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Understanding a century of Labour dominance: Social science and the puzzle of voting behaviour in Wales

Richard Wyn Jones¹

As we mark a centenary of Welsh Labour electoral hegemony in Wales, this article explores the ways in which social scientists have sought to explain this unprecedented record of success. In exploring these various accounts, a window is opened on shifting academic thinking about the basis of vote choice and tribute is paid to pioneering work that is now often overlooked. Building on this analysis of attempts to explain Labour dominance in Wales, the article concludes with a consideration of avenues for future exploration.

November 15th, 2022, marks exactly a century since the Labour party first emerged from a UK general election with both a majority of seats in Wales and a plurality of the votes cast by the Welsh electorate. Remarkably, it has gone on to *at least* match this feat in every subsequent general election. Indeed, in nine general elections (1945, 1950, 1951, 1955, 1959, 1964, 1966, 1970 and 1997) the party secured an absolute majority of the votes cast in Wales in addition to the majority of Welsh MPs. Labour dominance has also characterized devolved elections, with the party emerging from each Senedd election with the largest number of seats and votes since the establishment of the then-National Assembly for Wales in 1999. By any standards this is a remarkable record. Reviewing global elections data, Labour's century-long period of electoral dominance in Wales would appear to represent the longest period of sub-state electoral domination in democratic history.

Comparison with the nearest contenders for Welsh Labour's record serves only to underline the extent of the party's achievement. The South Tyrolean People's Party has won every election in Italy's small, predominantly German speaking autonomous province since 1948, while the Christian Social Union (CSU) has dominated Bavarian electoral politics since 1953.² Both of which represent extraordinary records of unbroken success. Yet even if Labour were to suddenly stop winning elections in Wales – and there's nothing at all to suggest that this is in prospect – it would still be several decades before the People's Party or the CSU could hope to match its current record. Can it really be doubted that Welsh Labour is the democratic world's most successful election winning machine?³

¹ The contents of the following reflects innumerable conversations with co-authors ranging over a twenty-five year period, most consistently with Dafydd Trystan Davies. More proximately, much of my current thinking has been developed in tandem with friends and colleagues Ailsa Henderson, Jac Larnar and Ed Gareth Poole. In preparing the Cymmrodorion lecture on which the article is based, I was also fortunate enough to be able to draw on the recollections of Denis Balsom, Kevin R. Cox, Mari James, James Mitchell and Richard Rose. Ed and Jac have also been generous enough to read and comment on this lecture. In underscoring my thanks to them all it is also important to emphasise that none should be held responsible for any errors or missteps that remain. Neither should it be assumed that they necessarily agree with the arguments that follow.

² The post-war South Tyrolean People's Party has its origins in the 'Deutscher Verband', a grouping which first won in 1921, shortly after South Tyrol's annexation by Italy. Along with all other non-fascist parties in Italy it was abolished between 1926 and 1945.

³ Note that the focus here is on Europe only. There is also a record of one-party dominance in the United States to be contended with, specifically in the post-reconstruction 'solid south'. The fundamental difference is that, in these cases, Democratic Party dominance was based on what is now known as 'voter suppression' and the rest of the apparatus of 'Jim Crow'. Labour dominance in Wales was premised on the extension and equalisation of the democratic franchise rather than, in the American case, its opposite. Comparing them, therefore, seems not only to do a serious disservice to Welsh Labour's achievement but to represent something of a category error.

That Welsh Labour's success has been achieved from the centre left of the political spectrum is particularly noteworthy.⁴ Anyone who follows electoral politics in the developed world will certainly be familiar with talk of the 'crisis of the left' or the 'crisis of social democracy'. There is currently a group of high-profile UK-based political scientists who seem to dine out – both metaphorically and one suspects quite literally – on this trope. But as a theme it is hardly new. Yet whatever happens elsewhere, either in the rest of the UK or in the developed world more generally, in Wales the centre left sails serenely on – from election after election, decade after decade.

Indeed, what makes the Welsh case even more remarkable – to the point of genuine peculiarity – is that Labour's isn't the first period of one-party dominance that we have experienced in Welsh political history. Neither is it the first period of one-party dominance from the centre-left of the political spectrum. Rather, Labour's post 1922 dominance superseded a previous era of Liberal electoral dominance that saw that party win at least a majority of seats and a plurality of the votes cast in Wales between the Second Reform Act of 1867 and 1918: which represents another full half century of one-party domination. All of which means that since the beginning of the democratic era – or perhaps, more correctly, the democratising era – and in terms of the electoral preferences of its voters, at least, Wales has experienced two successive, extended periods of one party-dominance by parties of the centre left. It is all we have known.

Given this context, and as we look forward to marking the centenary of Welsh Labour electoral hegemony in Wales, the task I have given myself in this lecture is to explore the accounts that have been offered by social scientists for this completely unprecedented record of success.⁵ How have scholars sought to explain Labour dominance, in particular, but also – where relevant – this even more extended period of centre-left electoral dominance in Wales?

Tracking the ways in which social scientists have sought to explain one-party dominance in Wales offers a window on shifts in academic thinking about the basis of vote choice that is of considerable interest in itself. A more considered meditation on the literature is also an opportunity to explore and pay tribute to some pioneering work by those who sometimes have not been given their due. Finally, from a personal perspective, as someone who's been involved in the study of elections and referendums in Wales for almost a quarter of a century, it's an opportunity to take stock. What has been learnt during my own period of activity that appears to be of lasting value and, just as importantly, what appears mistaken?

The remainder of the lecture will be divided into three main parts. First, we will focus on the place of one-party dominance in Wales in some of the founding texts of the study of comparative politics and the early formative steps to apply social scientific methods to the understanding of voting in Wales. Secondly, we will shift our focus to Aberystwyth, and the pioneering work associated above all with Denis Balsom based on data from the 1979 Welsh

⁴ To return the previous comparators, while the Christian Social Union is undoubtedly a party of the centre right, the South Tyrolean People's Party is a catch-all party containing within itself ideologically disparate factions. But for a sense of its overall disposition, it is worth noting that, as the European level, it aligns with the centre-right European People's Party.

⁵ My reference to *social* rather than *political* scientists is deliberate. Voting behaviour remains a subject of interest across several social scientific disciplines, and (*inter alia*) sociologists and geographers have joined self-identified political scientist in making distinguished contributions to our understanding of voting behaviour in Wales. It is also the case that, for at least some of the period under consideration in the following discussion, disciplinary boundaries were – mercifully – much more porous than is presently the case.

Election Study. For better or worse, the third part of the lecture is more self-referential and focuses on work in whose production I have been heavily involved myself, albeit in conjunction with several colleagues. This will bring the story up to the present day.

In the beginning: why is Wales different?

