

## **The Public Legitimacy of the National Assembly for Wales**

Roger Scully and Richard Wyn Jones  
Wales Governance Centre  
Cardiff University

Abstract: This article examines the public legitimacy of the National Assembly for Wales. Both the Assembly, and the broader system of devolved government for Wales, initially enjoyed very limited public support. We show that support for devolution in general has risen substantially, while some elements of public attitudes towards the Assembly itself now appear distinctly positive. However, we also demonstrate that public legitimacy, defined as ‘diffuse support’ for the Assembly, remains limited. The article then examines what factors explain levels of diffuse support for the National Assembly. We find that variation in such support is best accounted for by factors associated with ‘non-material consequentialism’: perceptions of the impact of the Assembly on the *process* of government. The conclusion assesses the implications of our findings for the National Assembly, as well as for the study of devolution and political institutions more generally.

Key Words: Public Legitimacy; National Assembly for Wales; Diffuse Support; Devolution; Consequentialism; Deontologism.

## **The Public Legitimacy of the National Assembly for Wales**

The relationship between people and the institutions that govern them is central to the study of politics. Much political theory considers the proper limits of government authority and the rights that citizens should have in relation to government; or approaches the relationship from the opposite direction to assess the duties and obligations owed to authority by citizens, and conditions under which authority should be granted acceptance and even loyalty. This latter concern – when, and with what consequences, citizens accept government as legitimate – is also a persisting theme for empirical enquiry, with substantial work exploring public attitudes to the newly democratic regimes established since the early 1990s (Bratton et al 2004; Evans and Whitefield 1995), and the apparently declining public legitimacy of many established democracies (Dalton 2004; Hay 2007). Public support for structures of government matters: its absence is associated with diminished public compliance with the law (Dalton 2004, ch.8; Kornberg and Clarke 1992; Schloz and Lubell 1998); greater support for radical constitutional change (Cain et al 2003; Dalton et al 2001; Shugart and Wattenberg 2001); and support for extreme, even violent, political activism (Craig and Wald 1985; Muller and Seligson 1982).

Public support is important not only in relation to entire systems of government; it also matters for particular governing institutions. Comparative legislative studies have argued that public support is a necessary bulwark for the status of a parliament (e.g. Mezey 1979). A detailed empirical literature on higher-level Courts has also argued for the importance of public legitimacy: “Legitimacy provides courts authority; it allows them the latitude necessary to make decisions contrary to the perceived

immediate interests of their constituents” (Caldeira and Gibson 1995: 460; Gibson et al 1998).

In 1999, the first ever elected all-Wales governing institution, the National Assembly for Wales (NAW), was created. The Assembly, and the broader system of devolved government within which it was embedded, initially enjoyed very limited public support. In the September 1997 referendum only a quarter of the Welsh electorate actively supported devolution.<sup>1</sup> A major study of public attitudes towards governing institutions in the UK conducted in the early years of devolution found very limited public support for, or trust in, the Assembly (Pattie et al 2004: chapter 2). Some evidence suggests that public opinion has changed substantially in subsequent years. Surveys point to steadily declining opposition to devolution (Wyn Jones and Scully 2012, chapter 3), while a clear majority endorsed enhanced law-making powers for the NAW in a March 2011 referendum. However, a decade-and-a-half into its life, and with its role in Welsh life likely to continue to grow, no detailed study of public attitudes to the NAW as an institution has yet been conducted.

In this article we investigate directly the public legitimacy of the NAW. As explained below, we define public legitimacy as ‘diffuse support’, and explore to what extent there is evidence of such support existing in relation to the Assembly. This investigation has obvious pertinence to students of Welsh politics, concerning as it does public attitudes to the central institution of devolved government in Wales. The article is also relevant to those interested in public reactions to the UK’s devolution experiment, exploring public legitimacy in that part of Britain where devolution

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<sup>1</sup> The creation of the Assembly was endorsed by only 50.3 per cent of voters in the September 1997 referendum, on a 50.1 per cent turnout.

initially rested on the shakiest foundation of public support. More generally, the article contributes to the growing scholarly literature on the legislature-citizen relationship (e.g. Leston-Bandeira 2012; Norton 2002), and extends it to the sub-state level. The article is structured as follows. First, we outline the concept of public legitimacy, and discuss how the legitimacy of an institution like the NAW might most appropriately be assessed. Then, drawing on detailed survey evidence from the 2011 Welsh Referendum Study, we attempt to assess the extent of diffuse public support that exists for the Assembly as an institution. Following this, we seek to investigate the factors that shape public attitudes. We outline two main alternative routes – the consequentialist and the deontological – towards legitimation, and assess the extent to which variables associated with each are related to public support for the Assembly. Finally, the conclusion considers the implications of the findings for the NAW, as well as for the study of devolution and political institutions more generally.

### **Investigating Public Legitimacy**

Institutions perceived to be legitimate are those with a widely accepted mandate to render judgments for a political community (Gibson et al 2003: 356).

