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## **Title**

Union Coalitions and Strategic Framing: The Case of the Agricultural Advisory Panel for Wales

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## **Abstract**

This article analyses the creation of a union coalition that introduced a new employment relations institution: the Agricultural Advisory Panel for Wales. Building on social movement theory, the article argues that the union's strategic framing within a conducive political opportunity structure enabled the coalition to form and pursue its goals. The union engaged in a specific frame alignment strategy, frame bridging, to explore and mobilize intersections and shared interests between its own frame and those of its coalition partners. Frame bridging prompted actors to reverse their policy preferences and participate in the coalition, which was facilitated by a political opportunity structure formed from the political salience of the agricultural sector and pre-existing social ties in the 'small state' political economy of Wales. The article contributes to the literature by developing and extending the frame bridging concept as a process enabling union coalitions.

## **Key Words**

Agriculture; Case Study (Methodological Expertise), Devolution, Employment Relations (Thematic Expertise), Framing, Frame Bridging, Social Movement Theory, Wages Regulation, Wales

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## **Main Text of Article**

### **Introduction**

As union membership and influence wanes, a key revival strategy for unions has been engaging in coalitions with social and political actors to extend influence beyond their own membership and resources (Frege et al., 2004; Rose, 2000; Tattersall, 2010). The purposes of union coalitions include: mobilizing support during strikes, collective bargaining and organizing campaigns; impacting social justice campaigns beyond the workplace; and, influencing legislative agendas. When successful, union coalitions can result in higher union membership, improved wages and conditions, and more progressive regulation (Behrens and Pekarek, 2021). However, building effective coalitions is difficult given limited actor resources, varying demands on organizations, and the potential for conflicting interests and ideologies between actors. These problems have prompted the literature (e.g. Frege et al., 2004) to ask: how and under what conditions can unions build successful coalitions? We explore this question by

analysing the creation of a union coalition that created a new Employment Relations (ER) institution, the Agricultural Advisory Panel for Wales.

In 2010 the UK Government announced its intention to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board that had regulated pay and working conditions for all agricultural workers in England and Wales since 1948 through measures including a graded structure of minimum wage floors. The union Unite, representing agricultural workers, argued that abolition would prompt employers to reduce pay, prompting convergence towards the statutory national minimum wage. In Wales, Unite responded to the UK Government's abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board by building a coalition to pursue fairer wages for agricultural workers. Unite's campaigning prompted key actors, including the Labour Party, to reverse their previous acceptance of the abolition of wage setting in Wales, instead forming a coalition that successfully pursued the 2016 creation of a new Agricultural Wages Advisory Panel for Wales. How was Unite able to motivate and enlist more powerful political actors in a campaign with considerable resource implications, including challenging the UK Government in the UK Supreme Court?

We build on social movement literature (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Tarrow, 1992, 2011; McAdam et al., 2001) to argue that the union's strategic framing within a conducive political opportunity structure was crucial for building a coalition and changing actor preferences. Unite engaged in frame bridging (Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986) to emphasize commonalities between its frame, focussed on social justice, and those of coalition partners. Frame bridging prompted some partners to reverse their policy preferences, enabling the coalition to create the Agricultural Advisory Panel for Wales. Meanwhile, frame bridging was supported by a political opportunity structure (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Tarrow, 1992, 2011)

that included the political salience of agriculture and a ‘small state’ political economy (Katzenstein, 1985).

Our argument targets a specific gap in the literature. Previous literature on unions and framing has focussed generally on seminal framing concepts (Gahan and Pekarek, 2013), often departing from Kelly’s (1998) social movement adaptation as set out by his mobilization theory (Gall, 2018). However, several more specific framing concepts (Snow et al., 1986; Benford and Snow, 2000), including frame alignment processes (i.e. frame bridging, frame amplification, frame transformation, and frame extension) have received less attention. There are exceptions such as the studies on frame extension of unions (Heery and Conley, 2007; Cornfield and Fletcher, 1998) but frame bridging remains underexplored and underspecified in ER and the sociology of work. This paper contributes to the literature by developing and extending frame bridging as a key union strategy for building coalitions.

The case is important in two substantive terms. One is that the Agricultural Advisory Panel for Wales was the first collective, industry specific wages regulatory institution to be established in the UK since the now-abolished wages boards were created. Governments established these boards, known as wages councils during the post-war era, for industries where low union densities precluded effective collective bargaining. They formed an important part of the post-war settlement incorporating state supported collective ER regulation until their abolition from the 1980s (Deakin and Green, 2009). The other importance is that the case demonstrates how institutions in Wales form part of an increasingly divergent UK political and institutional context, driven by political devolution. The case output was the only sub-national ER wage setting institution to be created in the UK following the establishment of sub-national assemblies and parliaments in 1999. The panel means that agricultural ER in Wales is now

regulated using bi-partite approaches more commonly found in ‘co-ordinated’ business systems. Meanwhile, the industry-wide protections embodied by the Agricultural Wages Board have been abolished in England where the industry is subjected to more ‘liberal’ regulation.

