

**ELECTORAL ACCOUNTABILITY, RESPONSIBILITY ATTRIBUTIONS, AND  
THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT IN DEVOLVED WALES**

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**Abstract**

This study explores the state of electoral accountability at the devolved level in Wales. Holding those in power responsible for their performance requires that citizens assign responsibility accurately and vote on the basis of policy outcomes. We examine whether citizens in Wales can identify devolved policy competences and office holders, and identify factors that are linked to accurate attributions. We then identify whether voters seek to use devolved elections as a sanctioning tool, even if they do not have the information required to do so accurately. The findings indicate that there is an acute accountability deficit at the devolved level in Wales: few have the knowledge or the inclination to hold those in power to account. The conclusion discusses the implications of these findings for democracy in Wales and in other multi-level settings.

## **Introduction**

A key function of elections is to provide citizens with an opportunity to hold those in power responsible for their performance. Citizens may re-elect incumbents who have performed strongly and dismiss office holders who have performed poorly. Yet citizens are not always able to use elections to sanction in this way. For elections to work as an effective sanctioning tool, citizens must be able to attribute responsibility for policy performance accurately and those attributions must inform voting behaviour. In many settings, fulfilling these requirements asks a great deal of citizens. They must be able to identify which governmental institutions are responsible for specific policy areas and which party(s) holds power within those institutions; citizens must also be informed sufficiently to be able to evaluate policy performance at least at a rudimentary level and they must vote on the basis of these evaluations. Citizens are unable to use elections to hold those in power responsible for their record if they fail to identify who deserves the credit or blame for policy outcomes and/or fail to take government performance into account when voting.

Two main sets of considerations relating to responsibility attributions weaken retrospective voting. First, institutional factors can make the task of attributing responsibility difficult for citizens. The dispersion of powers between levels of government in multi-level settings, and the sharing of power between governing parties in multi-party settings, present challenges. Second, due to individual-level factors, many citizens do not draw on their attributions when deciding how to vote even if they attribute responsibility correctly. Some voters simply do not take into account which political actor is responsible for governmental performance when voting. Others do not in practice credit or blame the political actor to which they attribute responsibility; bias affects the process of translating functional responsibility (i.e. who is responsible) into causal responsibility (i.e. who is blamed) (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a; Hobolt

and Tilley, 2014b; Rico and Liñeira, 2017). Many voters, it appears, fail to use their vote to hold those in office to account.

The architects of devolution argued that creating an elected body, the National Assembly for Wales, would revitalize democracy in Wales by bringing government ‘closer to the people’ (HC Deb 22 July 1997, c757). The composition of government would be closely aligned with public preferences in Wales; accountability would be stronger since citizens would more easily be able to hold those in power responsible for government performance. However, politicians and commentators have long voiced concerns regarding the strength of accountability in devolved Wales. Concern centres on the issue of whether voters possess sufficient knowledge to make effective use of their vote at devolved elections. Devolution has not been undertaken in a way that makes it easy for citizens to understand the division of competences between Westminster and Wales. Constitutional change has been – and continues to be – a major feature of devolved politics in Wales. News coverage of devolution is of limited accuracy and consumption of news media created in Wales is low (Thomas et al., 2004; Cushion and Scully, 2016; BBCNews, 2012).<sup>1</sup> This suggests that citizens may find it difficult to identify which office holders should be rewarded or sanctioned come election day.

In this article we investigate the strength of accountability at devolved elections in Wales. Specifically, we examine three issues relating to responsibility attribution and voting behaviour: the extent to which Welsh voters attribute responsibility accurately, the factors

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<sup>1</sup> It is on the basis of these weaknesses in the media landscape that politicians and commentators have long voiced concerns regarding the strength of accountability in devolved Wales. Yet while limited news media consumption is a potential explanation for *why* there is an accountability deficit in Wales (if there is one), it does not provide a direct measure either of the degree to which people in Wales are (mis)informed or of the strength of electoral accountability in Wales.

linked to (in)accurate responsibility attributions, and whether attributions inform voting behaviour at devolved elections. This study adds a new dimension to our understanding of electoral behaviour in Wales: it provides new insights into the context in which voters develop political preferences and translate their evaluations of policy output into a vote choice at devolved elections. The study also advances understanding of the potential and pitfalls of decentralisation: it addresses the question of whether the UK's relatively new constitutional arrangements have led to a strengthening of the link between citizens and those in power in the context of the devolved nation which has the most limited public sphere.

The article is structured as follows. First, drawing on previous empirical studies, we discuss the factors that have been found to make the task of attributing responsibility more challenging for citizens, and develop a series of expectations relating to the Welsh context on the basis of these insights. Then, drawing on survey data from the 2016 Welsh Election Study (WES), we examine the extent to which voters in Wales attribute responsibility correctly and identify factors that are linked to voters' (in)ability to attribute responsibility correctly. The study subsequently explores whether responsibility attributions inform voting behaviour in a bid to identify whether the citizens in Wales use devolved elections to reward or punish those they *believe* are in power. The conclusion considers the implications of the findings for devolved elections in Wales, and for understanding electoral accountability in multi-level settings more generally.