As with many fundamental political concepts, *legitimacy* lacks a single, settled meaning or defined field of application. It has been understood in a variety of ways, and applied to a range of political phenomena. Yet there is a definite core to the concept – a concern with the rightfulness of authority (Beetham and Lord 1998: ch.1). Our use of the term here can be delineated fairly clearly. We are concerned with the

public, normative legitimacy of the NAW. Thus, we focus on the mass public in Wales rather than some or other set of elites. We address *normative* legitimacy (subjective attitudes towards the rightfulness of the institution's authority) rather than *legal* legitimacy, or *formal* legitimacy in relation to pre-specified criteria (cf. Beetham and Lord 1998: 3-4). And in focussing on the devolved NAW we are concerned not with public attitudes to the boundaries of the *political community*, nor with those concerning a particular set of *political authorities* (a specific government), but with views about the *political regime*: the broad system and structures through which a particular set of political authorities wield political power within a defined political community (Dalton 2004; Easton 1965).<sup>2</sup>

Empirical investigations of the public legitimacy of political institutions have long drawn on an important distinction between 'diffuse' and 'specific' support (Easton 1965). The latter concerns approval of particular actions, policies or office-holders. But it is the former, understood as "support that is not contingent upon satisfaction with the immediate outputs of the institution", that is typically viewed as synonymous with public legitimacy (Gibson et al 2003: 356; see also Easton 1965: 273). In practice, attempts to investigate the degree of diffuse support enjoyed by a political institution are therefore concerned with something different from the levels of immediate approval or current popularity enjoyed by those who hold office within that institution. Rather, researchers seek evidence of – or the absence of – a deeply-rooted institutional loyalty. Thus, researchers have generally sought to develop

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<sup>2</sup> Dalton further distinguishes three aspects of support for a political regime: support for the Principles of the regime, support for the Norms and Procedures under which it operates, and support for the Institutions of the regime. However, he acknowledges that, in practice, "it is often difficult to draw such fine distinctions" (2004: 7). Our study is primarily concerned with the third aspect: the legitimacy of the National Assembly for Wales as an institution through which substantial public authority is now being wielded. However, it also clearly incorporates elements of the first aspect as well: the legitimacy of the principle that Wales should be a partially self-governing entity within the UK.

methods of enquiry that explore attitudes to an institution within the context of disapproval of specific actions; to probe the degree to which “[c]itizens may disagree with what an institution does but nevertheless continue to concede its authority as a political decision maker” (Caldeira and Gibson 1995: 357). In the following section, we will use such methods to explore the public legitimacy of the National Assembly for Wales.

### **Assessing the Legitimacy of the National Assembly for Wales**

Much is already known in general terms about public attitudes towards the government of Wales. Substantial survey evidence gathered since 1997 has examined views in Wales about devolution and the practical achievements of devolved government. For example, a consistently-employed question on ‘constitutional preferences’ has shown a substantial decline in opposition to devolution since the 1997 referendum, with a growing majority of survey respondents favouring some form of devolution within the UK (see Table 1.)<sup>3</sup>

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

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<sup>3</sup> The survey question asks respondents ‘Which one of these statements comes closest to your view?’. The options presented to respondents are:

- Wales should become independent, separate from the UK and the European Union
- Wales should become independent, separate from the UK but part of the European Union
- Wales should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has law-making and taxation powers
- Wales should remain part of the UK, with its own elected assembly which has limited law-making powers only
- Wales should remain part of the UK without an elected assembly
- Don’t know.

For ease of presentation, the table combines the two ‘Independence’ options.

This evidence, along with that from other questions deployed in various surveys (Wyn Jones and Scully 2012, chapter 3), indicates that majority support in Wales for devolution is now well established. But this does not, in itself, necessarily connote much in terms of attitudes to the NAW as an institution – other than that most people do not reject a form of government for Wales that includes the Assembly.

Investigating the legitimacy of the Assembly, as defined above, requires more specific and detailed measures.

Measures of several distinct dimensions of public attitudes to the NAW were included in the 2011 Welsh Referendum Study (WRS).<sup>4</sup> *Trust* is recognised by many studies as a very important dimension of public attitudes to governmental institutions (e.g. Norris 2011): could an institution be regarded as ‘legitimate’ if it were not generally trusted to wield public authority appropriately? As mentioned earlier, Pattie et al (2004) found the Assembly in its early years to be lacking in trust from the Welsh public. WRS therefore asked several questions about trust in members of the Assembly, alongside equivalent questions about other institutions and their members. The results, presented in Table 2, indicate that while NAW members are far from universally trusted, they fare notably more positively in this regard than their counterparts at Westminster. More broadly, levels of trust in the institutions of devolved government, and those who work within them, are higher than in equivalent UK-level bodies.

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<sup>4</sup> The 2011 Welsh Referendum Study was funded by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council of the United Kingdom (RES-000-22-4496). The Co-Directors of the Study were Roger Scully and Richard Wyn Jones. Survey fieldwork for the study was conducted by YouGov, via the internet. The pre-referendum wave of the study included 3029 respondents; 2569 of these (or 84.8 percent) also participated in the post-referendum wave. All data used in the analysis here are weighted for representativeness of the registered adult electorate in Wales, using YouGov’s standard weighting factor which adjust for a range of demographic and attitudinal factors, including age, gender, region, social class, newspaper readership and past vote. WRS data, as well as further details on the study, are available to download at: <http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/researchresources/>.

## TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Another approach commonly taken in research on the legitimacy of political institutions is to probe whether people support the current role and status of the institution. In studies of the U.S. Supreme Court, for instance, respondents have been asked whether they favour reducing the scope of its jurisdiction (e.g. Gibson et al 2003). WRS did not include any directly equivalent questions that asked whether the NAW's scope of responsibilities should be reduced. Some insight into such matters may be gained, however, from a series of questions that asked respondents about the most appropriate level of government to exercise authority over several policy areas. As shown in Table 3, absolute majorities endorsed the Assembly (rather than Westminster, local councils or the EU) controlling policy-making in largely devolved areas like education and health; a substantial plurality also supported the Assembly exercising primary responsibility in the currently non-devolved area of Policing. There was little support, however, for the Assembly acquiring responsibilities over defence and foreign affairs. Overall, there is very little support for *reducing* the scope of the NAW's responsibilities; if anything, the public support extending them.

## TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Constitutional preferences, institutional trust, and views on the scope of the NAW's responsibilities tell us some useful things about public attitudes to the Assembly, Nonetheless, to facilitate a more direct investigation of levels of diffuse support for the NAW, we draw on a question used in much empirical research on institutional

legitimacy in the U.S.A.<sup>5</sup> This question seeks to identify diffuse support by locating respondents within a hypothetical context in which specific support for an institution would necessarily be low. Adapted for the Welsh context by WRS, the question asks survey respondents to indicate their extent of agreement or disagreement with the following statement:

‘If the National Assembly for Wales started making lots of decisions that most people disagreed with, it might be better to do away with the National Assembly for Wales altogether.’

This question probes the essence of diffuse support for an institution: does one support its continued existence even when opposing its current actions? To help contextualise the extent of diffuse support for the Assembly revealed by responses to this question – how much diffuse support is a lot? – WRS respondents were also asked equivalent questions about their local authority, the UK Parliament at Westminster, and the European Union. Table 4 presents the responses obtained. The figures suggest that diffuse support for the National Assembly is much greater than for the European Union, but rather weaker than for either local councils or the UK Parliament. Nearly half of WRS respondents disagreed with the notion that the UK Parliament should be ‘done away with’ if it were making lots of unpopular decisions; more than a third offered a similar viewpoint with regard to their local council. This compares with somewhat under a third for the Assembly, and only one-in-five for the EU. By contrast, slightly over two-in-five agreed with doing away with the Assembly in the event of it making numerous unpopular decisions, double the proportion

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<sup>5</sup> The question format adapted for use in the Welsh context here is used in the U.S. context in, for example, Caldeira and Gibson (1992); and in the study of the European Court of Justice by Caldeira and Gibson (1995).

believing that about the UK Parliament. These results suggest that public support for the NAW is still rather conditional in nature. While there is substantial support for the Assembly to exist, and to exercise a significant role in the government of Wales, in the event of the Assembly becoming associated with unpopular actions many Welsh people find it quite possible to imagine life without it.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

The results presented in this section of the paper offer a rather mixed picture. Opposition to devolution and the very existence of the National Assembly for Wales has fallen substantially since the 1997 referendum. Levels of trust in NAW members appear to have risen, and are now higher than trust in members of UK-level political institutions. There is also clear majority support for the NAW to retain at least its current scope of responsibilities. However, a question directly probing the diffuse support enjoyed by the Assembly indicates significant limits to the levels of such public support currently enjoyed by the institution among the Welsh people.

### **Exploring the Basis of Public Attitudes to the National Assembly**

The previous section of the paper examined relevant available evidence on public attitudes towards, and levels of diffuse support for, the NAW. However, it did not explore what factors might shape those attitudes. We now turn to this latter question, beginning by considering the main potential sources of influence.

*Potential Influences on Public Attitudes:* Public attitudes to an institution like the Assembly might be shaped by an infinite number of factors. But previous academic literature on political legitimacy, and on devolution in the UK, points us to two main types of potential influence. The first is what Kay's theoretical analysis of justifications for Welsh devolution terms *Consequentialism*: the notion that devolution, if valued, would be "desired on the grounds that it is believed to have good or desirable effects" (2003: 51). The emphasis is thus on practical implications: what difference having a National Assembly might make.

Citizens' attitudes to political institutions certainly can be shaped in a consequentialist manner. A much-celebrated example is that of West Germany after World War II, where success in delivering political and socio-economic stability engendered broad public support for the institutions and principles of the Federal Republic (Boynton and Loewenberg 1973; Baker et al 1981). In the terminology used earlier, specific support for the successes of the Federal Republic appeared to generate diffuse support for the republic and its institutions.

The 1997 devolution referendum in Wales saw consequentialist arguments given great prominence. The Labour party, in particular, underplayed any suggestion that devolution to Wales was about national recognition. The emphasis was on practical consequences: "the stated purpose of devolution was to produce better government rather than, say, give 'proper' constitutional recognition to Welsh nationhood" (Wyn Jones 2001: 37).