This is not the place – and neither am I qualified – to provide a history of the development of the study of politics as a distinct field of academic enquiry. As it happens, I have worked in two Welsh universities with claims to particularly long-standing pedigrees in this regard. Aberystwyth’s Department of International Politics recently celebrated a centenary since the establishing of what was to become its founding chair, while in 2020 Cardiff marked a hundred and twenty years since the teaching of politics first began at that institution. But notwithstanding these momentous anniversaries – and conscious that am at this point flirting with nothing less than institutional apostasy – it is nonetheless reasonable to claim that it was only during the 1960s and early 1970s that the disciplinary identity of politics (including international relations) crystallized in any coherent way. In the UK and the rest of Europe, at least, *this* was the formative period.

In these islands, the establishment of the 1964 British Election Study is rightly regarded as a foundational moment in terms of the study of elections. This was the point at which social scientific techniques pioneered in Michigan began to be applied systematically to the study of elections in Britain (cf. Northern Ireland). But simultaneously, through the pioneering efforts of scholars such as Jean Blondel, Hans Daalder and Stein Rokkan – and boosted by the rapid expansion of higher education right across western Europe – international networks began to be formed which aimed to facilitate comparative, cross-national research.⁶

From our perspective, it is interesting to note how soon Wales and the distinctiveness of Welsh voting behaviour began to feature in the emerging literature. It seems plausible to attribute this to two factors. First, in the terms of the literature on voting behaviour in Britain in which the relationship between social class and partisan choice was central, it was clear that Labour was performing significantly better than might be expected given Wales’ class structure. Or as noted by Blondel in one of the era’s seminal texts,

Wales is a definite Labour stronghold: Labour received almost a quarter of the middle-class vote, instead of about a sixth over the whole country, and almost three-fifths of the lower middle-class and working-class vote, instead of about two-fifths over the whole country.⁷

Meanwhile, the Conservatives were underperforming, leading David Butler and Donald Stokes (in another equally influential publication) to pronounce Wales ‘The most anti-Conservative area in all of Britain’.⁸ Wales was different. There was a puzzle that needed to be explained.

Moreover, there was a wider frame of reference which validated the study of such territorial differences and anomalies. This reflected the fact that state-formation, centre-periphery relations and, relatedly, the way that states adapted to deal with internal heterogeneity, were key points of interest for those emerging international networks to which I have already

⁶ Leading to the development of the ECPR (European Consortium for Political Research) in 1970 <<https://ecpr.eu/AboutUs/History>> [accessed 15 May 2022].

⁷ Jean Blondel, *Voters, Parties and Leaders: The Social Fabric of British Politics* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 64.

⁸ David Butler and Donald Stokes, *Political Change in Britain: Forces Shaping Electoral Choice* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1969), p. 171.

alluded. In such a context, Welsh distinctiveness was not merely a minor footnote to an Anglo-British story but was of interest in and of itself for the light it shed on a much broader, truly cross-European set of processes. Perhaps the key intellectual figure in all of this was the Norwegian, Stein Rokkan.⁹

In his case, an interest in and knowledge of Wales that is very obvious throughout his work was further encouraged by very close family connections. His wife Elizabeth was Welsh and the family seem to have spent their summer holidays in a cottage close to St David's cathedral in Pembrokeshire.¹⁰ As such it should probably come as no surprise that the first serious attempt to explain the distinctiveness of voting behaviour in Wales was published in a pathbreaking collection edited by Rokkan and the eminent Finnish scholar, Erik Allardt. It was Kevin R. Cox's essay on 'Geography, Social Contexts, and Voting Behaviour in Wales, 1861-1951'.¹¹

Cox was already by that point based at Ohio State where, during a long and distinguished career, he would go on to become one of the best-known Marxist-influenced scholars writing on geography. His interrogation of voting behaviour in Wales drew on his 1967 PhD thesis that, on the basis of aggregate data, had shown that what he termed 'levels of left-wing voting in Wales – defining left wing as including the Liberal party and the Communists – are highly underpredicted when regressed on social class measures'.¹² There was, therefore, something about Wales that escaped narrow class analysis – or at least meant that class in Wales operated differently that it did in either England or Scotland. The question facing Cox was, therefore, what did this Welsh difference consist of? A related and equally fundamental question was even if this difference could be conceptualized, was there data available that might allow it to be studied through those methods that were being increasingly utilized by social scientists – which in the field of voting behaviour meant quantitatively?

The latter point is now easily overlooked, but it is worth recalling a fundamental truth about the study of voting behaviour in Wales, namely that even if the right questions are asked, 'British' individual level data rarely draws from enough respondents in Wales to allow for disaggregated analysis. This for the simple reason that the Welsh and indeed the Scottish populations are so small relative to England's (Northern Ireland tends to be completely excluded from consideration). With only one exception in 1979 – to which we return in the next section – it is only since 1997 that we have had regular Welsh surveys of the kind that underpin most analyses of voting behaviour. This meant that the pioneers of our

⁹ Stein Rokkan and Derek Unwin (eds), *The politics of territorial identity: Studies of developments in the European Peripheries* (London: Sage, 1981); Stein Rokkan and Derek Urwin, *Economy, Territory, Identity: Politics of Western Europe Peripheries* (London: Sage, 1983). For an over-view see Stein Rokkan, *State Formation, Nation-Building and Mass Politics: The Theory of Stein Rokkan*, ed. by Peter Flora with Stein Kunhle and Derek Urwin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ For details of Rokkan's life and career see Arild Stubhaug, *Stein Rokkan: Fra periferi til sentrum* (Bergen: Forlaget Vigmstad & Bjørke AS, 2019).

¹¹ Kevin R. Cox, 'Geography, Social Context, and Voting Behavior in Wales, 1861-1951', in *Mass Politics: Studies in Political Sociology*, ed. by Erik Allardt and Stein Rokkan (New York: The Free Press, 1970), pp. 117–59.

¹² Cox, 'Voting Behavior, 118. It is worth emphasising that Cox focuses on general elections in Wales in the period predating the rise of Plaid Cymru as an electoral force. The latter development would serve only to reinforce his general point about the prevalence of 'left-wing' voting in Wales.

understanding of vote choice in Wales were almost exclusively reliant on aggregate level data, with all the problems of ‘ecological fallacy’ that arise in such a context.¹³

Another related key problem was that the aggregate measures that were available offered no *direct* access to the senses of national identity existing in Wales – that is to individuals’ own sense of self. Rather, the distinctiveness of Wales had to be approached via measures focused on religious nonconformity and the Welsh language; in other words, a focus on two markers of Welshness that had already been largely eclipsed across large parts of the territory of Wales. All of which meant that Cox’s discussion of electoral behaviour in what he termed ‘traditional Wales’ – that is, those parts of Wales where Welsh was still widely spoken and Nonconformist Protestantism was still an important social force – was noticeably fuller and more persuasive than his discussion of electoral behaviour in what he identified as ‘modern Wales’.

