

The 2015 General Election in Wales

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Abstract

This paper examines the 2015 UK general election in Wales. It first outlines the political background to the election, before going on to assess the content and conduct of the campaign and the parties' relative success in targeting their campaigning efforts. The results are then examined in detail: these show that while Labour, for the twentieth successive general election in Wales, won the most votes and a majority of seats, it also suffered an unexpected net loss of seats; meanwhile the Conservatives won more seats in Wales than at any election since the heyday of Thatcherism. UKIP confirmed their arrival as a serious element of party politics in Wales, but the Liberal Democrats lost more than two-thirds of their 2010 vote. British Election Study data is then used to model the main factors shaping patterns of party support. Finally, the conclusion assesses the implications of the 2015 election for the future of party politics in Wales, and for the 2016 National Assembly for Wales election.

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1. Introduction

The 2015 general election in Wales was, on the surface, a rather undramatic event. In sharp contrast to Scotland, most parties experienced only small changes in vote share from 2010, while only four of the forty Welsh seats actually changed hands. But while inevitably less dramatic than events in Scotland, the election in Wales still had plenty of interest. The Conservatives won their largest number of parliamentary seats in Wales since the heyday of Thatcherism. Labour, who had long expected to make significant gains in Wales, actually lost ground. UKIP confirmed that they had arrived in Welsh politics, coming third in vote share. And Plaid Cymru, while gaining no seats and making only a modest vote share rise, saw their party leader attain a higher profile than even before in a UK general election.

This paper will examine the 2015 general election in Wales. It will first provide an overview of the political background to 2015, before going on to discuss the election campaign. Next, the paper will examine the results of the election in detail. Then, data from the British Election Study (BES) will be deployed in an initial attempt to model the factors shaping voting behaviour in Wales in 2015. Finally, the conclusion to the paper will consider the implications of the 2015 election for the 2016 National Assembly election, and for the future of party politics in Wales.

2. The Background to the Election

For Wales, as elsewhere in Britain, much of the background to the election was shaped by events five years previously. Patterns of party support in Wales changed almost from the moment that the ink dried on the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition agreement. These changes did not primarily concern the coalition's senior partner. The Welsh Tories' poll ratings remained robust at, by historic standards, quite respectable levels.¹ Though they continued to be heartily disliked by much of the Welsh electorate,²

¹ On the Tories' historic weakness in Wales, see Scully (2014).

² For instance, a YouGov poll in July 2013 that asked respondents to rate the main parties on a 0-10 Like-Dislike scale found a full 46 percent of voters giving the Tories a 0/10 rating – the only party getting a higher percentage of 0/10 ratings was the BNP (see: <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/2013/08/06/public-attitudes-to-the-parties-an-alternative-approach/>).

the Conservatives retained the stubborn electoral support of around one-fifth to one-quarter of voters throughout the 2010-15 parliament. The major hit, in Wales as elsewhere, was taken by their coalition partners. The Liberal Democrats had won fully a fifth of the Welsh vote in 2010. Yet much of this support had come from disillusioned former Labour voters, who rapidly abandoned them once they joined the Conservatives in government. Within weeks, the party's support in Wales had halved.³ Meanwhile, no longer tarnished by association with an unpopular UK government and reclaiming many of those deserting the Lib-Dems, Labour in Wales rapidly revived. This recovery enabled Labour to achieve its best-ever National Assembly for Wales (NAW) election result in 2011, and then make substantial gains in the 2012 Welsh local elections. Despite having governed in Cardiff continuously since 1999, and in some Welsh local authorities for decades, Labour largely fought these elections as an opposition party. Rather than emphasise its own record, Labour campaigned primarily as the best party to 'stand up for Wales' in opposition to a Conservative-led UK government. The success of this rather implausible political pitch reflects the continuing influence of UK-level politics on Welsh electoral behaviour (Scully, 2013).

But Labour's strong position in the Welsh polls throughout 2011 and 2012 eroded significantly in the following two years (see Table 1). By the end of 2014, Labour's support in the Welsh polls was no higher than the vote share it had won in 2010.⁴ In part, detailed survey evidence suggested, this reflected an increasing focus on Labour's own performance in government in Wales, with voters not much impressed by its record in key policy areas.⁵ Labour's apparent failures in managing the Welsh NHS became a UK-wide political issue in 2014: the Conservatives, and newspapers sympathetic to them, argued that the Welsh NHS illustrated broader Labour incompetence.⁶ Yet as Labour support eroded, none of its established political rivals took immediate advantage. The Conservatives' poll ratings held steady, but no more;

³ For details, see <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/opinion-polls/>.

⁴ The final Welsh poll of 2014, conducted in December by YouGov, placed Labour on 36 percent for the general election, more-or-less equal to the 36.2 percent that the party had actually won in Wales in 2010.

⁵ On public ratings of Labour's governmental performance in Wales see, for instance, <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/2014/02/24/ernie-wise-and-welsh-politics/>.

