

Politicising national identity: how parties try to define 'Welshness' for themselves

*The politicisation of national identity in Wales has increased dramatically since devolution. But political parties do not present a common version of 'Welshness', writes **Sophie Williams**. Each party expresses its own version instead, conflating national identity with their own political ideology in the process.*



St David's Day celebrations at the National Assembly in Cardiff. Photo: [National Assembly of Wales](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

Late 2017 saw the effect that heightened calls for self-determination can have on the status quo. The constitutional crisis in Catalonia, votes for greater autonomy in Northern Ireland, and the ongoing impact of Brexit on relations between the UK nations served to highlight the impact of national identity politicisation. Though not a new phenomenon, these issues are growing in international importance, and no less so in Wales, where 20 years of devolved government has irrevocably changed the domestic political landscape.

Devolution in Wales was partly predicated on the idea that it would increase a sense of 'Welshness': that citizens would feel their existing identity more strongly when centred around their own government. This expectation has been challenged by quantitative data. Using the Moreno question, Roger Scully, Richard Wyn Jones, and Dafydd Trystan [demonstrated](#) that 'Welsh and British' remains the most common identification.

This conclusion prompted Jonathan Bradbury and Rhys Andrews to [investigate](#) any causal links between devolution and increased politicisation of national identity. Their research found that devolution has *not* generated an increased sense of national identity. What has changed since devolution, they argued, is the level of national identity politicisation. Welshness dominates public discourse and is dominated by political parties who seek to assert their Welshness in different ways.

In light of this finding, Bradbury and Andrews sought to understand the reasoning behind this increased politicisation, and suggested that all parties seek to achieve the same aim: to converge on a shared sense of 'civic Welshness'. They argued that this umbrella approach bridges different versions to create a broader Welshness, in order to counteract the inherent tensions that exist between overly exclusive visions of Welshness.

My own, more [recent research](#) has explored the politicisation of national identity, examining the facets of Bradbury and Andrews' arguments. This research supports their first finding: that the politicisation of Welshness has increased, promoted by the main political parties in different ways. Devolution is identified as a key causal link, as highlighted in this excerpt:

Fifteen years ago, we had difficulty with the idea of Welsh Labour...those days are long gone...Welsh Labour probably now has a stronger Welsh identity than it has ever done. Welsh Labour Senior Assembly Member (7/11/2014)

Other parties were equally clear that devolution had provided a catalyst for the development and promotion of the Welshness of their branding. The Welsh Conservatives, for example, had felt the need to mobilise and respond to the new political arena, in order to achieve electoral success:

The Conservative Party over the past fifteen, twenty years, has developed its Welsh branch...certainly since the establishment of the Assembly, it certainly has had to become more Welsh... Welsh Conservative Assembly Member (18/8/14)

Bradbury and Andrews suggest that parties achieve this by presenting a common, palatable version of 'civic Welshness', one which transcends party boundaries and seeks to mitigate division. The accuracy of the theory is less certain. Do parties present a united front on the issue, or do they differ in their political mobilisation? My research has found that, instead of presenting a united national identity across the political spectrum, politicians instead conflate Welshness with their own party political ideology. Instead of converging on a shared meaning, political elites project their own visions of national identity, merging them with their particular set of political values.

For example, the Welsh Liberal Democrats present a vision of Welshness founded in the Liberal and federalist tradition, while the Welsh Conservatives argue the Conservatism and Welshness are inherently compatible. A Plaid Cymru interviewee argued that Plaid Cymru is the only truly Welsh party, while a Welsh Labour interviewee suggested that being Welsh and Labour was a 'natural' state of being. The Welsh Conservatives, in particular, were clear in that they had had to work the hardest to convince the electorate of their Welshness, and to counteract the historical view of the party as English and anti-Welsh.

In this way, Welsh political elites frame different versions of Welshness, conflating elements of their political ideologies with national identification. But, in so doing, they silence competing versions, for how can Welshness mean conservatism, Liberalism, socialism, and nationalism all at once? These findings directly challenge those of Bradbury and Andrews. Although it seems clear that elites are politicising national identity as never before, they are not presenting a shared civic version of Welshness, but are rather competing with one another in this effort.

A wider part of this research considered people's understandings of Welshness and their attitudes to politicians, to assess whether or not attempts by politicians to appear more Welsh had had a positive impact on their electoral prospects in the minds of voters. This work requires further scrutiny, but there was a contemporaneous consensus amongst participants that politicians are untrustworthy.

Politicising national identity in Wales has increased dramatically since devolution, although, contrary to Bradbury and Andrews' initial suggestions, it seems that the parties compete with one another to express the 'true' vision of Welshness and Welsh values, conflating national identity with their own political ideology. The question remains as to how effective this is as an electoral strategy. Welsh Labour in particular remains steadfastly popular across large parts of Wales, as seen in the 2017 General Election result, while the Welsh Liberal Democrats have struggled to remain politically relevant. The introduction of UKIP to Welsh politics may have further altered the dynamic. This is, then, a changing picture, and it will be interesting to see the development of Welsh national and the role it plays in shaping Wales' political future.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It draws on the author's [published work](#) in Parliamentary Affairs and first appeared at [LSE British Politics & Policy](#).



Sophie Williams holds a PhD from Swansea University.

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