Drawing on the work of Welsh historians, geographers and classics of Welsh social science such Alwyn D. Rees’ *Life in a Welsh Countryside*, Cox posits ‘egalitarianism’ and ‘veneration of education’ as key values in ‘traditional Wales’. They persisted as legacies of earlier struggles against religious and economic discrimination even if developments such as disestablishment and the break-up of the great estates had served to reduce ‘conflicts within the social structure’.¹⁴ These values help underpin ‘left wing’ voting in ‘traditional Wales’, above and beyond what might otherwise be expected given the area’s class composition.

Given the limitations of the data, explaining why class significantly underpredicts Labour support in ‘modern Wales’ was significantly more challenging. Especially in a context in which Cox highlights not only the decline of the chapels but also the role ‘English immigrant unionists’ as ‘the most ardent propagators of left-wing radicalism’ in the coal mining areas, in dragging these communities into the Labour fold.¹⁵ It is, after all, far from obvious why Anglicisation and a wider process of cultural homogenisation should result in a position in which both working and middle class voters in Wales end up as being more likely to vote for Labour than working and middle class voters across the rest of Britain (which overwhelmingly means in England)? Surely the logic of the argument is rather that we should expect any differences in voting behaviour to be effaced. In the context of the data available, Cox’s analysis was ingenious and even today retains its interest, and this not only as a historic document. But without individual level survey data and, equally crucially, better survey measures, there were always going to be hard limits to what he or anyone else could say about the subject.¹⁶

Class, National Identity and Cultural Attachment: The road to ‘The Three Wales Model’

This initial interest served to catalyse much more serious engagement with understanding voting behaviour in Wales; eventually in Wales itself. This was part of a wider process of engagement with what was sometimes termed ‘extra-England’ or UK politics, this in juxtaposition to the more orthodox focus on (Anglo-centric) British politics. It was an engagement that developed an important collective dimension via the Political Studies

¹³ For completeness, I note that Cox managed to access some individual level data for Wales from 1960–61, but it was of very limited utility for his analysis.

¹⁴ Cox, ‘Voting Behavior’, 156.

¹⁵ Cox, ‘Voting Behavior’, 156.

¹⁶ A point that can be extended to the analysis in Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British national development, 1536-1966* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

Association Work Group on United Kingdom Politics which met annually for a number of years after 1976. This group was convened by Richard Rose, an American political science working at the University of Strathclyde.¹⁷ Indeed, Rose and Strathclyde were central to a great deal of activity. For me, at least, the characteristic yellow covers of Strathclyde's Studies in Public Policy working paper series will remain indelibly associated with the experience of studying Welsh politics as an undergraduate student. But buttressing Rose's intellectual entrepreneurship was financial support from the Social Science Research Council and the Nuffield Foundation. Support presaged on the notion that social scientists needed to prepare for the possible advent of devolution. Neither was this the only network focused on what we now know as 'territorial politics', not least because the ECPR network that Stein Rokkan had done so much to build also maintained his engagement. All in all, this was a lively and indeed formative period in which international exchange and mutual learning was central.

Scholars working on Wales and/or working at Welsh universities were actively involved in this milieu, with Aberystwyth's Department of Political Science emerging as the most prominent centre of activity. This due in no small part to the role of Peter Madgwick, whose role as a pioneer of the study of politics in Wales has been largely forgotten. Yet not only was Madgwick centrally involved in the PSA Work group,¹⁸ he was also lead author of *The Politics of Rural Wales: A Study of Cardiganshire*.¹⁹ This pathbreaking work of social science drew on a representative sample of over 700 respondents across the county conducted in 1971. The 'Cardiganshire Survey' prepared for the ground for what was Madgwick's great gift to future generation of scholars interested in Welsh politics. For it was Madgwick, by this time collaborating with Denis Balsom, who managed to secure financial support for and then field the 1979 Welsh Election Study.

The 1979 survey is destined to remain a reference point for all those interested in Welsh electoral politics. It provided – for the first time – individual data for a representative sample of the Welsh electorate. No longer would analysts have to rely solely on aggregate data. But in addition, it fielded an extensive range of measures exploring the extent of respondents' engagement those aspects of Welsh life that had been so central to the work of Cox and indeed Madgwick's previous work on Cardiganshire, that is religious nonconformity and Welsh language. Even more importantly, perhaps, and again building on the Cardiganshire survey, it sought to directly interrogate respondents' sense of national identity.²⁰

The Aberystwyth team, with Denis van Mechelen joining Balsom and Madgwick in the research group, went on to publish two major pieces of academic analyses based on data from

¹⁷ Rose was one of the first academics working in the UK to recognise the significance of Rokkan's pioneering work and was himself one of the founders of the ECPR. See Richard Rose, *Learning about Politics in Time and Space* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2013).

¹⁸ See, for example, Peter Madgwick and Richard Rose (eds), *The Territorial Dimension in United Kingdom Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

¹⁹ P.J. Madgwick with Non Griffiths and Valerie Walker, *The Politics of Rural Wales: A study of Cardiganshire* (London: Hutchinson, 1973).

²⁰ As far as I'm aware, the 1971 Cardiganshire Survey was the first Welsh survey to field a national identity question. The question was 'Do you usually think of yourself as Welsh, English, British or what?' See Madgwick, *Rural Wales*, 250.

this survey.²¹ They were followed up by a chapter by Balsom which summarized and, as we shall see, popularized their main arguments.²²

What is arguably *the* key analytical contribution made by team emerges from their ability to operationalize national identity as part of their analysis. For once national identity was factored in it became clear that what makes Welsh electoral politics distinctive is that those in Wales who identify as Welsh rather than British have a much greater propensity to vote for Labour and not to vote for the Conservatives.²³ This was the case both for Welsh identifiers who regarded themselves as middle class as well as those who regarded themselves as working class. By contrast, among British identifiers, patterns of vote choice were similar to those that prevailed across the remainder of Britain with Labour support lower and Conservative support higher across both classes. (An indication of how much has changed in the interim is that, at this time, Scottish voting patterns were not regarded as so dramatically different as to necessitate separate treatment).

Alongside national identity, the other key concept underpinning the Aberystwyth team’s understanding of voting behaviour in Wales was ‘cultural attachment’.²⁴ This was operationalized as a multi-item scale aimed at measuring any given individual’s relationship to those markers of identity that Cox had viewed as central in his depiction of ‘traditional Wales’, namely the Welsh language and religious nonconformity. To score highly on this ‘Cultural Attachment Scale’ was to be thoroughly immersed in this culture, with a low score indicating the opposite. While there were undoubtedly some British identifiers who scored highly on the Cultural Attachment Scale, this was not a numerically or electorally significant group. In practice, therefore, the scale acted as a way of differentiating among Welsh identifiers. While the Conservatives performed poorly and Labour well among *all* Welsh identifiers, Welsh identifiers who scored highly on the scale had a greater propensity to vote for Plaid Cymru than those with low scores, among whom Labour was utterly dominant (see Table 1).