The practical consequences of devolution can, in turn, be divided into two categories: material and non-material. The material consequences of devolution concern their impact on public welfare and effective policy delivery. The comparative political science literature remains somewhat inconclusive about the extent to which perceptions of effective policy delivery are an *essential* ingredient for the development of diffuse public support for political institutions (e.g. Dalton 2004, ch.3). But even if not a necessary condition, material consequences may be an important part of the story.

However, Kay's (2003) articulation of consequentialism also points to potential non-material effects. In addition to specific policy consequences, citizens may also perceive devolution to impact on the process and practices of government: how, and by whom, they are governed. 'How' themes were prominent in Welsh debates in the 1990s, where the type of politics anticipated in the new Assembly was deliberately contrasted with how politics was alleged to be practiced at Westminster. The 'new politics' of devolution, it was suggested, would not merely bring government physically closer to the people, but would also make political life more 'open', more 'inclusive' and less confrontational (Osmond 1998). It is doubtful whether these aspirations have been, or ever could be, wholly realised (Chaney and Fevre 2001). Nonetheless, these ideas suggest one plausible source of influence on public attitudes: perceptions of the impact of devolution on the *process* of government and politics.

A related but distinct potential influence on public attitudes is the impact of devolution on the 'democratic deficit' alleged to have opened up during the pre-devolution era of Conservative UK governments. Executive office in the Assembly

has at all times been in the hands of political parties commanding a much more substantial electoral mandate than that achieved by Welsh Conservatives in the late-1980s and 1990s. The Assembly may attract public support simply because it has been dominated by parties reasonably well attuned to Welsh political sensibilities.

But while the perceived material or non-material consequences of devolution may well strongly influence public support for the NAW, they do not exhaust the sources of potential influence. Such is the lesson of much comparative political research, which finds that “the satisfactions that members of a system feel they obtain from the perceived outputs and performance of the political authorities... is only indirectly relevant, if at all, to the input of support for the regime” (Easton, 1975: 437). Thus, an early examination of public reactions to the performance of the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales found that consequentialist evaluations were only modestly associated with public preferences about how these nations should be governed: “support for the principle of devolution has not been closely related to perceptions of the performance of the devolved institutions” (Curtice 2005: 122).

An alternative approach to understanding the factors shaping public attitudes towards the National Assembly is given by Kay’s notion of *Deontological* justifications for devolution. This, put simply, is the idea that devolution is not justified or valued primarily for its material consequences; instead, “devolution is thought to be inherently valuable” (2003: 51). As so defined, deontologism is the direct (indeed, tautologous) converse of consequentialism: virtue attached to devolution that does not arise from its consequences must be innate.

The most obvious reason why a National Assembly might be regarded as having deontological virtue would be that the institution offers political recognition of, and significant autonomy to, Wales as a nation. By raising the political standing of the Welsh much closer to that enjoyed by other prominent non-state nations (such as the Basques and Catalans in Spain), the Assembly may be fulfilling a valuable function in the eyes of many people. The converse is also true: some may be hostile to the NAW precisely because they oppose such an institutional manifestation of Welshness. The general point is that there is substantial scope for levels of public support for the National Assembly to be shaped by the politics of national recognition.

*Empirical Analysis:* This section of the paper attempts to explore the factors that influence levels of diffuse public support for the NAW. The dependent variable for our analysis is responses to the ‘do away with’ question discussed earlier, which directly measures diffuse support for the Assembly. The analysis will explore the relationship between WRS respondents’ answers to this question and a set of potential explanatory variables. Most of the latter are derived directly from the hypothesised consequentialist and deontological sources of influence on public attitudes discussed above.<sup>6</sup>

Three broad categories of explanatory variable are employed. The first category comprises several basic socio-demographic control variables: these specify the Age, Gender and Social Class of respondents. Previous work on general public attitudes to

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<sup>6</sup> In practice, as we acknowledge in places below, the clean theoretical distinction between consequentialism and deontology can be difficult to operationalize empirically quite so neatly.

devolution in Wales has suggested that these factors may be significantly related to public attitudes.<sup>7</sup>

The second category of explanatory variables comprises several linked to the different forms of possible consequentialist influences on public attitudes. In relation to material consequentialism, we specify three pairs of dummy variables that measure respondents' perceptions of the impact of the National Assembly on outcomes in three key areas of public policy: health, education, and the economic standard of living. But we also develop several variables directly linked to non-material consequentialism. First, we include two dummy variables measuring respondents' perceptions that having a National Assembly had, or had not, 'improved the way Wales is governed'.<sup>8</sup> Second, to assess the hypothesis that individuals' attitudes to the NAW might be shaped by their sense that it has helped deliver government more in tune with their political preferences, we include a series of variables for the party identification of respondents. If this hypothesis is well-founded, we would expect support for the Assembly to be particularly high among identifiers with Labour and with Plaid Cymru, who held office as a coalition government in Wales at the time that the survey data was gathered.

The final category of explanatory variables specified is directly related to the deontological justification for devolution outlined above. To gauge the extent to which public attitudes towards devolution are shaped by the politics of national

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<sup>7</sup> Members of younger age cohorts, members of the working class, and women have all been found in previous work to be somewhat more favourable towards devolution in Wales (see Wyn Jones and Scully 2003).