⁶ At his speech to the Welsh Conservatives' conference in April 2014, David Cameron rather melodramatically suggested that Offa's Dyke "has become the line between life and death" (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-26956254>). This theme was developed further by Conservative-sympathetic newspapers, notably in the *Daily Mail* front page story of 21st October 2014, headlined 'Patients in Mass Exodus to England'.

while the Liberal Democrats' problems were dramatically illustrated by the May 2014 European Parliament election, where they came sixth in Wales, behind even the Greens. Nor did Plaid Cymru make much progress. Though under a new leader from 2012 in Leanne Wood, whose profile and popularity slowly grew, Plaid's poll ratings improved only modestly during 2014.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The big change in Welsh party politics during 2013 and 2014 was the rise of UKIP. Hitherto, Wales had seemed immune to the charms of Nigel Farage's party. Wales had been UKIP's second or third weakest 'region' in the 1999, 2004 and 2009 European elections; the party had also repeatedly failed to win seats in Welsh Assembly elections. But from 2013 onwards UKIP started figuring more prominently in the Welsh polls, and in May 2014 it caused a sensation by coming within 0.6% of beating Labour for first place in Wales in the European election. By the end of 2014, UKIP were polling in the high teens in voting intention for the general election; those same polls also put them on course to win multiple National Assembly seats.⁷

As the fixed-term parliament approached dissolution the polls suggested a modest Labour revival in spring 2015. The final Welsh poll before the start of the official campaign placed Labour on 40%, almost four percentage points above the vote share it had achieved in 2010 (see Table 2). The Conservatives and Plaid Cymru remained at more-or-less the same level of support they had won five years previously. The big changes from five years previously were the advance of UKIP (though their support had dipped a bit from their end-2014 peak) and, to a lesser extent, the Greens; and the decline of the Liberal Democrats. The Welsh Lib-Dems' 5% rating in the final pre-campaign poll indicated that they retained merely a quarter of their support from the previous election.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

⁷ The December 2014 YouGov poll put UKIP on 18 percent support for the general election; a uniform national swing-based projection of devolved voting intentions put UKIP on seven seats for the NAW (see: <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/2014/12/29/a-little-christmas-treat/>).

3. The Campaign

The campaign in Wales was generally uneventful (unlike, say, in 2001 when Wales had played host to John Prescott's infamous 'Rumble in Rhyl'). Bar a few mildly unsavoury episodes (such as an attempt to smear Plaid Cymru's candidate in Ceredigion over an article he had written fourteen years previously),⁸ and the inevitable sniping between party activists on Twitter, the weeks preceding the election lacked major incidents.

All the main parties published Welsh manifestos: documents which re-emphasised their UK-wide policy agenda but sought to give them a specific Welsh relevance, while also highlighting particular Wales-relevant policies. Notable features included the following:

- Labour's Welsh manifesto was a modestly-modified version of the Britain-wide document, with key phrases or sections added in or substituted to emphasise the relevance of particular policies and commitments for Wales. In addition to promising to deliver on the all-party St David's Day Agreement for limited further Welsh devolution,⁹ Labour promised a 'funding floor' for Wales, a policy that might partially address the perceived unfairness to Wales of the Barnett Formula that funds the devolved governments.
- The Welsh Conservatives' manifesto similarly followed closely the format of the UK-wide document, although its Welsh-specific content was slightly more fulsome. The Welsh Tories also promised to deliver on the St David's Day Agreement. Among specifically Welsh policies they gave particular prominence to commitments on improving Welsh transport links; they also continued their attacks on Labour's NHS record in Wales. A somewhat problematic feature of the manifesto, however, was a collection of health-policy commitments that clearly related to devolved matters,

⁸ The main local paper in Ceredigion, the *Cambrian News*, absurdly suggested in early April that the concerns expressed by Mike Parker in a 2001 article about the rise of the BNP, and racist attitudes more broadly in parts of rural Wales, were a 'Nazi smear' on all English incomers. This claim did not stand up to any scrutiny of the original article, not sit well with the fact that Parker himself was an English incomer, from Kidderminster.

⁹ Talks held between the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru in the wake of the Scottish independence referendum had produced agreement on some further advances in Welsh devolution. These were summarised in the command paper published just prior to St David's Day (1st March 2015); see: Wales Office (2015).

and thus could not be decided by the outcome of the 2015 election (Welsh Conservatives 2015: pp33-34).

- The Liberal Democrat's Welsh manifesto also followed closely the format of their UK one. It highlighted the party's key election pitch of the need to balance deficit reduction with the protection of public services; with regard to the latter, particular Lib-Dem priorities such as the pupil premium and the focus on mental healthcare were prominent features. The manifesto also saw the party renew their long-standing commitment to substantial further devolution for Wales – what they termed “proper Home Rule for Wales and a Welsh Parliament” (Welsh Liberal Democrats 2015: 125).
- Plaid Cymru's manifesto, *Working for Wales*, had two main themes: the need for an end to austerity policies from the UK government; and the argument for greater devolved powers and financial resources to be given to Wales. Among the other specific commitments, shared with the SNP, was an opposition to the UK renewing the Trident nuclear-missile system.
- UKIP's Welsh manifesto was a very thin document, with little Welsh-specific content beyond a promise to replace the Barnett Formula with a system in which “Wales is treated fairly” (UKIP 2015: 4). The Welsh Greens' manifesto was also distinctly thin, and sought to do little more than summarise the party's general policies and highlight a few Welsh implications.

Though dutifully covered by the main media outlets, the manifestos did little to drive the campaigns. The most important episodes in the national campaign were probably the various televised debates. The first Britain-wide leaders' debate was hosted by ITV on 2nd April. From a Welsh perspective it was notable mainly for featuring Plaid Cymru's leader, Leanne Wood. Though inexperienced in such events, and initially somewhat less polished than some other participants, Wood performed capably – particularly when berating UKIP's Nigel Farage over immigration. For Plaid, however, the major success of the debate was less Wood's performance than her mere presence: giving the party a profile they had never previously attained in a UK general election, contests where Plaid had normally struggled for attention. Wood also participated in the second major

Britain-wide debate, hosted by the BBC two weeks later.¹⁰ While the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon was the main star of the debates, they appeared to generate a notable boost both to Wood's profile and popularity within Wales.¹¹