### **Framing and union coalitions**

Union coalitions are defined as “involving discrete, intermittent, or continuous joint activity in pursuit of shared or common goals between trade unions and other non-labour institutions” (Frege et al., 2004: 138). Such non-labour institutions can include civil society and non-governmental organizations (Rose, 2000, Mayer, 2009, Tattersall, 2010). Coalitions pursue immediate union objectives by supporting strikes, collective bargaining and organizing, but often target broader joint goals such as social justice, where unions have, for example, mobilized with civil society actors for higher minimum and living wages (Heery et. al, forthcoming; Luce, 2018). Frege et al. (2004) distinguish between ‘coalitions of protest’ and ‘coalitions of influence’. The former focus on mobilization, agitation, and confrontation to pressurise opponents. The latter focus on political representation, whereby unions and their coalition partners use their legitimacy, expertise, and influence to shape public policy.

Nevertheless, the literature has highlighted difficulties in creating and sustaining union coalitions (Needleman, 1998) and identified conducive factors and conditions. One key ‘push factor’ for unions is their lack of bargaining strength, while a key ‘pull factor’ is the symbolic or material power of potential partners (Frege et al., 2004). This literature also explored the formation and maintenance of relationships, such as Mayer’s (2009) analysis of a blue-green coalition that campaigned against chemical pollution damaging workers and the natural environment. The coalition developed a distinctive frame around safety that integrated interests

of coalition partners active across the natural environmental and ER, replacing earlier frames that had divided them. This article follows Mayer's focus on framing although we focus on a different aspect, that of frame bridging.

The literature on framing originated in sociology, in particular the social movement literature. Early research identified how mental frames helped individuals interpret their surroundings, enabling actors to absorb information, interpret social processes and respond to uncertain situations (Goffman, 1974). Beyond the individual level, social movement literature focussed on how collective actors create frames to build coalitions, mobilize supporters and act collectively (Snow et al., 1986; Benford and Snow, 2000; Benford, 1993). This literature differentiates between key framing concepts including *framing tasks*, *frame alignment processes* and *opportunity structure*.

Collective action frames tend to be built for specific purposes, fulfilling three key *framing tasks* if successful. First, diagnostic framing refers to identifying a problem or grievance that the movement intends to remedy, often by specifying an opponent and attributing blame for creating the grievance. Second, prognostic framing responds to the question of 'what can be done' by developing solutions and defining means-ends relationships. Third, motivational framing provides a 'call to arms' to form the agency element of collective action frames (Gamson, 1992), within which movement entrepreneurs construct narratives of severity, urgency, efficacy, and propriety to mobilize supporters (Benford, 1993).

The literature recognised that framing is dynamic, contested and evolves over time, identifying four *frame alignment processes* (Snow et al., 1986; Benford and Snow, 2000). First, frame bridging describes the "linking of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally

unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem” (Benford and Snow, 2000: 624). Activists identify linkages between distinctive group agendas by aligning goals and values. Second, frame amplification refers to the embellishment, idealization, and elaboration of pre-existing frames, enhancing the appeal of movement goals to mobilise latent supporters. Third, frame extension captures how actors revise key frames to include issues of interest to potential adherents. Extended frames might target groups lacking representation by incorporating their pleas. Fourth, frame transformation refers to a complete revision, prompted by the failure of collective actors to gather support sufficient to advance their aims. Benford and Snow (2000: 624) observe that of these processes, frame bridging has received little systematic attention despite its potential importance to coalition construction.

Finally, framing takes place within an *opportunity structure* as successful mobilization does not occur in a vacuum. Gamson and Meyer (1996) defined an opportunity structure as dimensions of the political environment providing incentives through creating expectations of success or failure. Tarrow (1992) argued that ideological disputes often prompted actors to exploit these political dimensions. Crucially, opportunity structures are based on resources external to the group framing the contentious issue, potentially across social, economic, and structural factors. Tarrow (2011) highlighted how political regimes shape opportunity structures, including heightening the political salience of topics to facilitate actor mobilization.

