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What about Wales? Brexit and the future of the UK

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Since the results of the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union were declared, the fact that a narrow majority of the Welsh electorate voted alongside a similarly narrow majority of English voters to Leave (Table 1) seems to have provided succour to those who would reject the notion that Brexit was driven by English nationalism. Now that detailed statistical analysis has confirmed that English national sentiment was indeed very strongly aligned with Eurosceptic sentiment (see Henderson et al. 2017, 2020; Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021), this view is no longer tenable. English nationalism clearly was one of the key drivers of Brexit. This, however, leaves open the question: what about Wales? How do we explain the Brexit result in Wales? Moreover, in a context in which Brexit is clearly acting as a major centrifugal force within the UK, leading to renewed calls for Scottish independence and Irish unity, what is its impact of Brexit on Wales' relationship with the Union?

Table 1: 2016 Brexit referendum results by constituent territory of the UK (%)

	England	Wales	Northern Ireland	Scotland
Leave	53.4	52.5	44.2	38.0
Remain	46.6	47.5	55.8	62.0
Turnout	73.0	71.7	62.7	67.2

To answer these questions, we will proceed in two steps. First, we focus on the Brexit result in Wales and, in particular, the way that it reflected the particularly heterogeneous nature of national identities in Wales. While in the aggregate opinion across the country was evenly divided, individual level data demonstrates the existence of very significant differences in attitudes within Wales towards the European project that were closely tied to different senses of national identity. Secondly, in the aftermath of Brexit, we examine the attitudes of these national identity groups to the constitutional future of Wales. Our argument is that Brexit has, unexpectedly perhaps, been accompanied by an increase in support for devolution across the Welsh population as a whole. But among that part of the population that was already most committed to autonomy, namely that group that in national identity terms regards itself as Welsh only, support for devolution has now tipped over into significant support for independence. Thus, even while the devolved election in May 2021 reaffirmed Welsh Labour's very long-standing dominance of the country's political landscape, even in Wales we find that, under the surface, the tectonic plates of the Union are shifting.

National identity and Brexit in Wales

The fact that Wales voted to leave the European Union despite being a net beneficiary from EU funding (Ifan et al. 2016) and being so dependent on the European single market appears to have come as a shock to many. But in Wales as elsewhere across the state, the costs and benefits European membership appear to have been viewed through the prism of national

identity (see, for example, Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021: 80-102). What renders Wales distinct is that it is home to *three* different sense of national identity that, either singularly or in combination, play a significant role in shaping perceptions: Welshness, Britishness and Englishness.

Table 2 is based on individual level data from the British Election Survey and notes both the proportion of the overall electorate holding a strong sense of a particular national identity or identities (Welsh, Welsh and British, etc.), as well as the proportion of that group that voted Leave. With regards the former, what is immediately apparent is that no group is dominant. This contrasts sharply with both England where the English British (i.e. those who feel both strongly English and strongly British) make up 50% of the electorate, or Scotland where the Scottish only make up 44% of the electorate. Also noteworthy is that only just shy of 1 in 5 of the Welsh electorate feel a strong sense of English national identity (be that English British or strongly English only), reflecting the large-scale population movement into Wales from England that has taken place in recent decades. Again, this contrasts with Scotland where the proportion of the electorate regarding themselves as feeling strongly English (in combination with Britishness or not) is around 5%. In England, the proportion of the electorate feeling either strongly Scottish or strongly Welsh is negligible.¹

Table 2: 2016 Referendum Vote in Wales: Leave by Strong National Identity

	Leave (%)	% of Welsh electorate
Welsh only	29	24
Welsh British	58	27
British only (not Welsh)	62	6
English only	71	2
English British	60	16
British only (not English)	44	9
Other/None	21	16

Data taken from British Election Study Internet Panel (Fieldhouse et al, 2020)

