Understanding the Differing Political Performances of the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru: A Statecraft Approach

William Kitson

Doctor of Philosophy

University of York

Department of Politics and International Relations

November 2023

ABSTRACT

Since the advent of devolution in 1999, there have been two growing categories of studies addressing the performance of the two most significant Stateless Nationalist & Regionalist Parties in Scotland and Wales: the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru. Pre-existing SNRP literature has sought to explain SNRP performance by focusing on one aspect of SNRP elite's decision-making such as ideological positioning (Massetti, 2011) or organisational reform (McAgnus, 2016). Alternatively, both comparative case study literature and specific literature on the electoral performance of the SNP and Plaid have either honed in on specific elections or have focused on the relationship between national identity and electoral performance since 1999. This thesis wishes to make a novel contribution to the literature by using Jim Bulpitt's Statecraft as a theoretical framework to develop a more comprehensive understanding and systematic explanation of the SNP's and Plaid's differing electoral trajectories throughout the devolution period. While the theory is useful to our understanding of national politics in its emphasis on how structures provide opportunities for actors to demonstrate competence, the thesis presents a revised version of Statecraft to both theoretically and methodologically update Bulpitt's framework but also to make it cognisant of the differing structures and practices of devolved politics. Using the revised 'Sub-national Statecraft', the thesis takes a comparative case study approach and uses a synthesis of methodological techniques in interviews, documentary analysis, and extensive secondary survey data to assess the decisions of both parties' leaderships and public responses to them. The thesis finds that Sub-national Statecraft provides a comprehensive and systematic explanation of the SNP's outperformance of Plaid. The thesis while acknowledging the saliency of Statecraft's 'functions' relating to Party Management and Political Argument Hegemony, argues Governing Competence and in particular how effective each party has been in exploiting the multileveled structure of devolution to advance their own goals, appears to be the key difference in explaining their opposite political trajectories.

CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

PC – Plaid Cymru
SNP – Scottish National Party
MLG – Multileveled Government
WLP – Welsh Labour Party
WLG – Welsh Labour Government
WAG – Welsh Assembly Government
NAW – National Assembly of Wales
GE – General Election
SNRP – Stateless Nationalist & Regionalist Party
PAH – Political Argument Hegemony
GC – Governing Competence
WES – Winning Electoral Strategy
PM - Party Management
SSAS – Scottish Social Attitudes Survey
GRA – Gender Recognition Act
FM – First Minister
SEM – Selective Evaluation Model
EU – European Union
EEC - European Economic Community
PFI – Private Finance Initiative
SLE – Scottish Labour Executive

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

"There's an old Garfield cartoon where he says if you want to look thin, stand next to a hippopotamus and certainly, if you want to be viewed as a credible party of government, stand next to Boris Johnson and the Conservatives" (Chris Hanlon, SNP Policy Convenor, 2021).

INTRODUCTION

The SNP and Plaid Cymru have been the primary political vehicles for nationalism in Scotland and Wales since the former's formation in 1934 and the latter's in 1925. Both parties have shared a fundamental long-term goal of Scotland's and Wales's secession from the UK but importantly have differed in their approach to both their iterations of nationalism and also the methods by which they hope to achieve independence. The SNP has historically and to this day leaned towards a civic nationalism, focusing on Scotland's distinct interests from the UK and therefore the need to be represented by separate political and legal institutions (Hearn, 2000). Alternatively, Plaid's nationalism has traditionally focused on cultural factors such as the Welsh language (Elias, 2009a). The parties for much of the first 40 years of their existence failed to electorally impact UK politics and constitutional reform remained an elusive goal. However, by the 1960s the parties began to make their impact known, with both parties winning Westminster by-elections. The continued election of nationalist MPs from Wales and Scotland resulted in the holding of a referendum on devolution in either country in 1979. While both parties failed to achieve the required result to create devolved parliaments, the territorial cleavage of politics would not abate and when New Labour was elected after 18 years of a Conservative government opposed to devolution, a 2nd series of referendums were held in Scotland and Wales on devolution. On this occasion, the referendums produced a result in favour of the creation of a Scottish and Welsh parliament, with the former having primary legislative powers. The advent of devolution represented at that time the largest structural opportunity either party had been offered since their formations. Before 1999, either party's purpose at Westminster had been to petition and indirectly influence the state-wide governing parties who in terms of seats dwarfed the nationalist parties. However, devolution ushered in an opportunity for either party to transform from a party of protest to a (potential) party of government (Hassan, 2009).

Initially, it appeared that both parties shared a similar experience of devolution, in electoral terms. In the inaugural devolved elections, both parties won just under 30% of the constituency vote, riding a wave of enthusiasm around devolution that either party had been inextricably associated with and consequently becoming the 2nd largest parties in both parliaments (Wyn Jones & Scully, 2006). Equally, in the 2003 election, both parties lost seats after the enthusiasm around constitutional reform had dissipated. However, after 2003, the parties would follow starkly different electoral trajectories both

at the sub-national level and, eventually, at Westminster. In May 2007, the SNP some 73 years after the party was first formed, was elected to government for the first time. The SNP from 2007 onwards have experienced continual electoral success at both Holyrood and Westminster. Even in 2016 and 2017 when the SNP lost a proportion of their seats in the Scottish and General elections, the party still comfortably remained the largest at Holyrood and the largest Scottish party at Westminster. Since then they have also arguably bounced back, gaining 13 seats in the 2019 general election and an additional seat in the 2021 Scottish election. In stark contrast, Plaid's number of seats at both the National Welsh Assembly/Senedd (NAW) and at Westminster have remained stubbornly low and their support has varied little. Since 1999 Plaid have somewhat electorally faltered, invariably yo-yoing between three or four seats at Westminster and failing to replicate their initial success of 17 seats in 1999 again in any Welsh elections since. This poses a significant question as to why either party has experienced such different electoral results in the devolution period. Therefore, the thesis begins the period of analysis with the first devolved elections in 1999 and ends with the last elections in 2021. In this sense, the long-term developments and strategies of either party can be assessed. The question of why the SNP's success has dwarfed that of Plaid's was the conceptual starting point of this research and the central empirical contribution the thesis wishes to make.