There were also two televised Welsh debates, both held in Cardiff towards the end of the campaign. Leanne Wood once again represented Plaid Cymru, though against a different set of opponents.¹² Whereas in the Britain-wide events she had been the least well-known figure, in these Welsh debates she was probably – mainly because of the coverage she had received from the earlier debates – the highest-profile participant. Wood was generally adjudged to have performed the strongest in the first of these events;¹³ the second one was more even, except for the performance of Labour's Owen Smith, who had a notably poor night often being forced onto the defensive.¹⁴

Local campaigning in the election in Wales was mostly concentrated on only a minority of seats. Little more than a dozen Welsh constituencies were really 'in play'; the remainder experienced a rather more low-key election. The Liberal Democrats' effort focussed almost entirely on four seats (the three they held, plus Montgomeryshire, which they had lost in 2010); similarly, Plaid Cymru concentrated on six seats (three held and three targets). Labour held several seats that were much safer than they looked on paper – where they had had faced strong Liberal Democrat challenges in

¹⁰ The first debate featured David Cameron, Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg, Nigel Farage, Natalie Bennett, Nicola Sturgeon and Leanne Wood. Cameron and Clegg were absent from the second debate, styled an 'Opposition Leaders' Debate' by the BBC.

¹¹ See <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/2015/04/22/new-barometer-poll-the-standing-of-the-party-leaders-in-wales/> for discussion of the improvement in Wood's visibility and popularity ratings in published Welsh polls. A very similar picture is painted by the multiple waves of the BES online panel: the first four waves (conducted between February 2014 and March 2015) all had at least 27.9% of Welsh respondents unable/unwilling to offer a score for Wood when asked to rate her on a 0-10 like/dislike scale; in the post-election wave this was down to merely 11.7%. Among those BES panel respondents offering a view, Wood's rating rose from being well below an average of 4/10 in the first four waves to above 4/10 in the final two waves (and 4.31 in the post-election wave).

¹² The first debate, hosted by ITV-Wales, was held at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama on 22nd April; BBC Wales then held another Welsh debate on 1st May at the Sherman Theatre. In addition to Leanne Wood for Plaid Cymru, Welsh Secretary Stephen Crabb represented the Conservatives in these events; Shadow Welsh Secretary Owen Smith spoke for Labour; the Liberal Democrats were represented by their Welsh leader Kirsty Williams; UKIP by their Welsh leader and MEP Nathan Gill; and the Greens by their Welsh leader Pippa Bartolotti.

¹³ See: <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/2015/04/23/about-last-night/>.

¹⁴ See: <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/2015/05/02/the-bbc-leaders-debate/>.

2010 that by 2015 had entirely evaporated.¹⁵ Labour thus sought to focus on a small number of defensive battles and several potential gains. Much Conservative campaigning was concerned with defending the gains of 2010 (when they had captured five new Welsh seats); their only serious additional target appeared to be Brecon and Radnor, where the Liberal Democrat collapse gave them realistic hopes. Although the Tories also talked up their chances in the Vale of Clwyd and Gower – launching their Welsh manifesto in the latter – few observers took these claims seriously. Gower, after all, had been held continuously by Labour for over 100 years.

Systematic evidence on the reach of the parties' campaigns on the ground in Wales can be drawn from the British Election Study (BES). The post-election wave of the BES on-line panel provides highly relevant data on voters' experiences of the campaign. First of all, how successful were each of the parties at contacting voters? Table 3 displays the proportion of BES respondents in Wales who reported having been contacted by each of the main parties during the final four weeks of the campaign. While the majority of respondents claimed to have been contacted by at least one party,¹⁶ Labour appear to have been some way ahead of their rivals on voter contacts in Wales. The Conservatives were the second most active party, followed respectively by Plaid Cymru, the Liberal Democrats and UKIP, with the Greens some distance behind all the other parties.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

The parties did not, however, all campaign in quite the same ways. Table 4 displays details on the types of contact made by each of the parties. The data show some significant commonalities between the parties – in particular that contact through direct mail or leaflets was by far the most common method for all of them. Indeed, very similar proportions of respondents reported contact by this method from all of the parties. Labour, though, stand out in terms of the much greater volume of in-person contacts

¹⁵ The Liberal Democrats had run Labour quite close in 2010 in Swansea West, Newport East, Pontypridd, and Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. Yet in 2015 the Lib-Dems made no serious campaign effort in any of these seats.

¹⁶ This overall percentage of respondents reporting contact is likely to be somewhat over-stated, due to the now well-attested tendency of on-line surveys to be somewhat biased towards more politically interested and engaged citizens. More important than the absolute figures reported in Table 3 (and tables 4 and 5) are probably the differences between the parties.

made with people at their homes: #LabourDoorstep was clearly more than just an internet meme. At the other end of the spectrum, UKIP and the Greens appear to have done far less doorstep canvassing – perhaps because they lacked the organisation and human resources for such an effort. It is also notable that the three traditional UK parties made much the most use of email to contact voters, with the Conservatives putting particular efforts into this method. The Liberal Democrats appear to have placed a greater emphasis than other parties on telephone canvassing – perhaps reflecting not only a paucity of grassroots campaigners in much of Wales but also that three of the four seats they concentrated on were large, rural constituencies with dispersed populations.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

But how much of this activity was actually going on in the places where the parties needed it to occur? To assess this, I divide the forty Welsh constituencies, for each of the four established main parties in Wales, into three categories: Safe, Competitive, and Hopeless.¹⁷ What proportion of BES respondents living in each category of seat were contacted by each party? The data, presented in Table 5, tell a fascinating story. Labour did contact far more Welsh voters than any other party – but many of them, it appears, were in the wrong places. A substantial proportion of the voter contacts it made were in seats it was never going to win, while many others were in seats it was not at all likely to lose. All the other three parties, but particularly the Conservatives and to an even greater extent the Liberal Democrats, were more effective at targeting their voter contact efforts in the marginal constituencies – those where they either faced a tough defence or had realistic hopes of capturing a seat. Astonishingly, the BES data suggests that though it had a much higher overall rate of voter contact than the other parties, Labour actually contacted *fewer* voters in their key seats than either the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats did in theirs, and barely more than Plaid Cymru. This suggests some significant flaws in the targeting of Labour’s ground campaign in Wales.

TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

¹⁷ Details for how each seat is classified for each party are in Appendix 1.

Four Welsh polls were conducted during the campaign, all by YouGov. The first came right at the start; the second almost half-way through (between the two Britain-wide leaders' debates); the third was completed a week before polling; while the final one was conducted during the last two days of the campaign. With so few polls it is difficult to be sure of trends – apparent changes could easily result from margin of error shifts or 'outliers'. Nonetheless, the data (see Table 6) suggest that the campaign saw little substantial change in party support levels; at most they hint at a modest improvement in Plaid Cymru's position, a slight decline for Labour, and a slow erosion of support for the Greens.

TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

4. The Results

In significant contrast to England (though very similarly to Scotland), the opinion polls in Wales proved pretty reliable indicators of the final vote shares won by each of the main parties. As can be seen in the overview of the results presented in Table 7, the vote share won by each of the main parties was within 1.2 percentage points of that suggested by YouGov's final pre-election Welsh poll. For the twentieth time in a row (in a run dating back to 1935), the Labour party won the most votes and a majority of the seats in Wales at a general election. The Conservatives were in second as predicted, while UKIP narrowly edged out Plaid Cymru for third place in vote share. The Liberal Democrats had the dreadful night that the polls had long been foretelling, losing more than two-thirds of the vote share they had won in 2010.

TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

But in some important respects, the election turned out to be rather less predictable than expected. Between May 2010 and May 2015 twenty-seven Welsh opinion polls on general election voting intention were published. All twenty-seven showed a net swing from the Conservatives to Labour when compared with the 2010 election result. Yet once all the votes had been counted, Wales actually produced a small (0.2%) net swing

in the other direction. The polls in Wales had been close to the final result, but as in England what error they had made was, it appeared, in the direction of over-reporting Labour support and under-reporting the Conservatives' position.

Yet even this national picture was less surprising than the results in some particular constituencies. The most marginal seat in Wales in 2010, Cardiff North, into which Labour had been putting considerable campaigning efforts for a long time, was held by the Conservatives with a substantially-increased majority. The Tories held all their other Welsh seats with some ease. And the Conservatives' two 'outside chances', in Vale of Clwyd and Gower, were both won by very narrow margins (some 237 votes in Vale of Clwyd, a mere 27 in Gower). This result raised the Conservatives' number of seats in Wales to eleven: a higher total than in the overwhelming election victory of 1987 (although on a lower vote share), and their best score since the Tory landslide of 1983. The Welsh Tories more than punched their weight in contributing to David Cameron's surprise majority.

For Labour the 2015 result could not be counted as anything other than a grave disappointment. Having spent the majority of the 2010-15 parliament a long way ahead of their rivals in the Welsh polls, they ended up with but a solitary seat gain – Cardiff Central, which they took from the hapless Liberal Democrats. And the two shock seat losses to the Conservatives meant that Labour, while still holding the clear majority of Welsh seats, was on its lowest total since 1987. Perhaps the worst aspect of these results for Labour was that they were so unexpected: throughout the campaign and even well into election night, senior Labour figures had been confident about holding all their existing seats and gaining both Cardiff Central and Cardiff North, and hopeful of making further gains. Those expectations proved to be seriously misguided. As elsewhere in Britain, one of the major stories emerging from the 2015 election in Wales was the failure of Labour's much-vaunted ground campaign. Another ominous feature of the result for Welsh Labour was their vote-share: the 36.9% they gained was their second lowest since 1918 (and worse even than they had managed under Michael Foot in 1983), while the gap between Labour's vote share in Wales and that in England, at 5.3%, was the lowest ever in a general election. Wales was still a bastion for Labour, but one that looked ever more insecure.

UKIP's performance showed that the 2014 European elections had not been a one-off; they are now established as a significant force in Welsh politics. They saved their deposit in every seat in Wales, and came second in six constituencies.¹⁸ Though UKIP were not close to winning in any of these places, the results did suggest that they were in a strong position to gain seats in the Welsh Assembly election some twelve months later – particularly in the South-East Wales region, where all of UKIP's five highest vote share performances were registered.

Plaid Cymru, by contrast, had a disappointing election overall. True, they did increase their vote share for the first time since 2001, but by less than a single percentage point. While Plaid held their three existing seats comfortably, and came within 229 votes of gaining Ynys Môn, they fell well short in their other main target of Ceredigion. And in Aberconwy, Caerphilly and Llanelli, seats where Plaid had hoped for strong results as the launch-pad to winning these constituencies in 2016, they actually lost ground. Leanne Wood had enjoyed a good election campaign but it had brought her party few additional votes.

The big losers of the election, however, were clearly the Liberal Democrats. Mark Williams' extraordinary skills as a constituency MP had enabled him to hold Ceredigion, though with a majority more than halved; without this success the party would have been wiped off the map in Wales, something their Liberal predecessors had avoided even during the darkest days of the 1950s and 1960s. But the Lib-Dems' other two seats were lost by substantial margins, while the party saved their deposit in only ten of the forty Welsh constituencies.¹⁹ Like the Greens – who stood in 35 seats in Wales but saved their deposit in only three of them²⁰ – the Liberal Democrats faced the prospect of struggling to win any seats at all in the 2016 Assembly election unless their fortunes could be revived.