<sup>8</sup> We recognise that the boundary between non-material consequentialism and deontology may be somewhat blurred here: some respondents might reasonably take the view that having a National Assembly had improved the way Wales was governed because it had granted political recognition to Welsh nationhood; others might deprecate the existence of the Assembly for the same reason.

recognition, we include a series of dummy variables recording the National Identity of respondents – measured on the now-standard ‘Moreno’ scale which allows for varying degrees of identification with Scotland/Wales and Britain. We also include two dummy variables related to respondents’ perceptions that creating the NAW had, or had not, ‘given the Welsh more pride in their country’.<sup>9</sup> (Precise codings for all variables are outlined in the Appendix).

*Results and Discussion:* A series of OLS regression models were specified for each of the major groups of independent variables outlined above; in addition, we ran an aggregate model that included all the variables.<sup>10</sup> Table 5 presents outline findings for the series of different models.<sup>11</sup> Model 1 includes only our socio-demographic control variables for the age group, sex and social class of WRS respondents. This model has a very limited fit to the data, indicating that these factors have little ability to account for differences in respondents’ levels of diffuse support for the NAW, although the individual coefficients indicate institutional support to be somewhat higher among those from younger age groups.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Here again, we acknowledge that this variable may tap into public sentiments that exist on the borderline between deontologism and non-material consequentialism.

<sup>10</sup> Given that there is no clear interval-level relationship between the categories of our dependent variable, it might be objected that OLS regression is not an appropriate functional form for the analysis. We therefore re-ran all analyses using ordered logistic regression (O’Connell 2006). This produced substantively very similar findings (details available from authors). Given the strong similarity of the findings, we have chosen to present the more readily interpretable OLS results.

<sup>11</sup> The ‘AIC’ figures presented in Table 5 are Akaike Information Criteria statistics. The AIC is a general indicator of model performance which penalises models with unnecessary variables, and thus encourages analysts not to run ‘kitchen sink’ models with every conceivable explanatory variable included (Burnham and Anderson 2002).

<sup>12</sup> One interpretation that has been suggested to us of the differences in levels of diffuse support enjoyed by the different levels of government (as shown in Table 4) is simply that the relative newness of the NAW means that it has yet to become as established a part of the political framework of government as local councils and the Westminster parliament. On this interpretation, simply existing for an extended period of time will make the NAW appear more ‘natural’ and tend to raise levels of diffuse support. Were this interpretation to be correct, there would likely be marked differences in levels of diffuse support by age group, with younger voters – who have little experience of the pre-devolution period – being more likely to offer support to the NAW than older age cohorts. This would appear consistent with the findings of our Model 1. But, as shown in Table 6 below, these findings are not robust within a fuller explanatory model, suggesting that this interpretation has limited validity.

## TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Model 2 includes the national identity and national pride variables specified in an effort to assess the impact of the politics of national recognition on diffuse support for the NAW. Perhaps surprisingly, the variables in this model also have a collectively very limited fit to the data. Although the individual coefficients do suggest, as expected, that a stronger Welsh identity is positively related to institutional support, while more British forms of national identity are negatively correlated with such support, the overall relationship is weak. Support for the NAW does not appear to be substantially related to or influenced by differences in the national identities that people in Wales affirm. Neither of the national pride variables specified are significantly related to attitudes towards the NAW. Thus, diffuse support for the NAW does not appear to be much about the politics of national recognition.

Model 3 includes the three sets of ‘material consequentialist’ variables that, as outlined above, are concerned with the perceived impact of the NAW on living standards, the NHS and education standards in Wales. The fit of this model is rather better than the previous ones, with the individual coefficients all in the expected direction (i.e. those perceiving improvements in all three policy areas tended to offer greater support for the NAW than those who associated the institution with declining performance in public policy) and many attaining statistical significance. However, even the impact of these material consequentialist variables rather pales when considered alongside that of the non-materialist consequentialist variables specified in

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Once other factors have been controlled for, younger voters are little different in their levels of diffuse support for the NAW.

Model 4. Those variables specified for the party identification of respondents have a generally limited association with levels of institutional support for the NAW.

Although Plaid Cymru identifiers are, rather unsurprisingly, strongly supportive of the elected Welsh institution, identifiers with the Labour party are not significantly more supportive of the NAW than those who identify with other parties or with none. This latter finding may well reflect in part Labour's status in Wales as a 'catch-all' party that still encompasses a diversity of attitudes towards devolution. The findings are much stronger, however, for the other variables specified in this model. The variables concerned with public perceptions that the NAW had or had not 'improved the way Wales is governed' are very strongly related to levels of diffuse support for the Assembly, with individual coefficients in the expected direction and many being highly significant. This suggests a close relationship between diffuse support for the NAW and attitudes towards *how* Wales is governed, with the Assembly receiving particularly strong support from those who regard its impact on the process of government as positive, and much less support from those taking a dimmer view of its impact.