## **1. Investigating Responsibility Attributions and Accountability**

How citizens attribute responsibility for policy outcomes plays a crucial role in determining whether elections serve as an effective sanctioning mechanism. According to the retrospective voting model, citizens use elections to reward or sanction those in power for their performance

in office (Fiorina, 1981); electoral accountability is strongest when there is a close link between performance evaluations and vote choice. Yet the retrospective voting model relies on the key assumption that citizens attribute responsibility for outcomes to the appropriate political actor(s) and draw on these attributions when deciding how to vote. Citizens must evaluate policy outcomes and sanction or reward those – and only those – who are responsible for the outcomes in question. In other words, to hold their elected office holders to account for their past performance citizens must engage in ‘attribution-sensitive retrospective performance based voting’ (Garry, 2014, p. 87). Citizens who misattribute responsibility are liable to reward or sanction the ‘wrong’ office holder; voters who fail to draw on their attributions when deciding how to vote do not engage in retrospective voting.

With these considerations in mind, scholars have examined whether and under what conditions citizens attribute responsibility accurately and draw on these attributions when voting. Several factors have been identified as making the task of attributing responsibility more challenging for citizens.

The complexity of the institutional environment has been identified as a major factor undermining citizens’ efforts to attribute responsibility. In systems of multi-level governance, responsibility is dispersed ‘vertically’ between institutions operating at different levels of governance, and citizens must identify at which level different functions are carried out. In addition to the increased information costs that citizens face in these settings, governments at different levels have an incentive to mislead citizens by shifting blame and taking credit (Anderson, 2006, p. 449). The difficulties for citizens are most acute in settings where power is shared between levels, along the lines of the marble cake model rather than the layer cake model of federalism (León, 2012; León and Orriols, 2016; Cutler, 2017). Several studies of

multi-level settings have demonstrated that citizens struggle to judge accurately which level of governance is responsible for various functions (Cutler, 2004; Gomez and Wilson, 2008; Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a). Even in settings where voters can attribute responsibility accurately, there is limited (Cutler, 2017) or no (Johns, 2011) evidence that citizens draw on these attributions when deciding how to vote. Evidence that responsibility judgments condition vote choice is restricted to highly salient issues (Arceneaux, 2006) and to highly motivated and knowledgeable voters (Arceneaux and Stein, 2006; Gomez and Wilson, 2008; Wilson and Hobolt, 2015). There is considerable evidence that governmental complexity weakens economic voting (Powell and Whitten, 1993; Anderson, 2006; Nadeau, Niemi, and Yoshinaka 2002). The link between responsibility attributions and vote choice is far clearer in unitary systems featuring single-party governments than in multi-level settings. The promise of decentralisation – that citizens find it easier to hold those in power to account – goes unfulfilled in many settings; politicians in multi-level settings appear to be ‘less, not more, accountable for their actions’ (Arceneaux, 2006: 731).

Considerations relating to the ‘horizontal’ division of power can also complicate the task of attributing responsibility. Factors such as the lack of voting unity within governmental parties, the presence of a bicameral opposition and a strong committee system have the effect of dispersing power at a particular level of governance and reduces governmental clarity (Powell and Whitten 1993; see also Nadeau, Niemi, Yoshinaka, 2002). In multi-party systems, power is often shared horizontally between parties forming a coalition government. In such settings, citizens must not only identify which level of government is responsible for a given policy outcome and which parties are in government at that level, but they must also identify which of the governing parties bears principal responsibility for performance in that area (Fisher and Hobolt, 2010). Many citizens fail at these tasks (Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013). Citizens

under multi-party governments find it more difficult to hold those in power to account: retrospective voting is less prevalent in systems with coalition governments than in two-party systems which feature a clearer divide between government and opposition (Fisher and Hobolt, 2010).

Bias can lead citizens to misattribute responsibility. It can also lead citizens to identify one political actor as responsible for governmental performance in a given area (functional responsibility) yet to credit or blame another actor for those outcomes (causal responsibility) (Arceneaux, 2006). Predispositions, most notably partisanship, can act as a ‘perceptual screen’ which conditions how citizens evaluate outcomes and assign responsibility for those outcomes. Party supporters tend to credit their party for policy successes while shifting blame away for policy failures (Bartels, 2002; Rudolph 2006; Marsh and Tilley, 2010; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011). Constitutional preference is another factor that can lead voters to engage in motivated responsibility attribution. Hobolt and Tilley find that ‘EU supporters are more likely to claim responsibility for the EU when things are going well and less likely to say that the EU is responsible when things are going badly’ (2014a, p. 6). Johns (2011, p. 66) finds that those who are supportive of Scottish independence are much more likely to (correctly) attribute responsibility for health to the Scottish government. It is clear that several sources of bias impedes voters’ efforts at assigning responsibility and blame.

Political knowledge is another individual-level factor which shapes responsibility judgments. Most citizens know relatively little about politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996), and this can make the task of attributing responsibility difficult. Political knowledge is shaped by the quantity and nature of information consumed by individuals. Citizens require information about the institutional environment and about policy outcomes to attribute responsibility

accurately and to follow through on these attributions when voting (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014: 18). Those with limited political knowledge tend to draw on cues when making political decisions. While these can sometimes be successfully used (Sniderman et al. 1991; Lupia, 1994), they often mislead citizens, especially when used to help determine complex issues (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a, p. 17; Johns, 2011, p. 57).

