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# FOR WALES, DO NOT SEE ENGLAND? AN ANALYSIS OF THE 2017 GENERAL ELECTION

## **Abstract**

This paper analyses the 2017 UK General Election from the perspective of the campaign and results in Wales, a nation which had the most interesting election campaign of all the different nations. The election saw a stark contrast between the way the two principal UK-wide parties fought their campaigns and how the campaign impacted on results. Drawing on data from a post-election survey conducted in June 2017, we consider the factors that shape voter choice which affected the outcome of the election in Wales. We argue that the election internalised and reflected a new pattern of party politics that is likely to stimulate differential election outcomes across the UK; this requires a different approach to understanding election campaigns, one that differentiates between the nations and how every political party operates in each territory. This will help distinguish different political and electoral fault lines , as well as constructing a more granular analysis of the campaign impact on electoral outcomes. We conclude that, to better and more comprehensively explain UK-wide elections, there is a need to provide distinctive national and regional analysis and it is mistaken to assume the same patterns will always exist in Wales as in England.

Wales, 2017 General Election, Conservatives, Labour, Devolution, voting

## **Background**

*“It’s not easy being a Professor of Politics. Everyone expects me to know what’s going on and what’s likely to happen. But I’m just as bamboozled as everyone else by the outcome of the UK’s recent general election. ” (Matt Flinders, Sheffield University).*

2017 was the general election that should never have happened. Under the 2011 Fixed Term Parliament Act, and following the general election of May 2015, another election was not due until 2020. Moreover, since she entered Downing Street in summer 2016, Prime Minister Theresa May had repeatedly

asserted that there would not be an early general election.<sup>1</sup> Yet there was a clear rationale to her change of mind. Securing a mandate to negotiate the UK's departure from the European Union, following the 2016 referendum, provided the Prime Minister with a clear pretext for an early poll. And her commanding opinion poll lead over a divided and fractious Labour party, led by an unpopular leader suggested that May would win a large parliamentary majority.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, it was not only the calling of the election that proved a shock. Much collective political and psephological wisdom about general elections, grounded in decades of research, appeared to be overturned in one fell swoop. The idea that the formal campaign period rarely sees significant swings in party support (Wlezien, 2016); that British politics was on a long-term trend away from two-party politics towards a more pluralist, multi-party model; that Labour never performs well in an election when led from the ideological left; and that a divided party without clear, widespread support for its leader never prospers during campaigns – each of these apparent truisms were seriously challenged by the 2017 election.

The 2017 election was also extraordinary for what it revealed about the United Kingdom (UK) as a multi-national polity. For the second general election in a row (yet only the second time ever), four different parties came first (in both votes and seats) in the four nations that comprise the UK. In other respects too, the election appeared to point to the UK becoming a more politically *multi*-national space. In Northern Ireland, the parties with the closest links to the principal mainland parties (the UUP and SDLP) lost their last remaining representation in the House of Commons. In Scotland, the unionist parties made a significant comeback from the overwhelming SNP electoral tide of 2015, when the party had won 56 of the 59 Scottish seats. Yet, this unionist revival in Scotland was achieved via a campaign that was strikingly different from that run south of the border. In particular, the most successful unionist party, the Scottish Conservatives, ran a campaign heavily focused around its Scottish leader, Ruth Davidson (rather than Theresa May),

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<sup>1</sup> “There is no change in our position on an early general election. There is not going to be a general election.” (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-calls-election-times-she-said-there-would-be-no-snap-election-a7688471.html>)

<sup>2</sup> A summary of the position in the opinion polls at the time of the calling of the 2017 election is provided here: <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/archives/9834>.

and on the specific issue of opposition to a second Scottish independence referendum (Awan-Scully 2018, chapter 4). Even in England, the main parties all felt the need to bend to the emergence of a more distinct English political identity: the Conservative manifesto celebrated the recent introduction in the Commons of a form of English Votes for English Laws (Conservative Party 2017: 31), while Labour proposed appointing a minister for England (Labour Party, 2017: 103).

## **Methods and focus**

This paper is an analysis of the 2017 General Election. Its focus is Wales, which in some respects - and perhaps contrary to popular perception - had the most interesting election campaign of all the nations. Here, the election saw a stark contrast between the way the two principal UK-wide parties fought their campaigns. The principal difference was that the Conservatives fought a standardised, British-focused campaign, against a Labour party that heavily emphasised distinctive Welsh branding, policies and leadership. Here we examine the contrasting strategies of the Conservatives and Labour (with some analysis of the campaigns and results of the other parties). We then explore the relative success of the approaches taken by the two largest parties. Labour's ultimate election victory in Wales, after early polling had pointed to a defeat of historic proportions, suggests that its strongly "Welsh Labour" campaign proved highly effective. We investigate in detail whether this was actually the case. To do so, we draw upon detailed evidence from a post-election survey. We examine the patterns of voting behaviour: from which social and attitudinal groups did the main parties capture their electoral support? We then use this survey evidence to conduct a multivariate modelling of 2017 vote choice in Wales – exploring the extent to which UK-level or Welsh-level political considerations drove the electoral choices of voters in Wales.

Finally, we consider the implications of the election for future electoral and party politics in Wales and across the UK.

## **The 2017 election campaign in Wales**

### *The Background:*

The long-term historical background to the election in Wales was one of substantial and sustained one-party dominance. Labour success has long been the *leitmotif* of electoral politics in Wales. The Conservative party has

underperformed in terms of vote share (compared to its performance in England) at every general election in Wales since 1865. The converse of Conservative weakness has been successive hegemonies for the principal, non-Conservative parties: for the Liberals in the half-century preceding World War One, and nearly a century of Labour dominance subsequently. Prior to 2017, Labour had come first in Wales (in votes and seats won) at every one of the twenty-five preceding general elections, in a run that started in 1922.