CONTRIBUTING TO THE SNRP LITERATURE

The existing literature surrounding the success of nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales can be neatly placed into three distinct categories. The first category of literature attempts to group all nationalist parties under the umbrella term of Stateless Nationalist & Regionalist Parties (SNRPs). This literature focuses on the operations of SNRPs and the decisions made by the party elites, such as ideological positioning (Massetti, 2011) and organisational reform (McAgnus, 2016) in determining their electoral fortunes. The second category of literature alternatively focuses on either internal or external supply-side explanations in specific Scottish and Welsh elections and the SNP or Plaid's performance within them. For example Johns et al's (2009) use of valence theory to explain the success of the SNP's 2007 Scottish election. The final category makes no explicit generalisation concerning SNRPs' electoral success but instead explains regionalist party electoral fortunes on a case-by-case basis using a common hypothesis of national identity. This literature posits that the electoral fortunes of either party have been largely determined by the strength of national identity in each given polity, the assertion being that where national identity is strong, so nationalist party support will be (Scully, 2013).

The primary shortcomings of this literature are threefold. The SNRP literature while useful in successfully identifying the role of particular aspects of external and internal supply-side factors in influencing SNRP success, fails to elaborate on how such factors relate to one another. In this sense, the SNRP literature to date has failed to create a comprehensive theoretical framework which considers the relative roles of ideological positioning, structural constraints and organisational reform in determining SNRP success and more importantly how these factors intertwine in sub-national contexts. This seems particularly essential for any research endeavours seeking to compare the relative success of different SNRPs competing in differing political systems. The second category of literature, analysing the performance of the SNP and Plaid at specific Scottish and Welsh elections, has often made important theoretical contributions such as the introduction of competency as a key factor in sub-national elections. However, such works have again often focused on one aspect of elite decision-making, and more importantly, have not addressed the question of SNRP success in a systematic way which analyses the adoption and changes in long-term strategies of Plaid and the SNP in devolved elections.

Finally, one of the main contentions this thesis takes with pre-existing works is the extent to which the third category of literature has overemphasised the role of national identity in explaining SNRP electoral fortunes. As will be explained in greater detail in Chapter 1, a large share of the literature on Plaid and the SNP has treated sub-national elections and parties as fundamentally different to that of Westminster elections. Some scholars have presented a connection between the varying levels of national identity in Scotland and Wales and the SNRPs differing respective electoral performances. While works such as Larner et al (2021) have demonstrated the correlation between established national identities and established voter choice in devolved elections such as 2021, the thesis seeks to cast doubt on the centrality of the concepts of Welshness and Scottishness in determining swing votes over the longue durée of devolution at different elections by approaching this relationship in a novel way. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 1 using Moreno's (2006) question data, there appears to be no apparent positive correlation between rises/falls in national identity and rises/falls in SNRP vote share. Equally, such analysis suggests significant swings of the vote between parties in devolved contexts have had little to do with national identity as, for instance when the SNP achieved remarkable increases in vote share at Holyrood in 2011 and Westminster in 2015, the level of Scottish identity had fallen from the previous election year. Looked at in this way, this raises considerable doubt over whether national identity can explain Plaid and the SNP's differing electoral trajectories. The lack of a theoretical framework through which to systematically understand devolved elections or which

focuses on factors outside of national identity, therefore is a caveat in the pre-existing literature that needed to be addressed.

A surprising observation of the current literature is the extent to which the concepts of competency and valence politics are under-utilised and under-developed in the explanation of Scottish and Welsh elections relative to state-wide elections. When Valence theory has been used in previous works (Johns, 2009; 2021; Scully & Larner, 2017) it has almost exclusively been used to explain the electoral results at specific elections. Equally the same studies, while at times highlighting the importance of parties in demonstrating competency as opposed to ideological factors in determining Scottish and Welsh elections, have never attempted to explain the strategies and means by which the two SNRPs sought to create an image of Governing Competence throughout devolution. The need to address, both the lack of an existing theoretical framework through which to understand the long-term office-seeking strategies of devolved parties, alongside this neglect of the concept of competency in determining sub-national votes, led to the adoption of an unlikely theoretical approach in this thesis: Jim Bulpitt's Statecraft.