Media consumption can assist citizens to attribute responsibility, but it can also be a hindrance; media reports can be inaccurate or misleading, or they can prompt individuals to draw on their biases (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a, ch. 5; Maestas et al., 2008). Reflecting this, empirical findings relating to the effect of media consumption on responsibility attributions in multi-level settings are mixed. Johns (2011, p. 66) finds that reading newspapers leads Scottish voters to misattribute devolved responsibilities to the UK level and suggests that this may be explained by the focus placed by the press on Westminster politics. Hobolt and Tilley (2014a, chs. 5–6) find that the media rarely assign credit or blame to the EU for policy outcomes and that media consumption does not have a general effect on the accuracy of responsibility judgments relating to the EU. Cutler (2017) finds that judgments are more accurate when the media clearly attributes responsibility for the issue in question to a particular level. The key, according to Cutler, is that ‘the media are structured to provide separate reporting of each government’s actions’ (Cutler, 2017, p. 18).<sup>2</sup>

This section has drawn on the increasingly voluminous literature on responsibility attributions to show that citizens often find it difficult to identify which political actor is responsible for governmental outcomes. Institutional complexity, bias, and limited access to reliable

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<sup>2</sup> Note also that Fortunato and Stevenson (2013) find some evidence that Dutch voters are better able to identify parties in government if they consume news media.

information hinder citizens' efforts to attribute responsibility and consequently limit the public's ability to hold those in power to account. The following section applies the literature's findings to the context of devolved elections in Wales, and draws up a set of expectations regarding electoral accountability in that setting.

## **2. Case and data**

There are grounds for expecting people in Wales to find the task of attributing responsibility particularly challenging. Many of the factors identified by the literature as making the task of attributing responsibility more onerous for citizens, apply in Wales.

It is likely that public understanding of devolution in Wales has been hampered by complexities relating to the vertical division of powers. The task of working out the division of competences may not have held great appeal to citizens at the outset, since the devolved institutions were initially given weak powers in a limited range of policy areas. While the devolved institutions received some budgetary powers and the right to enact secondary legislation in 20 subject areas (including health and education) in 1999, they were not granted tax-raising powers or the right to create primary legislation. Competences in devolved areas were therefore shared between Cardiff and London at this time, with arrangements resembling a marble cake model of federalism rather than the layer cake model that citizens find easier to understand.

Public understanding of devolution may not have improved over time. Devolved powers have been modified several times since 1999, and it is reasonable to expect that this has led to confusion. The first constitutional revision took the form of the Government of Wales (2006) Act. This Act introduced the Legislative Competence Order system, whereby the devolved institutions could ask the UK Parliament for permission to make primary legislation relating to

strictly defined issues. The power to make primary legislation in all 20 subject areas devolved to Wales was granted in 2011, following a lacklustre referendum which did little to educate the Welsh public (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2012). Two successive Wales Acts in 2014 and 2017 revised constitutional arrangements further. Both augmented devolved powers in limited ways, while the latter granted limited tax raising powers for the first time. Collectively, these changes have seen a partial move away from a shared competences model towards an arrangement that more closely resembles the simpler layer cake model of federalism. However, we can expect that the frequency, complexity and low-key nature of reforms has made it difficult for the public to grasp where responsibility lies.

Governmental incongruence and intergovernmental conflict between administrations in Cardiff and London since 2010 may have further obscured the lines of responsibility. The post-2010 period has seen open conflict between administrations at the two levels on issues such as government spending levels, the scope of devolved competences, and Brexit. There has been plenty of scope for the Welsh Government to seek to shift blame onto the national level (Scully and Larner, 2016, p. 512), given the UK government's austerity agenda and the fact that the overall size of the devolved budget is strongly linked to the UK government's spending decisions. To complicate matters further, recent years have seen election campaigning on issues that do not relate to the same level of governance as the election in question. State-wide parties have used events held in Wales during UK general election campaigns to discuss publicly salient devolved issues (BBC News, 2017), and discussion of issues reserved to the UK level (such as EU membership and immigration) have taken place during devolved elections in Wales (Morris, 2016).

Ambiguities relating to the horizontal division of powers between devolved institutions may also have hindered efforts to attribute responsibility. The National Assembly for Wales was initially established as a corporate body, with no legal separation of power between a legislative and an executive body, and with the institution as a whole responsible for all decisions. A *de facto* shift occurred in the early years of the Assembly, and the Government of Wales (2006) Act formalized the separation of powers between the legislature (the National Assembly for Wales) and the executive (the Welsh Government). The decision at the time of the separation to name the executive ‘The Welsh Assembly Government’ did little to serve the interests of clarity. These teething problems have left a problematic legacy: despite these changes to the division of powers, it is not uncommon to hear citizens blame the devolved legislature rather than the devolved executive for governmental performance.