Yet, whilst Wales has in some senses long been distinctive in its voting behaviour (Scully, 2016), and although it has enjoyed significant political autonomy under devolution from 1999 onwards, it also remains firmly within a British political space. In contrast to Scotland, support for Welsh independence has been consistently low, and whilst the issue has gained some traction since the EU referendum, it remains of low public salience at this point.<sup>3</sup> The majority of the Welsh population live within thirty miles of the 170-mile long open border with England, and a significant proportion of that population were born in England.<sup>4</sup> Wales also has a considerably weaker indigenous news media than in Scotland: most people in Wales consume their news about politics from sources edited in London (Scully and Cushion, 2016). All of this makes for a very different set of demographic and political influences in Wales.

In the 2015 general election, Labour had again topped the poll, winning the majority of Welsh seats. Yet, this was nonetheless a disappointing election for the party, in Wales as elsewhere in Britain. The gain of Cardiff Central from the hapless Liberal Democrats was offset by the unexpected, narrow loss of two seats (Gower and the Vale of Clwyd) to the Conservatives. Labour's total of 25 Welsh seats was its lowest since 1987,<sup>5</sup> while its Welsh vote share of 36.9 percent was the second lowest since 1918. It was the Conservatives, who gained three seats (and thus emerged with its highest number of Welsh seats since the Thatcherite high water-mark of 1983) who

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<sup>3</sup> On public support for Welsh independence, see, for instance <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsin-wales/2017/05/30/new-polling-on-welsh-independence/>.

<sup>4</sup> According to the 2011 Census, approximately 21 percent of the Welsh population were born in England. See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/2011censuskeystatisticsforwales/2012-12-11>

<sup>5</sup> We should also note that in 2015 Labour won 25 out of 40 Welsh parliamentary seats, whereas in 1987 their 24 came from a Welsh total of 38.

were happier. The biggest advance in terms of vote share in 2015, though, was UKIP – winning 13.6 percent of the Welsh vote, and saving their electoral deposit in every seat.<sup>6</sup> This success carried through to the following year’s election for the National Assembly for Wales, where UKIP won 7 seats on the PR-based regional lists to enter a devolved legislature for the first time.

Both the Conservatives and Labour saw their party vote shares fall substantially in the 2016 Assembly election from the previous contest, while the Liberal Democrats retained just a single seat and thus ceased to exist as an official recognised party in the Assembly. After only a modest advance in vote share in the 2015 general election, Plaid Cymru managed little better in the Assembly contest twelve months later – although party leader Leanne Wood, her profile boosted by her role in UK televised leaders’ debates in 2015, won a striking personal victory against the Labour cabinet minister, Leighton Andrews, to capture the constituency seat of Rhondda.

### ***THE CONSERVATIVE CAMPAIGN IN WALES:***

Wales was central to the 2017 general election being called - at least in the sense that, having insisted for months that there would be no early election, the Prime Minister apparently changed her mind during an Easter walking holiday in Snowdonia. In calling a snap election, a governing party should expect to strengthen its position in power. At the start of the election campaign, this looked like the safest of safe bets for the Conservatives. They began the campaign with a substantial, and long-sustained, opinion poll lead across Britain, over a main opposition party whose left-wing leader had been publicly opposed by most of his own MPs, was rated poorly by much of the public, and had so far shown little aptitude for party leadership. Jeremy Corbyn’s speech at the Welsh Labour spring conference in Llandudno had been markedly unimpressive, while around that conference, Labour MPs and Assembly Members openly disparaged him and talked down their own party’s future prospects.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The 2015 general election saw a stark contrast between Wales and Scotland, where every single UKIP candidate lost their deposit.

<sup>7</sup> Personal observation by one of the authors who was in the audience.

The potential for Conservative success was underlined by the first Welsh opinion poll of the election campaign, published the Monday after the election was called. It gave the Conservatives a wholly unprecedented, ten-point lead in Wales. On a uniform swing, the party were projected to gain ten seats directly from Labour.<sup>8</sup> Such a result would have seen the Conservatives winning a majority of Welsh seats for the first time since 1859, and inflicting upon Labour its first general election defeat in Wales since 1918. Further details of the poll made even better reading for the Conservatives.<sup>9</sup> Brexit was rated the most important issue in the election by the Welsh people – the majority of whom had, less than twelve months earlier, voted to leave the EU. The Conservatives were the most highly-rated party to handle Brexit. And the Prime Minister was the most popular politician in Wales – again, something unheard of for an English Conservative leader – with a substantial popularity advantage over Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn.

The Conservative campaign sought to press home this apparently decisive advantage for Prime Minister in her public standing over the Leader of the Opposition. There was little if any attempt at Welsh branding of the Conservative campaign. The Welsh Conservative manifesto looked very similar to the UK-wide document: even the colouring of the cover and the fonts used were identical, while the only difference in the titles was the addition of the text “a Stronger Wales”.<sup>10</sup> The party’s campaign launch in Wales was fronted by the Prime Minister herself rather than the party’s National Assembly leader, Andrew RT Davies, or Welsh Secretary, Alun Cairns. The launch also featured prominent mentions of the Conservatives’ key campaign theme of “strong and stable” leadership, which sought to emphasise the contrast between May and Corbyn. In short, the focus was all on the choice facing the UK as a whole, and a contest between the two main Britain-wide parties.

The site of the Conservative campaign launch in Wales was also telling. It was held in Bridgend: a seat that the Tories had last won in the 1983 general election. Yet this was a seat which the first Welsh opinion polls projected the

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<sup>8</sup> <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/2017/04/24/the-first-welsh-poll-of-the-general-election/>.

<sup>9</sup> <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/2017/04/27/1755/>.

<sup>10</sup> The Conservatives UK manifesto was entitled ‘Forward Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future’; the Welsh version simply added the words ‘a Stronger Wales’ immediately before ‘a Stronger Britain’.