Statecraft was developed by Bulpitt in the 1980s and 1990s as a means of assessing the success of political leaders in the UK to win *national*, Westminster elections (Bulpitt, 1983; 1986; 1988; 1989; 1995; 1996a; 1996b). For Bulpitt (1986:21), Statecraft was 'the art of winning elections and achieving a necessary semblance of Governing Competence in office'. Specifically, Bulpitt gave analytical priority to how political leaderships managed, resolved and navigated a range of governing problems so that their electoral fortunes were positively affected or (at worst) were not negatively impacted by such constraints (Bulpitt, 1995:520). Chief among these constraints for political elites was the electoral one, which ensured office-seeking was the primary motivation in the decision-making of UK political parties (Buller & James, 2011). The work of Jim Buller (2000a; 2000b; 2006; 2011; 2014; 2015) would incorporate how broader structural constraints political leaderships faced, such as the global economy and Europeanisation, impacted the Statecraft of UK political parties. Statecraft's application to the sub-national level seeks to contribute to the study of SNRPs, particularly the SNP and Plaid, in the following three ways:

1. Statecraft's four functions provide something close to a comprehensive framework through which to understand how demand-side factors, internal and external supply-side factors all relate to each other in explaining electoral fortunes. The Party Management function allows researchers to explore how party elites try to create and maintain party unity or even prevent

disunity through organisational reforms to the party structure (internal supply-side). The Political Argument Hegemony function allows us to explore the interplay of demand-side factors of the electorate's prevailing ideological preferences and the strategies elites use to try to utilise or shape such ideological consensuses to their advantage for more important goals relating to governing (external supply-side). Finally, Governing Competence (to Bulpitt the most significant function of Statecraft) allows us to explore the role of identified valence issues at the devolved level in determining perceptions of competency. In particular, this function allows us to explore the salient interplay of internal and external supply-side factors in determining votes at the sub-national level; i.e. how sub-national parties can use the mechanism of office and more broadly the multileveled structure of devolution to further their electoral fortunes. In many ways, the functions of Statecraft are therefore building upon the previous research of SNRP scholars. McAgnus's explanation of organisational reform largely relates to the function of Party Management, Massetti's largely relates to Political Argument Hegemony, and Johns' use of valence is developed further in the function of Governing Competence. Therefore, unlike the existing literature, the use of Statecraft in this thesis expects to establish a more comprehensive framework through which to understand the relationships between these various vote-seeking activities, over the 5 terms of either devolved parliaments.

2. A large share of the literature has relied on ideological explanations, in directly explaining sub-national electoral results. While not invalidating the salience of left-right, centre-periphery, and European integration ideologies in explaining devolved politics, one of Statecraft's principle assumptions is that ideology is used *instrumentally* by political parties. This seemingly is a neglected aspect of SNRP research to date and would provide an important perspective as to why SNRPs can be more flexible in their left-right and European ideologies. SNRPs can more freely adopt positions on these ideological continuums which allow the parties to advance their practical goals of Governing Competency and other more salient ideological goals of constitutional reform. Quasi-structural factors also play an important role here, in that if a consensus exists in public attitudes towards a certain left-right and European integration position, SNRPs are in a unique position in being defined by their territorial goals to flexibly adopt such ideological positions which maximise their electoral appeal.

3. Another key assumption of Statecraft is that the structural context political elites operate within can 'provide the space for active, creative and courageous leadership' providing an

opportunity to demonstrate competence (Buller & James, 2011:538). This idea has been explored somewhat in the pre-existing SNRP literature, such as Massetti's exploration of the effects of differing voting systems on SNRP performance, and in McAgnus's (2016) and Elias & Tronconi's (2011) assertion that devolution presented an opportunity for SNRP's to use governmental office as a mechanism to undermine negative views of the party and demonstrate competence. However, there is a failure in this literature to expound in any kind of systematic way how governmental office garners a perception of competence, outside of a simple explanation of public exposure of SNRPs in government or the adoption of left-right policies not historically associated with SNRPs (McAgnus 2016; Hepburn 2009). In particular, Buller's (2000b) idea of structural constraints being advantageous in how they can 'discipline domestic expectations' and 'insulate' governments from broader political criticism is a key contribution the Statecraft literature can make to sub-national dynamics of competency and elections. Buller's explanatory framework, of how Westminster elites increasingly throughout the 1980s/1990s perceived the Europeanisation of policy as an electorally attractive option in how blame and responsibility for negative policy outcomes could be 'hived off' to a higher level of government (Buller, 2000b), holds a great degree of pertinence at the sub-national level. A central aspect this thesis wishes to explore, unlike the previous SNRP literature, is how regional parties in devolved government, can defer blame for negative policy outcomes onto the higher level of Westminster government, for their political gain. As will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 2, SNRPs are in a unique position in being able to most effectively utilise this strategy to not only further their electoral interests but also their constitutional preferences. State-wide parties too can use this strategy in certain political contexts but have to be careful to curb their argument short of a constitutional critique. This governing principle shall be referred to as the 'structural insulating framework'.

CONTRIBUTING TO THE STATECRAFT LITERATURE

While Statecraft for the reasons described above, can help us gain a more comprehensive understanding of not only SNRP political performance but also to more holistically understand sub-national politics, the theory requires theoretical and methodological revision both in general terms and amendments concerning the sub-national level. In the first instance, the thesis seeks to theoretically update Statecraft and the operationalisations of 'functions' due to theoretical, empirical and methodological shortcomings. While all the criticisms Statecraft has come in for will be discussed comprehensively in Chapter 2, the primary enduring problem with Statecraft is how we empirically

test if, and how, a party has succeeded in the four functions of Statecraft (Evans, 2006:53). Buller & James (2011) significantly developed the theory by operationalising the four functions of Statecraft, to make the theory more sensitive to empirical testing and give us an interpretation of if a party/government had achieved Governing Competence, Party Management, PAH or a WES. However, there exist four enduring theoretical problems with Statecraft and particularly existing operationalisations presented by Buller & James (2011) that will be remedied in this thesis:

