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## The 2011 Assembly elections in Wales in context

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## 1. Introduction

- 1 The modern process of devolution, in the late 20th century, had several roots. The last step in the creation of the United Kingdom was the union of parliaments in 1801 and the 19th and early 20th centuries were subsequently marked by Home Rule movements in Ireland and Scotland. The stumbling blocks to a solution were political (nationalism, sovereignty, representation...) administrative and economic (taxation, public spending...). Federal solutions, although envisaged, were never implemented (Pilkington 2002: 53-94) in part because the four home nations are very different to one another in terms of contribu-

tions to the state, their social and economic structures and their needs. Piecemeal innovations of different kinds were introduced over the years, including the Scottish Office (1885), the Welsh Office (1964) and radio and television channels (Bogdanor 2001: 166-200). Pressure from nationalists in the 1960s and 1970s, plus Labour's need to comfort its position in Scotland and Wales and to obtain nationalist support in the Commons, led to the first devolution referendums of 1979, which failed to lead to devolved administrations. Eighteen years of Conservative government (1979-1997) reinforced the argument for devolution as did the implementation of the European Union's regional policy, outlined in the 1993 Treaty of Maastricht. When Tony Blair's New Labour government was elected in 1997 referendums were organised in September 1997 to ask the people of Scotland and Wales if they wanted a devolved institution, which they did. Though the result in Scotland (75% "yes" votes) was stronger than in Wales (50.1% "yes" votes) these results paved the way for the new Labour administration to frame the legislation for the implementation of a Parliament in Scotland and an Assembly in Wales.

- 2 The first elections to the Welsh Assembly were held in 1999 and then every four years after that, in 2003, 2007 and 2011. The latest Assembly elections were held on 5 May 2011. Another vote was held, state-wide, on 5 May 2011, although we cannot examine its impact within the scope of this paper. This was a referendum to ask British voters if they wished to change the traditional UK voting method, in general elections, the "first past the post" method, in favour of an Alternative Vote system such as that used in Australia. 68% of UK voters rejected the proposition. The Assembly elections were preceded by a Wales only referendum in March 2011 to ask voters if they wished the provisions of part 4 (section 103) of the Government of Wales Act 2006 to be implemented. These concerned the deepening of the Welsh Assembly Government's powers, basically so that the Welsh Assembly, like the Scottish Parliament, could directly pass legislation, to be known as Acts of the Assembly, in the twenty devolved areas for which it was responsible in Wales. The system in place depended on Legislative Competence Orders (LCOs) being granted by Westminster in response to a request from the Welsh Assembly. An LCO was an Order in Council which transferred legislative authority from the Westminster Parliament to the Assembly.

- 3 This referendum was organised under the terms of the One Wales coalition between Labour and Plaid Cymru, an agreement made in June 2007, when the two parties were in a coalition government in Wales. Taking place, as it did, barely two months before planned elections to the Assembly, did this third referendum have an impact on the Assembly election results?
- 4 In order to try to answer this question we must first examine the historical perspective of Assembly elections in Wales.

## **2. Voting trends in Welsh Assembly elections - the dominance of the Labour party**

- 5 In the post war era, politics in Wales has been marked by the very clear hegemony of the Labour party, and in general elections the non-proportional electoral system in the UK has exaggerated the lack of balance in Welsh politics. In UK general elections this dominance has never really been challenged, although since 1974 the other three principal parties, the Conservatives, the Liberals/ Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru, have represented Welsh constituencies in the House of Commons. However, since 1945, Labour has always won over half the seats in Wales in every general election (Camp-Pietrain 2006 : 245-8).
- 6 There has been no consistent pattern to any Conservative victories as they have won and lost atypical constituencies throughout the years, going from 14 seats in 1983 to none in 1997. The Liberal-Democrats have never gained anything like their pre-war status, their wins varying between 1 and 4 seats and Plaid Cymru's successes have been similar.
- 7 Since 1999, the four elections to the Welsh Assembly have more or less mirrored this trend. These four parties are the only ones to have elected representatives in the Welsh Assembly, not including two independent AMs, one elected in 2003, and one in 2007. There are 60 seats altogether and 40 of the Assembly Members (AMs) are elected by the traditional British system of "first past the post", (single member district plurality) while the other 20 AMs are elected from five re-