Conservatives to gain. In addition, it was a high-profile constituency because it was represented in the National Assembly by the then First Minister, Labour's Carwyn Jones. Also, there had been controversy in the local Conservative association after an outside candidate had been imposed on the constituency. Nevertheless, for the Tories to capture this seat, particularly given Jones' prominent status in the Labour campaign (see below), would have been a highly symbolic victory.

So there was little obvious Welsh leadership apparent in the Conservative campaign. This seemed deliberate but also reflected Andrew RT Davies's low visibility and popularity with the Welsh public.<sup>11</sup> The first Welsh televised debate of the campaign saw his repetitive use of the Conservative mantra of "strong and stable leadership", attracting derisive heckling from the audience.<sup>12</sup> Yet, neither was Alun Cairns a commanding or particularly impressive Conservative representative. Indeed, after a public spat between Cairns and Davies about which of them should represent the Tories in the second Welsh televised debate, eventually neither did so, with the Conservative case being advanced (in the end, rather capably) by north Wales AM, Darren Millar. Overall however, while the Conservatives certainly campaigned *in* Wales, they did not have much of a distinctive Welsh campaign: their focus was on the UK-wide political scene, and on a binary choice between May and Corbyn for the next UK Prime Minister.

#### *The Labour Campaign in Wales:*

The contrast between the Conservative and Labour campaigns in Wales was dramatic and stark. Facing a UK-wide political context that, at the start of the election, looked extremely negative, Labour in Wales made every conceivable effort to emphasise its Welshness and through this prism, its distinctiveness from Corbyn and the UK party.

Labour's efforts in Wales were very evidently led by the First Minister. Carwyn Jones spoke for Labour in the Welsh television debates. He also featured prominently in all of Labour's Welsh Party Election Broadcasts – programmes in which there was not a single mention of Corbyn. Significantly, this approach represented a huge shift for Labour from the previous general

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/2017/04/27/1755/>.

<sup>12</sup> Personal observation by one of the authors who was in the audience.



election when Labour's main spokesperson in Wales, and its voice in television debates, had been the Shadow Welsh Secretary (and subsequent UK party leadership contender) Owen Smith – with Carwyn Jones a minor player. Now, despite not contesting the election, Jones was front and centre of the campaign.

The contrast with 2015, however, was about more than just leadership. Then Labour's Welsh manifesto had been a lightly "Welshed-up" version of the UK document. In 2017, it had a wholly different title from the UK version ("Standing Up For Wales", compared to "For the Many, Not the Few"), and a completely different cover design. The Welsh version featured a large photograph of Carwyn Jones on the front cover, and prominent use in a large font of the name "Welsh Labour/Llafur Cymru". The 2016 Assembly election, where they had lost only one seat, and the May 2017 Welsh local elections, where Labour losses had been much lower than expected, had shown that, even in difficult political times, the Welsh Labour brand still had appeal and not inconsiderable resilience. It was this that was now emphasised in all of the party's campaigning material. Even in the relatively anglicised, marginal constituency of Cardiff North, Labour campaigning material stressed a Welsh brand, identity and distinctiveness. Interestingly, especially for our analysis, Labour stuck with its heavy Welsh emphasis and branding even after the Britain-wide picture began to look less ominous as the campaign progressed.

#### *The other parties' campaigns in Wales:*

This paper focuses specifically on the two parties vying to form a UK government in an election that turned out to be very much two party dominated. Nevertheless, it is useful and necessary context to consider the other parties that contested the election. Given most attention was focused on the battle between Conservatives and Labour, all of the smaller parties unsurprisingly struggled to gain traction. In Wales, both Labour and Plaid Cymru sought to position themselves as defenders of Wales against a post-Brexit onslaught and a prospective Tory landslide. This could be interpreted as a rather odd approach for Labour, given that it had been in power in Cardiff for eighteen years, holding the levers for significant policy interventions in health, education, transport and housing. But it is important because it effectively crowded out Plaid Cymru, leaving the party struggling to craft a distinctive image and appeal. The early polls compounded this as they

indicated a Tory landslide which made it difficult for Plaid to suggest that they might be influential in a hung parliament. Its leader Leanne Wood remained popular with much of the Welsh public (as we discuss below), but, as in all previous UK elections, Plaid found it difficult to articulate convincing reasons for people in much of Wales to turn to a party that had little apparent prospect of influencing the make-up of the next UK government. The Plaid manifesto, entitled “Defending Wales: An Action Plan”, had a heavy Brexit focus with a mix of policies that were devolved and reserved.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, Plaid’s recent strategic focus has been trained on positioning itself as a potential party of government in Wales, continuing to find it difficult to make itself relevant in the context of UK-wide elections. This was particularly the case in 2017 when early polls suggested a tight battle between Labour and the Conservatives, with some suggesting that some Plaid voters switched to Labour to prevent a possible Tory victory.

The Liberal Democrats, as elsewhere, failed to appeal effectively to its target audience of remain voters. Their manifesto, "Change Wales's Future", focused on a second referendum on Brexit. Given their poor – and declining – British and Welsh polling performance, the party’s prospects were soon realistically limited to holding onto their one remaining Welsh seat, Ceredigion.

UKIP had seen its support plummet after the 2016 EU referendum. Meanwhile, the UKIP Assembly group had done little to generate positive profile for the party, being in a perpetual state of acrimonious internal squabbling with many AMs leaving the group. The party’s ambitions in 2017 were limited to retaining a respectable vote share in those places where it chose to stand candidates (32 of the 40 Welsh constituencies).

