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Citation for final published version:

Cole, Alistair Mark , Jones, J. Barry, Williams, Colin, Loughlin, John and Storer, Alan 2003. Political institutions, policy preferences and public opinion in Wales and Brittany. *Contemporary Wales* 15 (1) , pp. 89-110.

Publishers page:

Please note:

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**Political Institutions, Policy Preferences and Public Opinion in Wales and
Brittany¹**

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Storer**

The research project from which this article is drawn investigates processes of regional governance in two cognate yet distinctive regions: Wales and Brittany. It is a binary comparison that does not pretend to exhaust the possibilities of other binary or multivariate comparisons. Starting from the premise that the common challenges of regional governance are at least as important as its institutional variations, we engage in three distinct exercises in comparative investigation; at the level of policy communities (through in-depth interviews in the two regions) issue-networks (via a detailed questionnaire) and public opinion (through a mass opinion poll carried out in both regions in July-August 2001).² This article presents some important results of the attitudinal surveys carried out in Wales and Brittany in 2001. These findings illustrate what people living in Wales and Brittany think of their regions and how they envisage their future development.

Why compare Wales and Brittany? Before addressing this issue, we need to determine what is the function of comparison? For policy-makers, comparison is bound up with practical politics. Within the policy community, comparison is envisaged primarily in aspirational terms. This process is important, as the National Assembly for Wales is currently working out its diplomatic priorities. The most obvious comparators are those within the UK itself, as the Welsh look with some envy on the Scottish Parliament with its primary legislative and tax-raising powers. Outside of the UK, Welsh policy-makers look to regions such as Catalonia, or to nation-states such as Ireland or Denmark as models³. These comparisons are sometimes quite unrealistic. Wales compares itself with the Irish Republic or the Scandinavian democracies, but does not yet possess the requisite political sovereignty to make such a comparison

meaningful. Unlike Ireland or Denmark, Wales is not an EU member-state. Others look to Spanish regions such as Catalonia, which share a similar model of asymmetrical devolution to that of Wales within the UK. Or, indeed, to German länder, which appear as important nodes within the evolving EU multilayered polity. Or again to Canada, which has institutionalised the bilingual society to which many in Wales aspire. There is obviously much to be said for comparing Wales and Catalonia or a Canadian province. But, whatever their merits, such comparisons are broadly aspirational; they present an idealised vision of what Wales might become. The economic and demographic underpinnings for such comparisons need to be demonstrated in a more rigorous manner than is usually the case.

Our interest as academics is rather different. Through comparison, we seek to illustrate diversity, as well as similarity. The comparisons we seek to draw are multi-dimensional ones. We are interested in the analytically separate dimensions of national context, regional identity, public policy and popular legitimisation. We contrast distinct traditions of territorial administration in France and Britain, but concentrate our attention on two regions – Wales and Brittany - facing many similar structural challenges and strategic choices. Through making comparisons in the area of education and training and language policy management, we seek to identify useful lessons for policy-makers on both sides of the channel. On the basis of successfully commissioned mass opinion surveys in Wales and Brittany, we are able to test the underlying legitimacy of new forms of regional governance.

We have identified the Wales-Brittany pair as being the most appropriate within the overarching context of Franco-British comparisons. We argue that the mix of

similarity and difference makes the Wales-Brittany pair excellent for comparative analysis, in terms of their physical location, their population size, their economic activity, their linguistic specificity, and – not least – their common historical ties. Of course, there are important institutional differences between the two. The powers of French regions are much weaker than those of National Assembly for Wales. In this respect, the project starts from a position of qualitative difference between France and Britain. The British Union state was always far more flexible than its French unitary counterpart. On balance, however, the UK has more in common with the unitary state tradition than it does with the federal one. This historical dimension of the comparison is deeply important for understanding how the predominant state tradition is perceived in regions with strong identity such as Wales and Brittany. Before considering in some detail our comparative opinion poll findings, we now present the Brittany region within its national context.

A French Region with a difference: Brittany

One of the most distinctive regions of France, Brittany has a strong sense of its specific position within French society (Favereau, 1993, Flatres, 1986, Ford, 1993, Le Bourdonnec, 1996, Le Coadic, 1998, Martray, 1983). Formerly an independent Duchy (from 818 to 1532), then a French province with special prerogatives (1532-1789), reduced for long to being a collection of disparate départements before becoming an administrative then political region, modern Brittany is a French region with a difference. Unlike many other French regions, Brittany can look to its past existence as an independent nation-state, with an elaborate set of state institutions and founding myths. Though the symbols of statehood have long been repressed, the

region retains many distinctive characteristics. The Breton language is the European continent's only Celtic language. The enduring symbolic importance of the Catholic religion is ever present physically in the architecture of Breton villages, as well in higher than average rates of religious practice. The spectacular growth of Breton cultural movements (danse, theatre, costume) is testament to a revival of Breton values and self-consciousness. At a more abstract level, observers have noted the capacity of Breton actors to join forces to promote their common interests and to defend Brittany against attacks from the outside world (Martray, 1983). Breton solidarity can also be gauged more intuitively by the effectiveness of Breton elite-level networks in Paris and Brussels, and by the importance of the Breton diaspora in retaining a sense of distinctiveness.