Despite similarities between social and labour movements, applications of social movement theory to unions were rare until *Rethinking Industrial Relations* (Kelly, 1998) explored how unions used framing to define grievances, develop shared identities, and mobilize members, an approach that was subsequently used widely within ER (Holgate et al., 2018). However, Gall (2018) argued that such research engaged fitfully with Kelly, as meta-analysis identified 440



journal articles citing Kelly's book but only 14 applied his theoretical framework fully while four set out developments or extensions. One of these extensions is Gahan and Pekarek's (2013) synthetic multi-level framework on union framing, but they also note the narrow focus of previous literature on seminal framing concepts while more specific framing concepts remain underexplored and underspecified.

Nevertheless, exceptions exist. Royle and Rueckert (2020) focussed on framing tasks to extend the concepts of diagnostic and prognostic framing to analyse worker mobilization through industrial action at McDonalds. Meanwhile, some frame alignment processes have been developed. Heery and Conley (2007) applied frame extension to examine how British unions moved beyond representing full-time employees to include part-time workers, driven by female activism and supported by new legislation. Cornfield and Fletcher's (1998) analysis of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization's legislative agenda identified a frame extension driven by adaptation to political constraints and opportunities, as it sought to boost recruitment. However, the concept of frame bridging remains underexplored and underspecified in ER and the sociology of work.

Finally, although linkages exist between the frame bridging elaborated in this article and the concept of bridge builders as used in the union coalition literature, differences exist. The concept of 'bridge builder' emphasizes the characteristics and role of activists across labour unions and adjacent social movement organizations in forging coalitions (Rose, 2000; Mayer, 2009; Tattersall, 2010) but frame bridging focusses on the process of aligning distinctive frames. This is the focus of our argument as developed below.

## **Building bridges in a small state**

The union, Unite, carried out strategic framing (Gamson, 1992) that aligned actors' distinctive frames and changed the policy preferences of the coalition partners, to enable coalition construction. Unite engaged in a frame alignment strategy, frame bridging (Benford and Snow, 2000), that exploited intersections and common ground between its own frame, focussed on social justice, and those of its coalition partners; the Labour Party in Wales that focussed on Welsh political solutions distinctive from those pursued by the UK Government, while the Welsh political party Plaid Cymru focused on gaining independence. The intersection between these three frames, once mobilized through a Unite campaign, motivated coalition partners to pursue the creation of the Panel through advancing different primary interests drawn from their own frames.

Unite initially formulated a social justice frame opposing the abolishment of the Agricultural Wages Board. The union's diagnostic framing pointed to poor working conditions and wages within agriculture, arguing that abandoning joint regulation exposed workers to a 'race to the bottom' as to pay and conditions; prognostic framing argued for the retention of collective regulation to secure wage levels; while motivational framing emphasized fairness and social justice for farm workers in Wales. However, this framing failed to motivate the Welsh Government, formed from a coalition between the Labour Party and Plaid Cymru to oppose the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board before 2011.

The Labour Party formed a single party Welsh Government after 2011. Unite retained social justice but bolstered mobilizing by targeting a key frame of the Labour Party; attaining political solutions distinct from those of Conservative-led UK Governments. This framing drew on two

interlocking perceptions. One was that the UK Government focused on market-led deregulatory policy preferences, compared to the more collective approach of the Welsh Government. The other was that the UK Government was remote from, and highhanded in governing, Wales. Bridge building through promoting the abolition of minimum wage setting as symbolising inter-governmental tension was effective. The Welsh Government, the most powerful coalition member, then pursued the creation of a Wales-specific regulatory panel.

Unite's social justice framing also had little initial success within Plaid Cymru, as their primary interest was building Welsh institutions as a precursor to gaining independence. Such motivation meant that the party had little interest in retaining the Agricultural Wages Board covering England and Wales but was more interested in creating a Wales only institution once Unite's frame bridging gained traction. While Unite's frame bridging after 2011 was aimed primarily at the Labour Party, it appealed to Plaid Cymru's frame of gaining Welsh independence by offering a deepening of political devolution. Plaid Cymru then changed its policy preferences from indifference to support, helping to demobilise employer opposition within agriculture where the cultural background of many employers can prompt support for the party's aspirations.

Finally, Unite's strategic framing took place within a supportive political opportunity structure (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Tarrow, 1992, 2011) characterized by two elements. One is the political salience of agriculture, as although it is small in terms of the overall labour market and economy, the industry has a localised importance in many rural areas and is heavily dependent on state provided financial subsidies administered by the Welsh Government that aim to support agricultural businesses and protect the environment. These dynamics mean that key actors are invested in the industry, prompting a greater willingness to intervene.

The other is the ‘small state’ political economy of Wales. Katzenstein (1985) defined such states as featuring two dynamics. The first was a perception of vulnerability to external forces, helping to generate social partnership ideologies across different actors, and the second was small scale prompting greater intra-elite interaction and negotiation. Both are present in Wales where many actors emphasize more collective approaches to social justice (Beynon et al., 2012; Morgan and Mungham, 2010) while the small scale of Wales combined with institutional clustering in its capital, Cardiff, to prompt an environment featuring strong social ties, which all facilitated coalition building efforts.