1. Many of the functions remain underdeveloped, neglecting fundamental aspects of parties' operations or relying on a heavy degree of inference. An obvious example of this would be Buller and James's operationalisation of whether a party has achieved successful Party Management by looking at the number of rebellions in parliament. While this may enlighten us as to which issues divided the parliamentary party, it gives us no indication of the wider nature of relations between the different faces of the party – e.g. grassroots members and the leadership. While only one example, this thesis asserts that most of Buller & James's operationalisations can be developed further to make Statecraft more sensitive to empirical testing. In many instances, this can be done by borrowing frameworks and theories from the more specialised pre-existing literature. In relation to the function of Party Management, literature on intra-party relations by Katz & Mair (1993; 2009) can be integrated to give a holistic framework to assess party unity and management. Similarly, the use of literature regarding perceptions of character and statesmanship can help provide a deeper understanding of non-economic factors in voters' competency judgements of parties (Sejits & de Clercy, 2020).

2. The operationalisations provided by Buller & James are useful in observing whether a party *has achieved* the functions of Statecraft but fail to elucidate the *means, methods and strategies* by which parties have been able to achieve these functions. Again the Party Management function here showcases the current operationalisations' shortcomings. Presently, in measuring Party Management through rebellions in parliament, Buller & James offer no suggestions outside of three-line whips to how party leaderships may manage disunity. This question of *how* a party achieves such Statecraft functions can again be aided by the adoption of pre-existing specialised literature. For instance, the linking of Party Management to studies on organisational reform (McAgnus, 2016), enables Statecraft to illustrate how proactive successful political leaderships have sought to prevent such disputes between idealistic grassroots members and the more pragmatic elites, by centralising and

professionalising party structures. The updated operationalisations presented in this thesis (Chapter 2), will equally concern themselves with how parties achieve each function, as well as if they have done so.

3. Statecraft in its present form is not clear which model of voting behaviour underlies its assertions. Buller & James (2011) attempted to clarify this theoretical shortcoming by presenting the Governing Competence function as underpinned by the Valence Model of voting behaviour. While a welcome addition in explaining the specific function of Governing Competence, it would appear implicit in Bulpitt's assertion that ideology is 'used and abused' by leaderships, that Downsian (1957) shifts in ideological positioning are a key element to a party achieving PAH. This ambiguity as to which model of voting behaviour is underlying Statecraft, is therefore a theoretical shortcoming in need of addressing. The adoption of the Selective Evaluation Model (SEM) of voting behaviour (Tilley & Hobolt, 2011) which essentially synthesises Downsian and Valence Models, resolves this contradiction of Statecraft. This shall be elaborated on fully in Chapter 2.

4. The thesis does not share the view of Buller and Bulpitt that 'a Winning Electoral Strategy' is a function in its own right and, rather, is presented in this thesis as a micro-analysis of the three other functions in the crucial campaign period leading up to an election. In other words, WES is synonymous with the supporting mechanism the manifesto acts as for the three other functions during campaigning. This shall be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

The four solutions presented above to the apparent caveats of Statecraft hope to enable the use of a succinct Statecraft model: less theoretically incomplete; sensitive to positivist empirical testing; that situates itself within existing literature more apparently pertinent to Statecraft's 'functions'. Such revisions may be sufficient in Statecraft's application at the national level, but the thesis aims to use Statecraft at the sub-national level to explain SNRP performance. While Bulpitt (1983), did give attention in his early works to the nature of centre-periphery relations in the UK, the primary focus of such analysis was almost exclusively from the perspective of the centre. In other words, the problem with Statecraft is not that the approach has not been applied to explain territorial politics, but rather that the analytical focus has always been on the motives of the centre in 'hiving off' powers to the periphery, rather than how the periphery went on to use such powers. Consequently, one of the thesis's central contributions is theoretically developing Statecraft, not only with the amendments outlined above, but making the theory cognisant of the key differences of elites operating within the differing structural context of sub-national politics, relative to the national level. Such differences

almost exclusively relate to the differing structural context that sub-national agents face, relative to national-level actors (see Chapter 2) and impact Statecraft's functions in the following three ways:

1. Governing Competence - Statecraft posits that at the national level, a party's governing credentials are a relative concept in how they relate to the party's primary opponent's perceived competency (Bulpitt, 1986). However, perceptions of governing capacity at the sub-national level are equally, if not more so, determined by the perceived Governing Competency of Westminster administrations (see Chapters 4 & 5). In this sense parties, particularly those in devolved government, appear to be in a competition for competency with Westminster, in Wales and Scotland. The operationalisation of competency used here will compare public perceptions of Westminster's and Holyrood's/Cardiff Bay's role in both negative and positive policy outcomes. Therefore, at the sub-national level, there exists a more obvious opportunity for devolved governments to protect their records of competency, if they can devise a narrative/strategy to offload responsibility for negative policy outcomes onto Westminster.

2. Party Management – Devolution has significantly complicated UK party structures, in how their management of party unity is now a multileveled task. In competing at both sub-national and national levels, parties since 1999 have had two different parliamentary groups operating at each level, creating a greater potential for internal disagreements as the aims of the party at either parliament may differ. Therefore, the operationalisation of Party Management will explore divisions not only of voting records at Holyrood/Cardiff Bay but also at Westminster. In terms of exploring any disagreements between the two parliamentary branches of the parties, this resulted in a requirement to conduct interviews with both MPs and MSPs/AMs/MSs from either party, to understand the two cohorts' differences.