The dominant political culture is one of political accommodation. Breton politicians of all parties, however divided they are internally, will tend to close ranks against threats from the outside. Despite a strong regional identity, however, Brittany has not produced significant regionalist parties, or at least parties which have been capable of winning seats in departmental, regional or national elections. Only one left-wing regionalist party, the Union Démocratique Bretonne (UDB) has managed some victories at the municipal level and then usually in collaboration with the Socialist Party. Le Coadic (1998) interprets this phenomenon as a consequence of the deeply rooted legitimist strand within Breton public opinion. Imbued by a Catholic, conformist ethic, the Breton public is not prepared to support pro-independence or pro-autonomist parties. We should also note that the mainstream political parties in Brittany have adopted regionalist themes and are more 'regionalist' than their national counterparts. This is true even of the Gaullist (RPR) President of the Brittany Region,

Josselin De Rohan, who has a much more ‘regionalist’ discourse than his RPR colleagues in most of the rest of France. Although Breton regionalism has, at times, been violent, this never reached the levels experienced in Corsica, the Spanish Basque country or Northern Ireland.

Brittany is sometimes taken as a litmus test for the health of regional identity within France. In post-war Brittany, there has been a strong political consensus among the regional elites in favour of enhanced regionalisation. From 1950 onwards, Breton actors of all political persuasions co-operated closely in the CELIB - Comité de d’étude et de liaison des intérêts bretons – the archetype of a post-war regional advocacy coalition. The CELIB could claim the credit for many of the improvements in transport infrastructure consented to the Brittany region in the 1960s and 1970s. Brittany is probably the most distinctive region in mainland France today. This distinctiveness adds a foresight dimension to the Wales - Brittany comparison. Brittany is the birthplace and driving force of regional political identity (and institutions) in France and, if UK style devolution ever comes to France, it will undoubtedly prosper in Brittany more than anywhere else.

Where should decisions be made? Public Opinion and Political Institutions in Wales and Brittany (2000)

The questions we asked in our comparative opinion polls were general ones attempting to capture the rather different situations in Wales and Brittany. There is a

difference, of course, between Wales and Brittany. Wales has a fairly long history of administrative decentralisation, and a recent history of political devolution (Jones and Osmond, 2002, Cheney, Hall and Pithouse, 2001, Marinetto, 2001, McAllister, 2000). Brittany has a history of more limited administrative decentralisation and a longer, but weaker, political decentralisation (Cole and John, 2001). Before analysing the poll findings in more detail, we now briefly compare and contrast the distinctive features of Welsh devolution and French decentralisation.

Wales had a history of administrative devolution from 1964 to 1999, which laid the foundations for a more autonomous form of regional governance. Many areas of public policy were, de facto, managed by Welsh civil servants acting independently of their Whitehall colleagues, with minimal supervision exercised by a Secretary of State and two junior ministers. Though subject to the political inconsistencies of UK governments and the sensitivities of successive Secretaries of State, civil servants in the Welsh office were usually left to get on with the serious business of policy implementation. The model of executive devolution contained in the Government of Wales Act (GWA) of 1998 is heavily imbued with the legacy of the Welsh Office, from the precise functions transferred to the key civil service personnel involved in assuring the transition (Rawlings, 1998, Cole and Storer, 2002).

After the narrowest of victories for the Yes campaign in the 1997 referendum, the Government of Wales Act (1988) created a National Assembly with secondary legislative powers, rather than with primary legislative and budgetary powers as in Scotland. In the Welsh model of executive devolution, there is an implicit division of labour between the devolved and central governments (Rawlings, 2001; Patchett,

2000). The core functions of the state remain with central government. These are defence, taxation, social security, immigration and nationality laws. The Government of Wales Act transfers eighteen fields but there is no precise, constitutionally based division as in a genuine federal system. The Assembly ‘has the exact powers of the Secretary of State’, though the Secretary of State had been part of central government with a voice in cabinet. The powers transferred to the Assembly were those of the old Welsh Office, powers that had evolved in an arbitrary and haphazard manner, usually reflecting different traditions within Whitehall departments. Consistent with the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty, and the principle of secondary legislative powers, Westminster retains legislative pre-eminence even in transferred areas. Conforming to the traditional local government model, moreover, the Assembly can only act where it has precise statutory responsibilities. It can not invest itself with new responsibilities, nor can it raise additional sources of finance. It can, however, make primary legislation within secondary legislation (through statutory instruments and circulars), which vests it with a distinct policy formulation role. For one of the architects of devolution, the only advantage of this hybrid and obfuscated system was that it helped to deliver devolution to Wales. The Welsh public, apathetic when not antipathetic, would not have accepted a bolder scheme.