The horizontal division of power between parties is less clearly problematic. Labour has governed throughout the devolved period, either alone (1999–2000; 2003–7; 2011–16) or as the major coalition partner with the Liberal Democrats (2000–2003 and since 2016) and Plaid Cymru (2007–11). This continuity should make it easier for citizens to identify at least which party leads the government. This is significant because voters tend to credit or blame the senior coalition partner for outcomes (Fisher and Hobolt, 2010; Duch et al., 2015). Nevertheless, with coalition governments commonplace and Labour’s choice of coalition partner having oscillated between the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru in the past, citizens may struggle to identify the exact partisan composition of the government.

Patterns of media generation and consumption do, however, provide grounds for concern regarding the ability of citizens to attribute responsibility on issues relating to devolved governance. Few people consume news created in Wales (Cushion and Scully, 2016), and

coverage of devolved politics in Wales by the London-based news media (widely consumed in Wales) is limited (Scully and Lerner, 2016: 511–12) and sometimes of poor accuracy (BBC Trust, 2008). The Westminster-centricity of UK-wide news coverage may give a misleading impression of which level of government and which parties are responsible for governmental performance in Wales. The limited consumption of indigenous news media leads us to expect that attributions are less accurate and play a more limited role in electoral behaviour in Wales than in settings where the media landscape is stronger.

In the remainder of this article we draw on data from the 2016 Welsh Election Study (WES) to identify whether citizens in Wales are able to attribute responsibility accurately, which factors are linked to their (in)ability to do so, and whether voters draw on these attributions when casting their ballot. WES is a three-wave panel survey conducted online by YouGov around the time of the devolved election, held on 5 May 2016. The pre-election wave was conducted between 7 and 18 March 2016, the election wave was conducted between 5 April and 4 May 2016, and the post-election wave was conducted between 6 and 22 May 2016. A total of 2,115 responded to all three waves, while 3,272 individuals responded to the first and largest wave. Survey weights have been applied in the analysis that follows.

### **3. Exploring attributions of responsibility in devolved Wales**

To what extent are people in Wales able to attribute political responsibility accurately? We investigate this issue by examining whether citizens can identify two issues: which level of government has responsibility for key policy areas, and the partisan composition of the Welsh Government in the period leading up to the 2016 election.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This section draws on Wave 2.

Before presenting the findings, it is worth noting that more than half of respondents (61.8%) agreed with the statement that ‘it is often difficult to figure out which level of government is responsible for what’. More than a third (36.9%) stated that the election campaign had provided them with insufficient information ‘to make an informed choice’. This provides an initial cause for concern about the state of affairs in Wales, given that this wave of the survey was conducted in the days leading up to election.

At the aggregate level, respondents correctly attributed responsibility for major policy areas. As can be seen in Table 1, the majority of respondents identified that responsibility for the two key devolved policy areas, health (64.4%) and education (58.6%), lies with the Welsh Government, and that responsibility for foreign policy (77.5%) and taxation (78.1%) lies at the UK level. There is much confusion regarding whether responsibility for law and order has been devolved, although a plurality (47.5%) correctly ascribed responsibility for this to the UK level. Despite the fairly positive general trend, a considerable proportion of the Welsh electorate – well over a third – is unaware that health (35.6%) and education (41.4%) are devolved competences. This is despite the fact that the Welsh Government spends almost half of its entire budget on health and that education is its third largest budgetary item (Welsh Government, 2017).<sup>4</sup>

[Table 1]

To ascertain whether citizens could identify the partisan composition of the Welsh Government during the term leading up to the election, respondents were asked ‘As far as you are aware,

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, knowledge levels were slightly lower on each measure when similar questions were asked a few weeks following the election in Wave 3 (other than in the case of foreign policy, for which there is no survey item in Wave 3). See Supplementary Material.

which party or parties have had ministers in the Welsh Government between 2011 and now?’ Respondents could select as many parties as they wished, and had 30 seconds to answer the question. The ‘don’t know’ option was available.

Only around 1 in 6 (16.0%) could identify that Labour governed alone in the period leading up to the 2016 election. More than a third of respondents (39.4%) were unaware that Labour – the long-time dominant party in Wales – was in government at all. While nearly half of respondents (44.6%) identified Labour as a party of government in Wales, it appears that many citizens were confused about the partisan composition of the Welsh Government and/or were under the impression that it comprised of multiple parties: 45.7% believed that a coalition government was in power at the devolved level in Wales at a time of single party government.

[Table 2]

The findings obtained so far present a bleak picture. While many citizens in Wales were able to identify that responsibilities for key policy areas are devolved, a large minority could not. Even more alarming is the finding that the overwhelming majority of citizens in Wales could not identify the partisan composition of the single-party government. The findings suggest that a vast proportion of citizens in Wales do not have the knowledge required to hold those in power at the devolved level to account.

#### **4. Explaining attributions of responsibility in devolved Wales**

The findings presented above suggest that there is at least some, and potentially considerable, variation in citizens’ understanding of devolution. It appears that while some may have sufficient information to evaluate the performance of office holders, others may not possess the information necessary to evaluate incumbents when deciding how to vote. With this in

mind, the next task is to identify which factors are linked with citizens' (in)ability to attribute responsibility correctly. This helps us to understand whether certain groups are in a stronger position than others to use elections as an accountability mechanism, and as a result whether electoral accountability is exercised only by distinct sections of the population.