### **Transforming fortunes: The rapidly changing polls**

In “normal” circumstances, a party will tend not to experience great changes in its poll ratings during a general election campaign (Wlezien, 2016). The efforts of each of the parties to persuade voters tend to cancel each other out, and the most effective efforts a party can make are often to ensure that it mobilises those who are firm supporters to actually turn out to vote on polling day. But 2017 was not a normal election, and nowhere was that more evident

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<sup>13</sup> The Plaid Cymru 2017 manifesto is available at <https://www.partyof.wales/actionplan17>.

than in Wales. Table 1 displays the headline voting intention numbers from the five Welsh polls conducted during the election campaign which shows that there was a rapid and substantial change in fortunes for the two main parties.<sup>14</sup> The first poll in April placed the Conservatives ten points ahead of Labour; even after the second poll demonstrated Labour support to be firming up, the Tories remained well ahead. It was only with the third poll of the campaign, published in mid-May, that a clear cross-over occurred between the two parties. The ten-point lead that this poll gave Labour was then reinforced in the final two polls before the election itself, which also gave Wales' traditionally-dominant party double-digit leads. Labour's resurgence in the polls did not only come at the expense of the Conservatives; the other parties were marginalised by the campaign, with their support steadily squeezed.

Beneath the changing voting intention numbers, the polls also identified a striking shift in the public mood towards the main two party leaders. Theresa May's stumbling campaign and policy reversals severely undermined the Tories' claim they offered "strong and stable leadership". This was always a potentially risky approach, as it required consistent and publicly perceptible strength from May throughout the campaign. At the first wobble, the campaign rhetoric was fatally undermined.

This was compounded by the fact that, somewhat surprisingly given how he had been derided from within and without, Jeremy Corbyn began to flourish in the intensity of an election campaign trail. His apparently relaxed and authentic familiarity with the public, and his willingness to meet and engage with them, contrasted powerfully with the distance and personal awkwardness shown by the Prime Minister towards ordinary voters.

These shifts were very evident in Wales. Figure 1 shows the average popularity ratings recorded in the five Welsh polls during the campaign by the four most prominent party leaders: May, Corbyn, Jones and Wood. In the space of six weeks, Corbyn went from being the least popular to being – jointly with Jones – the most popular leader; May managed to achieve the reverse.

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<sup>14</sup> All the general election polls conducted in Wales were carried out by YouGov, on behalf of ITV Wales and Cardiff University's Wales Governance Centre.

These changes in party support and leader ratings occurred despite the issues on the agenda changing much less substantially. The second Welsh poll of the campaign in early May 2017, asked respondents about “the most important issues for you in the upcoming general election”; the most commonly-identified issue, named by 59 percent, was “Britain leaving the EU”, ahead of “health” (which was suggested by 42 percent of respondents) and “immigration and asylum” (the choice of 34 percent).<sup>15</sup> The final poll, conducted immediately before the election, repeated the same question. Brexit remained the top issue (named by 53 percent), health was still in second place (by 39 percent of respondents), and immigration and asylum was still in third place (34 percent). Whatever other successes the Welsh Labour election campaign had achieved, it had not fundamentally shifted the issue agenda upon which people might, at least in part, base their electoral choice.

## Results

Only in the context of expectations generated by the early opinion polls were the final results in Wales a shock. The 2017 election was the 26th successive general election where Labour won the most seats, and the largest share of the popular vote in Wales. In that sense, it was very much a case of “business as usual”. But, given the campaign had started amidst widespread expectations of a Labour catastrophe, it was astonishing for the election to end up delivering the party’s highest vote share in Wales since the first Tony Blair landslide of 1997. Labour’s 2015 to 2017 vote share increase was, in fact, higher in Wales - at 12.1 percentage points - than in any other nation or region of Britain. Even alongside an historically-high Conservative share of the vote in Wales (see below), this surge in support brought three Labour gains, all from former Conservative seats. In addition to re-capturing the Gower and Vale of Clwyd - seats narrowly lost in 2015 - Labour also won back Cardiff North which the party last won in 2005. Labour’s vote share did not decline in any of the 40 Welsh seats, and it showed particularly strong improvements in Cardiff, which had voted clearly for Remain the previous year, and saw three of Labour’s five largest vote share gains on 2015.

For the Welsh Conservatives, the election was ultimately a huge disappointment. The party’s 33.6 percent vote share was something it had not achieved

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<sup>15</sup> Respondents were asked to pick up to three issues from a long list; percentages quoted in the text therefore sum to well over 100.

since 1935, and not beaten since December 1910. And yet ultimately, this impressive vote share delivered very little for them. The party lost three of its eleven seats, suggesting a misdirected Conservative campaign effort. The party's largest vote share was in (Leave-supporting) Islwyn, a valleys seat where the Conservatives never had any prospect of victory. Meanwhile, all five of the party's worst vote-share changes since 2015 occurred in seats where they entered the election as the incumbent party. Its worst performance was in Cardiff North; its second and third-worst vote share changes were in the Vale of Glamorgan and Preseli Pembrokeshire respectively, which came close to unseating Welsh Secretary, Alun Cairns and his immediate predecessor in the role, Stephen Crabb.

In Wales, as across Britain, the election witnessed a (possibly temporary) resurgence of two-party politics. The combined Conservative and Labour vote share surged to 82.5 percent (having been as low as 62.3 percent in 2005). With the traditional main parties dominating as they had not done for a long time (across Britain, the combined Conservative and Labour vote share was the highest since 1970; in Wales it was the largest since 1966), the other parties found themselves heavily squeezed. Plaid Cymru regained its status as the third party in popular support (something not achieved in a general election since 2001), but saw its vote share decline by almost two percentage points on a mediocre 2015 performance. In terms of seats, however, Plaid got lucky. In Ceredigion, their talented young candidate, Ben Lake narrowly captured the seat from the Liberal Democrats; elsewhere, in the Arfon seat that Plaid has held since February 1974, Labour fell short by a similarly tiny margin. The implications of this were powerful. Barely more than 200 votes separated the final outcome in terms of seats for Plaid Cymru - equalling its best-ever total of four MPs - from falling back to two for the first time since 1983. Plaid's vote share in Wales was its lowest in twenty years, with it losing deposits in almost half (16) of all Welsh seats. The self-styled "party of Wales" was barely registering with voters in much of the nation. And in seats that the party had targeted for potential gains, or significant advances, including Cardiff West, Llanelli and Rhondda, Plaid saw a fall in vote share and heavy defeats.