Table 1. National identity and cultural attachment: The Aberystwyth Model of Vote Choice in Wales

	Welsh identifying	British identifying
High Cultural Attachment	Lab strong; Plaid competitive (Cons weak)	--
Low Cultural Attachment	Labour dominant (Cons weak)	As rest of Britain

The Aberystwyth team’s model of vote choice identified three different groups of voters, each tending to different patterns of vote choice:

²¹ Denis Balsom, Peter J. Madgwick and Denis van Mechelen, ‘The Red and Green: Patterns of partisan choice in Wales’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 13(3) (1983), 299–325; Denis Balsom, Peter J. Madgwick and Denis van Mechelen, ‘The political consequences of Welsh identity’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 7(1) (1984), 160–81.

²² Denis Balsom, ‘The Three Wales Model’, in *The National Question Again: Welsh Political Identity in the 1980s*, ed. by John Osmond (Llandysul: Gomer, 1985), pp. 1–17.

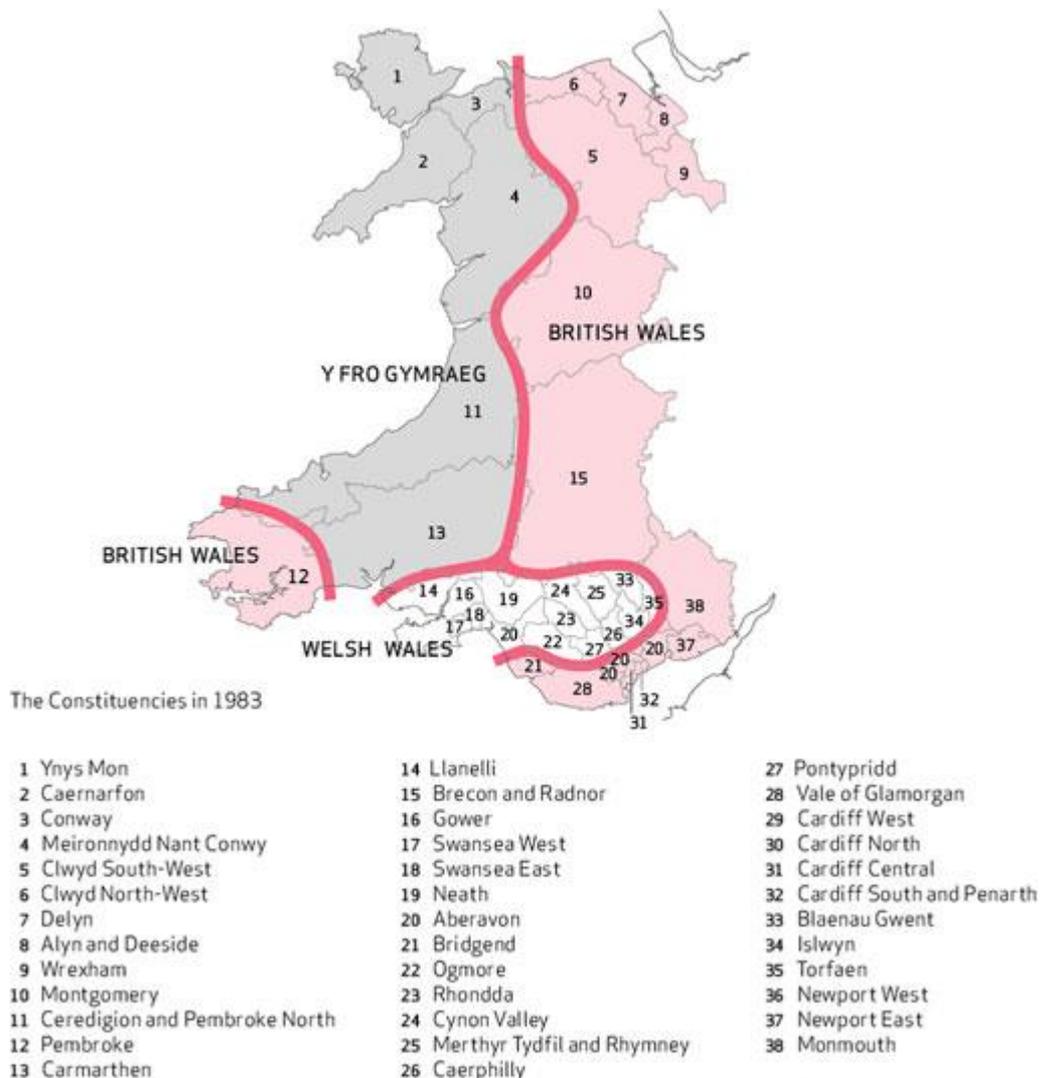
²³ Balsom et al., ‘Red and Green’.

²⁴ Balsom et al., ‘Political Consequences’. As the connection seems to have become largely lost, it is worth re-emphasising that this work draws heavily on themes developed in Madgwick, *Rural Wales*.

- (i) **Welsh identifiers with low cultural attachment**, among whom Labour was dominant.
- (ii) **Welsh identifiers with high cultural attachment**, a group among whom both Labour and Plaid Cymru performed strongly.
- (iii) **British identifiers with low cultural attachment**, among whom vote choice is determined by the same factors that determine vote choice across the remainder of Britain.

Three groups of voters; three Wales's. It is here that in his best-known contribution, Denis Balsom would go on to transpose onto a map of Wales.²⁵ The result was this now-iconic image and the 'Three Wales Model'.

Figure 1: The Three Wales Model



There can be no doubt that the map represents something of a bowdlerization. There is, after all, very little that is inherently spatial about the Aberystwyth team's understanding of the

²⁵ Balsom et al., 'Three Wales'.

drivers of vote choice in Wales.²⁶ The logic of their analysis is rather that we can expect high cultural attachment-Welsh identifiers to behave in the same way whether they live in Caernarfon in ‘Y Fro Gymraeg’ or in Caldicot in ‘British Wales’.²⁷ But while the point of the map was to try to indicate that there are more such voters in the former than the latter place, over time many seem to have come to understand the Three Wales Model *as* a spatial model. Or in other words, it’s become a case of ‘voters behave in certain ways because they live in particular places’, rather than as was intended, namely that ‘particular places tend to be home to voters with particular characteristics.’ In this way, the individual level analysis that underpins the map has been forgotten – to the extent that my own now lengthy experience suggests that even undergraduate students studying elections in Wales need to be constantly urged to look beyond the map at the model of voting behaviour that underpins it.