To this end, we report findings from a series of multivariate models that explore the predictors of knowledge of devolved politics (Table 3). We constructed four dependent variables. The first pair is based on additive scores relating to knowledge of devolved competences and the second pair is based on additive scores relating to knowledge of the partisan composition of the Welsh Government. For the dependent variable used in Model 1, each respondent was awarded a point for each correct answer to the question 'which level of government is mainly responsible for the following policy areas?': health, education, law and order, foreign policy, and taxation. The minimum score is zero and the maximum is five. The dependent variable used in Model 2 only draws on responses to the health and education survey items, with scores ranging from zero to two. Since these are two key devolved issues, the ability to attribute responsibility accurately in relation to these issues is a crucial indicator of how well respondents know which issues lie within the remit of devolved decision-makers. Model 3 takes a binary dependent variable, which indicates whether the respondent was aware that Labour was in government alone. Model 4 examines whether there are systematic differences between those who believed that Labour was in power alone, those who believe that Labour governed in coalition, and those that did not identify Labour as a governing party. The dependent variable divides respondents into three categories: those who identify Labour as governing alone score 2; those who identify Labour as being in government as part of a coalition score 1; and those who failed to identify Labour as a governing party score zero. The two pairs of models presented in this section operate at two levels of stringency, with Models

1 and 3 providing more demanding tests of respondents than Models 2 and 4. Since the dependent variables used in Models 1, 2, and 4 are counts, we estimate Poisson regressions. Model 3 presents a logistic regression, since the dependent variable (which identifies whether the respondent knew that Labour governed alone) is binary.<sup>5</sup>

We include three sets of independent variables, and the specification of the four models are identical. The first set presents the standard socio-demographic variables: age<sup>6</sup>, whether children are present in the household, education level, gender, housing status, marital status, and social class. This provides a means of testing whether older, wealthier, married, better-educated citizens are more knowledgeable about politics in Wales as they are found to be in other settings. We also include an interaction between gender and living in a household without children to account for the difficulties respondents (and especially female respondents) who live in households with children may have in finding time to acquire information about politics.

The second set of independent variables relates to the experience of living in Wales and to issues of culture and identity. We include variables relating to the respondent's place of birth, Welsh language ability, and national identity, as is customary when exploring issues relating to public attitudes and participation in Wales (Scully and Wyn Jones, 2012). In light of findings that constitutional preferences are linked to attitudes and evaluations (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a; Johns, 2011), we also control for respondents' constitutional preferences.

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<sup>5</sup> For summary statistics, replication materials, and detailed descriptions of all variables and their WES codes, see Supplementary Material.

<sup>6</sup> We include both a squared and a cubed term for respondent age to account for potential differences across age groups and the likely non-linear relationship between age and political knowledge.

The third set of predictors focus on political interest, engagement and outlook. Inclusion of the self-reported measure of political interest enables us to examine whether those with greater interest in politics assign responsibility more accurately. Such a finding would suggest that more needs to be done not only to educate citizens about politics, but also to generate interest in devolved politics among the public. The dummy variable ‘Welsh media consumption’ indicates whether the respondent consumes any TV, radio, or print news media created in Wales.<sup>7</sup> This provides a means of examining whether knowledge levels are higher among those who source at least some news from Welsh sources. A self-reported measure of respondents’ likelihood to vote is included to test whether better-informed citizens are more likely to vote. We include a series of party identification dummy variables, and a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was contacted by any party during the election campaign up until the point at which the survey was administered.

On the whole, the findings belie our expectations that several factors are linked with higher knowledge levels. The only variables for which there is a clear effect on knowledge levels across all four models relate to interest in politics and propensity to vote in devolved elections. Those reporting a higher level of interest in politics and those who claim they are more likely to vote assign responsibility more accurately, both in terms of the division of competences and the partisan composition of the Welsh Government. In contrast to findings obtained in Northern Ireland (Garry, 2014), we find that those who know less about devolved politics are less likely to vote at devolved elections.

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<sup>7</sup> This does not take into account any online news media generated in Wales since the survey data does not enable us to create a reliable measure in relation to this issue.

There is no indication that socio-demographic factors such as age, housing status, or children in the household has an affect on the accuracy of attributions. Those who have been educated to university level are no more likely to be able to identify the division of competences between the UK and the devolved levels; however, they are more likely to be able to identify that Labour was in government, and that Labour governed alone. Reflecting the widespread finding that women are less knowledgeable about politics than men (Dolan, 2011), Models 3 and 4 identify that women are less likely than men to identify that Labour was in government, and that it governed alone. However, the findings do not suggest that women are less likely to correctly assign policy responsibility. The attributions of women who do not live in a household with children are just as accurate as those of men. Model 1 and Model 3 suggest that married people and those with partners were less likely to be able to assign responsibility correctly, although Models 2 and 4 do not identify a similar trend.