The final model, Model 5, includes all the individual variables in an aggregate model. Goodness-of-fit statistics show that this model has the best fit to the data, indicating that this aggregate model, including several different types of explanatory variable, accounts for variation in the dependent variable more effectively than a simpler model based only on one type of explanatory variable. Detailed results from this model are presented in Table 6, which displays unstandardized OLS regression estimates (with robust standard errors) for all variables. These results confirm the major findings from the individual models reported previously. In particular, the aggregate model confirms

that, even after other factors are controlled for, the variables most strongly associated with respondents' levels of diffuse support for the NAW are the non-material consequentialist variables concerned with the process of government. Although there are a number of other variables which attain statistical significance in this aggregate model – with middle-class respondents, Plaid Cymru identifiers and those with a strong sense of Welsh national identity all reporting greater levels of institutional support, while those perceiving the Assembly to have had negative impacts on the standard of living and the NHS reporting lower levels of such support – the majority of the explained variance is accounted for by attitudes to the impact of the Assembly on the standard of governance of Wales and on the relationship of 'ordinary people' to how Wales is governed.

#### TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

A more intuitive sense of the implications of the findings of Table 6 can be gained from Figure 1. This presents estimated average levels of diffuse support for the NAW (on the 1-5 scale of the dependent variable used in the OLS regression analysis) for the different categories of each of our explanatory variables, with all other variables in the aggregate model set at their mean values.<sup>13</sup> The figure shows quite small differences across most of the explanatory variables, but rather greater ones for the main non-material consequentialist variables. Even after all other variables are controlled for, those believing that the creation of the NAW had improved the government of Wales averaged more than one full point higher on the five-point scale in their level of diffuse support for the Assembly than those believing that the

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<sup>13</sup> The estimates presented in Figure 1 were computed using the Clarify programme available from Gary King's web-site (<http://gking.harvard.edu>). (See also King et al 2000; Tomz et al (2003)).

institution had led to a decline in the government of Wales. Differences across all the other variables are (with the singular exception of those between Conservatives and Plaid Cymru identifiers) much smaller in nature.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The previous section of this article demonstrated that, notwithstanding some positive aspects of public attitudes towards the NAW, the level of diffuse support enjoyed by the institution still appeared rather limited. This section has explored the factors that may influence the levels of such support. The findings have shown that diffuse support appears largely unrelated to basic social background variables; perhaps more surprisingly, diffuse support also appears to have little relationship with the form of national identity that individuals affirm or with levels of national pride. Our results have also shown a rather limited relationship between diffuse support for the NAW and either individuals' party identification or their assessment of the 'material' consequences of devolution for policy delivery in Wales. Rather, the main influence suggested by our findings is perceptions of the implications of devolution for how Wales is governed.

## **Conclusions**

The creation in 1999 of a National Assembly for Wales, even one with rather limited powers, was a major innovation in the government of Wales, and part of a substantial programme of constitutional reform across the UK. Yet the NAW initially rested on a very limited basis of popular support. The evidence presented in this article has shown

that generalised support for devolution has grown substantially in Wales since the late-1990s; in other respects too, attitudes towards the Assembly now appear distinctly positive. Yet the ‘diffuse support’ enjoyed by the institution, as defined and measure here, remains fairly low. In that sense, the public legitimacy of the NAW remains limited and conditional. Examining the factors underpinning the degree of diffuse support enjoyed by the Assembly, we have found that diffuse support has little relationship to people’s senses of national identity; nor is it very strongly associated with perceptions of the material impact of devolution on public policy outcomes. Rather, it is those who perceive the Assembly having had a positive impact on the process of government in Wales who appear most willing to grant diffuse support to the chamber; and, conversely, those who do not perceive these positive consequences from devolution who are most likely to withhold such support.

A number of broader implications may follow from the findings of this study. For the NAW, the findings here suggest that while support for Welsh devolution has grown, and attitudes towards the Assembly have in some ways become distinctly more positive than they appeared in the early days of devolution, the status of the institution remains somewhat vulnerable. Many people seem currently quite favourable towards the Assembly, yet they also find it very possible to imagine life in Wales without the body if it manifestly fails to ‘deliver the goods’. For a significant proportion of the Welsh people, our findings suggest, the NAW is an optional feature of how they are governed, rather than a fundamental, non-negotiable one. In the short- to medium-term at least, the Assembly may need to retain the widespread impression among the public that it has had a positive impact on the process of government in Wales in

order to attract wider support for its existing status or any substantial additions to its powers.

It would be valuable to be able to compare the findings of this study directly with ones for the Scottish Parliament. Given the very different paths that devolution has followed in the two nations, it is distinctly possible that the nature, as well as the level, of public support for Scotland's Parliament is quite different to that for Wales' Assembly. More generally, this study demonstrates the need for scholars of politics in both nations to move beyond the analysis simply of public attitudes towards 'devolution', or comparing support for a number of broad constitutional options, and towards a more differentiated and multi-dimensional analysis of public opinion. A similar moral can be drawn for the study of political institutions, including legislatures. There are very good grounds for believing that public attitudes towards such institutions are important. In the case of legislatures, such as the NAW, study of attitudes towards them need to be developed as part of a broader research agenda investigating the links between parliament and citizens (Leston-Bandeira 2012). Our findings here reinforce the point that people do not simply have a singular attitude towards political institutions. How people think about the institutions that govern them can be complex and multi-faceted; our strategies for investigating public attitudes must therefore be so as well.