Still, Plaid's performance appears almost triumphant when set alongside that of the Liberal Democrats. Its results were literally the worst ever. Never in the

history of the party or its predecessors (either as the Liberals or as the Alliance) had their vote share in Wales been as low as the 4.5 percent won in 2017. For the second general election in a row, the party's vote share in Wales was even lower than that in both England and Scotland: it also fell further than in Scotland or any English region. Never, even at the lowest points for the Liberals, had they failed to win a single Welsh seat at a general election. But with the defeat of incumbent MP, Mark Williams in Ceredigion, the Liberal Democrats were now wiped off the map. In 2010, the party had won a double-figure percentage vote share in every Welsh seat bar Ynys Môn; just two general elections later, it only managed to save their deposit in four seats across Wales. Meanwhile, its greatest vote share decline was in the constituency which had been, at the start of the campaign, its primary target seat, Cardiff Central.

UKIP, however, managed the impressive feat of doing even worse than the Liberal Democrats. Having saved every single deposit in Wales in 2015, just two years later, every UKIP candidate lost their deposit. The party shed fully five-sixths of its 2015 vote share, in a performance that may well signal the beginning of the end of their (brief) period as a significant political force in Wales. They will retain a relevance to Welsh politics, however, through their continued presence in the National Assembly until at least the 2021 devolved election.

### **Understanding Voter Choice**

To understand more about the factors shaping vote choice, and the outcome of the 2017 election in Wales, this section of the paper draws on data from a detailed post-election survey conducted in Wales in June 2017.<sup>16</sup> We can use this data to examine the patterns of voting behaviour across the electorate in Wales, and further to probe the factors that appears to have shaped the choices that voters made.

As an initial stage in analysis, in Table 1, we simply present the percentage of respondents in the 2017 survey who reported having voted for each of the

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<sup>16</sup> The survey was conducted as a further wave of the 2016 Welsh Election Study. This study included a three-wave survey of voters around the May 2016 Welsh Assembly Election; it was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK (grant ES/M011127/1), with all fieldwork being conducted by YouGov. The June 2017 follow up wave was funded by Cardiff University; a sample of 3,014 respondents were obtained, the vast majority of them having participated in the previous year's surveys. Fieldwork in 2017 was again conducted by YouGov.

four largest parties in the election in Wales, across different categories of various social characteristics and political attitudes and past behaviours.<sup>17</sup>

## TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Our findings show a similar pattern of social divisions as have been reported in Britain-wide analyses of 2017 voting behaviour (e.g. Curtis 2017). Social class, the traditional dividing line in British voting behaviour, had little association with voting patterns this time around. It was between age groups, rather than different social class categories, where the large differences in behaviour can be observed. Fully three-quarters of all our respondents in the 18-24 age groups reported voting Labour; among this group only seven percent indicated that they voted Conservative. By contrast, among respondents aged 65 or over, fewer than a third suggested that they had voted Labour, and fully half had apparently supported the Conservatives. There are also some indicators in the data of differences by education level, with Labour support particularly high, and Conservative support low, among university-educated respondents. Modest gender differences can also be observed: Labour did relatively better among female voters, the Conservatives better with men.

There are, for the most part, also predictable patterns with regard to political attitudes and behaviours. Labour support was much higher among 2016 Remain voters than was that of the Conservatives; both Labour and Plaid Cymru did better amongst voters who regarded themselves as on the left, while the Conservative attracted much more support from those who considered themselves as being on the right. Similarly, it is unsurprising that most Labour and Conservative identifiers voted for those parties, respectively; nor that Conservative voters tended to be those most approving of the UK government's record, and Labour supporters to take the most positive view of the record of the Welsh Government.

Nonetheless, there are some aspects of the findings that stand out. Among the rather small group of remaining Liberal Democrat identifiers in Wales, nearly as many voted Labour in 2017 as supported the Lib Dems - testimony to the abject failure of the party's campaign in Wales. It is also striking to

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<sup>17</sup> Self-reported non-voters are excluded from the figures presented in Table 1.

observe, when looking at leadership ratings, that of those voters with a clearly positive view of Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood (those rating her at 7 or above on a 0-10 scale), the majority of them actually voted Labour. As in the previous year's Assembly election, Plaid were unable to turn Wood's general popularity with much of the Welsh electorate into large numbers of votes for her party.

To probe rather further, we then conducted a multivariate analysis of behaviour in June 2017. This allowed us to examine more deeply the multiple influences on voting choices – and, in particular, the relative impact on vote choice of UK-level or Welsh-level political factors. Given the ultimate dominance (both in terms of votes and seats) of Labour in the election, the dependent variable in the analysis is specified simply whether respondents voted Labour or not (with non-voters excluded from the analysis).<sup>18</sup> The explanatory variables included in the model are those included in Table 1. These include the key social background variables of age group, education level, sex and social class: these are important to include both as control variables, but also to explore the extent to which the associations between these variables and voting patterns reported in Table 1 are robust once other factors are taken into account. A number of more directly political variables are also included in the models. These include a standard measure of party identification, as well as variables that appear likely to be directly germane to understanding the specific dynamics of the 2017 general election. Thus, we include 2016 referendum vote, to explore the extent to which this shaped voting choices. And we also then include , UK- and Welsh-level party leader ratings, and UK and Welsh Government approval ratings: these latter variables potentially provide us with insight into whether Labour's attempt to frame the election campaign around Welsh political actors was ultimately successful in terms of the factors that came to have the greatest impact of the choices that voters ended up making.