gional "top up" lists. Given the electoral history in Wales and also the way that devolution had been engineered it was expected that Labour would dominate the Assembly, and this is what happened in 1999, despite the bitter wrangling and the scandal that had affected Welsh Labour just previous to the election (Pilkington 2002:134-138). Labour had won 55% of the Welsh votes in the 1997 general election but in the 1999 Assembly elections this share fell to 37% (constituency votes) and 35% ( regional lists), (28 seats, 46.6% share of seats). Plaid Cymru gained second place, ahead of the Conservatives, with its best score ever in Assembly elections, rising from 10% of the vote in 1997 to 28% and 30% in 1999, (17 seats, 28.3 % share of seats). In Wales, this pattern of voting somewhat differently in UK elections and Assembly elections has continued over the past 14 years and the nationalist party has generally been the major beneficiary. Plaid's wins have almost always been in the north-west and the western coastal areas, where there is a higher concentration of Welsh speakers, while Labour has always won seats in regions of greater concentration of population (English speakers for the most part) in the greater south-east and the north east ,with some early victories in the very south west.

- 8 After the 1999 election Labour governed in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats; after 2003 the party won half the Assembly seats so it governed alone. In 2007 however, Labour had its worst result in the Assembly election, winning only 26 seats. There was a 4.7% swing to Plaid from Labour, which was obliged to govern in coalition with Plaid which had 15 AMs. However, in the 2011 elections Labour bounced back (winning half of the seats, 30,) while the Conservatives continued with their modest score. Labour won 4 more seats than in 2007 and Plaid lost four, dropping to 11 AMs, but only one of these seats, Llanelli, directly linked the two parties. Elsewhere Labour gained one seat from the Conservatives (Cardiff North), one seat from the Liberal Democrats (Cardiff Central) and one from an Independent (Blaenau Gwent).

### **3. The 1999 elections (the results are given in the accompanying table)**

- 9 The 1999 elections were held two years after New Labour's historic general election victory in 1997 when Labour won 34 of the 40 constituency seats and Plaid won 4 leaving 2 to the Liberal Democrats. No Conservative MPs were elected in Wales in the 1997 election. Yet only two years later, in the first vote for the new Assembly, Labour only took 28 of these seats while Plaid returned 17 Assembly Members. It is possible that such different results are due to the fact that state-wide elections prompt electors to react in favour of the state-wide parties while more local elections will incite people to vote on more local issues. Also, the fact that AMs are elected by two methods acted somewhat in favour of the other parties because the Conservatives nevertheless gained 9 seats and the Lib Dems got 6.
- 10 In the 2003 Assembly elections Labour consolidated its hold on the Assembly and Plaid lost ground. The nationalist fervour that had lifted the devolution struggle in the late 90s ran into the sand and the party had been led by a lacklustre and unauthoritative leader. Interestingly, the Conservatives made some headway in these elections and this can be viewed with respect to the national context which was Britain's involvement in Iraq, the fact that the two major state-wide parties had voted for the war and in 2003 the British were meeting with some success, for example the fall of Baghdad in April 2003.

### **4. The 2007 elections**

- 11 The elections of 2007 however saw a reversal in Labour's fortunes. Again, it was the largest party in the Assembly but with only 26 seats it was nearly two months before a Welsh governing executive was formed. After trying to strike a deal with the Liberal Democrats, in the end an agreement was made with Plaid after the nationalist party secured a number of commitments from Labour, including the organisation of a referendum on the extension of the Assembly's legislative competences. This was known as the "All Wales Convention". This led

to the creation of the post of deputy First Minister for Wales for Ieuan Wyn Jones the new leader of Plaid. The national context of the time for Labour was a period of turbulence for the party as the elections took place a month before Tony Blair resigned and Gordon Brown was elected party leader and Prime minister of the UK. In the UK Labour were unpopular after a decade in government, haunted by stories such as the war in Iraq, for example, which by then had turned into an intractable situation, and the scandal of loans being paid to Labour in return for honours.

## **5. The 2011 elections**

- 12 The elections of 2011 were the first to be held after the powers referendum and the first to elect a Welsh government with legislative powers in the twenty areas of devolved competence. It was thought by many that after the successful referendum Plaid would be able to capitalise on a fresh surge of interest in Wales-only matters. However, this did not happen. Yet for Labour, the results were better than in 2007 and with the party in opposition in Westminster, expectations of success in Wales were more or less met. The party won its strongest ever share of the vote at the expense of Plaid and also of the Lib Dems.