3. Political Argument Hegemony – Statecraft has typically depicted the concept at the national level as only encompassing one left-right economic issue that parties have jostled for hegemony over (Bulpitt, 1986; Buller & James, 2011). However, due to the nature of sub-national politics and in particular the presence of electorally significant SNRPs, centre-periphery arguments assume a level of saliency unfathomable at the national level. Equally, in the UK context the heightened salience of the UK's EU membership, as devolution progressed, has resulted in European integration arguments being a central feature of sub-national politics in the latter half of the thesis's period of analysis. The fundamental difference of sub-national politics that this iteration of Statecraft will consider extensively in Chapter 7,

is how devolved parties' political success is in part determined by their ability to relate each of their arguments on these continuums to reinforce one another.

In summary, the thesis's contributions are threefold. Firstly, the use of Statecraft is a novel interpretation of sub-national politics in how it provides a comprehensive agentic framework through which to understand devolved electoral outcomes in relation to Governing Competence, Party Management and Political Argument Hegemony. Secondly, the thesis aims to theoretically update Statecraft, addressing the general criticisms and shortcomings levelled at the theory in its current format and also in applying the theory at the sub-national level, presenting revisions to the theory to make Bulpitt's work compatible in explaining devolved politics. Finally, with a significantly developed new theoretical framework of 'Sub-national Statecraft' outlined, the thesis hopes to make a substantial empirical contribution to the literature on how the SNP has been able to achieve the electoral heights it has, while Plaid has politically stagnated.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The thesis consists of seven substantive chapters. Chapter 1 summarises the existing literature concerning SNRPs. Firstly, it discusses the varying definitions of SNRPs, highlighting the problems with pre-existing definitions and presenting a hybrid intentional-functional definition. It then categorises existing SNRP works into three fields. The first category groups all nationalist parties together under the umbrella term of Stateless Nationalist & Regionalist Parties (SNRPs), focusing on the operations of SNRPs and the decisions made by the party elites, such as ideological positioning & organisational reform, in determining their electoral fortunes. The second category alternatively analyses either parties' performances at specific elections but does not attempt to provide a systematic explanation over the whole period of devolution. The third category makes no explicit generalisation concerning SNRPs' electoral success but instead explains regionalist party electoral fortunes on a case-by-case basis using a common hypothesis of national identity. However, using available empirical data, the chapter finds that existing individual national identity explanations of the SNP's and PC's electoral fortunes, and the more generalised explanations concerning SNRPs, are all unable to systematically explain the two parties' electoral performance over the five terms of each parliament since 1999.

Chapter 2, in finding the existing SNRP literature to be lacking, proposes Jim Bulpitt's Statecraft as a useful alternative theoretical framework to understand the political fortunes of SNRPs. The chapter first, gives a comprehensive overview of the pre-existing Statecraft literature, empirical applications of Statecraft, and the academic critiques of the theory. Having highlighted the existing criticisms in the

literature, the thesis will respond to such criticisms and attempt to present Statecraft as a more comprehensive, agency-based, supply-side explanation of SNRP political performance. Additionally, acknowledging the key differences of regional electoral competition, which the 'national' format of Statecraft would be incongruent with, the chapter will introduce 'Sub-national Statecraft' as a compatible adaptation of the theory for sub-national politics. This theoretical revision will not only modify how the functions of Statecraft are operationalised at the regional level but also will develop them for their more universal application, from the more limited operationalisations presented by Jim Buller & Toby James (2011).

Chapter 3 will justify both the case study selection and the research methods used in the thesis. The chapter firstly justifies the use of the UK comparison of the SNP and Plaid Cymru. The chapter will then justify the use of the comparative case study research design used in this thesis, before going on to outline how semi-structured elite interviews will be used in tandem with documentary analysis and available secondary data, to understand and uncover the key motivations in each party leadership's decision-making process.

Chapter 4 will explore the function of Governing Competence in Scottish politics between 1999 and 2021. The chapter will first elucidate how the SNP managed to cultivate a viable economic alternative to Scottish Labour when in opposition, managing to outflank Scottish Labour with social democratic policy. Once in government, the SNP then successfully used the structure of devolution as a tool to promote their governing credentials while simultaneously tarnishing Westminster's. Equally, 'the structural insulating framework' was a key part of the SNP's strategy concerning the key non-economic valence issues after 2016, again using the mechanism of government to demonstrate its governing credentials concerning the NHS and later COVID. Additionally, at every election since 2007 the SNP leader has been perceived by the electorate as the most competent/statesperson like by Scottish voters. So while personal competency may not be as salient in determining votes as economic or valence competency, it still plays a key role for a smaller section of voters as Sejits & Clercy (2020) found that 30% of UK voters prioritised personal competency over any other factor when voting. While in the first term of devolution, the SNP struggled to assert their governing credentials, the chapter finds that once in office and able to utilise the structural insulating framework to direct blame towards Westminster, the SNP have been able to uphold an image of Governing Competence to an extent rarely seen in UK politics.