Table 2 presents outline findings from a series of models. As can be seen, the social background variables included in model 1 have only a fairly limited ability to account for vote choice. Even though there has been much discussion about the sharp divides along lines of age and education in 2017,

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<sup>18</sup> [Given that the dependent variable for the multivariate analysis is binary, we deploy binary logistic regression models.](#)



these variables do only a limited amount to statistically account for vote choice in Wales in the election. Rather surprisingly, perhaps, so also does Brexit vote (model 2): although this was supposedly the ‘Brexit election’, voting behaviour in the referendum does not very reliably then distinguish between those who went on to support Labour in 2017 and those who did not. Our other political variables, ideological self-placement, party identification and government approval (model 3, 4 and 5, respectively) have rather greater empirical traction. However, it is party leader ratings that are clearly the most closely associated with vote choice (model 6); this is a finding that remains robust when all the variables are included in a composite model (model 7). The composite model also has the best fit overall. Results from this model show that, even once numerous factors have been accounted for, the strongest predictors of Labour vote choice were positive attitudes towards Jeremy Corbyn, Labour party identification, and negative attitudes towards Theresa May (full results for this module are presented in the Appendix).<sup>19</sup>

## TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Some of the implications of these findings are suggested in Figures 1a and 1b. These show the predicted probabilities for respondents of voting Labour at every point along the 0 to 10 popularity scale for both Carwyn Jones and Jeremy Corbyn (with all other variables held constant at their mean values). As can be seen, higher ratings for Jones were associated with a much smaller rise in the probability of voting Labour (and with much wider confidence intervals) than were higher ratings for Corbyn. Detailed examination of the multivariate estimates set out in the Appendix confirms that far greater explanatory power, in accounting for decisions to vote Labour or not, is provided by attitudes to Corbyn than attitudes to Jones (or any of the other main party leaders).

## FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

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<sup>19</sup> [The detailed results from the composite model also show quite strong negative associations between Labour vote choice on the one hand and Plaid Cymru identification and positive attitudes towards Leanne Wood on the other. While Labour’s 2017 electoral resurgence did eat somewhat into Plaid Cymru support, it did so by peeling away some of the softer Plaid support; those with a clear Plaid identity, and who viewed the Plaid leader positively were much less likely to defect. This fits well with previous research \(e.g. Scully and Wyn Jones 2012\) indicating that there is a significant portion of the Welsh electorate that harbours broadly positive attitudes to both Labour and Plaid Cymru, and which can shift between the two according to the electoral context.](#)

In short, our modelling of vote choice suggests that, for all the emphasis of Labour's Welsh campaign on Welsh branding, and on foregrounding Jones as the main face and voice of the party's message, ultimately it was Britain-wide factors that had the greatest influence on voting decisions. Although the emphasis of the Labour campaign in Wales was initially to try to minimise the party from a damaging UK-level context, it was to the party's benefit that this attempt appears to have been unsuccessful. The rise in Corbyn's ratings was what principally drove Labour's improvement in the polls, and ultimately delivered for them a much better outcome in the election than had seemed possible in the difficult early days of the campaign. Labour's Welsh branding in Wales appears to have played very much a secondary role.

## **Conclusion**

The 2017 general election was an unusual election in so many respects, and it certainly generated some highly unexpected results. Given the election outcome challenged academic research, especially long-standing assumptions about the paths that most elections normally follow, it is important to establish why there was such a departure, and the likelihood of this proving permanent. Part of this analysis must unravel how the election played out across the different UK nations.

This paper contributes to this process through a more forensic examination of the election in Wales than any hitherto. We draw two main conclusions about Wales. The first is that, in an election that witnessed greater differentiation between the UK's four nations than ever before, the campaign in Wales occupied an intriguing "halfway house" position. The Conservatives ran a heavily British-focused campaign, with the Welsh party seeking to piggy back on the initial popularity of Theresa May. Facing a similar context (but with different implications) to the Conservatives, Labour took a very different tack - doing everything it could to emphasise its distinctively Welsh identity and leadership. In contrast to Scotland, where even the campaigns run by the unionist parties appeared to (at least implicitly) accept the distinctiveness of the Scottish political arena, Wales experienced a mixture of British and Welsh focused campaigning.

The success of Labour in Wales would appear to point to a better choice. But our second conclusion, based on our empirical analysis of voting choice and shifts during the election campaign, is that UK-wide factors were still the principal influence on voter choice. Carwyn Jones was an electoral asset to Welsh Labour. But Labour's extraordinary campaign polling surge, and its eventual success, owed far more to Corbyn's leadership and Britain-wide campaign dynamics than it did to Jones and Welsh Labour.

The 2017 general election in Wales both internalised and reflected a new pattern of party politics that is likely to stimulate differential election outcomes across the UK. This necessitates a different approach to understanding election campaigns, one that differentiates between the nations of the UK and how every political party operates in each territory. This will help distinguish different political and electoral fault lines in each nation, as well as constructing a more granular analysis of the impact of campaign on electoral outcomes. As Flinders put it: "The rules of the political game have changed but nobody seems to know quite what they are anymore. We need a new language of politics in order to fully grasp what kind of democracy this is (let alone where it might be going)" (Flinders, 2017). This will necessitate a change in approach to generate more nuanced analysis, moving away from the assumption that political and electoral trends in England will always be replicated in Wales. We contend that, to better and more comprehensively explain UK-wide elections, the new language of politics will need to have both national and regional accents.