Turning to vote choice in the referendum, it is clear that those who felt strongly Welsh but without feeling the same attachment to Britishness voted heavily to Remain in the EU. At the other end of the spectrum, the substantial minority in Wales who feel both strongly English and strongly British (the English British) or strongly English only tended to vote to Leave. That is, they voted in the same way and in similar proportions to their equivalents in England itself. Another group that voted heavily Leave were the Welsh British – those who feel both strongly Welsh and strongly British. This underlines the fact that, on international matters at least, many of the same attitudes that align with Englishness in England (and

¹ To simplify our narrative, while we include data on the Other/None category in both Table 2 and Figure 1, we do not include them in our analysis. Suffice it to say that this group would appear to be composed of (in the main) two rather different kinds of people: (1) cosmopolitans who deliberately reject all national identity labels; and (2) the wholly apathetic.

indeed Wales) also align with Britishness in Wales and Scotland (as demonstrated in detail in Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021: 135-67)

Two other national identity groups require our attention. The first is that group of people with a strong claim to Welsh national identity but who nonetheless identify as strongly British only (as a proxy, the table includes those born in Wales who identify as strongly British only.) This group tends to be geographically concentrated in part of Wales such as south Pembrokeshire and parts of Monmouthshire as well as the old borough towns. Again, space precludes fuller consideration. From the perspective of the current discussion, the point is that this group voted heavily to Leave. In complete contrast, we find a group with a strong claim to English identity but who nonetheless choose to identify as strongly British only (as a proxy here, we use those born in England who identify as strongly British only.) Like those in England who identify as British only, they also tended to vote Remain. In this way, Wales' English minority is large enough to allow us to see the national identity patterns and attendant political differences that characterise English society being reproduced west of the border too.

In summary, therefore, as was the case in Scotland and England, voting behaviour in the Brexit referendum in Wales was also closely and significantly related to senses of national identity (for formal confirmation see Henderson et al. 2020). What makes Wales different, is that the pattern of national identities found there are particularly complex and heterogeneous.² This in turn clearly raises the possibility of very different responses among these national identity groups to the implications of Brexit, especially as it cannot be assumed that the views of these different groups align in the same ways on issues other than that of the UK's membership of the UK.