**Table 1: Constitutional Preferences (%) 1997-2011, Wales**

<i>Constitutional Preference</i>	1997	1999	2001	2003	2006	2007	2009	2011
Independence	13	10	12	13	11	12	15	13
Parliament	18	28	37	36	40	42	34	34
Assembly	25	33	25	25	24	26	27	28
No elected body	37	24	23	20	20	16	17	18
Don't Know	7	5	4	5	5	5	6	8
<i>Number of Respondents</i>	686	1256	1085	988	1000	884	1078	2359

Sources: 1997 Welsh Referendum Study, 1999 Welsh Assembly Election Study, 2001 Wales Life and Times Survey, 2003 Wales Life and Times Survey, 2006 Survey by NOP for the Electoral Commission, 2007 Welsh Election Study, 2009 YouGov poll for Aberystwyth and Cardiff Universities, 2011 Welsh Election Study (pre-election wave).

**Table 2: Measures of Trust, Wales 2011**

a. 'How much do you trust the following to work in Wales best interests?' (%)

	Just about always	Most of the Time	Only Some of the Time	Almost Never	Don't Know
UK Government	5	22	44	22	7
Welsh Government	21	45	21	6	7
Westminster MPs	3	18	51	21	8
National Assembly Members	18	45	23	6	7

b. 'How Much do you Trust [X] to...?' (average on 0-10 scale)

	'Tell the Truth'	'Do What is Right'
UK Government	3.74	3.88
Welsh Government	5.19	5.31
Westminster MPs	3.53	3.72
National Assembly Members	5.04	5.20
Your local council	4.31	4.38
The European Union	3.40	3.28
The Courts	6.49	5.94
The Police	5.42	5.60

Number of respondents = 2569

Source: 2011 Welsh Referendum Study (post-referendum wave)

**Table 3: Public Attitudes to Institutional Responsibilities, Wales 2011**

'For each of the following issues, please indicate which level of government you think *ought* to make most of the important decisions for Wales' (%)

	NHS	Schools	Police	Defence and Foreign Affairs
Welsh Government	54	53	48	13
UK Government	32	23	32	73
Local Councils	5	14	10	2
European Union	1	0	0	3
Don't Know	9	9	10	10

Number of respondents = 3029

Source: 2011 Welsh Referendum Study (pre-referendum wave)

**Table 4: Institutional Loyalty, Wales 2011**

‘If [X] started making lots of decisions that most people disagreed with, it might be better to do away with the [X] altogether’ (%)

	Strongly Agree / Agree	Neither / Don't Know	Strongly Disagree / Disagree
My local council	36	29	35
The National Assembly for Wales	41	30	29
The UK Parliament at Westminster	21	31	48
The European Union	55	24	20

Number of respondents = 3029

Source: 2011 Welsh Referendum Study (pre-referendum wave)

**Table 5: Goodness-of-Fit Measures for Models of NAW Institutional Support, 2011**

<i>Model</i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>AIC#</i>
1. Age, Sex & Social Class	.01	9908
2. National Identity & Pride	.07	9727
3. Material Consequentialist variables	.23	9156
4. Non-Material Consequentialist variables	.33	8730
5. Aggregate Model	.37	8597

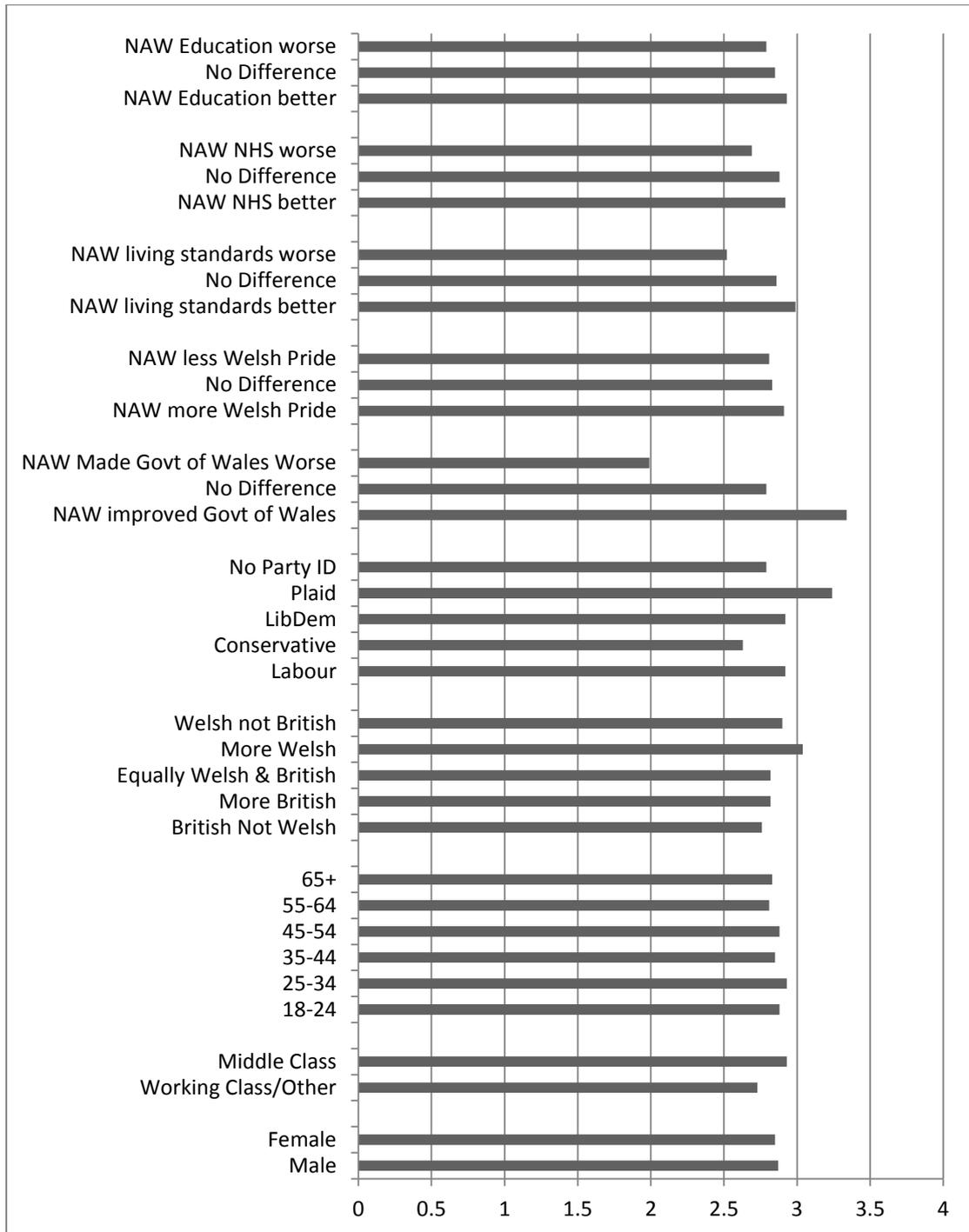
# Smaller AIC figures indicate superior model performance.