## **Methods**

We used a mixed-method approach (Bergman, 2008) comprising qualitative and quantitative data gained through interviews, consultancy, and documentary analysis. Our methodology sought to obtain multiple perspectives on the Agricultural Advisory Panel to generate a rounded description of circumstances surrounding its emergence. The collation of data across three strands enhanced the robustness of our account by allowing triangulation.

The first strand was data collected when assisting the Welsh Government to prepare a regulatory impact assessment of the Interim Agricultural Wages Order (National Assembly for Wales, 2016). Our work enabled us to gather quantitative data, such as those on wages and employment, or qualitative data as to the policy development process gained through interacting with government officials. These enabled us to gain understanding across two areas. One was the political and economic characteristics of agriculture, while the other was the processes and motivations that created the Agricultural Advisory Panel for Wales. The second strand was collecting documents such as explanatory memoranda to the Agricultural Wages

Orders, the responses to the Welsh Government's consultations on the establishment of the Panel and its operations, the Panel's constitution, and annual reports, as well as statistical data on the industry.

The third strand was semi-structured interviews that took place with twenty-eight representatives of: The Welsh Government (Ministers and senior civil servants); employer organizations representing farmers in Wales and elsewhere (policy officers and members); the union representing agricultural employees (officers and activists); other labour organizations (policy officers); farm managers; and, other organizations active within the agricultural sector. Of these individuals, six were current or former members of the seven-strong Agricultural Advisory Panel for Wales. Interviews sought to obtain individual perspectives as to the regulation of agricultural ER and to gain an understanding of the political, social, and economic dynamics shaping the case.

## **Framing**

This section analyses the frame developed by Unite, and its frame bridging (Snow et al., 1986; Benford and Snow, 2000) designed to mobilize the coalition by connecting with the pre-existing frames of other actors.

In 2010, the Conservative-led UK Government announced its intention to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board arguing that such regulation duplicated the statutory National Living Wage, burdened the industry, and reduced efficiency (DEFRA, 2012). Unite's initial framing focused on achieving greater social justice throughout the labour market; where the union viewed deregulation as impacting negatively as 'there might be all sorts of good reasons why

things need to change, but [deregulation is] always an attempt to bring people down rather than bring people up' (Interview with Unite representative). The union applied its diagnostic frame to agricultural ER, observing that few workers were subject to the grade one wage floor equivalent to the UK Government's National Minimum Wage, with others benefiting from the higher floors of grades two to six, with progression dependent on experience and skills. Unite argued that removal of all wages floors and their replacement with the UK Government's statutory National Minimum Wage would result in a 'dash to the bottom' as farmers passed on price pressures from supermarkets and food processors to converge on wage levels around the statutory minimum (National Assembly for Wales, 2012a), proposing through a prognostic frame that the Welsh Government defy the UK Government to retain minimum wage setting.

Nevertheless, Unite had insufficient agency to overcome the UK Government's determination to abolish agricultural wage fixing in Wales. Although the union represented agricultural workers, membership density was low, reflecting the difficulty of organizing a workforce fragmented across many small and isolated employers. Low density meant that Unite's organizing agency within the workforce was limited; a more productive approach would be to construct a motivational frame sufficient to mobilize the resource-rich Welsh Government, given that it shared social justice concerns with Unite. The Welsh Government had, for example, promoted social partnerships within the National Health Service since the early 2000s where it dismantled an internal market to create structures where employers' organizations and unions co-operated to resolve ER issues (Bacon and Samuel, 2016).

However, Unite's motivational framing around social justice failed to convince the Labour Party-Plaid Cymru coalition government, in office until 2011, to support retaining minimum wage setting. The Labour Party's Manifesto for the 2011 assembly election, for example, did

not mention the topic (Labour Party, 2011). The Labour Party won this election and formed a single party government. Meanwhile, Unite's earlier failure to gain support from the pre-2011 coalition government prompted it to mobilize a pre-existing frame developed within Labour, namely attaining political solutions distinct from those of Conservative-led UK Governments. This frame was rooted in long-running political disputes between both governments prompted by ideological differences, as well as what the Welsh Government perceived as the high-handedness and disinterest of the UK Government in Welsh affairs. Tensions between both governments gestated long before the Conservative-led UK Government took office in 2010. Economic restructuring under the Conservative Governments of the 1980s and 1990s left a legacy of mistrust, as did the extent to which UK Government Ministers for Wales, most notably John Redwood, were seen as remote and high-handed (Gooberman, 2019).