But by the same token, bowdlerization though it may be, it must also be recognized that the map has also proven to be a brilliant popularization of a kind that vanishingly few academics have ever managed. This is not only because people seem to like maps, although that has almost certainly helped!²⁸ More fundamentally, the map expresses something about Welsh politics that we all intuitively know to be true; a pattern that we see repeated in election after election. In that all-important regard, it’s both brilliant and compelling. The problem is that very popularity and plausibility of the Three Wales Model as a spatial representation of Welsh electoral politics serves to occlude the sophistication of the work by Balsom and the rest of the Aberystwyth team.

Of course, from our current vantage point where we can take for granted the insights generated by the Aberystwyth team, their analysis raises at least as many questions as it answers. Most obviously, why is it that Welsh identifiers tend to find Labour so much more *simpatico* – and the Conservatives markedly less attractive – than is the case for British identifiers living in Wales? Could it be, for example, that the social values associated with these identities differ? But while these are valid questions (to which we return), it would be grossly unfair to find fault those who fielded and analysed the 1979 survey for failing to anticipate the interests of those working four decades and more later. The fact remains that their work transformed our understanding of electoral politics in Wales.

Identity, valence and identity (again): The post-devolution era

In the academic world, the Aberystwyth model popularized via the Three Wales Model was remain almost literally the last word on voting behaviour in Wales until the end of the century; a period which encompassed the waxing and waning of Conservative support in Wales under Thatcher up to and including the Tory wipe-out at the 1997 UK general election. This longevity reflected not only the quality of the Aber-team’s work. It was also a reflection of the fact that no further Wales-specific studies of voting behaviour were undertaken until

²⁶ One of the eight items that constitutes the Cultural Attachment Scale (CAS) relates to whether or not respondents live in an area termed as North West and West Wales and Upper South Wales (see Balsom et al., ‘Political Consequences’). But given the nature of the other items in the Scale, it is still possible to score very highly on the CAS while residing outside these areas.

²⁷ The term ‘Y Fro Gymraeg’ was co-opted into academia – initially, it would seem, by geographers E.G. Bowen and Harold Carter – from Welsh language political discourse (see E.G. Bowen and Harold Carter, ‘The Distribution of the Welsh Language in 1971: An Analysis’, *Geography*, 60(1) (1975), 1–15.) In the latter context it was first used by Owain Owain in January 1964 in the *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* journal *Tafod y Ddraig*, and later came to be associated with Emyr Llywelyn and the *Cymdeithas* splinter-group *Adfer*. See *inter alia* Emyr Llywelyn, *Adfer a’r Fro Gymraeg* (Pontypridd: Cyhoeddiadau Modern Cymreig, 1976).

²⁸ In this context see the illuminating discussion in Paul O’Leary, ‘Of Devolution, Maps and Divided Mentalities: Deconstructing a New National Icon’, *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*, 127 (1998), 7–12.

the 1997 devolution. There was therefore no new data to work with beyond small and not particularly useful sub-samples of British surveys.

Indeed, it is striking how quickly the intellectual excitement and activity of late 1970s dissipated after the 1979 referendum, especially in Wales. In this sense the various publications of the Aber team from the early 1980s acted a coda to an era that – institutionally at least – had already passed.²⁹ True, a few individuals continued to circulate in the orbit of the UK politics working group as it gradually morphed over time into a sub-field of the study of politics (still) known as ‘territorial politics.’ But without a political project to latch onto, all institutional momentum was lost. While its fate may have had nothing to do with the apparent end of the devolution dream, the absorption of Aberystwyth’s Political Science department into that university’s Department of International Politics is symbolic of how little priority would now be accorded to understanding the distinctiveness of Welsh politics. What was for a period the main home for the study of Welsh politics vanished with scarcely a ripple and is today almost entirely forgotten.³⁰

All of which means that when devolution re-emerged as a political project in the mid to late 1990s, Wales’s social scientists were far less well prepared than had been the case in the late 1970s.³¹ As far as the study of politics was concerned, while there was some teaching activity in Cardiff, Swansea and Aberystwyth, the academic staff involved were fewer in number and more poorly networked than been the case two decades before.³² In this overall context, it was pure serendipity rather than any kind of planning that meant that Aberystwyth’s ‘Interpol’ was to become the initial host for work on voting behaviour in Wales. But as a result of a chance phone call in 1997 – and generously nurtured in the initial stages by Oxford’s Anthony Heath – Dafydd Trystan and myself, later joined by Roger Scully, began to lay the foundations for a series of election and referendum studies that has now extended for almost a quarter of a century.

Summarising the work that has emerged from this evolving research group – a group that has been physically located in Cardiff for the last decade or so – is not straightforward, especially

²⁹ Madgwick had in fact already departed (circa 1981) to become Head of the Department of Law, Politics and Economics at Oxford Polytechnic.

³⁰ Indicative of this is the fact there is literally no mention of the Department of Political Science in the outline history of the Department of International Politics found on its website <<https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/about/centenary/interpollegacy/timelineofevents/>> [accessed 15 May 2022].

³¹ The sequencing almost certainly matters here. The (post-legislative) 1979 referendum was preceded by a decade of relatively constant, very public debate centred around the Kilbrandon Commission process and the tortuous parliamentary passage of what would become – eventually – the Wales Act 1978. This meant that scholars had a great deal of material to study. As we have seen, the Social Science Research Council also funded work in an anticipation of the potential establishment of Assemblies in Cardiff and Edinburgh. By contrast, in the 1990s, in Wales at least the important deliberations were private and internal to the Labour party. Even when it became clear that a referendum would ultimately need to be held before the establishment of what would become the National Assembly, there was very little public debate of the merits and demerits of devolution prior to Labour’s massive victory in 1997 UK general election. The pre-legislative referendum was then held only a few short months later, on the basis of a rather thin White Paper. In short, before the summer of 1997, at least, there was little for academia to engage with. It is notable that the (by then) Economic and Social Research Council’s ultimately very successful devolution programme not established until after the 1997 referendum.