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**Table 1: Percentage Vote for Main Parties Across Social Categories and Political Attitudes, Wales 2017**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>LibDems</i>	<i>Plaid</i>
<b>Age</b>				
18-24	75	7	8	7
25-34	68	13	7	9
35-44	52	22	8	13
45-54	51	26	7	12
55-64	44	33	6	12
65+	29	51	7	10
<b>Education</b>				
No formal qualifications	42	42	5	7
GCSE/O-Level/Equivalent	43	38	4	10
A Level/Equivalent	54	30	6	8
University or equivalent	50	26	9	13
Other qualifications	38	38	7	11
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	42	35	7	12
Female	49	30	7	10
<b>Social Grade:</b>				
AB	43	36	8	11
C1	48	30	7	12
C2	42	35	7	10
DE	50	30	6	9
<b>2016 Remain Voter</b>	59	17	11	12
<b>Self-Described Ideology</b>				
Very/Fairly Left	79	1	5	12
Slightly Left	64	9	13	11
Centre	40	33	8	14
Slightly Right	10	74	5	6
Fairly/Very Right	4	63	0	0
<b>Party Identification</b>				
Labour	3	92	2	2
Conservative	87	5	4	4
Lib-Dems	40	10	45	5
Plaid Cymru	21	2	3	73
<b>UK Govt Approval</b>				
Strongly/Tend to Approve	8	80	3	5
Neither Approve nor disapprove	31	38	8	14
Strongly/Tend to Disapprove	71	5	8	13
<b>Welsh Govt Approval</b>				
Strongly/Tend to Approve	60	20	6	12
Neither Approve nor disapprove	46	30	9	11
Strongly/Tend to Disapprove	26	53	6	9

<b>Leader Ratings:</b>				
<i>May:</i>				
0-3	72	4	9	12
4-6	27	44	8	14
7-10	5	85	3	4
<i>Corbyn:</i>				
0-3	6	74	5	9
4-6	42	22	14	18
7-10	81	2	6	9
<i>Jones:</i>				
0-3	17	61	5	9
4-6	42	32	9	14
7-10	71	12	6	10
<i>Wood:</i>				
0-3	27	60	4	3
4-6	55	24	9	9
7-10	56	10	7	25

Source: Welsh Election Study, 2017 post-election wave.

**Table 2: Summary Findings for Models of Vote Choice at 2017 General Election, Wales**

<i>Model</i>	<i>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>% correctly predicted</i>
1. Age, Education, Sex & Social Class	.09	62.5
2. Brexit Vote	.05	64.0
3. Ideological self-placement	.22	73.5
4. Party ID	.41	81.1
5. UK and Welsh Government approval	.30	77.6
6. Party leader ratings	.55	86.0
7. 'Composite' model	.64	88.3

\* Dependent variable = Vote for Labour versus vote for all other parties



Figure 1a: Predicted Probability of voting for Labour in 2017 General Election by 0-10 Ratings for Carwyn Jones