¹⁸ UKIP finished second in Aberavon, Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Islwyn, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, and Swansea East. The contrast with the fortunes of the party in Scotland is stark: there, UKIP had stood candidates in 41 of the 59 seats, and every single one had lost their deposit.

¹⁹ The Lib-Dems secured the 5 percent vote-share required to save their electoral deposit in: Brecon and Radnor, Cardiff Central, Cardiff South and Penarth, Ceredigion, Monmouth, Montgomeryshire, Newport East, Pontypridd, Swansea West, and Wrexham.

²⁰ The Greens saved their deposit in Cardiff Central, Ceredigion and Swansea West. Welsh leader Pippa Bartolotti failed to do so in Newport West.

5. Examining Voting Behaviour in Wales in 2015

This section of the paper will make an initial attempt to explore patterns of voting behaviour in Wales at the 2015 general election. It will do so in two stages. To begin, Table 8 presents some simple, bivariate statistics on the estimated level of electoral support for each of the main five parties within different categories of some basic socio-demographic characteristics: age, education level, gender, housing status, (subjective) social class, Welsh language and place of birth. In which sections of the population was electoral support for each of the parties concentrated?

TABLE 8 ABOUT HERE

The clearest thing to emerge from the figures shown is how difficult it was, in 2015 in Wales, to account for voting choices by social characteristics. There is only a very modest association between voting behaviour and most of the social markers examined in Table 8. Differences in voting preferences by age group are modest, although those which are observable in the data are broadly in the expected direction: thus, the only age group in which the Conservative party was in the lead in Wales according to the BES data was those aged 66 and older, while this age group also had the highest level of UKIP support. Differences by gender are also modest in the main – although, once more in line with previous work (Ford and Goodwin 2014), UKIP support is several points higher among men than women. Something rather similar is observable for education: UKIP support is notably lower amongst the more highly educated, while support for the Liberal Democrats and (especially) Plaid Cymru is rather higher. There is also only a modest relationship between housing status and voting behaviour, although Labour support is notably high among those renting Council or Housing Association properties.

Somewhat stronger associations with voting behaviour emerge for the last three factors included in Table 8. There is a clear – although again far from overwhelming – relationship between social class identity and voting behaviour. Among those identifying as middle-class, the Conservatives were actually well ahead. But among the rather greater number of Welsh voters identifying as working-class, roughly half supported the Labour party. We can also observe a clear relationship between language

and vote choice: Plaid Cymru's level of support was roughly five times greater among fluent Welsh speakers than among non-speakers, while the Conservatives' electoral support among non-speakers of Welsh was more than double that among fluent speakers of the language. Notwithstanding Plaid's *relative* strength amongst Welsh speakers, we should take note that Labour still won the electoral support of far more of this group than did Plaid Cymru. Finally, somewhat similar patterns as for language, if not quite as strong, are also observable for place of birth: as one might expect, Plaid Cymru support is strongest among those born in Wales; both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats do relatively better among those voters now in Wales who were born in England.

Overall, though, these socio-demographic markers were not very highly correlated with vote choice. This can be further demonstrated by the second stage in our analysis, in which we report findings from a series of multivariate models that sought to explore voting choices. Two sets of (otherwise identical) models were run: one, using binary logistic regression, explored voting support for Labour compared to all other parties; the second set used multinomial logistic regression to explore support for the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and UKIP. Outline findings for these models are presented in Table 9; coefficients (and robust standard errors) for the final composite models are reported in Table 10.

Several sets of models are reported in Table 9. The first is simply a socio-demographic model based on the age, education, gender housing status and class variables included in Table 8. The second model supplements these general socio-demographic variables with two more oriented to the cultural/national divisions that have often animated Welsh political life – variables for place of birth and Welsh language ability. The third model includes variables measuring respondents' self-placement on the left-right scale, and two issue scales concerning EU integration and socio-economic redistribution, as well as respondents' perceived distance from the two largest parties on each of these three scales.²¹ The fourth model is a 'valence politics' model, based around the main

²¹ Respondent's perceived distance from all of the main parties was measured on these scales by the BES; however, many respondents offered Don't Know, or did not answer, for some of the smaller parties on some of the scales. In order not to lose too many cases from the analysis, only respondents' perceived distances from Labour and the Conservatives on these scales are included in the model.

factors identified as important by advocates of this approach (e.g. Clarke et al 2009): party identification, ratings of the party leaders, and evaluations of the competence of parties.²² Finally, Table 9 also reports a composite model, which includes all those variables included in each of the individual models.²³

TABLE 9 ABOUT HERE

The findings confirm that basic demographic factors have rather little ability to account for voting patterns in Wales in 2015, while little further explanatory leverage is generated by including place of birth and language. However, ideological self-placement and issue positions do provide much greater insight into voting behaviour. So also do variables typically associated with a 'valence politics' approach to explaining vote choice – party identification, leader ratings, and assessments of the respective parties' competence on what respondents regard as the 'most important issue' facing the country. Finally, the composite model has the best fit of all the models, suggesting that some combination of the different factors included in the individual models, and particularly models 3 and 4, are most readily able to explaining voting choices in Wales in 2015.

TABLE 10 ABOUT HERE

The detailed results in Table 10 show relatively few variables attaining significance; there may be some colinearity between variables, or other refinements of the model required in further analysis. The main variables that emerge as statistically significant are those most readily explicable: that is, those with an identity with a party are generally far more likely to vote for it, as are those who have a positive view of that party's leader. If they confirm anything, the results of this initial analysis of voting in Wales in 2015 reinforce the importance of party leaders for vote choice in contemporary general elections.