³² They were J. Barry Jones at Cardiff University, Jonathan Bradbury at Swansea, and myself in Aberystwyth. While Jones (then entering the twilight of his academic career) and Bradbury (whose academic career was still in its early days) were territorial politics specialists, my own *bone fides* were far weaker given that my research focused on international relations and security studies.

as I'm hardly in a position to be dispassionate about it all. But several observations appear in order, at least as a starting point:

1. The main achievement has undoubtedly been the establishment of a proper data infrastructure, including surveys of both the 1997 and 2011 referendums; studies of every devolved election; and even studies of 3 UK general elections in Wales, namely the 2001, 2010 and 2019 elections. These are data that can be returned to time and again by future generations of scholars, who will have new and interesting things to say about them – and will doubtless be quick to point out where people like myself have got it badly wrong!
2. Relatedly, there have been some important innovations. Innovation in survey mode, where – among other things – the Welsh Election Study has helped pioneer the move to online surveys. This development has in turn helped facilitate regular Welsh opinion polling. There has also been innovation in terms the contents of the surveys themselves, for example in the development and/or fielding of new questions probing national identities, values, as well as exploring a host of other issues including policy differentiation, the governance of Wales, Brexit, Covid-19, etc.
3. Since its resuscitation, the Welsh Election Study has been embedded in wider research networks, most obviously cooperating closely with successive Scottish Election Study teams. It is from these networks that important initiatives like the Future of England Survey have emerged. In relation to the latter, it is – I like to think – a nice irony that over the past decade or so serious study of English attitudes has relied on initiatives from the Celtic periphery of the state of which England is the dominant part.³³
4. More substantively, it's also important to underline that voting behaviour has not been the sole concern for those of us working on public attitudes in Wales. Rather, for much of the first 15 or so years of activity, it was support for and the legitimacy of devolution that formed the central focus. This work has not only underpinned two books and various other academic publications.³⁴ It has also helped inform the Richard Commission, the Jones Parry Commission and the Silk Commission, as well as wider public debate.
5. Relatedly, even in the context of voting behaviour, turnout and differential turnout has been accorded at least as much priority as understanding as the drivers of partisan choice.³⁵

Having said all of that, what has this body of work had to say about the drivers of vote choice in Wales, and specifically how has it sought to explain the distinctiveness of voting behaviour in Wales?

It's probably useful to differentiate between three periods. An initial period which is perhaps best regarded as a development on the work of the early 1980s in that it focused on relationship between national identity and vote choice. Then a second or middle period where the focus shifted dramatically away from identity – in various ways a centrepiece of *all*

³³ See, in particular, Ailsa Henderson and Richard Wyn Jones, *Englishness: The political force transforming Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

³⁴ The books are Bridget Taylor and Katarina Thomson (eds.), *Scotland and Wales: Nations Again?* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999) and Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully, *Wales Says Yes: Welsh Devolution and the 2011 Referendum* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012).

³⁵ Perhaps the most significant result of this work is the development of the concept of 'multi-level voting'. See Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully, 'Devolution and Electoral Politics in Scotland and Wales', *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 36 (1) (2006), 115–134.

previous work on voting in Wales – to an approach focused on the alleged explanatory power of ‘valence’. For reasons to which I will return, once it became apparent that this represented an intellectual *cul de sac*, more recent work has returned to the importance of national identity not only in relation to vote choice at Senedd and UK elections, but in relation to social values, and to constitutional attitudes including attitudes towards the way Wales is governed as well as the UK’s relationship with the European Union.

I shall not dwell at length on the first period. Suffice it to say that the key publication was an analysis of Conservative weakness in Wales.³⁶ This was a subject given added piquancy by the fact that Tories failed to win a single Welsh constituency in either the 1997 or 2001 UK general elections, while owing all but one of their seats in the first devolved Assembly to the proportional element of the National Assembly’s voting system – that is to the element in the voting system to which the party was (and remains) opposed.

The analysis not only showed that the Conservatives performed particularly poorly among those who identified as Welsh who tended to view the party as ‘the English party in Wales’. It went on to argue that being anti-Conservative appeared to be part of the constellation of markers associated with feeling Welsh; or in other words, being anti-Tory was part of the package of what being Welsh was all about. Little wonder, perhaps, that the article garnered a lot attention among Welsh Conservatives. It may even have helped encourage the relatively brief, post-devolution attempt to cultivate a new, more-warmly Welsh image for the party.

The second period was inaugurated in a paper by Roger Scully and myself published in 2012 which sought to completely overthrow previous understandings of voting choice in Wales and substitute an alternative approach in its place (Scully and Wyn Jones 2012).³⁷ As such it provided a detailed critique of the work from the early 1980s – perhaps most tellingly with regards the construction of the Cultural Attachment Scale. It also went on to claim that a valence voting model offered a far superior understanding of vote choice in Wales not only in the devolved election in 2011, but even at the time of the 1979 general election that was the subject of that first election study. This claim was based on the ostensible fact that, statistically speaking, the valence model was a better predictor of vote choice than the ‘Three Wales Model’ (as it termed the Aberystwyth team’s model of vote choice summarized in Table 1 above).

By 2012, ‘valence’ had become *the* dominant approach to understanding voting behaviour at the British level, in Scotland, as well as further afield. The core argument of this approach is that voting behaviour is driven by the electorate’s perception of the competence of the different political parties in delivering broadly agreed-upon policy goals. These perceptions are accessed not by detailed knowledge of party platforms and the like, but via heuristics including perceptions of party leaders and impressions of past performance. Analytically-speaking, valence models are constructed on the basis of three key variables: (i) perceptions of the party leaders; (ii) perceptions of party competence in dealing with the most important issues of the day, and (iii) party identification. Constructed in this way, there can be no doubt that valence models appear to have extraordinary predictive power. If we know about a given individual’s responses on these measures, we can be very certain that we know who she or he

³⁶ Richard Wyn Jones, Roger Scully and Dafydd Trystan (2002), ‘Why the Conservatives do (even) worse in Wales?’ in Lynn Bennie, Colin Rallings, Jonathan Tonge and Paul Webb (eds.), *British Parties and Elections Review*, 12 (2002), 229–45.

³⁷ Roger Scully and Richard Wyn Jones, ‘Still Three Wales? Social Location and Electoral Behaviour in Contemporary Wales’, *Electoral Studies*, 31(4) (2012), 656–67.

will vote for; far more certain than if we adopt the Three Wales approach to segmenting the electorate. Thus, it seemed that Wales too had joined the valence revolution, with the approach subsequently utilized in several other analyses of elections in Wales.³⁸

But was it really that simple? It should be noted that at the same time as making these bold claims for valence, the authors accepted that they could offer no explanation as to why voting behaviour in Wales was consistently different from that found in England.³⁹ Indeed, given that it was largely the same parties, with the same leaders, pursuing the same policies, about all of which electors gained knowledge from broadly the same information sources, it is not clear how one might even begin to explain why *our* evaluations of competence are so consistently different from *theirs*?⁴⁰ Unless, that is, one returns to differences in the ‘social location’ of voters; which is to say return to class, national identity and language – the very things that had been dismissed as both old hat and irrelevant.