Disputes flared after 2010, when the new Conservative led UK coalition Government with its focus on austerity was ideologically at odds with the Labour Welsh Government, symbolised by the Labour Party's campaign slogan in the 2011 National Assembly elections of 'standing up for Wales'. Both governments feuded on devolved topics such as education and healthcare, notably when UK Prime Minister David Cameron described the administrative healthcare border between England and Wales as 'the line between life and death' (BBC, 2014). Importantly, political differences fuelled perceptions on the part of Welsh Government Ministers that the UK Government did not understand devolution or respect devolved institutions. One was Education and Skills Minister Leighton Andrews who argued that 'a tendency as part of the policy design process [was] to take England as the default when policies were being developed' (Interview with Leighton Andrews), ignoring the distinctive needs of Wales.

Against this background, Unite launched a campaign to retain minimum wage setting that aimed to gain the attention of the Labour Party by arguing that the Conservative-led UK Government's abolition of agricultural wages regulation symbolised conflict between the two governments. The campaign promoted its framing across social media and traditional media, such as when Unite's Welsh Regional Secretary argued publicly that abolition symbolised the UK 'coalition government's disrespect for devolution and disregard for Welsh workers' (Western Mail, 2013). However, the most important element of the campaign was the process by which individual Unite activists were equally active within the Labour Party, enabling them to engage in frame bridging by highlighting joint interests. These Unite activists attended Labour Party conferences to highlight the existence of, and threat to, agricultural wages fixing and build political support for its retention. One such activist recalled that he:

Spoke at Welsh Labour Party Conference, hijacked a debate on regional pay and there'd never been anything particularly on the agricultural side, but I just used the regional pay debate to get in there and make a call for something to be done about farm workers in Wales (Interview with Unite representative).

The purpose of such calls was to raise awareness of minimum wage setting within the context of both frames, prompting the mobilization of Labour Party politicians and activists behind retaining such regulation through a new institution. One example was the Labour Party Assembly Member, Mick Antoniw, previously a lawyer specialising in union representation. He knew Unite activists socially and discussed agricultural minimum wage fixing with them at conferences and other events. He then worked with the union to produce campaigning material arguing against abolition (Antoniw, 2012) on the grounds of social justice and the right of the National Assembly for Wales to legislate on agricultural ER. His material was



influential in raising awareness of the topic within the Labour Party, many of whose members, activists and elected representatives were from urban areas and lacked knowledge as to agricultural ER.

Unite's frame bridging achieved its objective. Their effectiveness in connecting agricultural wages regulation to intergovernmental conflict was demonstrated by two examples. The first was statements made by Owen Smith, the Labour Member of the UK Parliament representing Wales in the UK wide Labour Party's shadow cabinet, summarising how distrust of the UK Government influenced the Welsh Government's policy towards agricultural ER. He argued 'what's really at stake is Tory [Conservative] acceptance of the devolution settlement and respect for the Welsh Assembly [...] revealing their [...] determination to block Labour measures to make Wales a fairer place' (ITV, 2013). The other was Alun Davies, the Welsh Government's Minister for Natural Resources and Food, recalling some 'quite extraordinary conversations' with representatives of the UK Government where the 'view was basically, "You do as you're told [accept abolition] You don't argue. This is [the] UK Government telling you to do something. You will do it."' (Interview with Alun Davies AM).

Once linkages between wages regulation and inter-governmental conflict had been articulated and publicised, this framing also raised awareness of the social justice implications of abolition. While social justice framing had failed to mobilize the Labour Party before 2011, the impact of Unite's frame bridging in relation to inter-governmental conflict prompted a belated acceptance of the social justice frame as demonstrated by statements made after 2011 by two Labour Party politicians. One was Assembly Member Mark Drakeford, a future Welsh Government First Minister who strongly agreed with Unite witnesses as to the desirability of wage setting during National Assembly for Wales committee hearings into the UK

Government's plan to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board (National Assembly for Wales, 2012c). The other was Alun Davies, whose position was similar to that of Unite, arguing that:

I felt that agricultural workers were in a weak position. I believe in minimum wage legislation. I believe in legislation which creates a framework within which employers and employees are able to negotiate [...] when you employ people, you take responsibility and you have responsibilities (Interview with Alun Davies AM).