Chapter 5 finds that Plaid has been afforded considerably fewer structural opportunities to present itself as a party of Governing Competence. This was primarily a consequence of a Welsh Labour party that achieved considerably more policy autonomy ('clear red waters'), relative to Scottish Labour, from New Labour at Westminster. Equally, Plaid upon entering office in 2007, did so as a junior coalition partner, inhibiting their ability to take credit for, and often even pursue, Plaid-inspired policies. Furthermore, the 'One Wales Coalition' primarily took place when Labour also held power at Westminster, so the strategy of the structural insulating framework as a mechanism to promote an image of Governing Competence, was largely unavailable to Plaid, unlike the minority SNP government. After 2011, Plaid struggled to cultivate an image of Governing Competence, due to Welsh Labour being able to frame Welsh politics from 2011-2021 as Welsh Labour vs English Conservatives. Here, Welsh Labour's use of the structural insulating framework mimicked that of the SNP's, but importantly they had to be careful to stop short of the centre-periphery argument and highlight only the *Conservative's* flaws, not *Westminster and the Union's* shortcomings. Plaid was out-muscled in the use of such a strategy and consequently struggled to garner an image of competence. In this sense, a considerably tougher (and arguably more fortunate) Labour in Wales, relative to Scotland, resulted in Plaid's difficulties in achieving an image of Governing Competence. The use of Statecraft in Chapters 4 & 5 therefore gives a new explanation of how parties at the sub-national level have, over the long-term, been able to utilise opportunities in the structure of devolution to benefit their perceived competency in key valence issue areas.

Chapter 6 explores how either party has handled disputes and management during the devolution era. The chapter explores three key aspects of Party Management. Initially, the chapter uses the operationalisation advocated by Buller and James (2011) of analysing the number and size of Plaid/SNP rebellions at Westminster. We can see that for the majority of devolution, Plaid has suffered more acutely from rebels in voting at the national level, than the SNP. The chapter goes on to use the revised understanding of Party Management of Sub-national Statecraft to analyse, in a more holistic manner, other sources of intra-party disunity outside of parliamentary voting records. In particular, the relationship between ideological differences within the parties being corroborated by personal disagreements will be explored, as while manifesting around different ideological issues and varying in magnitude, the interplay of these sources of disunity is a problem both parties have managed, to varying degrees of success. However, the main contribution the chapter wishes to make is presenting professionalising organisational reforms of either party as an essential way for the party leadership to control the party. Importantly, the chapter shall explain how the timing and extent of such reforms were critical in the parties' differing levels of unity, particularly when in government (McAgnus, 2013).

Finally, the chapter will explore the relative nature of party unity and how Plaid faced a much tougher political opponent in Welsh Labour who, while early during the devolution era suffered from disunity with the UK party over its divergent ideological profile, would in the long term establish a quiescent relationship with London despite their ideological differences. In the Scottish case, the SNP as devolution went on, increasingly had to only keep an amicable set of relations within the party relative to Scottish Labour, whose image of unity imploded due to a lack of policy autonomy.

Chapter 7 examines the ideological positioning of the SNP and Plaid in relation to winning Political Argument(s) Hegemony, within their respective devolved political systems. Unlike in Statecraft's original depiction of PAH manifesting around a single left-right political issue, at the devolved level, unsurprisingly, centre-periphery arguments are also of central importance to electoral competition and political narratives. Equally, by the 4th term of both parliaments, European integration arguments became a third political argument of salience for Scottish and Welsh parties to position themselves on, in the run-up to the 2016 EU referendum. Once again, the SNP were aided by a considerably more favourable structural context relative to Plaid. The SNP were successfully able to pursue a 'preference-accommodation' strategy with an electorate with a long-established majority in favour of social democracy, and continued membership of the EU, which remained consistent throughout the devolution period. Plaid alternatively, appears to have misread the structural context they were working within. The adoption of a left-right 'preference shaping' strategy and a commitment to a pro-EU position, even after polls and the Brexit vote showed a new Eurosceptic majority in Wales, appears to show an inability of Plaid's leadership to accurately understand the electoral context they operated in. More importantly, the chapter will analyse how the adoption of these ideological arguments was related to each parties' centre-periphery arguments, and whether the linking of such arguments has changed public, or indeed elites', attitudes towards constitutional reform.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature surrounding the success of nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales can be neatly placed into two distinct categories. The first category of literature attempts to group all nationalist parties under the umbrella term of Stateless Nationalist & Regionalist Parties (SNRPs). This literature focuses on the operations of SNRPs and the decisions made by the party elites, such as ideological positioning & organisational reform, in determining their electoral fortunes. The second category of literature alternatively makes no explicit generalisation concerning SNRPs' electoral success, but instead explains regionalist party electoral fortunes on a case-by-case basis using a common hypothesis of national identity. This literature posits that the electoral success, or failure, of such regionalist parties is largely determined by the strength of national identity in each given polity, the assertion being that where national identity is strong, so nationalist party support will be. In this chapter, the merits and gaps in the existing political science literature shall be identified. The chapter will first explore the collective SNRP comparative literature, before then moving on to the specific Scottish and Welsh case studies. Finding that neither the existing individual national identity explanations of the SNP's and PC's electoral fortunes suffice, nor do the more generalised explanations concerning SNRPs, this chapter concludes that a more comprehensive agentic theoretical framework is required to understand SNRP leadership's strategic decision-making and its relationship to electoral performance.