However we define devolution in Wales, the Brittany regional council’s functions are weaker. The regional institution in France is the result of a long process of what might be called “creeping institutionalisation” as it was gradually (and grudgingly) granted a position in the politico-administrative system alongside the départements and the communes (Dupiorier, 1998, Nay, 1997, Loughlin and Mazey, 1995). Brittany

became an administrative region in the late 1950s, acquiring its own indirectly elected regional authority in 1972. The 1982 decentralisation reforms introduced direct elections⁴ for the regional councils in 1982 (operational since 1986) and reinforced their policy responsibilities. It is important to stress the limited character of French decentralisation and regionalisation. The regional institution was established while retaining the longer established and, in many ways, more powerful départements. Large cities and towns had also become powerful levels of subnational government (Cole and John, 2001). The regions might, therefore, be considered the poor cousins of French subnational government. Decentralisation in Brittany (and throughout France) is less overtly linked with territorial identity than in the case of Wales or Scotland. Regional structures do not respect the informal boundaries of France's historic regions. Thus the French Basque country - squeezed into the Midi Pyrenées – does not even have its own département. Alsace and Lorraine are two separate regions. Historic Brittany has been divided ever since Marshall Petain's decision to remove the Loire Atlantique département (and its capital Nantes) from Brittany in 1941. To allow France's historic regions to exist would be tantamount to admitting the existence of a union state of the UK variety, rather than the French unitary version. Decentralisation was not intended to give political recognition to specific 'ethnic' groups within France. The only partial exception to this rule is Corsica which has had a specific statute since 1982.

Decentralisation in France was supposed to promote better governance, not to challenge the underlying principles of the French unitary state. There is no real equivalent in Brittany of the National Assembly's capacity to adapt primary Westminster legislation. There *are* examples in the overseas French territories, in

New Caledonia and French Polynesia especially. The Matignon agreements, if ever implemented, would give the Corsican Assembly the power to adapt primary legislation and make regulations. Nowhere in mainland France, however, is UK style devolution yet on the agenda. But the regional councils do have precise legal responsibilities in economic development, secondary education, training, transport and several other fields. Moreover, elected French Regions have limited tax-varying powers that are not available to the National Assembly for Wales. They have used their powers ambitiously and are actively seeking new powers. The republican belief that all parts of the French territory must be treated exactly the same is increasingly contested, not least from Breton politicians and public opinion.

Though Wales and Brittany represent distinctive forms of political decentralisation, our polling evidence reveals a strong demand in both regions for effective regional political institutions.

----Table One around here ----

How should we interpret these findings? Let us first consider the case of Brittany, where regional institutions are well-established. In Brittany, as in Wales, we observe overwhelming support for consolidating or strengthening existing regional institutions. There is virtually no constituency for the *status quo ante*; regional institutions are fully accepted as part of the normal democratic process. Breton opinion is very evenly divided between those satisfied with existing arrangements

(44%) and those advocating either an Assembly with legislative and tax-raising powers (33%) or an 'autonomous' Brittany (12%). These findings confirm the existence of a Breton regional political consciousness. They leave entirely open the question of whether the Breton public would support a more thoroughgoing regional or federal evolution. This survey question has been asked in no other mainland French region, but the consensus expert view emphasises the complex pattern of multiple Breton identities and a willingness to envisage more advanced forms of political decentralisation than elsewhere in France (Pillet, 2001). As in Wales, the autonomy solution is confined to the margins of the political spectrum, a discovery confirmed by the absence of support for a strong autonomist political movement.

Our poll not only indicates strong support for regional political institutions in Brittany, but also a desire to strengthen the regional over the local, national and European levels in specific areas (notably education, training and language, our fields of policy investigation). Following the annual surveys conducted by the Paris-based think tank the OIP (Observatoire Interrégional du Politique), these trends are more pronounced in Brittany than elsewhere. This sense of regional ownership is well demonstrated by our Brittany-specific question on the administrative reunification of the historic Brittany region. Historic Brittany consisted of five départements, stretching from the far western Atlantic coast to the Loire. During the wartime authoritarian regime of Marshall Pétain, Loire Atlantique (and its capital Nantes) was separated from the rest of Brittany. Recovering the Loire-Atlantique has been a rallying cry of the Breton political movement ever since 1941. Our poll suggests strong public support for the reunification of historic Brittany (61%). This attachment to the physical embodiment of historic Brittany is itself a powerful form of

‘regionality effect’. Our survey demonstrates that it is shared across the political and geographical spectrum, with only minor variations according to département, partisan allegiance or other variables.

