

Welsh devolution: The settled will?

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In 1999 devolution was hailed as 'the settled will of the Scottish people' but the closeness of the Welsh result left devolution contested. Does the 2011 referendum result finally deliver the 'settled will of the Welsh people'?

The emphatic nature of the Yes vote in the referendum on 3 March 2011, albeit on a low turnout, not only completed the National Assembly's transition to a full legislature, to many it has ended the contested nature of Welsh devolution. Has devolution therefore become the settled will of the Welsh nation?

Lifting the 'shadows' of 1979 and 1997

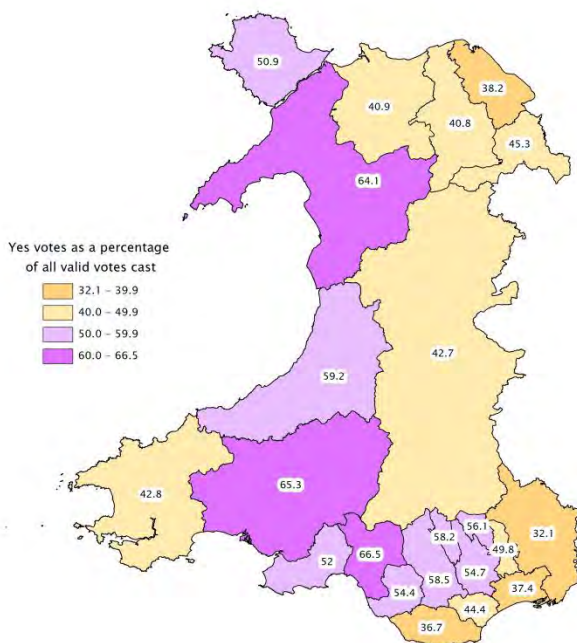
Such conclusions could not be taken from the previous referendums concerning Welsh devolution held in 1979 and 1997.

In 1979, the proposal for a National Assembly was resoundingly rejected by the Welsh public who were hostile to the most minimal of self-government.

Although such attitudes had changed dramatically by 1997, Wales remained divided down the middle on devolution. The people of Wales voted for a National Assembly, but they did so with a narrow and half-hearted mandate given by a bare majority of those who turned out to vote. By contrast, the creation of a Scottish Parliament in 1997 was supported by a margin of four to one. It could be argued, therefore, that unlike Scotland, devolution remained contested in Wales.

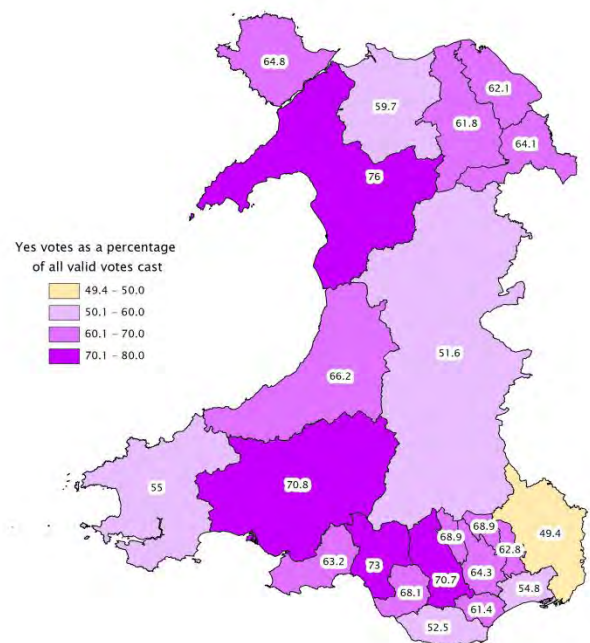
In 2011, the way in which Wales made its choice seemed unequivocal. 63.5 per cent of voters were in favour of further powers to the National Assembly, the exact same percentage that voted in favour of tax-raising powers for the Scottish Parliament in 1997.

1997



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2011



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Wales united

The 2011 result also demonstrated that support for further devolution and the strengthening of the National Assembly had evened out geographically across the country.

Support for devolution has evened out across the country

All but one of the 22 local authority areas had voted Yes. Even the single area that voted No – Monmouthshire – did so by only the narrow margin of 320 votes.

The strength of the Yes vote varied relatively little across the country. The geographical divisions between east-west and north-south, so apparent in 1997, seemed to have disappeared. Surprisingly, a higher percentage of people in the north-eastern counties of Wrexham and Flintshire voted Yes than the inhabitants of Cardiff.

Not only was the overall result in 2011 clear; it was one in which Wales seemed very much united.

A full endorsement?

Perhaps comparing the 2011 result with previous polls concerning the creation of the National Assembly is misleading. In contrast to the stark choices faced by voters in 1979 and 1997, some have argued that the Welsh people were not asked to pass judgement on a fundamental constitutional question in 2011.

As a result, it is difficult to know whether the 2011 result was an emphatic endorsement of the record of the National Assembly and successive Welsh Governments since 1999, or simply a placid recognition that devolution in Wales is here to stay.

In addition, although the overall result of the 2011 referendum was decisive, the turnout in comparison with the previous referendums was significantly lower. Only 35.2 per cent of registered voters took part, and while this was not quite as low as some had feared, it was still much lower than the 50.1 per cent who voted in 1997 and the 58.8 per cent who took part in 1979.

Turnout in 2011 was much lower than in 1997 and 1979

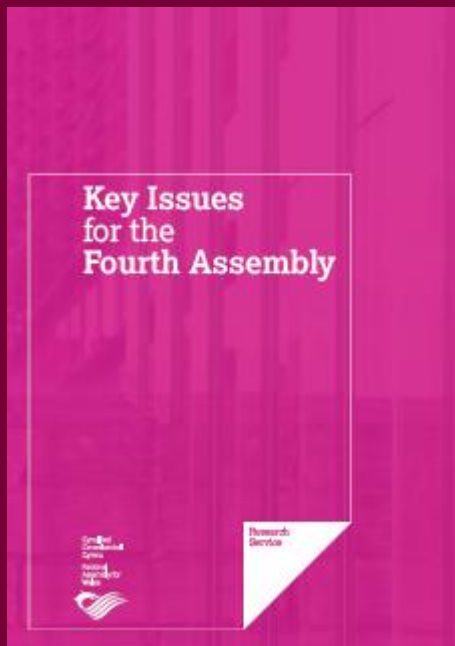
Perhaps that the most striking element of the 2011 referendum therefore was the level of apathy apparent amongst the Welsh public.

Future dynamics

Despite this, the result of the referendum is likely to be hugely consequential for devolution in Wales. In particular, commentators have noted that the nature of the result will create a momentum and dynamic that will bestow a new legitimacy on the National Assembly which was not provided by the 1997 referendum.

Along with the planned reduction in Welsh MPs from 40 to 30 by the date of the 2015 UK general election, and a commitment by the UK Government to consider the proposals of the Holtham Commission, will there now be a shift in political focus from Westminster to Wales?

Article taken from Research Service publication



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