In terms of the variables relating to identity and the experience of living in Wales, those who speak at least some Welsh are no more knowledgeable than non-Welsh speakers. In contrast to Hobolt and Tilley (2014a) and Johns' (2011) findings in other multi-level contexts, we identify no link between respondents' preferred constitutional status and their ability to assign responsibility correctly. While Model 3 indicates that those who have a stronger Welsh identity are more likely to identify that Labour governed alone than British identifiers, none of the other three models indicate that there is any meaningful differences between respondents from these two categories. Those born in Wales are no more likely to assign policy competence correctly than those who have moved to Wales later in life. However, interestingly, those who were born outside Wales are more likely to be able to identify that Labour was in government, and that Labour governed alone, than respondents who were born in Wales. This finding is unexpected and may be explained by the fact that the differences between Wales and the rest of the UK

may be more starkly noticeable for those who have lived both in Wales and in other parts of the UK.

A highly noteworthy finding is that consumption of any news media generated in Wales has no effect on the accuracy of attributions, in contrast to findings obtained in other settings (Cutler, 2017; Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013). This presents a challenge to the claim that the main cause of the limited awareness of devolved governance in Wales is the low consumption of indigenous Welsh news media. The finding that those who consume Welsh media are no more knowledgeable about devolution than those who do not suggests that knowledge levels would change little even if more people were to consume indigenous Welsh news media.

There is no evidence that those who identify with any of the six parties examined are better able to identify the partisan composition of the WG than non-identifiers. Conservative and Plaid voters are more likely to accurately attribute responsibility for policy competences, and there is inconsistent evidence that the same applies for Liberal Democrat voters. Model 1 indicates that those who were contacted by any party are more likely to attribute responsibility for policy competences more accurately, although that pattern does not emerge in Model 2 (which specifically deals with two key devolved areas). There is no indication that those who have been contacted by a political party during the campaign are better placed to identify the partisan composition of the WG. This may suggest that parties are not doing enough during the election campaign to inform the public of which party (or parties) is responsible for policy performance.

If the solution to the problem identified in the previous section – limited knowledge – is to take steps to improve public understanding of devolution, the findings presented in this section

provide no clear solution as to where such efforts should be targeted. Few groups within the population are identified as being less knowledgeable than others. The main pattern identified is that those with a greater interest in politics and those who are more likely to vote are more knowledgeable. This suggests that it is those who are most difficult to reach (i.e. those who are least interested in politics) are those that need reaching the most. It also indicates that those who are less politically engaged are not only less likely to vote, but also less likely to be able to use their vote well. Finally, the findings suggest that increasing the consumption of news media created in Wales may not be as effective a strategy to improve public understanding of devolution as many claim.

[Table 3]

## **5. Responsibility attributions and electoral behaviour in Wales**

So far we have examined one specific aspect of the health of electoral accountability in Wales: whether citizens possess sufficient information to hold those in power to account. In this section we examine a separate aspect: whether voters in Wales use their vote to punish or reward those they believe are in power, even if they are operating on the basis of inaccurate information. In other words, we examine whether responsibility attributions have a moderating effect on vote choice, taking into account who the voter believes had been in power. If retrospective voting operates in Wales, the problem is solely one of knowledge, and the remedy must focus on increasing public awareness of devolution. However, if performance evaluations do not shape electoral behaviour, then devolved elections in Wales are undermined by a dual problem: that citizens have neither the information nor the inclination to use their ballot to hold those in power to account.

We examine this issue in two ways. First, we consider whether voters engage in retrospective voting by rewarding or punishing those they believe are in government on the basis of performance evaluations. This provides a means of testing whether voters may still attempt to vote retrospectively, but reward or sanction the incorrect party (Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013). Second, we examine whether the most knowledgeable voters – those who could identify that Labour governend alone – vote retrospectively.

The two logistic regression models reported in Table 4 take dependent variables that are based on actual constituency vote choice, and are estimated on the sample of respondents who voted.<sup>8</sup> The dependent variable used in Model 1 is a binary variable which identifies whether the respondent voted for one of the parties that they thought had been in government in Wales during the previous term. Model 1 is specified in the same way as the models presented in Section 2, apart from the addition of two independent variables which account for respondents' performance evaluation of health and education. The respondents were asked if they thought the standard of healthcare in the NHS and the standard of education had fallen, with higher scores indicating that the respondent thought that the standard had fallen. These are the two variables that are of key interest for us: a positive and statistically significant effect would indicate that citizens draw on performance evaluations when deciding how to vote. For Model 2, a binary dependent variable which identifies whether the respondent voted for Labour or for any of the other parties is used. The model is specified as Model 1, with three additions: a dummy variable indicating knowledge of Labour being in government at all, and interaction terms between this knowledge variable and policy assessments in health and education. We are particularly interested in whether there is an interaction between being aware that Labour

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<sup>8</sup> These variables are taken from the post-election wave of WES (Wave 3), and standard survey weights are applied. The exclusion of non-voters and between-wave attrition account for the smaller sample size than that used in the previous section.

governed alone and evaluations of health and/or education. An interaction would indicate that the best-informed citizens draw on performance evaluations when deciding how to vote; the converse finding would indicate that even the best-informed citizens do not vote retrospectively.

[Table 4]

The key finding that emerges from these models is that retrospective voting is not a discernible feature of electoral behaviour in Wales, at least not in relation to the two key devolved issues of health and education. Voters in Wales do not draw on their evaluations of government performance in these two policy areas when voting, and cast their ballots to sanction or reward those they believe are in government. The typical voter is just as likely to vote for a governing party whether or not they approve of the government's record on health and education. Even more knowledgeable voters, those who can identify that Labour governed alone, do not vote retrospectively. These voters, again, are just as likely to vote for or against Labour regardless of what they think about the government's performance in these two key policy areas.

