Why Did the Valleys Vote Leave?

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Presentation to the annual conference of the Political Studies Association group on Elections, Public Opinion and Parties, September 2018
1. Introduction: Wales and Brexit

2. Why Did the Valleys Vote Leave?

3. Modelling the Vote in Wales

4. Focus Group Research

5. Conclusions
Wales and Brexit

• Wales voted Leave (52.5%-47.5%)

• 17 of 22 Local Authorities voted Leave

• All of the valleys voted Leave
The South Wales Valleys

- Former heavy industrial areas
- Long history of Labour hegemony
- Strong Welsh identity
- Substantial EU Aid since 2000 to valleys communities
Why Did the Valleys Vote Leave?

• Socio-economically similar to post-industrial areas that voted Leave in England

BUT

• Strong general economic interest in Welsh Membership of the EU
  • Net beneficiary of EU budget (Structural Funds, CAP)
  • High private-sector dependence on single-market links (Airbus, Ford, GE Aviation)

• Welsh political elites overwhelmingly behind EU membership; self-image of Wales as progressive and internationalist

• Long-standing Labour loyalty in valleys: Welsh Labour united against Brexit
Modelling the Vote in Wales

- British Election Study Internet Panel
- Wave 9, June-July 2016
- Wales N = 2,141
- Logit models of referendum vote choice (robust standard errors)
## Modelling the Vote in Wales

### Table 9.5: Summary Stats on Multivariate Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Pseudo R2</th>
<th>% Correctly Predicted</th>
<th>AIC</th>
<th>BIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Welsh Language</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>1703</td>
<td>1720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Model 1 + Education</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>1637</td>
<td>1676</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Education</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>1635</td>
<td>1663</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Age</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>1683</td>
<td>1716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Income</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>1699</td>
<td>1732</td>
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<td>6. All social background</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>1638</td>
<td>1762</td>
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<td>7. Ideological scales</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>1260</td>
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<td>8. National identity scales</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<td>9. Political alienation</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>1593</td>
<td>1604</td>
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<td>10. Models 7 + 8 + 9</td>
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<td>70.8</td>
<td>1141</td>
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<td>11. Composite model</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>74.3</td>
<td>1131</td>
<td>1279</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Modelling the Vote in Wales

• Expected relationships for Age and Education; no robust relationship with Welsh language competence

• Little relationship with Welsh identity

• Little relationship with economic left-right attitudes

• Strong relationship with: British identity; social libertarian-authoritarian attitudes; political alienation
Focus Groups, 1

- Five groups conducted late August 2017

- Groups conducted in Merthyr and Rhondda Cynon Taf
  - 18-44 year olds, Merthyr
  - 45-64 year olds, Merthyr
  - 65+, Merthyr
  - 18-44 year olds, RCT
  - 45-64 year olds, RCT

- All participants working-class Leave voters from June 2016
Focus Groups, 2

Discussions explored...

• Reasons for voting Leave (particularly given benefits to their communities of EU Aid etc)

• Had participants changed minds since June 2016?

• Perceived implications of Brexit for to their communities

• Views on Brexit process: how was it going so far?
Focus Group Findings: Changed Minds?

Nobody had changed their mind!

No participants suggested they would vote differently in August 2017 from June 2016.

Some concerns with handling of Brexit (see later) but not changed views on basic issue.
Focus Group Findings: Immigration, 1

Immigration is a key factor behind Brexit support.

But concerns are not articulated as generalised xenophobia or racism.

Specifically working-class concerns, and concerns for community outlined.
**Focus Group Findings: Immigration, 2**

Working-class concerns...

- Making labour market more competitive, driving down wages for locals
- Good for employers and big business, not for ordinary workers
Focus Group Findings: Immigration, 3

Concerns for community...

• Pressure on public services

• Impact of immigrants willing to work for low wages: ➔ town-centres having to cater for low-wage economy: proliferation of pound and charity shops etc (Merthyr 65+ group)
Focus Group Findings: Economic Implications, 1

Very sceptical of alleged economic benefits of EU membership

Simply didn’t believe Wales is beneficiary of EU budget: believe figures wrong, or true ‘for accounting purposes’ only

Some thought little EU money spent in their communities:

“I know they done the roads round here but that’s it” (18-44 group, Merthyr)
Focus Group Findings: Economic Implications, 2

Others recognised EU money spent on valleys, but very critical:

‘White elephants’; ‘Vanity projects’

Projects seen as spending money on outside contractors and consultants without understanding communities: ‘It was done to us, not with us’

Example of person employed on EU-funded project, which created over 60 local construction jobs, but all staff laid off two years later once project finished (45-64 group, Merthyr).
Focus Group Findings: ‘Difficult But Worth It’

Concerns about how Brexit process being handled (even by August 2017)

Expected Brexit process to be difficult, and possibly to have short-term economic costs

But staying in EU would be ‘vote for things as they are now’; and feeling that, in the valleys, things could not get much worse

Believed it would be worth it in the longer-term; older voters particularly concerned about sovereignty and independence of UK, and articulated dislike of the EU and how it worked
Conclusions, 1

“The British public may be wrong... but they are logical in the consequences that flow from their beliefs” (Cowley 2014: 174).

• Clear articulations of positions on issues like immigration and how the EU works: premises possibly flawed, but clear reasoning from those premises
Conclusions, 2

• Failure of EU Aid to visibly eradicate poverty, and alleged inefficiencies meant little credit to EU for spending

• Risk Acceptance in the Domain of Losses: i.e. ‘people feeling they had little left to lose rolled the dice’.
Conclusions, 3

• Dogs that Didn’t Bark:
  • Welshness
  • Labour

Chapter 9 in: Roger Awan-Scully, Elections in Wales: Democracy in a Semi-Sovereign Nation (University of Wales Press, 2019)
Diolch / Thanks

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