²² The competence of parties was measured by first asking respondents what they regarded as being the 'most important issue facing the country', and then which party was best able to deal with that issue. The variables included in the model measure, for each respondent, whether they regarded each party as the best able to tackle whatever they regarded as the most important issue.

²³ Details on the precise codings of all variables used in the multivariate analysis are given in Appendix 2.

6. Conclusion

The 2015 general election in Wales was undoubtedly less dramatic than in Scotland, but it was still replete with interest. Wales' long-dominant party, Labour, remained some way ahead of all others. But it lost ground, and Labour's Welsh bastion now looks distinctly shaky. Meanwhile, two parties of the right both made substantial progress, in a significant challenge to Wales' self-image as a more politically radical nation than England.

Unlike England, but in common with Scotland and Northern Ireland, Wales will return to the polls for a national election within twelve months of the general election. The May 2016 National Assembly for Wales contest now looks like being contested against a very different political background to what might have been expected only a few months ago. Had the opinion polls (in England) been correct, then Labour in Wales might have faced fighting an election while associated with a weak, minority Labour government at Westminster. The party does not now face that challenge. But it does have to fight another contest within a year of the morale-sapping disappointment of May 2015. And, in the meantime, the contest for the leadership of the UK Labour party has thrown up plentiful other challenges for the party. The Conservatives will likely go into the Assembly elections buoyant after the successes of 2015. But from now on they will also take sole responsibility for any unpopular things that the government in London does: the Liberal Democrats will no longer operate as their political human shield. The Lib-Dems face the challenge of picking themselves up and re-building after years of unpopularity that have severely eroded their base of local councillors, as well as greatly reducing their Westminster representation; while UKIP will seek to continue their recent momentum in Wales in 2016. And Plaid Cymru, operating on the more promising terrain of a devolved election and under their increasingly well-known leader, will seek once more to challenge Labour's dominance of the National Assembly – but in a nation that shows little sign of responding to it as Scotland has responded to the SNP. Almost the only certainty is that things are unlikely to be dull.

Tables and Figures

Table 1: Average Poll Ratings for Westminster General Election, Wales

Party	2012	2013	2014
Labour	51.0%	48.3%	40.5%
Conservative	23.5%	22.0%	23.5%
Lib-Dems	6.0%	8.3%	6.1%
Plaid Cymru	10.5%	10.3%	12.0%
UKIP	5.7%	8.3%	13.4%

Source: <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/>

Table 2: Final Pre-Campaign Poll in Wales

Party	% Support	Change on 2010 Vote
Labour	40%	-3.8%
Conservative	25%	-1.1%
Lib-Dems	5%	-15.1%
Plaid Cymru	11%	-0.3%
UKIP	14%	+11.6%
Greens	5%	+4.6%

Source: Welsh Political Barometer poll by YouGov; fieldwork March 24-27, number of respondents = 1189.

Table 3: Voter Contact Rates During the Campaign

Contacted by...	%
Labour	44%
Conservatives	34%
Plaid Cymru	28%
Lib-Dems	24%
UKIP	21%
Greens	10%
Other party	2%
Not contacted by any party	42%

Source: British Election Study On-Line Panel Study, Wave 6 (post-election wave); number of respondents = 1556. Percentages sum to well over 100 because many respondents reported contact by more than one party during the campaign.

Table 4: Types of Voter Contact during the Campaign by Party (%)

	Labour	Cons.	Lib-Dems	Plaid	UKIP	Greens
<i>Phone</i>	6	6	9	4	2	0
<i>Letter/Leaflet</i>	86	87	90	93	94	94
<i>At home</i>	30	15	13	16	6	2
<i>In street</i>	9	6	8	6	6	4
<i>Email</i>	18	22	15	8	9	9
<i>Other</i>	4	3	5	5	3	3

Source: British Election Study On-Line Panel Study, Wave 6 (post-election wave); percentages in table are of those respondents who reported being contacted during the campaign by a party (as per Table 3). Percentages sum to more than 100 because some voters were contacted in more than one way by a party during the campaign

Table 5: Contact Rate for Main Parties in Types of Seat

	Hopeless	Safe	Competitive
Labour	44%	40%	53%
Conservative	27%	43%	56%
Lib-Dems	19%	n/a	64%
Plaid Cymru	25%	44%	50%

Source: British Election Study On-Line Panel Study, Wave 6 (post-election wave); seats are classified for each party as indicated in the Appendix.

Table 6: Welsh Opinion Polls During the Campaign*

Party	31/03/15	15/04/15	30/04/15	06/05/15
Labour	40%	40%	39%	38%
Conservative	27%	26%	26%	26%
LibDems	6%	6%	6%	7%
Plaid Cymru	9%	12%	13%	12%
UKIP	13%	13%	12%	13%
Greens	5%	4%	3%	2%
<i>N of respondents</i>	1035	1143	1146	1202

* All polls conducted by YouGov. Dates listed for polls are dates when fieldwork was completed.

