the relationship of Scotland and Wales to the wider UK political system will also play a role in shaping voting decisions. Also – and in part because of these differences – the terms of party competition in Scottish and Welsh elections are different. Westminster elections are still about whether Labour or the Conservatives will win.

But in Scotland and Wales the Conservatives limp in as third, sometimes fourth party. The real contest is between Labour and the nationalists - SNP in Scotland and Plaid Cymru in Wales – as a quick look at the Scottish and Welsh results at Westminster in 1997 and 2001 and in the devolved elections in 1999 shows .

Table 7 Election Results in 1997, 1999 and 2001 in Scotland and Wales

	1997 Westminster Election		1999 Devolved Elections		2001 Westminster Election	
	Scotland	Wales	Scotland	Wales	Scotland	Wales
Labour	45.6	54.7	33.6	35.5	43.9	48.6
Conservatives	17.5	19.6	15.4	16.5	15.6	21.0
Liberal Democrats	13.0	12.4	12.4	12.5	16.4	13.8
SNP	22.1	-	27.3	-	20.1	-
Plaid Cymru	-	10.0	-	30.6	-	14.3

Table 7 shows a stable pattern of Westminster voting, with Wales and Scotland doing their bit for Tony Blair's two landslides. The only significant variations are in Labour and nationalist performance at Westminster *as compared to* the 1999 devolved elections. There is a clear trade-off: Labour did better at Westminster than in the devolved elections, with the nationalists more than making up the difference in the devolved contexts.

Is that trade-off about mid-term protest? Perhaps. There is plenty of evidence from other political systems that voters like to give national governments a bloody nose in mid-term elections, before retuning to their 'real' allegiances at the next national election. This is a familiar pattern in by-elections and local and European elections in the UK and in Congressional elections in the US.

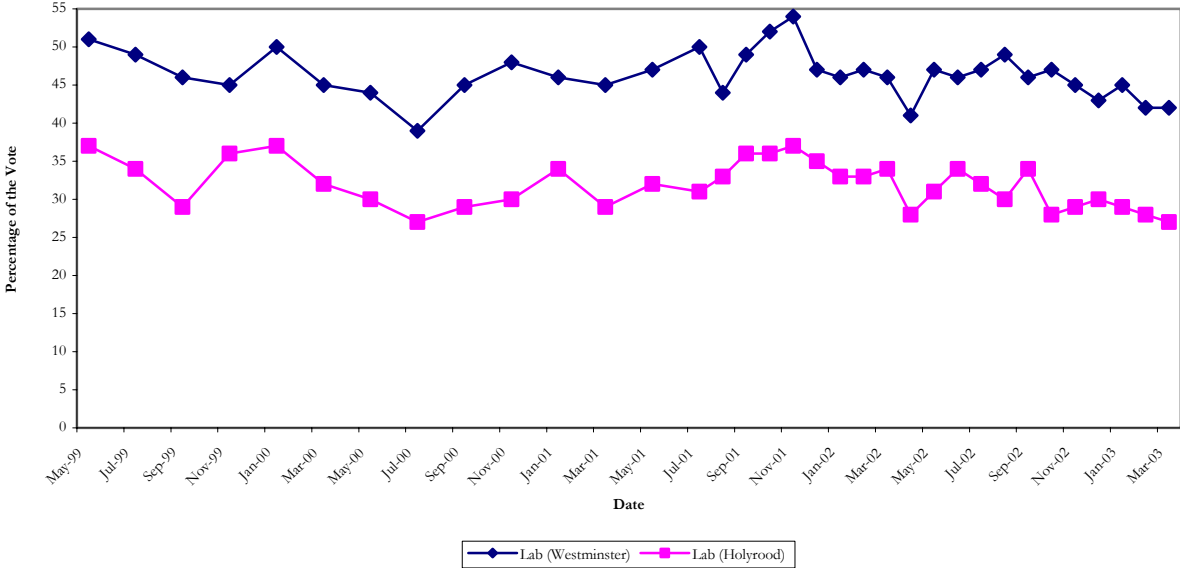
But there is another possible explanation. Voters might see national and devolved elections as being about different issues, and might vote in them according to quite different criteria. This is also a familiar pattern in political systems where territorial issues –language or distinctive cultures or identities – are important, like Spain or Canada.

In political systems like Spain and Canada devolved election results are shaped by a different, territory-specific set of factors than nationwide results. Devolved elections have their own, distinctive rhythm shaped by differences in policy preference and debates about the relationship of devolved territories to government at the centre, in Madrid or Ottawa.