Finally, Unite's frame bridging in relation to inter-governmental conflict and the importance of distinctive Welsh political solutions also impacted other actors, as the Labour Party is not the only political movement motivated by political conflicts between the Welsh and UK Governments. The central frame of Plaid Cymru is to gain political independence for Wales. While the Labour Party does not share Plaid Cymru's independence frame, both parties wanted the UK Government to devolve more powers to the National Assembly for Wales. This shared objective means that Unite's frame bridging was also attractive to Plaid Cymru, as the party sees the creation of autonomous Welsh institutions as contributing towards building a case for independence. Although Plaid Cymru did not mention agricultural wage setting in its 2011 Manifesto (Plaid Cymru, 2011), it joined Labour in subsequently reversing its disinterest to support the creation of a new Wales-only institution. Linkages between creating a new institution and recasting the devolution framework to obtain greater powers were made explicit by Llyr Griffiths, Plaid Cymru's Agricultural Spokesman for Sustainable Communities, Energy, and Food, who argued that 'Plaid Cymru has always welcomed the establishment of a Welsh Agricultural Wages Board' although delays to its establishment caused by intergovernmental conflict meant that 'the current devolution dispensation is not fit for purpose' (Western Mail, 2014).

## **Political opportunity structure**

Framing takes place with an opportunity structure (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Tarrow, 1992, 2011). The structure in Wales that enabled the formation of the coalition had two elements. One was that the political salience of the agricultural industry was far greater than suggested by its 3.2 per cent share of all workforce jobs in Wales (Welsh Government, 2019:8).

Salience was prompted by three factors. The first was subsidy, as the agricultural industry depended on financial support provided by the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy through schemes administered by the Welsh Government, notably the Basic Payment Scheme based on the level of individual farm receipts under previous production-based schemes, and agri-environmental schemes. More than half of all farms in Wales in 2017-18 would have either made losses or only marginal profits without such these subsidies, with poor profitability concentrated in smaller upland farms (Welsh Government, 2019). While Welsh Government subsidy to farm businesses is expected to focus more on environmental stewardship after Brexit, large subsidies requiring a sizable administrative structure are expected to continue. The second was the localised economic and political importance of agriculture. Most of Wales is rural and often sparsely populated, and agriculture accounts for up to 12 per cent of all employment in some such counties (Welsh Government, 2019: 8) where it remains politically important as reflected by the political activities of their elected representatives. The final factor was cultural, as 43 per cent of the agricultural workforce speaks Welsh (Welsh Government, 2019: 11). Although the relationship between individual language ability and nationalistic support for greater institutional autonomy is far from automatic, political scientists have argued consistently that Welsh speakers are generally more supportive, as occurred in the 2011 referendum on granting the National Assembly for Wales greater law-making powers (Wyn

Jones and Scully, 2012). These factors mean that the agricultural industry tends to be formed from employers and workers often supportive of enhancing autonomous and distinctive political and regulatory structures.

These three factors prompted a formerly senior civil servant to argue that Welsh Government has a 'very hands-on' approach to governing agriculture because:

It would be understandable if agricultural matters were a bit of a footnote in the Welsh Government, but far from it because of the social and cultural implications of agriculture. Wales is a very rural place. It [agriculture] always had a very prominent part in political life (Interview with former civil servant).

The other element of the political opportunity structure was a 'small state' (Katzenstein, 1985) political economy characterised by three factors: a sense of vulnerability; a shared focus on collective solutions; and, close ties between social and political actors.

First, vulnerability is in part prompted by the complex and difficult historic political relationship between Wales and England. Vulnerability stemming from such historical experiences has been given contemporary force by two factors. One is the historic underperformance of the Welsh economy while the virtual extinction of once vital heavy industries prompted negative socio-economic impacts, including high levels of poverty and a reliance on UK Government subsidies to maintain public services. The other is threats to the Welsh language that is now spoken by less than a quarter of the population and is endangered in many rural areas where it was once dominant.

Second, political discourse in Wales has a stronger focus on more collective approaches to social and political topics compared to elsewhere in the UK. Beynon et al. (2012) argued that this focus in part stems from the legacy of heavy industries, with their decline often blamed on UK Government policies; one factor prompting ‘patterned variation’ within UK-wide ER as demonstrated by a higher union density in Wales than elsewhere, institutional divergence (Bacon and Samuel, 2016), and a Social Partnership Bill that will encourage ethical employment practices within public sector supply chains. Meanwhile, the collective focus is symbolised by the dominance of the Labour Party in Wales where it has gained the largest share of the vote and number of seats at every general election since 1922 (Awan-Scully, 2020) and at every election to the National Assembly for Wales/ Welsh Parliament since the first such election in 1999.