DEFINITIONS

The SNP in Scotland and Plaid Cymru in Wales have been categorised in political science as SNRPs. But what is an SNRP? The definition of what an SNRP constitutes is a contested matter, with some scholars focusing on ethnic dimensions, some emphasising language/culture, while others focus on socio-economic issues particular to a region in mobilising territorial interests. Müller-Rommel (1998:18) defines SNRPs as 'parties that refer to geographically concentrated minorities which challenge the working order, even the democratic order, by demanding recognition of their cultural identity'. SNRPs have been described as parties focusing primarily on articulating, mobilizing and defending the collective identity of a territorially defined social group within a state, to make "an ethno-territorial community responsible for itself" (Jeffery, 2009; Seiler, 1995:20). In other words SNRPs seek to establish, or strengthen, "some kind of self-government" for that community (De Winter & Tursan, 1998:241). Typically, SNRPs hope to achieve 'self-government' and 'recognition' by altering the constitutional status quo of their territory, 'advocating anything from cultural autonomy to national independence' (Rokkan & Urwin, 1983:141). While these definitions are useful in exploring the ethnic and cultural basis for the existence of many Nationalist and Regionalist parties, they fail to account for

those SNRPs who emphasise economic territorial demands (Sardinian Action Party, Quebec Solidaire etc.) and those who have downplayed their association with cultural labels (such as the SNP). Eve Hepburn in response to SNRP's different categories of demands, devised a definition which classifies the SNRP party family as possessing a shared goal of:

'Sub-state territorial empowerment, whereby empowerment involves seeking to represent and advance the particular interests of the stateless territory and where territorial interests may be economic, political, social, cultural or symbolic in nature' (Hepburn, 2011:6).

The advantage of this definition is that 'territorial interests' are not viewed purely in ethnic or cultural terms, and additionally the term 'territorial interests' is not treated as a synonym for a party's desire for independence. Therefore, such a definition would allow for a discussion of parties who wish to enhance the political/cultural/economic autonomy of their region without becoming a sovereign state, for example, the Christian Social Union in Bavaria.

However, even Hepburn's definition has limitations. One issue with Hepburn's definition (and all those highlighted before) is that it is entirely 'intentions-based' – in other words, such definitions relate to the ideological goals of what SNRPs hope to achieve. Hepburn here fails to outline any kind of 'functional' criteria of what an SNRP constitutes - that being the difference in how SNRPs practically operate and electorally compete relative to other party families. Therefore, the first addition that will be made to Hepburn's definition in this thesis is that SNRPs advocate, as their 'core mission', the 'sub-state territorial empowerment' of their region at *all levels* of elections they compete in (Massetti, 2011:26). This means that state-wide parties (such as the British Labour party) whose regional branches may give a sizeable amount of attention to centre-periphery issues, would not be classed as SNRPs. This is because such parties, both at the state-wide level and when viewed holistically as a whole, attach far more salience to the traditional left-right issues, unlike SNRPs whose primary focus is issues of the centre-periphery cleavage. So regional branches of state-wide parties are not considered here as SNRPs.

Related to this point, the second functional addition to Hepburn's definition will be borrowed from Massetti (2011:26) who outlines that an important feature of an SNRP, is that it only fields candidates within a certain region(s) of the state. SNRPs limit their electoral activity to the region as a consequence of their wish to defend solely the interests of 'their' people (ibid). This would mean parties such as the late Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), whilst having overwhelmingly eastern

German electoral support post-unification and stressing the regional economic hardships of East Germany compared to the West, would not be classed as an SNRP as they competed state-wide. Alongside historical factors of attachment to the party, PDS's programme was social democratic and the benefits such policies would have brought East German voters may explain their concentrated support in the economically underdeveloped East. However, the party's aim was always to expand their vote share in the West and build a state-wide support base. So admittedly the PDS could be classed as a *de facto* SNRP but are admittedly more at home under 'the radical left party family' banner (Hough & Koß, 2009). Therefore, the PDS shall not be classed as an SNRP here, as the focus of this thesis is on those *de jure* SNRPs whose party leaderships have chosen to limit their electoral competition to a specific region, for the primary purpose of defending and advancing the centre-periphery interests of the region, not left-right ones.

Any workable definition then needs to consider the ideological intentions-based, and the practical functional, criteria in defining an SNRP and the relationship between these two categories of criteria. On this basis, Hepburn's definition (above) will be used as a starting point, as it aptly covers the various forms of 'territorial interests' SNRPs. However, the thesis will also incorporate Massetti's functional considerations of: 1. 'territorial empowerment' being the party's 'core mission' at all levels of electoral competition; 2. the party only fielding candidates in particular regions of the state (not state-wide). The addition of such functional criteria for defining SNRPs helps elucidate 'grey area' regionalist parties such as the DUP. While formed originally as a reactive anti-secessionist party, the DUP both in their intentions (in supporting the autonomy of Northern Ireland and their raison d'être being the centre-periphery issue of keeping NI in the United Kingdom), and in functional terms (in competing only in Northern Irish constituencies), would be defined as an SNRP. Therefore, any party which meets both of these intention-based and functional-based criteria can be considered an SNRP.

Against this hybrid intentional-functional definition laid out above, the SNP in being strong advocates of Scottish independence based on political nationalism and economic arguments of a prosperous autonomous Scotland, is an SNRP. Plaid Cymru likewise is classed as an SNRP, as their long-term goal is independence for Wales (although this only crystallised fully in the last 20 years). Both in government and opposition, Plaid have actively promoted Wales's cultural and (particularly) linguistic autonomy from the rest of the UK. Both parties don't contest seats outside of Scotland/Wales and although both parties compete at Westminster elections, their *raison d'être* at both electoral levels is centre-periphery issues.

WHY STUDY SNRPs?