## **6. Conclusion**

A key rationale for creating elected institutions at the devolved level in Wales in 1999 was to strengthen accountability. Yet claims that there remains an accountability deficit in Wales remain prevalent. This study has explored the state of electoral accountability at the devolved level in Wales. We structured the investigation to reflect the notion that to use elections as a sanctioning mechanism citizens must be able to assign responsibility accurately and must vote retrospectively. We examined whether citizens can identify the key competences of devolved

policy-makers, what factors underpin their ability to do so, and whether voters draw on their evaluations of governmental performance when voting.

Our findings are as alarming as they are consistent. A surprisingly large proportion of citizens in Wales do not possess basic knowledge of devolved governance. A substantial minority are unable to identify key devolved policy areas, while the overwhelming majority cannot accurately identify the composition of the government. Since few groups are identified as being less knowledgeable than others, it will take more to address these problems than simply targeting specific groups within the population. It is the least engaged politically that find the task of attributing responsibility most challenging, and this group may be the hardest to reach. Crucially, Welsh voters do not appear to draw on their evaluations of government performance when voting. Voters are just as willing to vote for a party they believe are in government regardless of whether they are satisfied with government performance. Even more knowledgeable voters, those who can identify the partisan composition of the government, do not vote retrospectively. In short, there is an acute accountability deficit at the devolved level in Wales. It stems from a twin problem: many citizens do not have the information required to hold those in power to account, and many do not use their vote to sanction poor performance. Retrospective voting is not a discernible feature of electoral behaviour in Wales.

Beyond the study of electoral politics in Wales, the finding that Welsh elections fail to serve as a strong accountability mechanism has implications for understanding the pitfalls of decentralisation. Creating elected sub-state institutions will not automatically give rise to a healthy new democracy, in which there is a strong connection between governors and the governed. Accountability requires an attentive and an engaged public; it requires citizens who are ready to act on their evaluations of government performance by sanctioning or rewarding

those in power on election day. Establishing elected institutions does not guarantee that democracy will flourish, especially if citizens are unwilling to use elections as an accountability mechanism.

This study also provides significant insights for scholars working on issues relating to responsibility attributions and multi-level governance. Exploring new terrain, we have identified another sub-state setting in which citizens struggle to attribute responsibility accurately and in which attributions do not moderate the effect of policy evaluations on vote choice. Our finding that knowledge of the partisan composition of government is extremely limited in Wales serves as a reminder (Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013) that scholars should not take for granted that citizens know which party or parties are in government, even in settings featuring single-party governments. The study provides further evidence that consumption of relevant news media does not always facilitate understanding of governance (cf. Hobolt and Tilley, 2014a; Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013; Cutler, 2017). Further work is required to identify how the institutional context, the focus of the media, and the nature of elections shape the ability of citizens to attribute responsibility.

**Table 1: Policy responsibility attributions (Wave 2, pre-election)**

<i>Statistic</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>Wales</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>DK</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Health</i>	18.1%	64.4%	2.4%	18.1%	2,277
<i>Education</i>	13.6%	58.6%	10.6%	17.2%	2,277
<i>Law and order</i>	47.4%	29.3%	4.5%	18.8%	2,277
<i>Foreign policy</i>	77.5%	1.9%	5.4%	15.2%	2,277
<i>Taxation</i>	78.1%	3.9%	2.8%	15.1%	2,277

**Table 2: Respondents' identification of parties in government and government composition in Wales.**

Parties with ministers in government	
Conservatives	34.0%
Green Party	5.8%
Labour	60.8%
Liberal Democrats	24.3%
Plaid Cymru	41.4%
UKIP	4.1%
Don't know	28.8%

-	
Labour in government alone	16.0%
Labour in government, but in coalition	44.6%
Some form of coalition <sup>9</sup>	45.7%
N	2277

**Table 3: Modelling political knowledge**

	Dependent variable:			
	Knowledge of division of competences	Knowledge of devolved competences	Knowledge that Labour governed alone	Knowledge that Labour governed (alone or in coalition)
	Poisson	Poisson	logistic	Poisson
	1	2	3	4
Age	-0.011 (0.024)	-0.055 (0.039)	0.020 (0.118)	0.028 (0.049)
Age (sq)	0.0005 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	-0.0004 (0.002)	-0.0004 (0.001)
Age (cubed)	-0.00000 (0.00000)	-0.00001* (0.00001)	0.00000 (0.00002)	0.00000 (0.00001)
AB	0.055 (0.040)	0.028 (0.064)	0.145 (0.206)	0.084 (0.082)
C1	-0.020 (0.037)	-0.034 (0.060)	0.267 (0.190)	0.090 (0.076)
C2	-0.010 (0.041)	-0.019 (0.067)	-0.003 (0.223)	0.090 (0.086)
Homeowner	0.041 (0.036)	0.077 (0.059)	-0.006 (0.183)	0.055 (0.074)
Higher education	0.021 (0.029)	0.055 (0.047)	0.410*** (0.149)	0.161*** (0.059)
Married or partnered	-0.050* (0.030)	-0.034 (0.049)	-0.326** (0.155)	-0.084 (0.062)

<sup>9</sup> Any type of coalition – regardless of whether Labour is included.