Third, close ties between social and political actors are prompted by the small scale of Wales and its capital, Cardiff. Wales has a population of around 3 million people of whom only some 350,000 live in Cardiff, prompting a ‘village like atmosphere’ (Morgan and Mungham, 2010). Most institutions including the National Assembly for Wales, the Welsh Government, unions, and all political parties are headquartered in Cardiff. An exception is the two farming unions, but these maintain close links with the Cardiff institutional cluster, necessitating a presence in the capital. Small scale and institutional clustering have created an environment characterised by dense and overlapping social networks encompassing unions, politicians, employers’ organizations, businesses, and civil society organisations. These combine to form a remarkably tight-knit social environment where participants can access and lobby policy makers across many formal and informal settings, prompting a Wales Chair of a prominent UK-wide employers’ organization to observe that:

Cardiff is a strange place I think in terms of the UK because people from my [UK-wide] organisation come to me, “How do you know everyone [...]?”, but the point is [...] the politicians, cultural, general administrative, civil service, it’s all here within a square mile or two square miles [...] I go to an event [...] I will walk into the room knowing a third to half the people. It’s just incredible. It really is. (Interview with EO representative).

An often-shared outlook combined with dense social networks to facilitate an environment conducive to coalition building and frame bridging. Within this context, intra-elite linkages in Cardiff enable informal negotiations as does the sense of vulnerability to, and occasional resentment of, political forces external to Wales.

### **The coalition and its outputs**

Unite and the Welsh Labour Government were the core of the coalition, but the coalition goal of creating an agricultural wage setting institutions was also supported by Plaid Cymru, which further enabled support and muted opposition. Unite created the coalition through its bridging and alignment of different actor frames. Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Government helped marshal support for coalition objectives and mute opposition, while the Welsh Government deployed its resources in pursuit of coalition goals.

Once mobilised by Unite’s frame bridging, coalition members acted to mute opposition from employers. Two farming unions represent employers in Wales. One is the National Farmers’ Union (NFU) Cymru, an autonomous division of the England and Wales NFU, and the other is the Farmer’s Union of Wales (FUW). The NFU Cymru opposed the retention of agricultural

minimum wages in Wales, arguing that these had been made ‘obsolete’ by the UK Government’s statutory minimum wage (National Assembly for Wales, 2012b). However, Unite’s frame bridging meant that wage setting was prioritised after 2011 by the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru. The importance of Welsh Government subsidy to many farms also made sustained opposition to the coalition less attractive, a dynamic bolstered by Plaid Cymru’s support as much of its electoral base is rural. These dynamics meant that while the NFU Cymru remained opposed to wage setting, it was politically isolated and incentivised to follow a pragmatic approach. A farm manager and NFU Cymru representative subsequently observed that ‘we understand there was a political reasoning behind this [the panel] arriving, we’re stuck with it and there we are. We’ve got to make the most of it.’ (Interview with farm manager and NFU Cymru representative). The other farming union, the FUW, was established many years before devolution to ensure that Welsh interests would not be overshadowed by those ‘who farmed in more fertile, arable producing areas in England’ (FUW, 2019) prompting a perceived lack of interest in topics more relevant to Wales (Interview with FUW representative). The FUW consistently supported minimum wage setting, and its support of a new institution in part reflected its support for the principle of devolution, with a representative arguing that as ‘so long as you believe in devolution, you can be proud of the fact that the Agricultural Wages Board is retained in Wales’ (Interview with FUW representative).

Once the coalition was operational, the Welsh Government took the leading role as it mobilized to challenge the UK Government in the UK Supreme Court. Devolution was governed by the 2006 Government of Wales Act that described or implied three jurisdictional categories of responsibilities. The first was responsibilities, such as agriculture, where legislative powers were held by the National Assembly for Wales. The second was those, such as defence, retained by the UK Parliament. The final category was responsibilities, including ER, not mentioned as

falling within the first two categories. The Act was silent on which institution had legislative jurisdiction over the final category, but it was generally assumed to be the UK Parliament. The 2006 Act stated that agriculture was devolved but did not mention ER, prompting the UK Government to argue that the Agricultural Wages Board's operations in Wales were within ER and were not devolved. Conversely, the Welsh Government after 2011 argued that such operations were agricultural and were devolved. By mid-2013, two conflicting acts governed agricultural ER in Wales: one, passed by the National Assembly for Wales, preserved wage setting machinery but the other, passed by the UK Parliament, abolished such machinery. The dispute was considered by the Supreme Court which found in favour of the Welsh Government by concluding that the National Assembly's powers over devolved topics took priority over those of the UK Parliament in the absence of a specified exclusion (Supreme Court, 2013).