Beguiled by the apparent predictive powers of the valence model, the authors had ended up championing an approach to understanding voting behaviour in Wales that could offer *no* insights into what made voting behaviour in Wales distinctive and therefore intellectually interesting. *Mea culpa; mea maxima culpa.*

For this reason alone, valence could not represent the last word on voting behaviour in Wales. But the argument to set valence aside become even more compelling as scholars (including most notably Geoff Evans) began to expose a significant technical problem with the model itself, centred on issue of *endogeneity*.⁴¹ To reprise, party identification is one of the key variables in the operationalisation of valence. Yet it is reasonable to ask whether party identification is really a *predictor* of vote choice that is somehow analytically separable from it. Or is it rather – as seems more likely – in essence nothing more than a synonym for vote choice? Because if they are not analytically separable then to observe that Labour identifiers overwhelmingly vote for Labour is hardly much of an insight: it’s just another way of saying that Labour voters vote for Labour. This point may be extended: are our evaluations of party leaders so easily separated from our party identifications, or indeed our intentions regarding vote choice? There is every prospect, therefore, that in embracing valence we have ended up

³⁸ In chronological order: Roger Scully, ‘More Scottish than Welsh? Explaining the outcomes of the 2011 devolved elections’, *Regional & Federal Studies*, 23(5) (2013), 591–612; Scully, Roger and Jac Larner, ‘A successful defence: the 2016 National Assembly for Wales election’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 70(3) (2017), 507–29; Laura McAllister and Roger Awan-Scully, ‘For Wales, do not see England: An analysis of the 2017 General Election’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 74(1) (2021), 138–57.

³⁹ Scully and Wyn Jones, ‘Still Three Wales’, 666.

⁴⁰ While the 2012 paper concludes with the (in retrospect, dubious) claim that it had successfully relocated the question of how to explain Wales’s electoral distinctiveness from the social characteristics of voters (per the Three Wales Model) to the realm of valence (Scully and Wyn Jones, ‘Still Three Wales’, 666), there seems to be no way of proceeding any further beyond that except by returning to social location-based explanations. Given, however, that the predictive power of such variables are always likely to be dwarfed by choice-focused variables more proximate to the act of voting itself, there seems to be no way that any explanation based on social location could ever be considered intellectually satisfying in a context in which the predictive power of a model is adjudged to be most important metric for deciding on the merits or demerits of a particular approach. If these constitute the rules of the game, valence variables will always ‘win’ even while being wholly unable to explain Welsh distinctiveness.

⁴¹ Geoff Evans and Kat Chzhen, ‘Re-evaluating the Valence Model of Political Choice’, *Political Science Research and Methods*, 4(1) (2016), 199–220. Evans had previously made a notable contribution to the study the 1997 referendum in Wales in Geoff Evans and Dafydd Trystan, ‘Why was 1997 different?’, in *Scotland and Wales: Nations Again?* ed. Bridget Taylor and Katarina Thomson (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), pp. 95-118.

with a circular argument that explains little if anything at all. While the 2012 piece may have made some salient points about the limitations of the Three Wales Model and the Cultural Attachment Scale, even on its own terms its preferred alternative appears deeply flawed.

Which brings us, finally, to the present day and the most recent developments in the literature; developments that are perhaps best summarized under the heading of a *return to identity*. In using this phrase, however, it is important to emphasize that it is not meant to imply a return to the same ideas and measures that preceded the valence turn. Much has been learnt in the interim. This, not only as a result of further research into the political attitudes and proclivities of Welsh voters themselves. Equally significant have been efforts to understand how voters in Wales think and behave in relation to others across the rest of Britain. Recent developments represent therefore something of a return to general themes and questions surrounding the role played by national identities in shaping political behaviour in Wales.

So, what have we learnt?

(i) British ≠ English

Ever since scholars have been able to investigate national identities at the individual level, there has been a progression in terms the survey questions used – from forced choice to investigating the impact of ‘nested identities’ via the Moreno question (Welsh not British, More Welsh than British, Equally Welsh and British, and so on). But the focus has always been on Welshness and Britishness and their inter-relationship. Even if Madgwick and colleagues asked about English identity, in analytical practice Britishness and Englishness have always been treated as if they were synonymous. But if that was ever justified, recent work on England suggests that it should no longer be assumed.⁴² Those who feel British *but not* English tend not only to have different political views but to vote differently from those who feel British *and* English or those who feel English only. Given that this is the case in England, why should the same not be true in Wales where, after all, more than a quarter of the electorate were born in England?

(ii) Identity strength is key

We also know that it’s not just which national identity or combination of national identities that an individual ascribes to that matters politically, it’s how *strongly* they feel that identity. To feel strongly Welsh and strongly British is likely to mean something very different from, say, feeling strongly Welsh and a little bit British, or a little bit Welsh and a little bit British. This in turn requires the use of different survey measures in our analyses

(iii) It’s also about the identities we eschew...

It’s not just about the identity or identities we adopt, it’s also about those identities we eschew. This is something that had already been recognized in part. All of those in Wales who feel Welsh could almost certainly also identify as British: indeed, most do. Some of us, however, do not and scholars have long been aware that this means something politically. To cite a relatively recent example, at the time of the 2016 referendum those who feel strongly Welsh *but not* strongly British had a fundamentally different attitude to Brexit compared to those who feel strongly Welsh *and* strongly British.⁴³ But what of those who could choose to

⁴² See, in particular, Henderson and Wyn Jones, *Englishness*.

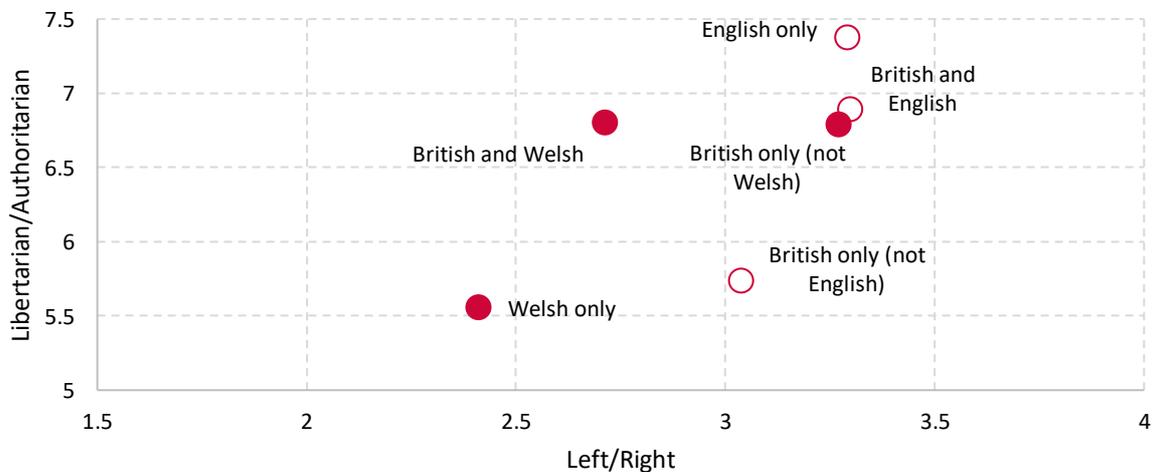
⁴³ See Richard Wyn Jones and Jac Lamer, ‘What about Wales? Brexit and the future of the UK’, *Discover Society: New Series*, 1(2) (2021) (<https://doi.org/10.51428/dsoc.2021.02.0004>).

identify as Welsh but instead adopt only the state-wide (i.e. British) identity while rejecting the territorial (i.e. Welsh) identity? Should we not consider the possibility that this is also associated with a particular set of political and social attitudes? After all, in England those that embrace the state-wide only while eschewing a territorial identity have a very distinctive set of attitudes compared to those who feel strongly English. Could the same be true of that segment of the Welsh population who have a claim to Welshness but choose only to embrace Britishness?