Woman	-0.057 (0.064)	0.050 (0.104)	-1.010*** (0.347)	-0.362*** (0.132)
No children in household	0.099** (0.049)	0.114 (0.082)	0.012 (0.229)	-0.007 (0.095)
Born in Wales	0.017 (0.035)	-0.017 (0.056)	-0.321* (0.175)	-0.109 (0.070)
Welsh lang. ability	0.016 (0.024)	0.026 (0.039)	0.046 (0.122)	0.060 (0.049)
More British than Welsh	0.003 (0.004)	0.002 (0.006)	-0.030* (0.018)	-0.009 (0.007)
Wales: pref. constitutional status	0.001 (0.001)	0.0003 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.001)
Greens (id)	0.065 (0.083)	0.141 (0.133)	-0.667 (0.477)	-0.029 (0.172)
UKIP (id)	-0.020 (0.055)	0.004 (0.091)	-0.248 (0.285)	-0.117 (0.116)
Plaid Cymru (id)	0.085 (0.056)	0.147 (0.090)	-0.271 (0.284)	-0.057 (0.114)
LibDem (id)	0.132** (0.064)	0.143 (0.105)	-0.112 (0.335)	0.022 (0.133)
Labour (id)	0.037 (0.040)	0.053 (0.066)	-0.029 (0.199)	0.044 (0.081)
Conservative (id)	0.079* (0.043)	0.159** (0.070)	-0.184 (0.223)	0.009 (0.089)
Any Welsh media consumed	0.009 (0.029)	0.041 (0.048)	0.058 (0.150)	0.005 (0.060)
Interest in politics	0.082*** (0.018)	0.087*** (0.030)	0.234** (0.096)	0.151*** (0.038)
Contacted by any party	0.025 (0.028)	0.059 (0.045)	0.296** (0.142)	0.114** (0.057)
Likely to vote	0.026*** (0.006)	0.027*** (0.009)	0.089*** (0.032)	0.070*** (0.013)
Woman*No children in household	-0.015 (0.070)	-0.106 (0.114)	0.127 (0.379)	0.137 (0.145)

Constant	0.966*** (0.373)	0.548 (0.602)	-1.791 (1.822)	-1.078 (0.765)
Observations	1,781	1,781	1,781	1,781
Log Likelihood	-2,886.22	-2,062.01	-616.858	-1,682.44
Akaike Inf. Crit.	5,826.45	4,178.01	1,287.72	3,418.89

**Table 4: Modelling political accountability**

	Dependent variable:	
	Vote for party respondent thought was in government	Voted Labour (incumbent)
	1	2
Age	0.232 (0.166)	0.444** (0.207)
Age (sq)	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.008* (0.004)
Age (cubed)	0.00002 (0.00002)	0.00004 (0.00003)
AB	-0.042 (0.294)	0.579 (0.371)
C1	-0.079 (0.270)	-0.274 (0.344)
C2	-0.024 (0.306)	-0.105 (0.393)
Homeowner	0.608** (0.268)	-0.567 (0.347)
Higher education	0.415** (0.209)	-0.026 (0.274)
Married or partnered	0.054 (0.231)	0.228 (0.295)
Woman	0.082 (0.202)	-0.177 (0.263)
No children in household	0.382 (0.281)	-0.113 (0.354)
Born in Wales	-0.046 (0.250)	-0.306 (0.336)
Welsh lang. ability	0.073 (0.171)	0.170 (0.223)
More British than Welsh	-0.015 (0.025)	-0.045 (0.034)
Wales: pref. constitutional status	0.007* (0.004)	-0.001 (0.005)

Greens (id)	1.605 (1.033)	1.157 (0.889)
UKIP (id)	-2.000*** (0.630)	-2.530** (1.061)
Plaid Cymru (id)	0.345 (0.371)	-2.223*** (0.570)
LibDem (id)	0.312 (0.432)	-0.666 (0.538)
Labour (id)	1.300*** (0.306)	2.647*** (0.345)
Conservative (id)	0.340 (0.340)	-1.169** (0.463)
Any Welsh media consumed	0.249 (0.222)	-0.557* (0.29)
Interest in politics	0.059 (0.134)	0.136 (0.181)
Contacted by any party	0.050 (0.201)	-0.099 (0.262)
Likely to vote	0.242*** (0.074)	0.026 (0.103)
NHS: standard fallen	-0.223 (0.145)	0.029 (0.464)
Education: standard fallen	-0.076 (0.153)	-0.201 (0.454)
Knowledge of Labour in gov.		1.121 (1.198)
Knowledge of Labour in gov. * NHS: standard fallen		-0.400 (0.503)
Knowledge of Labour in gov. * Education: standard fallen		-0.145 (0.498)
Constant	-6.190** (2.719)	-7.271** (3.419)
Observations	754	754
Log Likelihood	-306.465	-205.995
Akaike Inf. Crit.	668.929	473.99
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

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