The Supreme Court ruling enabled the legislation passed in 2013 by the National Assembly for Wales creating the Agricultural Advisory Panel for Wales to be safeguarded. This bipartite panel agrees minimum hourly rates and other employment terms and conditions for all agricultural workers, before drafting enabling legislation. Minimum rates are set for six grades, with individual positioning depending on qualifications, work responsibility and experience, although grade 1 is set slightly above the UK Government's National Living Wage. Overtime rates of 1.5 times basic hourly pay apply to all grades, while regulations set holiday pay, sick pay, paid bereavement leave, paid travel time and rest breaks. All grade 1 workers who have worked for an employer for 30 weeks are entitled to undertake training sufficient to enter grade 2. Finally, the Panel sets other payments including on-call allowance and night-work supplement.



The Panel uses pendulum bargaining where both sides present offers, one of which is eventually accepted. The process begins with a claim from the employee side, followed by a counterclaim from the employers. Both then explain their positions, before entering recess to consider revisions. The Chair speaks to both sides to encourage convergence before the Panel votes on both proposals; ‘The point of that obviously is nothing in the middle. You’ve got to go to one or the other’ (Interview with Panel member). Initial pay rounds were, however, characterized by the employer side either refusing to submit a proposal, or proposing no change. These rounds resulted in great variation as independent members were forced to choose between two extremes. The 2017 round, for example, resulted in pay rises of only 1.2 per cent for Grades 3 to 6 but the subsequent year saw rises of 10 per cent for Grade 2 and between 4 and 7 per cent for higher grades (National Assembly for Wales, 2017, 2018). Data on the impact of the wage floors have not been released by the Welsh Government but some 13,600 farm workers are regulated by the new structure (Welsh Government, 2019; 9). Most of these are at Grade 2 or above, while workers in England are regulated only by the UK Government’s National Living Wage, enabling the Panel to secure minimum wages for agricultural workers in Wales higher than those in England.

## **Conclusion**

Our case study demonstrates that Unite was motivated to form a coalition by factors identified by the literature (Frege et al., 2004). ‘Pull factors’ included the low level of union membership and its lack of bargaining power. A ‘push factor’ was that possible coalition partners included those with greater political power and resources. Nevertheless, Unite faced three obstacles when forming a coalition. First, the Labour Party and Plaid Cymru were initially disinterested in opposing the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board or in collective solutions. Second,

responsibility for ER in the UK generally lies with the UK Government, potentially preventing an autonomous Welsh solution to the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board with its England and Wales remit. Third, Unite had little material or political incentives with which to attract coalition partners.

The article argues that Unite's frame bridging was key in mobilising coalition partners. Unite's initial focus on its social justice frame was insufficient to mobilise the Labour Party and Plaid Cymru before 2011. However, Unite's bridge building subsequently targeted and mobilised a key frame of the Labour Party, namely pursuing different political solutions from the UK Government. Similarly, Unite moved beyond its social justice frame to engage Plaid Cymru as its frame bridging connected to the party's key frame of independence, while the creation of a Wales specific ER institution resonated with this goal. Thus, the coalition successfully pursued a joint goal but each actor acted on different primary interests rooted in their distinctive frames (social justice, distinctive Welsh political solutions, Welsh independence). The frame bridging was facilitated by a political opportunity structure formed by close social ties in the 'small state' political economy of Wales and the political salience of agriculture.

This argument moves beyond previous literature on frame alignment processes and union coalition building (Heery and Conley, 2007; Cornfield and Fletcher, 1998; Gahan and Pekarek, 2013) by developing and extending the frame bridging concept as a key union strategy for building coalitions. It also demonstrates that unions can build bridges between their own frames and those of others in a way that is sensitive to the primary interests of the other actors, enabling the union to change policy preferences of partners to form a coalition sufficiently powerful to achieve the union's key objective.

We also move beyond previous literature in a different sense. Previous research on union coalition building focussed on civil organizations and excluded “joint union action with state agencies and political parties” (Frege et al., 2004; 139). However, our paper demonstrates that in a context of declining union power and membership, it can be meaningful for unions to pursue goals beyond their own individual reach by building coalitions with resource rich actors, even if those are political parties or state actors such as the Welsh Government.

The key accomplishment of the coalition is also important for ER research in substantive terms. The case illustrates that devolved institutions are central to a Wales specific political and institutional environment that can, in certain circumstances, be exploited by union frame bridging and coalition building to drive substantive sub-national divergences within UK ER. The case output, the Agricultural Advisory Panel for Wales, is the first collective, industry specific wages regulatory institution to be established in the UK since the now-abolished wages councils were created. Agricultural ER in Wales is now regulated using bi-partite approaches more commonly found in ‘co-ordinated’ business systems, as are activities in Scotland (Dukes, 2019) and Northern Ireland where long-existing institutions were not affected by the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board. The pattern in England, however, is different, as industry-wide ER protections have been abolished to regulate agriculture in a more ‘liberal’ manner.

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