National Identity and the Constitutional Future of Wales

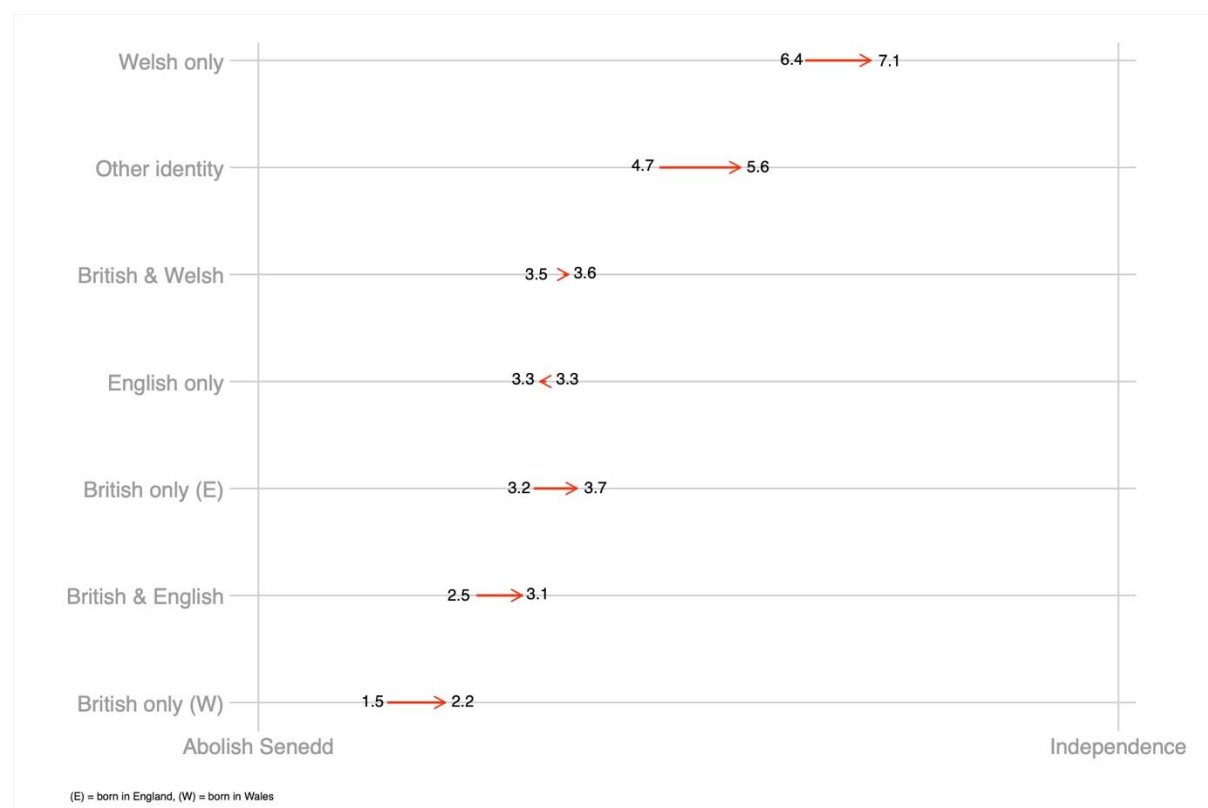
The period since the 2016 referendum has been a time of almost unparalleled tumult in modern UK politics; with that tumult seemingly set to continue despite the Conservative party's convincing victory (in England only, of course) in the 2019 general election and the UK's exit both from the EU and subsequent transitional arrangements. Relationships between the UK's constituent units has been and remains a central point at issue. In Scotland, supporters of independence have argued that the decision to leave the EU against the manifest wishes of the Scottish electorate provides grounds for a second independence referendum. As predicted by Remainers, Northern Ireland's relationship with both Great Britain and the rest of the island of Ireland has become an open sore. Meanwhile, intergovernmental relations between central and devolved governments within the UK have plumbed new depths with even the unionist Welsh Government warning that what is regards as Whitehall's high-handed attitude is imperilling the Union.

² Again because of considerations of space, we have omitted consideration of the role of the Welsh language in shaping attitudes towards Brexit. It is worth noting, however, that fluent Welsh speakers tended to be particularly Europhile. Thus, British Election Survey data suggests that only 16% of fluent Welsh speakers who identify as strongly Welsh only voted to Leave the EU, making this perhaps *the* most pro-EU demographic group in Britain.

The Welsh Government's increasingly dire warnings are in part no doubt a response to the remarkable growth of the grassroots 'Yes Cymru' independence which, at over 18,000 members, is now second only to the Labour Party itself as Wales' largest political movement. Given that recent opinion polls suggest that around half of Labour voters in Wales would vote for independence if a referendum were to be called, it is hardly surprising that the party is concerned. But the growing salience of and support for independence (the same polling suggests that around one third of the electorate would vote Yes if a referendum were to be called) is only one manifestation of the impact of Brexit on the constitutional debate in Wales.

So far as the UK government has been concerned, it is increasingly obvious that Brexit is viewed as a rationale or pretext (depending on one's viewpoint) for recentralising power. This is perhaps most obvious in the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 through which the government has given itself the power to spend in areas that were previously considered the preserve of devolved governments. But from a Welsh perspective, it is also striking to note the extent to which the post-Brexit successors for EU structural funds (from which Wales was a major beneficiary) exclude devolved government from any meaningful involvement, all in the name of strengthening the Union. Indeed, it would appear that the Conservative government now regards devolution itself as a threat to the territorial integrity of the state rather than as a means of managing differences within it.