## **6. The Referendum on Assembly powers**

- 13 On 3 March 2011 was provided for in the Government of Wales Act 2006, part 4. These powers were activated on 29 March 2011 and so, beginning with the fourth Assembly (2011-2015), the Welsh government has been enabled to pass primary legislation directly in its areas of devolved competence instead of passing Assembly Measures which used to depend on Legislative Competence Orders (LCOs).
- 14 The referendum was finally held at the insistence of Plaid Cymru and it was one of the conditions of Plaid's participation in the 2007-2011 coalition. It was felt that Wales needed to hold the referendum to mark a point about Welsh distinctiveness. The vote was seen as giving not only more visibility to the Welsh Government's future legislative

power but it would also provide a more solid grounding for this constitutional innovation.

- 15 The 3 March Referendum question was: "Do you want the Assembly now to be able to make laws on all matters in the 20 subject areas it has powers for?" Turnout across Wales was only 38.2%, but 63.5% voted "Yes" and 36.5% voted against. All areas of Wales were in favour except for Monmouthshire (50.64 % voted "No") which is in the south-east and is one of the most anglicized areas of Wales. The highest approval rates were in the north, the west and the Valleys in the south. The strongest numbers of "Yes" votes were recorded in those areas that are identified as Welsh-speaking with a tradition of support for Plaid Cymru but there were also high levels of support in areas with strong traditions of voting Labour. Research showed that unlike in previous referendums, people voted on the issue on the ballot paper rather than other factors, such as what they thought of the Westminster Government, for example (Scully and Wyn Jones 2011). Voters therefore responded to the question rather than expressing a view on a "second order" topic (Withers 2011 b). The results would seem to suggest that Wales was moving towards being more politically confident, however the campaigns that preceded the vote were somewhat odd in that their organisers were obliged to conduct them in an unusual manner.
- 16 The "Yes" and "No" camps were organised as "umbrella campaigns", that is to say they were alliances made up of different groups and parties. However, campaigning on both sides was undermined when "True Wales", the group that advocated a "No" vote in the referendum, did not apply for "lead campaign" status. Campaign funds and facilities were available to both sides but both groups had to request "lead campaign" status. By refusing this status the "No" group deprived themselves of £70,000 of public subsidy, free delivery of leaflets across Wales, TV and radio broadcasts, and deprived the "Yes" group of all these benefits too. This was in line with the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 and according to Electoral Commission rules. The "True Wales" group was founded in 2008 in response to the All Wales Convention in order to oppose further devolution. Led by Rachel Banner, a teacher and member of the Labour Party, they launched their campaign on 19 January 2011, with the slogan "Vote 'No' for a Better Devolution".



- 17 The "Yes for Wales" campaign had the support of the four main political parties in the Assembly and was led by Roger Lewis, a successful businessman and chief executive of the Welsh Rugby Union with a strong public profile. The campaign benefited from the support of an umbrella organisation called Tomorrow's Wales / Cymru Yfory, founded in July 2004 by Barry Morgan, the Archbishop of Wales. Its aim was to agitate for greater democracy in Wales and for the country to have a more stable, more accountable and more efficient government. With connections all over Wales and in every sector of society this group worked successfully to support the "Yes" campaign by producing information documents and by sharing resources.
- 18 The effect of the referendum result was not as straightforward as might have been thought; the fact that Welsh voters responded favourably to their Welsh government being given legislative powers in line with those of the Scottish Parliament did not translate into increased support for the nationalist party in the Assembly elections that followed, unlike in Scotland. In fact, Plaid lost four seats while the "Westminster effect" worked in Labour's favour. Labour is the party of opposition in Westminster and the traditional strong support for the party in Wales was mobilised because the campaign was centred around traditional fears of what the Tories might do to Wales if they won more Assembly seats. There was a fear that the Conservatives might possibly drive Wales into further decline (Shipton 2010). The overall changes in parties gaining and losing seats were modest and "seem to have reflected UK wide factors rather than specifically Welsh issues" (Trench 2011:5) although the Lib Dems came off worse than the Conservatives. This was attributed to the Lib Dems' poor track record as part of the Westminster coalition, such as their broken pledges concerning the raising of university fees. For some commentators, Plaid's big losses were attributed to the fact that the party did not focus enough either on Welsh matters or on their achievements while in the governing coalition (2007-2011). Attacking Labour, their erstwhile partners in coalition, was not a winning strategy when seeking to win Labour votes (Withers 2011a)
- 19 With all due respect, Labour's 2011 victory in Wales cannot be said to be due to charismatic leadership as is the case in Scotland where Alex Salmond enjoys a very strong image and reputation. The current First Minister, Carwyn Jones, was elected Welsh Labour leader, and thus

First Minister, in December 2009 when Rhodri Morgan retired. First Minister Morgan led Wales from 2000-2009 and was a strong personality who was at pains to distance himself from the Blair government. Carwyn Jones is however steadily making his mark and raising his profile among the people of Wales. However, it is possible that what is perceived as a lack of a strong leadership profile may partly explain that, while Labour continues to dominate in the Welsh Assembly, the party's presence has less force than in state-wide politics. However, it has also been suggested (Wyn Jones and Scully 2006) that the very nature of a devolved election raises the consciousness of voting in a national context rather than in a supra national one which would explain why Plaid nevertheless has done better in Assembly elections than in Westminster polls.