In Wales, the poll was primarily designed to measure general attitudes towards devolution in Wales and the National Assembly during the first two years of its operation. By any measure the National Assembly’s formative years have been stormy. The wafer thin majority in the 1997 referendum raised doubts about the commitment of the Welsh voters and the legitimacy of the whole project. The departure of one Welsh Secretary (Ron Davies) and the appointment of another (Alun Michael) generally regarded as having been imposed by Tony Blair did little to enhance the devolutionary process. Furthermore, the failure of the Welsh Labour Party to win an overall majority in the first Assembly elections frustrated the expectation of strong and consistent policies, arguably one of the main justifications for devolution. The resultant scenario of ‘all-party inclusive policy- making’ was less than convincing and eventually led to Alun Michael losing a vote of ‘no confidence’. It was against this background of institutional initiatives, political experimentation and plain damage limitation that our poll of Welsh public opinion was taken in late June 2001.

The results presented in Table One are remarkable on three counts. Only 24% supported the pre- devolution arrangements. The prediction by Ron Davies that devolution would be a process rather than an event appeared to have been vindicated. Furthermore, 49% of respondents supported the strengthening of the National Assembly to give it powers at least equivalent to those of the Scottish Parliament.

This shift in public opinion is consistent with the majority view encountered in over 40 interviews in and around the National Assembly that the current system suffers from a lack of clarity and a confused and unworkable attribution of functions. Our in-depth interviews demonstrated a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the devolution introduced by the Government of Wales Act and a desire to move towards primary legislative powers. The Welsh, while never the constitutional pacesetters, now look to follow Scotland's lead.

Other findings from the poll confirmed the Welsh public's more positive attitude to the devolution process in Wales. When asked the question '*What are your personal views on devolution for Wales, that is the creation of the National Assembly for Wales, which has taken over responsibility for areas such as health and education in Wales ?*', a majority (51%) were in favour or strongly in favour of devolution, with only 32% against.⁵ There would appear to have been a shift in popular opinion since the Welsh referendum in 1997. When moving on to ask more specific questions about the effectiveness of the National Assembly, the Welsh people appeared to be less confident about the Assembly. Firstly, the majority (60%) of those asked disagreed with the statement that '*The quality of public services has improved under the Assembly*', indicating that the Welsh public is still waiting for 'the Assembly to deliver'. This is to be expected. The Assembly was only two years old during the polling exercise and only in the longer term will it be able to impact on the deep-seated economic and social problems facing the country. On the issue of whether the existence of the Assembly has democratised political processes in Wales, respondents were split almost evenly, with a small majority against the proposition that '*The say of*

people in decision-making has improved under the Assembly'. This is an immediate problem for the Assembly which appears to reflect the general disillusionment with politics in the UK, indicated by the low general election turnout of 2001. The Assembly still needs to convince a large section of the Welsh public that devolution is bringing Welsh politics closer to the Welsh people. Proponents of devolution and the Welsh Assembly Government in particular will take comfort from the slight majority of people who agreed that '*The existence of the Assembly has given Wales more lobbying power within the UK government*'. This view represents quite a sophisticated assessment, recognising on the one hand the limited nature of the legislative powers devolved to Wales and, on the other, the enhanced lobbying capacity exercised by a 'democratic Assembly' compared with a Secretary of State heading a small central government department. We draw the conclusion, as in the Western Mail leader, that public opinion is 'warming to the Assembly'.

We deduce a strong underpinning of support for regional political institutions in Wales and Brittany. But these basic similarities mask essential differences between Wales and Brittany. This becomes apparent when we consider preferences for regional expenditure.

What priorities for regional action? Public Opinion and Public Policy in Wales and Brittany (1500 Max)

Regional public spending priorities are indicative not only of actual policy choices, but also of the appropriateness of public intervention of different levels in specific

policy fields. Even in the most federally inclined system, it would be difficult to imagine defence expenditure being a major priority for a sub-central authority. The survey proceeded to ask an open-ended question ('If your region had more money to spend, where should its first two priorities lie') seeking to elicit the Welsh and Breton public's preferences for regional public expenditure. Table Two presents a hierarchy of the first preferences. We now consider the implications of these figures for Wales and Brittany.