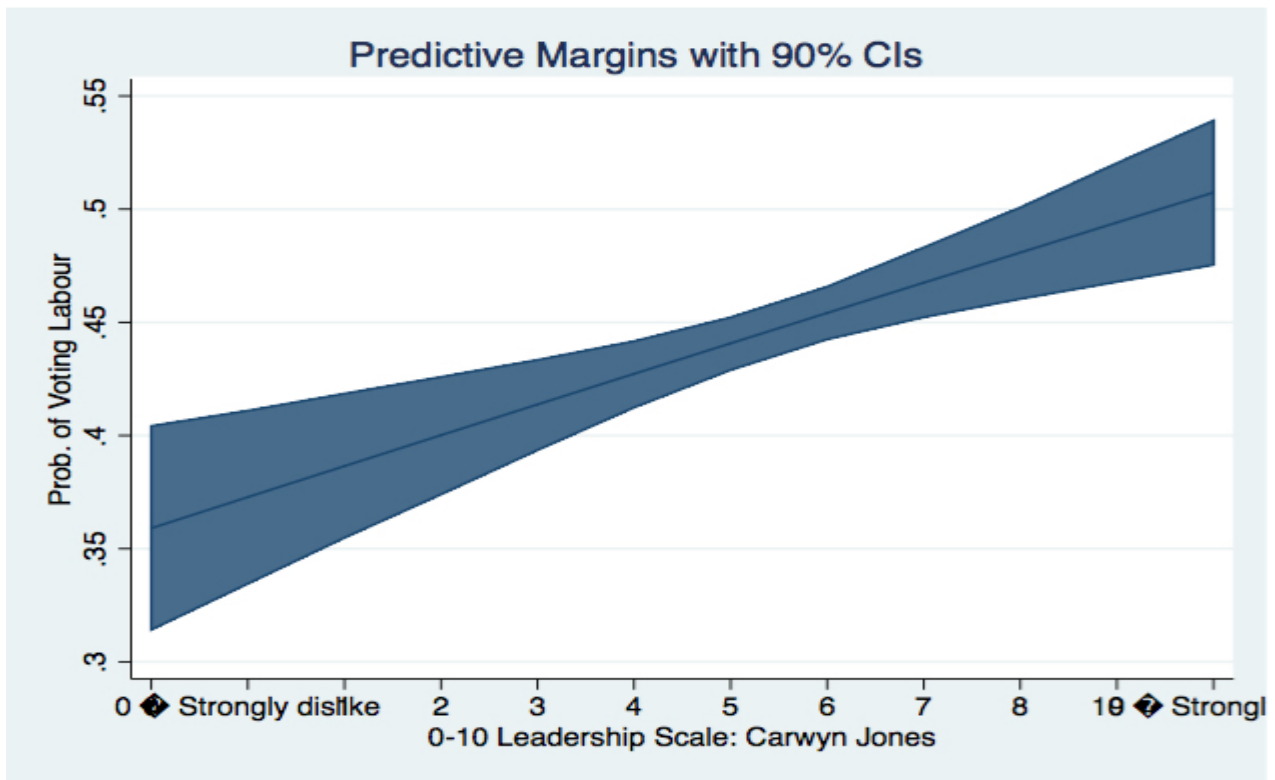
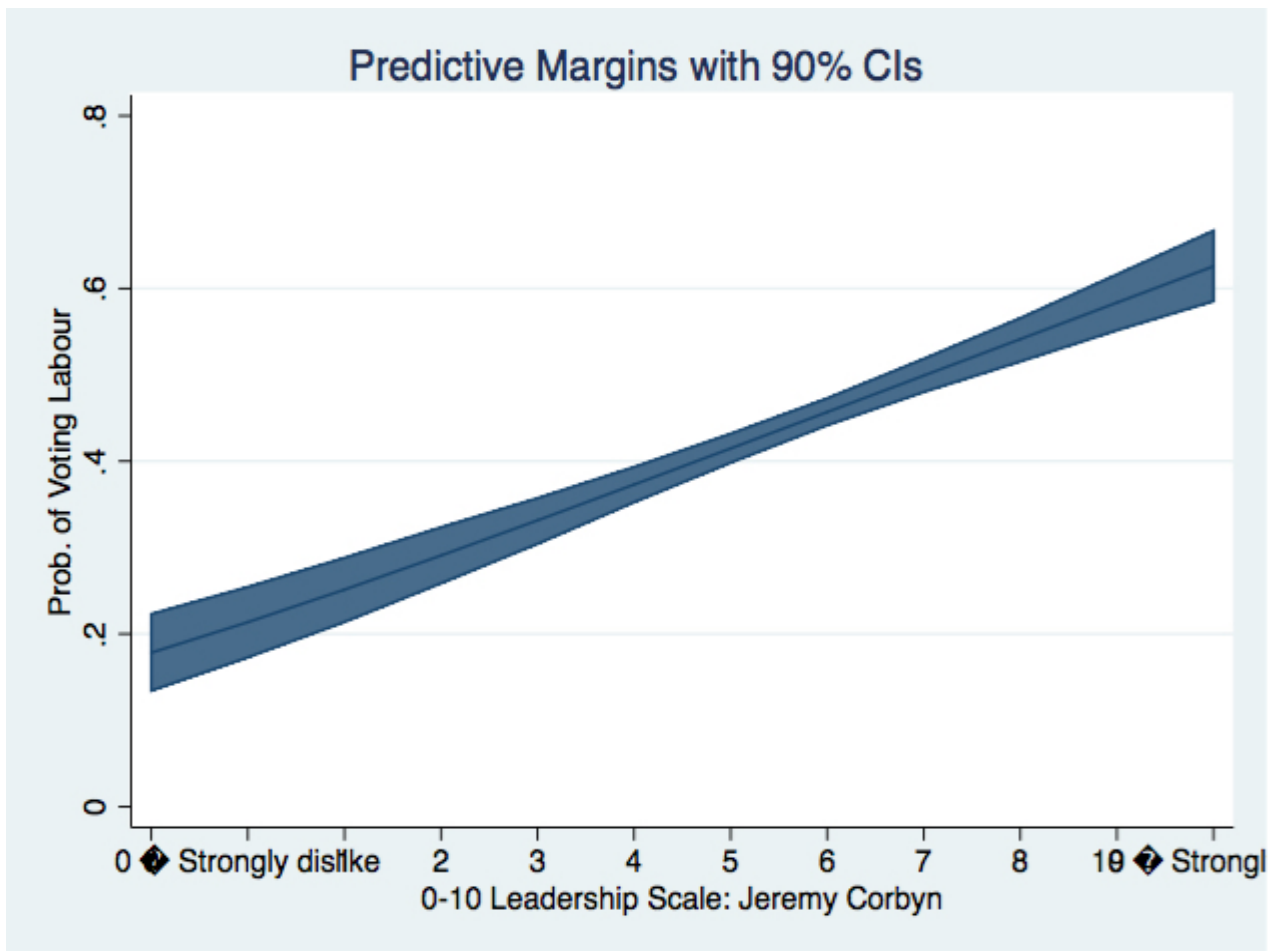


Figure 1b: Predicted Probability of voting for Labour in 2017 General Election by 0-10 Ratings for Jeremy Corbyn



**Appendix: Binary Logistic Regression Estimates (Robust Standard Errors) for 2017 General Election Labour Vote Choice, Wales**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Labour Vote</i>
<b>Age Group</b> (Reference category: 65 and older)	
18-24	1.83 (.52)***
25-34	1.59 (.36)***
35-44	.76 (.28)**
45-54	.79 (.27)**
55-64	.38 (.24)
<b>Female</b>	.13 (.18)
<b>Social Class</b> (Reference category: uncategorized)	
AB	.34 (.64)
C1	.10 (.64)
C2	-.05 (.65)
DE	.09 (.65)
<b>Highest Education Qualification</b> (Reference category: none)	
GCSE/O-Level	-.84 (.42)
A-Level	-.35 (.45)
University-level	-.61 (.41)
Other qualifications	-.60 (.40)
<b>Party Identity</b> (Reference category: none)	
Conservative	-1.00 (.36)**
Labour	2.06 (.24)***
Lib Dem	.07 (.35)
Plaid Cymru	-1.02 (.33)**
<b>Party Leader Ratings</b> (0-10)	
Theresa May	-.27 (.05)***
Jeremy Corbyn	.41 (.04)***
Carwyn Jones	.11 (.05)*
Leanne Wood	-.15 (.04)***
<b>Government Approval</b>	
UK Government	-.31 (.12)*
Welsh Government	.24 (.13)
<b>0-10 Left-Right Scale</b>	.05 (.09)
<b>2016 'Remain' Voter</b>	.05 (.09)
Constant	-2.12 (.88)*

\* P < .05; \*\* P < .01; \*\*\* P < .001