(iv) National identities are closely associated with values

Lest this appear to be a case of over-complicating matters for its own sake, our work on the relationship between national identities and values suggest that these distinctions really do matter. Here, for example, is an illustration of the relationship between values and national identities as found in Wales. With regard values we include positions on both the left-right and libertarian-authoritarian scales. In the case of national identities, we differentiate between a Welsh national identity complex – that is between those who can plausibly consider themselves Welsh and/or British – and an English national-identity complex – which is to say those living in Wales who can plausibly consider themselves English and/or British. We do this by treating those electors born in Wales and those born in England separately, with the former being considered part of a *Welsh national identity complex* and the latter part of an *English national identity complex*. This is obviously crude and some of us – I speak as a strong Welsh identifier who was born in the United States – simply get lost in the model. Nonetheless, limitations aside, the results are striking.

Figure 2: Values and National Identities in Wales, 2016



Source: British Election Study, 2016

Electors in Wales who feel strongly Welsh tend to be more left wing than those who do not; those who feel strongly Welsh and not strongly British are particularly radical. In a context in which we are seeking to explain Labour dominance and concomitant Conservative weakness, this would appear to be a particularly momentous finding. But note also – underlining a point that I’ve already made – that the attitudes of what we might term the British not Welsh are not only different from the strongly Welsh and strongly British as well the strongly Welsh. They are also different from the British not English. In the Welsh context, to treat those that feel strongly British only as a single undifferentiated group is problematic, for it clearly matters which territorial identity is being eschewed in the process of arriving at that identity.

(v) Different national identities are strongly associated with different national projects/nationalisms

Finally, today we are even more aware than in the past of the ways in which different senses of national identity are strongly associated with different national or nationalist projects – by which I simply mean different sets of assumptions about how territory and governance arrangements should align. Again, however, this is complex. That devolution was most strongly supported by Welsh identifiers has long been well known. Similarly, most of you will be aware that those who identify as strongly English were very supportive of Brexit. But unless you've been following our work closely, you may be more surprised to learn that those who are both strongly Welsh and strongly British tend to be both supportive of devolution and approving of Brexit. In other words, they are supportive of and apparently see no inherent contradiction between two national projects, one attaching to their Welsh identity and the other to their sense of Britishness.⁴⁴

Exploring this nexus of national identities, values and (increasingly?) of associated national projects or nationalisms, seems to be a promising route towards understanding *why* Labour dominate in Wales and also, and perhaps equally importantly, why the Conservatives struggle. Both questions that, despite all the efforts outlined in the preceding discussion, have never been satisfactorily answered.

There are, however, further dimensions that are still be explored or, better perhaps, reinterpreted before we can approach anything approaching definitive answers. Attentive listeners will have noticed that I've had very little to say about social class in the last section of this lecture. This reflects the fact that the literature which I've been discussing has had little to say about social class as it has fallen out of favour as an explanation of voting behaviour. But that doesn't mean that it should be discounted.⁴⁵ What, for example, are we to make of the fact that Welsh identifiers are significantly more likely to describe themselves as 'working class' than those in Wales who do not regard themselves as Welsh, this even when they are located in the same income bracket? If narratives of the inter-relationship between nation and class differ between national identity groups, could this be another – mutually reinforcing – part of the story of Labour dominance and Conservative weakness? If so, how significant a role might it play?

We must also to return to the political attitudes and voting behaviour of Welsh speakers, which if anything appear to have become more distinctive over time. While the criticisms of the Cultural Attachment Scale may be well founded, it at least has the virtue of reminding us of the need to be attentive to the ways in which Welsh speakers become socialized into a distinctive political worldview. In other words, there remains much more work to be done in this regard as well.

⁴⁴ That many of the attitudes that align with Englishness (but not Britishness) in England align with Britishness in Wales and Scotland – including attitudes towards the European Union – is demonstrated in Ailsa Henderson, Ed Gareth Poole, Richard Wyn Jones, Daniel Wincott, Jac Larner and Charlie Jeffery, 'Analysing vote choice in a multi-national state: National identity and territorial differentiation in the 2016 Brexit vote', *Regional Studies*, 55(9) (2021), 1502–16, as well as Henderson and Wyn Jones, *Englishness*.

⁴⁵ Geoff Evans and James Tilley, *The New Politics of Class: The Political Exclusion of the British Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Conclusion

It would be satisfying to be able to conclude this overview of more than half a century's scholarly activity with a claim that we've 'cracked it'; that we've finally understood it all! Alas, this is simply not the case. We've certainly made very significant strides in terms of data collection and survey measures. Our understanding of the extraordinary heterogeneity of the Welsh electorate has also come on in leaps and bounds in recent years. As a result, we have a better understanding of the electoral coalition that underpins Labour's dominance in Wales, as well as the extent of the challenges facing that party's main rivals, namely Plaid Cymru on the one hand, and the Conservatives on the other.⁴⁶ But our understanding of the *how* of Labour dominance is clearly better than our grasp of the *why*. There are also remain groups in Wales about whose political attitudes we still know remarkably little. Our knowledge of Black and Ethnic Minority voters in Wales, for example, remains pitifully inadequate.

Finally, it also needs to be emphasized that in seeking to explain Labour dominance we are aiming at a 'target' that is changing as Wales itself is changing. The Wales of November 1922 is clearly hugely different from the Wales of November 2021. But then so is the Welsh Labour party. Indeed, it's not the same Labour party as the Labour party of 1997 let alone that of 1979. The *genius* of Welsh Labour – and I don't think that that's an exaggeration – is that so far at least it's managed to keep pace with a changing Wales. It will be for future observers to comment on how successfully it manages to maintain this extraordinary record in the period of rapid social, constitutional, economic, and ecological change on which we are now embarked.

⁴⁶ Jac Lamer, Richard Wyn Jones, Ed Gareth Poole, Paula Surridge and Daniel Wincott, 'Incumbency and Identity: The 2021 Senedd Election,' *Parliamentary Affairs* (2022) (<https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsac012>).