Is it this kind of distinctive rhythm that explained the different pattern of results in Scotland and Wales in 1999 and is set to be repeated in 2003? Most likely. There is plenty of survey data that shows that Scottish and Welsh voters make a systematic distinction in their voting intentions for Holyrood and Cardiff Bay as compared to Westminster.

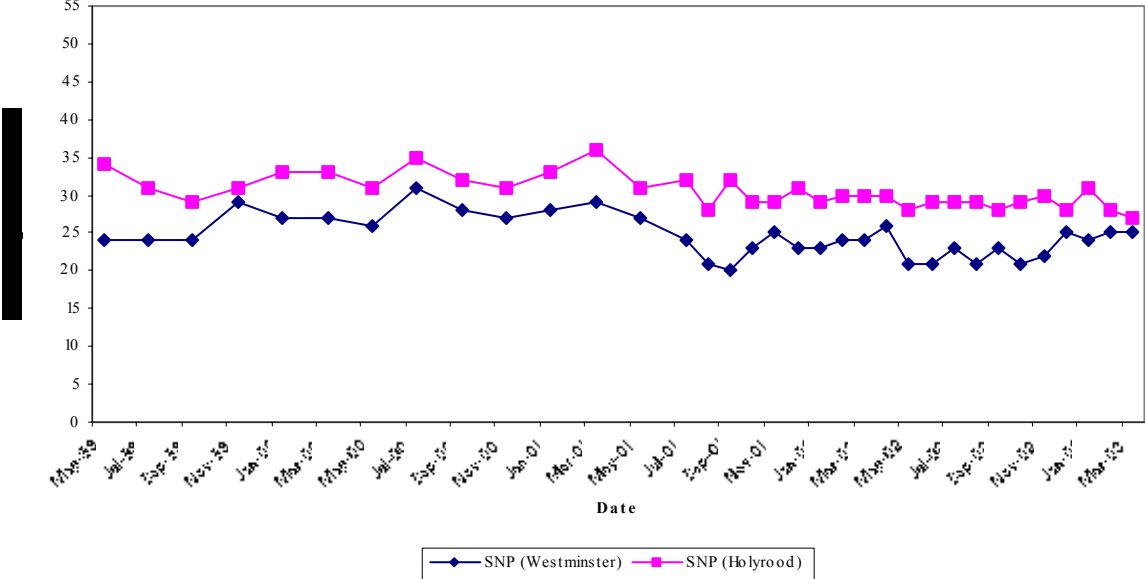
Figures 1-2 show results from System Three opinion polls in Scotland from 1999-2003 - the first term of office of the Scottish Parliament. The polls asked voters *simultaneously* to give their party preferences for Westminster *and* Holyrood elections. They show a steady pattern of difference unrelated to the rhythm of the Westminster electoral cycle. Labour is simply less popular when it comes to ‘voting for Scotland’ than it is for Westminster (Fig. 1).

Figure One: Voting Intentions in Scotland, Labour



The reverse applies to the SNP, which gets a substantial devolution bonus (Fig. 2).

Figure Two Voting Intentions in Scotland, SNP



Though fewer polls have been done in Wales, the same pattern holds. Labour's dominance in Westminster voting intentions runs alongside a systematically much weaker showing in Welsh Assembly voting intentions. And the devolution bonus for Plaid Cymru is even bigger than that of the SNP in Scotland.

How, then should we interpret the devolved election results in 2003? NOT through the lens of the last Westminster results in 2001. Labour *will* do worse than it did at Westminster, and SNP and Plaid *will* do better. But that will not be 'news' as such and it will not be any kind of judgement on the Blair government (unless, which so far seems unlikely, a sense of crisis in Iraq overwhelms the devolved elections campaigns).

The real news would be if the SNP and Plaid came close to unseating Labour in Scotland or Wales or even took over as leading coalition partner. That clearly would be big 'news', but it would be a judgement about the performance of the McConnell government in Scotland or the Morgan government in Wales, not about the Blair government in Westminster.

This *Devolution Briefing* was written by Robert Hazell, Director of the Constitution Unit at University College, London, Dan Hough, Lecturer in Politics at the University of Nottingham, Charlie Jeffery, Director of the ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme and Alison Park, Director of Studies at the National Centre for Social Research. It reports work funded by the ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme and the Leverhulme Trust's Nations and Regions Programme at UCL. All data in Tables 1-6 are from the *Scottish Social Attitudes* survey, the *Welsh Life and Times* survey, and the *British Social Attitudes* survey (all National Centre for Social Research), unless otherwise stated.

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.

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