**Table 6: OLS Results for Aggregate Model of NAW Institutional Support, 2011**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficient (Robust Standard Error)</i>
Female	.00 (.05)
<i>Age:</i>	
18-24	-.04 (.09)
25-34	.03 (.08)
35-44	-.01 (.08)
45-54	.01 (.08)
55-64	-.04 (.07)
Middle Class	.18 (.05)***
<i>National Identity:</i>	
Welsh not British	.11 (.07)
More Welsh than British	.27 (.07)***
More British than Welsh	.02 (.08)
British not Welsh	-.08 (.06)
<i>National Pride:</i>	
NAW given Welsh more pride	.07 (.05)
NAW given Welsh less pride	-.13 (.12)
<i>Party Attachments:</i>	
Labour	.04 (.06)
Conservative	-.11 (.07)
LibDems	.13 (.09)
Plaid Cymru	.46 (.10)***
<i>Material Consequentialism:</i>	
NAW improved living standards	.18 (.07)*
NAW worsened living standards	-.32 (.08)***
NAW improved NHS	.05 (.07)
NAW worsened NHS	-.18 (.08)*
NAW improved education	.04 (.08)
NAW worsened education	-.11 (.07)
<i>Non-Material Consequentialism:</i>	
NAW Improved how Wales Governed	.48 (.07)***
NAW Worsened how Wales Governed	-.80 (.07)***
(Constant)	2.57 (.09)***
N = 3029	

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

**Figure 1: Average NAW Diffuse Support Levels (1-5) across Categories of Explanatory Variables**



## **Appendix: Variables Used in Empirical Analysis**

### Dependent Variable:

'If the National Assembly for Wales started making lots of decisions that most people disagreed with, it might be better to do away with the National Assembly for Wales altogether'

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Tend to Disagree
- 3 – Neither agree nor disagree / Don't Know
- 4 – Tend to Agree
- 5 – Strongly Agree

### Independent Variables:

*Sex:* Reference category = male

*Age:* Reference category = 65 and older

*Social Class:* Reference category = working class or unclassified

*National Identity:* ('Which, if any, of the following best describes how you see yourself?'); reference category = Equally Scottish/Welsh and British, Other or Don't Know

*Party Attachments:* reference category = non-identifier or identifier with another party

*Material Consequentialism:* ('Do you think that having a National Assembly for Wales has...?')

- Led to an improvement in living standards in Wales
- Led to a decline in living standards in Wales
- Reference category: Neither – it has made no difference / Don't know
  
- Led to an improvement in NHS standards in Wales
- Led to a decline in NHS standards in Wales
- Reference category: Neither – it has made no difference / Don't know
  
- Led to an improvement in education standards in Wales
- Led to a decline in education standards in Wales
- Reference category: Neither – it has made no difference / Don't know

*Non-Material Consequentialism:*

'To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements ... Having a National Assembly has improved the way Wales is governed'

- Improved = Strongly Agree / Agree
- Worsened = Strongly Disagree / Disagree
- Reference category = Neither agree nor disagree / Don't Know

*Deontologism:*

'Do you think that having a National Assembly has...'

- More Pride = 'Given the Welsh more pride in their country'
- Less Pride = 'Given the Welsh less pride in their country'
- Reference category = Neither / Don't Know

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