---- Table Two around here ----

Public opinion in Wales has fully integrated the significance of devolution into its thinking. Its priorities for future regional expenditure involve generic spending areas – such as health and education - rather than more narrowly defined Welsh interests such as culture or language. The priorities for Assembly expenditure are broadly in line with those of the UK as a whole. Health and education are the overwhelming concerns, with the Welsh electorate demonstrating an awareness that the Assembly now makes many essential decisions in these areas.⁶ Health and education are two areas where the Assembly has been devolved powers to define and apply Welsh solutions. The lessons for the Assembly are mixed. On the one hand, the saliency of these issue-areas justifies the search for Welsh solutions to intractable policy problems (of educational underachievement or of health standards below the UK average)⁷. On the other hand, not only do health and education present seemingly irresolvable policy dilemmas, both fields also contain their own complex pre-existing actor systems and their own path dependencies. Health and education symbolise the

semi-sovereign nature of Assembly policy making. There is a gulf between the expectations placed on the Assembly and the constraints of interdependent, semi-sovereign politics (Cole and Storer, 2002). There is no general legislative competency for the Assembly in these devolved areas: the Assembly can only act where it has a statutory basis for action. The Assembly can decide to shift resources to health or education, but some other policy field will lose out. As 'Treasury rules' apply to Wales, the Treasury continues to control the purse strings. Without tax-varying powers, the Assembly depends upon executive-led negotiations with the Treasury, which are undertaken by the Secretary of State and not by the Assembly itself (which must, however, be consulted).

That the Assembly makes a difference is not in doubt, however. The existence of the Assembly has proved a powerful bargaining chip with the Treasury, testified by the resources obtained by the Assembly in the last two budgetary rounds. The Assembly can engage many reforms which are resource neutral: the power of the purse does not determine everything. The Assembly's impact can be demonstrated in the sphere of education and lifelong learning, one of our fields of investigation. The Assembly has abolished the TECs and created a new complex new institutional structure coordinated by ELWa. In the field of pre-16 education, the Assembly has rejected premier Blair's specialist schools and pledged to retain the comprehensive system. The Assembly has also rejected all private finance initiatives in education. But education is an area of interdependent policy-making and the Assembly does not exercise control over all secondary legislation concerning education in Wales. One interviewee lamented the fact that 'since devolution, more secondary legislation affecting Wales on education has been passed through the Westminster parliament

than the Assembly'. Teacher pay and conditions in particular were entirely decided by London. In the area of health, the Assembly has reformed the structures of healthcare (the creation of area-wide NHS offices) and enacted a number of symbolic egalitarian measures (such as free eye tests for pensioners) but the specific solutions it can adopt are limited within the structures of the NHS as it currently exists.

The counterpart to Welsh electorate's concern with health and education is that other Assembly priorities – such as the environment, social inclusion, transport, urban development and rural assistance – did not figure highly in the public's perceptions of important spending priorities. This hierarchy confirms the polity building dimension of Welsh devolution that we explore below. While polity building is deeply satisfying, there is a danger that the Assembly (and the Welsh Assembly Government in particular) will be identified in the eyes of public opinion as a rather distant Cardiff-based administration rather than a proximate authority bringing decision-making closer to the people.

In Brittany, the findings differ in important respects from those observed in Wales, where health and education dominated popular preferences. These results do not imply that the Breton public cares less about health and education than in Wales. In the Breton case, expenditure priorities demonstrated a realistic appraisal of the limited powers of the French regions much more than a disinterest in the areas of health and education. Breton public opinion has fully integrated the constraints of decentralisation into its preferences. It is because health and education are not identified as areas of regional policy intervention that they do not appear as high

priorities for regional expenditure. We would certainly not expect health to top the list of spending priorities for a French regional Assembly. The French system of health care is elaborately – and expensively – managed by a social partnership of employers and trade unions, increasingly closely monitored by the central state. The regions do not have any responsibilities therein (though the départements do). The low ranking of education is rather more intriguing. Though France prides itself on its national education system, implying uniform standards and practices throughout the country, French regions also have important responsibilities in secondary and higher education. The regions build and maintain upper secondary schools (lycées) and some universities, provide equipment, participate in educational planning and – of great importance in Brittany – can make grants to private schools. Education is by far the largest spending post of all French regions, around 50% in the case of Brittany. We surmise that, though there is intense interest in Brittany in education, this issue area is perceived primarily either as a national or a more localised policy responsibility. The Regional councils have not yet drawn much political capital from their major budgetary investment in education over the past fifteen years. Education is one area where the central state has succeeded in shedding responsibilities to the periphery (regional councils and state field services) while retaining strategic control (Balme, 1999).

Unlike in Wales, in the case of Brittany the public's expenditure preferences pinpoint issues of specific regional importance, rather than generic spending areas. They suggest a strong 'regional effect'. The first priority was the environment. Environmental issues are high on the political agenda in Brittany, which has to face specific challenges unknown to most other French regions. The second priority for

regional expenditure identified in the survey is economic development. There is an established post-war tradition of public intervention in supporting the Breton economy, whether through direct investment or through providing transport infrastructure. By distinguishing economic development as the second priority for regional expenditure, the Breton public again identified an area where regional action could (or should) make a difference. Amongst the other priorities for regional expenditure we can identify two further areas closely linked to the specific attributes of Brittany: tourism and culture. Brittany is one of France's major tourist regions. That Bretons look to the regional authority to promote tourism supports the proximity argument; regional investment is appropriate because the Region has detailed knowledge of local conditions. We might make a similar observation with respect to culture. It is entirely appropriate for the regional authority to promote culture, not only because culture is worth promoting, but also because it has a strong regional dimension.