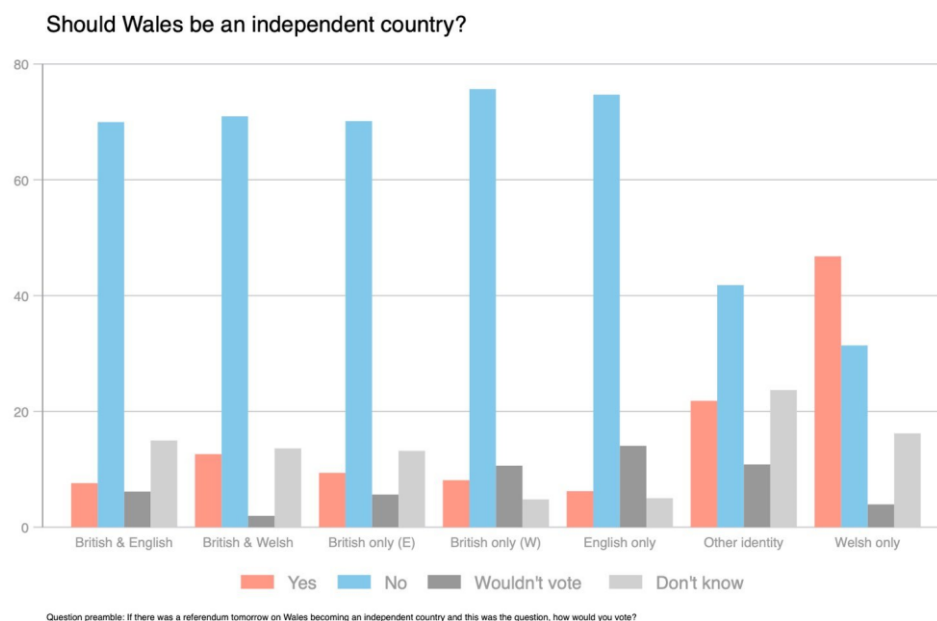
Figure 1: Change in constitutional preferences by national identity 2016-2021



Data taken from 2021 Welsh Election Study (Wyn Jones et al, 2021)

From the perspective of Brexit ideologues this may well make perfect sense. Devolution is clearly (almost) as offensive to the sensibilities of those who would champion untrammelled Westminster parliamentary sovereignty as was membership of the EU. It is also the case that, in England, Euroscepticism is closely tied not only to English national identity but also, relatedly, to a sense of what has been termed 'devoanxiety'; that is a sense that devolution has left the Celtic periphery of the state in general, and Scotland in particular, unfairly privileged at the expense of England (see Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021: 103-23). But in Wales itself, things look rather different. As Figure 1 makes clear, the period since 2016 has in fact seen an overall increase in support for devolution across most identity groups – including some of those most supportive of Brexit.

Figure 2: Should Wales be an independent country (%)



Data taken from 2021 Welsh Election Study (Wyn Jones et al, 2021)

As the same Table also makes clear, however, this overall shift in support for (more) devolution is from very different starting points. Attitudes to Welsh devolution have always been related to national identity (Wyn Jones and Trystan 1999). Indeed, what is striking is the extent to which that proportion of the population that has long been most supportive of home rule, that is the Welsh only, has now shifted decisively to supporting independence. This is demonstrated in Figure 2, which shows the response by national identity group to straightforward yes/no question on independence. It should also be stressed, of course, that the continuing overwhelming opposition to independence among other identity groups is a stark reminder of the scale of the challenge facing Yes Cymru and its supporters.

Conclusion

Five years on from the Brexit referendum, even if the question of the UK's membership of the EU has been settled for at least the foreseeable future, it is surely undeniable that the Brexit has morphed into a wider state legitimacy crisis? While attitudes in England have been its motive force, it is a crisis manifested in the continuing strong support for secession in

Scotland and the destabilisation of the institutions established as a result of the peace process in Northern Ireland. Even if it is less dramatic, the story in Wales is nonetheless significant. A majority of the Welsh electorate may have voted for Brexit, but there is no evidence that this was intended to take place at the expense of devolution. Yet that is precisely what has occurred as a result of the way that successive UK governments have chosen to interpret the referendum mandate. Their approach that has already inspired one of the unlikeliest unintended consequences of Brexit, namely the creation of powerful Welsh independence movement. While the country's demographics significantly complicate the task facing those who would argue for greater autonomy up to and including independence, it would be unwise to assume that Wales will always be content to play the part of bystander.

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