## 7. Conclusion

- 20 The 2011 results in Wales are in stark contrast to the results of elections to the Scottish Parliament where the Scottish National Party (SNP) are now in power with a sizeable majority (69 seats /129), with the dominating personality of Alex Salmond as head of the SNP and as First Minister of Scotland. It is also in contrast to the electoral picture in the rest of the UK. The governance of the UK now presents a rather complex picture. Wales now has a Labour government while Scotland is governed by the Scottish National Party and the UK state is governed from London by a Conservative -Liberal Democrat coalition - a whole state of affairs that was never supposed to come about.
- 21 The fourth Assembly elections would seem to show that since devolution was first started a new party system has not evolved in Wales. However, voting patterns and party support are not the same as in state-wide elections and although Labour does continue to dominate in Assembly elections it does not enjoy the same level of support as in general elections.
- 22 The expectation that by introducing a two tier voting system, Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) the best of both worlds would be achieved in representative government and popular representation has only been partly realised because the constraints imposed by the Labour party in its own interests and the effects of Westminster politics continue to have a significant effect in Wales. At present,

there is much discussion about recommended changes made by the Boundary Commission under the terms of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act of 2011 as these changes would affect Wales quite dramatically. The number of Welsh Westminster constituencies would fall from 40 to 30. Similarly, changes to the voting systems used in Assembly elections are also under discussion. Such changes to electoral boundaries and possibly to the voting systems would also change the results to Assembly elections (Scully and ap Gareth 2011:4). Now that the Welsh government has legislative power, the Electoral Reform Society follows the conclusions of the 2004 Richard Report and recommends that the Assembly be elected by the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system and that there be 80 AMs. The current number of 60 is too low and there is already "a strain on the system" (Scully and ap Gareth 2011:13). The reduction in the number of MPs would make way for politicians in the devolved areas.

- 23 And yet, by reconfiguring the 2011 results according to the STV model, (Scully and ap Gareth 2011:23) Labour would still have half of the AMs in the new expanded Assembly, with 40 of the 80 seats, while the Conservatives would gain 20 seats. The Lib Dems would obtain 5 seats and Plaid would score 15.
- 24 Plaid has a new leader, Leanne Wood, the first woman to lead the party and an English speaker whose avowed intent is to make Plaid a "pan- Wales" party. Hoping to establish an appeal across all Wales, her aim is to tackle Labour in its heartland constituencies in the south Wales valleys. She may have a long struggle.

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## English

The subject of this article is the votes that took place in Wales in the spring of 2011. In May 2011, the fourth elections to the National Assembly for Wales produced a win for Labour, overturning previous tendencies within Wales and giving Wales a distinctive political profile within the UK. The people of Wales had already been to the polls in March 2011 in a Wales-only referendum to determine whether the Welsh wanted their Assembly to be granted legislative powers similar to those of the Scottish Parliament. The vote in favour of this deepening of powers was carried. This paper briefly examines the historic trend of elections to the Welsh Assembly and also tries to discover whether the March referendum had any effect on the May elections. This paper is not a comparison of the election results in the three devolved territories although some mention is made of Scotland where the model is in some respects closer to that of Wales.

## Français

Cet article examine les élections organisées au pays de Galles au printemps 2011. Lors des quatrièmes élections à l'Assemblée nationale, en mai 2011, le parti travailliste a remporté une nette victoire, contrairement à ses résultats ailleurs au Royaume-Uni. Les Gallois s'étaient déjà rendus aux urnes déjà, au mois de mars 2011, pour voter lors d'un référendum sur les pouvoirs législatifs de l'Assemblée. Ils ont approuvé l'élargissement des responsabilités de l'institution de gouvernance nationale. Cet article présente une brève mise en perspective historique des élections à l'Assemblée et tâche de voir si le référendum a eu un impact sur les élections. Cet article ne fait pas d'analyse comparative entre les trois territoires où les pouvoirs sont dévolus. Néanmoins, des références à l'Écosse s'avèrent pertinentes de temps à autre.

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## Mots-clés

Dévolution, Elections, Wales, 2011

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