In Wales and Brittany, we subjected two policy areas to more intense scrutiny: training and regional languages. In Brittany, as in Wales, support for expenditure on regional languages was very low down the list of popular priorities - fewer than one per cent of first preferences in both cases. We should exercise some caution when interpreting this figure. Priorities for public expenditure do not automatically equate with issue saliency. In an area such as support for regional languages, policy objectives might be achieved with minimal additional public expenditure. In Wales (50%) and in Brittany (53%) a majority of respondents identified the National Assembly for Wales, or the Brittany Regional Council as the appropriate level for decision-making on language-related issues. The findings for training policy provide

further support for the regional level in both countries. Welsh and Breton public opinion was remarkably similar in preferring the regional institution as the ‘primary political institution making decisions in the area of training policy’, rather than the EU, national government or local government.⁸

Our second series of questions lead us to refine our argument somewhat. A logic of appropriateness appears to be at work. Whether consciously or not, the Welsh public appears to have integrated the evolutionary character of devolution into its calculations. It looks to the Assembly (in an exaggerated manner) to concentrate its resources on remedying deep-rooted problems in health and education. To all extents and purposes, the Welsh public implores its Assembly to act as a government, divided opinions over devolution notwithstanding. The Breton public wants regional public expenditure to be concentrated in areas where regional institutions might make a difference, or where the image of Brittany itself is involved. We might conceive of this as a bounded regionality. There is no equivalent process of state building to that one might infer from the findings in Wales. Health and education provide a useful contrast to training and regional languages. In the core areas of health and education, even in regionally minded Brittany, there is a preference for a system of national regulation, consistent with French public service doctrine, equality of standards and the legacy of 150 years of ‘republican’ ideology.

Institutions, identities and voting intentions in Wales and Brittany

How best can we comprehend these institutional viewpoints in Wales and Brittany ?

Full analysis of the structural and attitudinal variables contained in the poll lies outside of the scope of the present article. We will limit our analysis here to two criteria - multiple identities and intended voting behaviour in an Assembly or regional election - which allow for meaningful comparisons to be drawn between Welsh and Breton public opinion.

Does identity matter? We asked respondents in both surveys to state whether they considered themselves to be more Welsh than British (more Breton than French), equally Welsh and British (equally Breton and French) or more British than Welsh (more French than Breton). The results are presented in Table Three

----- Table Three around here -----

The table is highly revealing. A far higher proportion of the Welsh survey – around one-third - considered itself to be exclusively or primarily Welsh than was the case in Brittany. A sense of Welshness as being essentially opposed to Britishness is firmly rooted in a sizeable minority of Welsh people. In Brittany, by contrast, the sense of regional identity is strong, but this is not considered as being in opposition to an overarching French nationhood. Regional identity is not a surrogate nationality. This finding is consistent with the mainstream portrayal of Breton political culture and society we investigated above. There is much less of a conflict between Breton and French identities than is the case for Wales and the UK. The greatest difference

between Wales and Brittany therefore lies not so much in institutional preferences for the future, as in the linkage between national and regional identities. Multiple identities are more easily assumed in Brittany than in Wales.

Simple cross-tabulations suggest that in the two cases there is some sort of relationship between identity and institutional preferences. Clear relationships were established between identity and institutional preferences at the two extremes. Those considering themselves to be uniquely or predominantly Welsh or Breton were far more likely to advocate either a Scottish-style parliament or independence (autonomy in the case of Brittany) than were those considering themselves to be primarily or entirely British or French. There also appears to be some sort of relationship between the ability to speak a regional language (Breton or Welsh) and an institutional preference in favour of greater regionalisation or autonomy. Our poll suggests that fluency in the Welsh language appears to be a major explanatory factor of institutional preferences. Those declaring themselves to be fluent in Welsh (some 12 per cent) were more likely to espouse an independent Wales than those with little or no knowledge of the language. A similar finding was observed in Brittany, though the numbers were smaller.

---Tables Four and Five around here ---

---- Tables Six and Seven around here ---

Do partisan preferences matter? We asked both populations how they intended to vote if a general or a regional election were to be held tomorrow. We then cross-tabulated regional voting intention with institutional preferences (and, in the case of Brittany, with attitudes towards recovering the Loire Atlantique). In Brittany, we observed surprisingly few differences according to voting intention. PS voters were scarcely more favourable than RPR voters to enhanced regional autonomy. Though we must treat these figures with caution, they bear out the belief expressed in many interviews that institutional preferences cut across existing parties. Institutional choices can not be reduced to a simple left-right cleavage. The RPR President of the Brittany Region, Josselin de Rohan, might have a sceptical position on greater autonomy, but many RPR voters did not share this view. Likewise, while the PS leader Jean-Yves Le Drian has repositioned the Socialist Party in favour of greater regional autonomy, more Socialist voters are happy with existing arrangements than in favour of a Scottish-style parliament. These findings are consistent with existing representations of Breton political cleavages. There is a moderation of political conflict within the Brittany arena. Moreover, national political parties are infused with Breton cultural values. There is also a distrust of political extremes, except in specific sub-cultural circumstances. While not going as far as to suggest a cross-partisan consensus on the broad issues facing Brittany, there is an underlying consensus to defend Breton interests to the outside world and limit political conflict.