Table 7: The 2015 Election Result in Wales (changes on 2010)

Party	Votes	% Vote	Seats
Labour	552,473	36.9%(+0.7)	25 (-1)
Conservative	407,813	27.2% (+1.1)	11 (+3)
UKIP	204,360	13.6% (+11.2)	0
Plaid Cymru	181,694	12.1% (+0.8)	3
Liberal Democrats	97,783	6.5% (-13.6%)	1 (-2)
Greens	38,344	2.6% (+2.1)	0
Others	15,616	1.1% (-2.3)	0

Table 8: General Election Vote (%) for Major Parties among Major Social Categories

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>LibDems</i>	<i>Plaid</i>	<i>UKIP</i>
Age					
18-25	35	29	9	7	14
26-35	42	22	11	8	7
36-45	40	18	9	19	10
46-55	44	23	5	12	12
56-65	39	26	9	8	13
66+	30	37	5	8	17
Education					
No formal qualifications	43	25	6	6	18
GCSE/O-Level/Equivalent	44	24	6	7	16
A Level/Equivalent	39	26	8	11	8
University or equivalent	36	25	10	15	7
Other qualifications	38	28	8	9	14
Gender					
Male	37	25	8	11	15
Female	39	27	8	9	10
Housing Status					
Owner occupiers	36	29	7	12	12
Council/Hous.Assoc. renters	50	20	2	15	10
Private renters	33	26	12	6	17
Subjective Social Class:					
Middle Class	22	44	11	9	10
Working Class	49	19	5	10	14
None/Other/Don't Know	33	24	12	12	11
Welsh Language:					
Fluent speaker	43	13	6	29	9
Non-Fluent	35	22	7	15	13
Non speaker	39	29	8	6	12
Place of Birth:					
Wales	43	21	6	13	13
England	29	34	12	5	13
Other	35	35	9	11	7

Source: British Election Study On-Line Panel Study, Wave 6 (post-election wave).

Table 9: Models of Voting in 2011 NAW Election

Panel A: Logistic Regression*

<i>Model</i>	<i>Cox/Snell R²</i>	<i>% correctly predicted</i>
1. Age, Education, Gender, Housing & Social Class	.05	66.0
2. 1 + Place of Birth & Welsh Language	.06	66.2
3. Ideology, Issue Scales & Perceptions of Distance from Parties	.40	80.9
4. Party ID, Leader Ratings & Party Best on Most Important Issue	.52	88.0
5. 'Composite' model: 2, 3 & 4	.58	92.3

* Dependent variable = Vote for Labour versus vote for all other parties

Panel B: Multinomial Logistic Regression#

<i>Model</i>	<i>Cox/Snell R²</i>	<i>% correctly predicted</i>
1. Age, Education, Gender, Housing & Social Class	.15	51.6
2. 1 + Place of Birth & Welsh Language	.21	52.0
3. Ideology, Issue Scales & Perceptions of Distance from Parties	.64	67.2
4. Party ID, Leader Ratings & Party Best on Most Important Issue	.80	80.1
5. 'Composite' model: 2, 3 & 4	.87	87.0

Dependent variable = voting for Conservative, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru or UKIP (reference category = vote for Labour)

Table 10: Binary/Multinomial Logistic Regression Estimates (Standard Errors) for Composite Model of Vote Choice in 2011 NAW Election

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Cons.</i>	<i>LibDems</i>	<i>Plaid</i>	<i>UKIP</i>
Age Group (Reference category: 66 and older)					
18-25	-.42 (.96)	1.66 (1.52)	2.42 (1.51)	.55 (1.34)	1.24 (2.45)
26-35	1.72 (.91)	-.19 (1.32)	.34 (1.44)	-2.80 (1.34)*	-3.58 (3.07)
36-45	.26 (.71)	-.13 (1.02)	.96 (1.14)	.18 (.94)	-3.58 (2.03)
46-55	1.09 (.68)	.07 (.99)	1.37 (1.09)	-.73 (.94)	-.97 (1.33)
56-65	1.02 (.68)	-.89 (.88)	.60 (1.03)	-1.05 (.88)	-2.69 (1.12)*
Female	.33 (.43)	.42 (.65)	.22 (.69)	-1.00 (.63)	-.09 (2.25)
Class Identity (Reference category: No ID given)					
Middle Class	.72 (.59)	.07 (.79)	.58 (.77)	.19 (.79)	-.54 (1.19)
Working Class	.72 (.49)	-.68 (.73)	.17 (.81)	.20 (.66)	-1.09 (1.10)
Housing Status (Reference Category: Other)					
Home Owner	-.26 (.46)	-.25 (.70)	-.35 (.67)	1.10 (.68)	1.24 (1.09)
Council/Housing Assoc. Rent	-.11 (.92)	-.16 (1.45)	.29 (2.00)	.96 (1.34)	-2.04 (2.49)
Highest Education Qualification (Reference category: No qualifications)					
GCSE/O-Level	-1.94 (1.04)	1.77 (1.30)	3.01 (2.05)	2.86 (2.05)	.91 (1.78)
A-Level	-1.13 (.98)	.99 (1.26)	1.44 (2.88)	3.18 (1.95)	-.92 (1.86)
University-level	-1.91 (.94)*	1.44 (1.18)	2.56 (1.99)	2.61 (1.91)	.94 (1.59)
Other qualifications	-1.30 (.92)	1.53 (1.14)	2.08 (1.97)	2.20 (1.94)	.67 (1.45)
Welsh Language (Reference category: Non speaker)					
Fluent speaker	.19 (.81)	.45 (1.37)	.28 (1.29)	1.18 (1.07)	-.10 (2.25)
Non-Fluent	.51 (.51)	.27 (.70)	-.39 (.79)	.14 (.63)	-.13 (1.08)
Place of Birth (Reference category: Born elsewhere)					
Wales	.20 (.85)	.25 (1.17)	-.28 (1.26)	-.06 (1.07)	2.64 (2.56)
England	.48 (.91)	-.99 (1.15)	.39 (1.23)	-.61 (1.15)	3.37 (2.51)
Party Identity (Reference category: no-ID given)					
Conservative	-1.46 (1.42)	.01 (.89)	1.15 (1.26)	-2.77 (1.70)	1.21 (1.48)
Labour	2.24 (.57)***	-1.49 (1.03)	-.12 (1.03)	-.81 (.78)	-2.52 (1.63)
Lib Dem	-.23 (.88)	.17 (1.15)	1.89 (1.02)	.89 (1.07)	.57 (2.38)
Plaid Cymru	-1.55 (1.17)	.75 (2.13)	3.17 (1.58)*	2.24 (1.08)*	-.22 (2.64)
UKIP	-.45 (1.51)	-3.44 (1.57)*	1.18 (2.00)	-12.91 (497.59)	-2.06 (1.76)
Party Leader Ratings (0-10)					
Cameron	-.22 (.12)	.35 (.16)*	.12 (.18)	.37 (.16)*	-.31 (.23)
Miliband	.34 (.10)**	-.25 (.17)	-.19 (.17)	-.64 (.15)***	-.06 (.24)
Clegg	-.17 (.10)	-.02 (.14)	.51 (.16)**	.02 (.13)	.07 (.19)