Such a consensus is less obviously apparent in the case of Wales. Within the Welsh electorate, we can identify three distinct positions, ranging from a residual Conservative hostility to the principle of devolution, to overwhelming support from intending Plaid voters for at least a Scottish-style parliament, with Labour and Liberal democrats occupying a median position favourable to going beyond executive devolution. Rather like the AMs interviewed, few support the existing settlement, with the status quo option arriving in third position in each electorate ('retain an elected Assembly with limited powers'). Executive devolution appears as the hollow core of regional governance in Wales.

Our findings are nonetheless remarkable. Only the Conservative electorate continues to oppose devolution, by a small margin. Devolution is a cleavage that has traditionally cut across existing political parties, most especially the Labour Party. The principle of an elected Assembly/Parliament is now accepted overwhelmingly in each electorate, except that of the Conservatives. While divisions remain in each party, the centre of gravity amongst intending Labour and Liberal Democrats voters (the governing coalition) has shifted beyond accepting devolution towards advocating a Scottish-style parliament. The Plaid Cymru electorate is the most cohesive, in its large majority dissatisfied with the limited devolution introduced by the Government of Wales Act.

We can observe this paradigm shift in favour of devolution in operation at the level of political practice and inter-party relations. The founding fathers were convinced that the majoritarian traditions of Westminster politics would be inappropriate for

Wales. The rhetorical commitment to all-inclusive politics implied new forms of cross-party dialogue and the involvement of non-governing parties in policy-making decisions. The arrival in power of Rhodri Morgan and the creation of the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition in September 2000 marked two important watersheds in the history of Welsh politics. The victory of Rhodri Morgan represented the coming of age of a specifically Welsh Labour party, cognisant above all of its core territorial interests. Party opponents, even when critical of the coalition, recognise the emancipation of the Welsh Labour Party. The formation of the Lib-Lab coalition was difficult to square with 'all-inclusivity', especially as Rhodri Morgan does not conceal his preference for a single-party administration after the 2003 elections. In some important respects, however, all Welsh parties have moved closer together since 1999. There is general agreement across all parties that the Assembly's powers need to be revised, though institutional preferences differ greatly. For the UK-based parties, moreover, there is an awareness that devolution encourages a territorial adjustment of their core political message. Even the Welsh Conservatives have learned this lesson. In extensive interviews in and around the National Assembly in 2001 and 2002, Assembly members from all parties expressed strong demands for new powers. Deprived of full legislative powers in the transferred domains, the National Assembly lacks the legal and political means for its policy ambitions. Even the Conservative group accepted that a clarification of the Assembly's powers was essential; such a clarification will await the next election at the earliest.

In association with a narrowing of positions within and between parties, our findings also suggest that traditional regional cleavages have lessened in intensity. The gap between those regions most favourable and least favourable to devolution is only

9%.⁹ There is little regional difference in the preferences for future political developments. The Scottish option, a parliament with law-making and taxation powers wins almost equal support across Wales with the exception of Cardiff which is most sceptical of such a change. However, strongest support is expressed almost equally in north and south; NW Wales with 42% and the Valleys with 43% . The figures suggest that a more cohesive Welsh attitude to devolution is emerging across the whole of Wales.

Conclusion

Devolution and decentralisation in Wales and Brittany are best understood as two alternative forms of territorial institution building. We observed above that, in important respects, the Wales-Brittany comparison is asymmetrical. There are certain disadvantages in asymmetrical comparisons, but there are also countervailing arguments. As developed throughout this article, devolution and decentralisation present two alternative models: one focussed on territorial identity and polity building, the other on proximity as a response to policy solutions.

Comparing comparable regions, even in distinctive institutional settings, allows for judgements to be made about the efficacy or otherwise of specific regional political institutions. A fuller comparison of devolution and decentralisation in Wales and Brittany would need to go beyond measuring institutional preferences, the purpose of this article. We need to develop an index that combines criteria drawn from the study of institutions, networks, social capital, identity formation, public policy co-ordination and central regulation. Such an index would allow a more realistic appreciation of the potential for regional governance than a limited description of rule-making capacity.

While awaiting such an exercise, the present article has focussed on comparing public opinion and political institutions in two neighbouring EU states. From our

empirical investigations we observe rather different processes at work in Brittany and Wales. Devolution in Wales emerges as a dynamic process with unintended consequences. When evaluating the potential for regional governance in Wales, we must draw a distinction between constitutional constraint and political dynamic. Constitutionally the power to act is spread across endless acts of parliament. Politically, a consensus is emerging within Wales for a strengthening of the powers of the Assembly. This consensus represents a paradigm shift by comparison even with the results of the Welsh referendum in 1997. The question is no longer whether devolution will survive, but whether the Welsh Assembly should be given powers equivalent to those in Scotland. This consensus has solid support within public opinion.

No such conclusion can be drawn in Brittany where, in spite of a strong undercurrent of support for a federal evolution, the status quo is the most widely supported position. Taken as a whole, Breton public opinion adopts a median position. There is little appetite for autonomy. This can be gauged by several criteria; the weak level of support for autonomist parties, the lack of consistent positions one way or the other from the main parties; the real, but limited constituency declaring itself in favour of autonomy; the Brittany specific focus of regional expenditure priorities. Bretons are widely attached to a legitimist form of regionalism. There is a strong sense of regional distinctiveness, but also a deeply embedded reluctance to transgress the established order. On the other hand, while respectful of established norms and processes, our findings suggest on balance that the Breton public would welcome a move towards greater regionalisation. Almost one half (45%) of the Breton public supported going

beyond the existing limited form of French decentralisation and adopting powers analogous to those of the Scottish parliament.

Politicians in both regions refer to traditions, or ambitions of all-inclusivity. Evidence from our quantitative and qualitative investigations suggests a more comfortable and harmonious relationship between identity, institutions and territory in the case of Brittany than in Wales. There is a definite tension between being British and being Welsh for around one-third of Welsh people. The proportion of those constructing their Breton identity against being French is much weaker. Divisions within Breton society are less affirmed than in Wales, where linguistic, territorial and political divisions persist, in spite of a rallying to the new devolved institutions.

Wales has a more developed system of political devolution than Brittany, but in many other respects it can learn from observing the French region. Welsh politicians tend to engage in aspirational comparisons with Catalonia, Ireland or Canada, but these are quite unrealistic. Welsh politicians need to encourage something akin to the pride in being Breton : that is, a non-exclusive identity broadly shared across the political spectrum and within Breton society. Wales needs to look to the example of regions such as Brittany which harness their identity to developing a strong sense of social and human capital.

Notes

¹ Research for this article was carried out as part of the ESRC's Devolution and Constitutional Change programme ('Devolution and Decentralisation in Wales and Brittany': grant number L 219 25 2007). The award holders are Alistair Cole (principal researcher), Barry Jones, John Loughlin and Colin Williams. Alan Storer is the Research Assistant. The award is based in the School of European Studies at Cardiff University (the Department of Welsh is also involved). We thank the Council for its support.

² Market Research Wales and Effience 3 simultaneously carried out the public opinion surveys in Wales and Brittany in June and July 2001. A representative sample of 1007, selected by quotas of age, gender, socio-economic group and locality, was interviewed in each region.

³ These examples were those most frequently cited in extensive interviews in and around the National Assembly for Wales in 2001 and 2002. Interviews took place in the following organisations: the National Assembly for Wales, ELWa, the CCETs, business organisations (CBI, FSB, Chambers-Wales, IoD, House-Builders Federation, the Economic Fora), trade unions (TUC, GMB, Unify), WEFO, WDA, local government, WLB, New Deal Taskforce, CCW, European Commission, EOC. Interviews are ongoing. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity.

⁴ Direct election is a slight misnomer. Up to and including 1998, elections for the French regional councils took place on the basis of departmental party lists. The proportional representation system used – a 5% threshold and the 'highest average' methods of allocating votes to seats – marginally favoured the larger parties. The

electoral constituency for the 2004 elections will probably be that of the region, rather than the départements.

⁵ The precise results were as follows: strongly in favour 11 per cent, in favour 40 per cent, against 19 per cent, strongly against 13 per cent, don't know 18 per cent.

⁶ The second priority in Wales was education (33 per cent), followed by health (26 per cent)

⁷ The situation is, however, regionally differentiated. In relation to education, standards across Wales are very varied, with high levels in rural areas, but much lower ones in the declining industrial areas, especially in the valleys. The pattern for health is rather similar. The valleys are a health black-spot, where the situation is compounded by the high rate of respiratory illnesses. As in Brittany, demands on healthcare are exacerbated by the high numbers of elderly pensioners retiring in Wales.

⁸ In the case of Brittany, 43,5 per cent favoured the Regional Council as the appropriate level for training policy, followed by 24.5 per cent for local government, 20,5 per cent for central government and only 3,1 per cent for the European Union. In the case of Wales the figures were the Assembly (41,5 per cent) the UK government (25.3 per cent), local government (23,4 per cent) and the European Union (3,1 per cent).