Farage	-.14 (.10)	.35 (.12)**	.07 (.15)	-.04 (.14)	.88 (.24)***
Wood	-.03 (.09)	-.11 (.14)	-.23 (.15)	.70 (.15)***	.01 (.20)
Party Best on Most Important Issue (Reference category: other/no party indicated)					
Conservative	.12 (.76)	.72 (.85)	-.16 (1.00)	-1.49 (1.03)	1.74 (1.41)
Labour	.90 (.49)	-1.52 (1.51)	-1.61 (.96)	-.15 (.71)	-7.81 (5.25)
Lib Dem	-1.50 (1.66)	.94 (1.88)	1.45 (1.29)	-1.32 (1.87)	-15.35 (16.01)
Plaid Cymru	-2.28 (3.13)	-9.06 (10.42)	.17 (4.06)	2.67 (2.50)	-8.48 (187.88)
UKIP	-.89 (.95)	-.43 (1.56)	-.34 (1.88)	-13.99 (519.90)	4.06 (1.57)*
0-10 Left-Right Scale					
Self-Placement	-.16 (.18)	-.24 (.27)	.09 (.27)	-.22 (.28)	-.31 (.34)
Perceived Distance from Cons	-.15 (.14)	-.61 (.24)*	-.00 (.23)	-.16 (.22).12	-.14 (.28)
Perceived Distance from Lab	-.22 (.13)	.29 (.19)	.04 (.21)	(.18)	.20 (.22)
EU Scale Self-Placement					
Self-Placement	.15 (.09)	.08 (.15)	-.11 (.15)	.11 (.14)	-.05 (.21)
Perceived Distance from Cons	.06 (.09)	-.06 (.14)	-.00 (.15)	-.13 (.15)	.12 (.19)
Perceived Distance from Lab	-.04 (.10)	-.05 (.15)	-.15 (.16)	.06 (.15)	.25 (.20)
Redistribution Scale Self-Placement					
Self-Placement	-.00 (.13)	.26 (.18)	-.11 (.15)	.13 (.19)	-.02 (.22)
Perceived Distance from Cons	-.10 (.11)	.14 (.17)	.14 (.20)	.18 (.16)	-.17 (.23)
Perceived Distance from Lab	-.17 (.12)	-.09 (.15)	-.02 (.17)	.02 (.16)	-.12 (.20)
Constant / Intercept	.23 (1.87)	-1.77 (2.46)	-7.23 (3.36)*	-5.90 (3.35)	-5.83 (4.19)

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

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Appendix 1: Categorisation of Welsh Constituencies by Party

For the purposes of the analysis reported in Table 5, this is how each of the forty Welsh constituencies was categorised for each party:

Seat	Labour	Cons.	Lib-Dems	Plaid
Aberavon	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Aberconwy	Competitive	Competitive	Hopeless	Hopeless
Alyn & Deeside	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Arfon	Competitive	Hopeless	Hopeless	Competitive
Blaenau Gwent	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Brecon & Radnor	Hopeless	Competitive	Competitive	Hopeless
Bridgend	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Caerphilly	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Cardiff Central	Competitive	Hopeless	Competitive	Hopeless
Cardiff North	Competitive	Competitive	Hopeless	Hopeless
Cardiff South & Penarth	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Cardiff West	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Carmarthen East & Dinefwr	Competitive	Hopeless	Hopeless	Competitive
Carm West & S. Pembs	Competitive	Competitive	Hopeless	Hopeless
Ceredigion	Hopeless	Hopeless	Competitive	Competitive
Clwyd South	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Clwyd West	Hopeless	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless
Cynon Valley	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Delyn	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Dwyfor Meirionnydd	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless	Safe
Gower	Competitive	Competitive	Hopeless	Hopeless
Islwyn	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Llanelli	Competitive	Hopeless	Hopeless	Competitive
Merthyr Tydfil & Rh.	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Monmouth	Hopeless	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless
Montgomeryshire	Hopeless	Competitive	Competitive	Hopeless
Neath	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Newport East	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Newport West	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Ogmore	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Pontypridd	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Preseli Pembrokeshire	Hopeless	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless
Rhondda	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Swansea East	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Swansea West	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Torfaen	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Vale of Clwyd	Competitive	Competitive	Hopeless	Hopeless
Vale of Glamorgan	Competitive	Competitive	Hopeless	Hopeless
Wrexham	Safe	Hopeless	Hopeless	Hopeless
Ynys Môn	Competitive	Hopeless	Hopeless	Competitive

Categorisations are based on either explicitly-stated party targets, or on the 2010 election results and subsequent polling. Further details are discussed at:

<http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/2015/06/16/post-election-review/>

Appendix 2: Codings for All Variables Included in Multivariate Analysis

TBC...