Before any discussion of the literature concerning case studies in Scotland and Wales or the more general SNRP literature, it's firstly important to highlight the value of studying regional politics, and specifically why the political fortunes of SNRPs, matter at all to the study of political science. While regionalism is nothing of a new phenomenon in European democratic politics, the saliency of SNRPs, and centre-periphery issues, in many national democratic systems, has been considerably greater in the last twenty years compared with the previous forty. The notable recent referendums on independence in both Scotland (2014) and Catalonia (2017), and more importantly the unresolved and ongoing debate surrounding sovereignty in these countries, are only indicative snapshots of SNRPs' newfound important role in Western politics. Writers such as Eve Hepburn (2011) have attributed this increase in the saliency of regional politics to the general trend for Western states since the 1980s to undertake decentralising reforms. The creation (or in some cases strengthening) of an institutional platform where centre-periphery issues were of increased relevance, according to Hepburn (2011), allowed SNRPs to exploit this structural opportunity to augment their political success. Alternatively, other writers such as Lieven De Winter & Huri Türsan (1998:2) suggest that the initial rise of SNRPs and regional politics was an expression of the anti-establishment dissatisfaction with 'existing political elites and traditional party politics'. Of course, both the former institutional explanation and the latter ideational one are not mutually exclusive, and in tandem provide a convincing explanation of the initial proliferation of SNRPs. They are not sufficient however in explaining how SNRPs moved from 'niche to normal', as Hepburn (2009) describes their development, and neither can explain why certain SNRPs have electorally excelled while others have stagnated.

Many writers have highlighted the saliency of regional politics by drawing attention to the success of SNRPs in their progress towards their goals of self-determination. In Wales, Plaid Cymru played an instrumental role in the creation of the NAW and in lobbying Westminster for the three Wales Acts (2006; 2014; 2017), which have extended the powers of the Senedd (formerly the NAW). Similarly, in Scotland, the SNP played a key role in the creation of the Scottish parliament and also forced Westminster into conceding further powers to Holyrood in the two Scotland Acts (2012; 2016). In Belgium, the *Volksunie, Rassemblement Wallon* and *Front Democratique des Francophones* were collaboratively successful in the federalisation of the state in 1993 and have since successfully obtained more devolved powers to regional government in 2001 & 2011. In Spain, the *Convergencia i Unio* were successful in obtaining greater powers for the regional government of Catalonia in 2016. This however tells us nothing of how SNRPs became electorally relevant actors in Western political systems, so how might we empirically measure the rise in the *electoral* saliency of regional politics?

An obvious and explicit indicator of this is the steady increase in the number of SNRPs since the 1980s. The number of, what Rokkan and Urwin (1983) coined, Western European 'peripheral parties' (a near synonym for SNRPs) stood at 29 in 1983. By 2009, Massetti (2010) found that there existed 93 SNRPs in Western Europe. We can reasonably presume then that this increase in the number of SNRPs is a reflection of the electorate's growing concern with centre-periphery issues. However, put in these purely quantitative terms, we only see the increase in the number of SNRPs and we fail to understand the increasing saliency of SNRPs in terms of both their electoral impact and influence on the political landscape and governments' policy agendas. Müller-Rommel (1998) employed a more useful way of categorising politically significant SNRPs, finding that against the criteria of: 1. contesting at least two national and regional elections; 2. polling above 3% in these elections; 3. gaining some representation in the national parliament; there only existed 12 'significant' SNRPs in Western Europe between 1980 and 1996. Using similar criteria to that of Müller, Massetti in 2009 found there existed 30 SNRPs who constituted a 'significant component' in their regional party systems in Western Europe (Massetti, 2010; Jeffery 2009).

However, the increase in the number of SNRPs even against such criteria as outlined above, does not necessarily imply an ability to exert influence over political discourse, party competition and policy-making. While of course, such behaviouralist analyses are useful this positivist methodology fails to encapsulate another key aspect of why SNRPs are now an integral part of many political systems. What has made many SNRPs increasingly important and relevant actors at both the regional and national level is their ability to be perceived by the electorate, not as 'niche' parties of protest who exist as single-issue (i.e. independence) parties, but as parties that can competently handle more traditional left-right issues in government too. Successful SNRPs have been able to frame and relate the party's centre-periphery arguments, to debates concerning left-right issues. The assertion here then is that regional politics is now more salient as a consequence of SNRPs demonstrating their governing credentials concerning traditional left-right issues; once voters have been convinced of an SNRP's competence, they will then be more likely to listen and prioritise their arguments concerning the centre-periphery cleavage (Elias & Tronconi, 2011). This thesis therefore largely refutes one explanation of regional voting behaviour, that being the 'second-order elections' theory which asserts voters perceive of Scottish and Welsh elections as less important than first-order state-wide elections (Oppenhuis et al, 1996; Reif & Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt and Teper-oglou, 2017). Indeed, studies such as Henderson & McMillan (2022) suggest that in polities such as Scotland, a sizeable proportion of the electorate now perceive Scottish elections as more salient than Westminster elections. In this sense,

the thesis while not disregarding Westminster elections will primarily focus on SNRP performance and decisions made at the sub-national level.

If this is the basis for why regional politics has become more significant across Western political systems, one useful way to measure the rise in the political saliency of regional politics is to observe the number of SNRPs who have entered government at either the regional or state level. In Quebec, Scotland, the Basque Country, Bavaria, the Canary Islands, Catalonia, Flanders, Faroe Islands, Galicia, Lombardy, Sardinia, South Tyrol, Valle d'Aosta, Veneto and Wales, SNRPs have all entered government at the regional level. The fact that only 8 of these regions had SNRPs in government before 1990, compared to 15 by 2007 shows the increasing presence of SNRPs. It may also be noted that some SNRPs such as the DUP in Northern Ireland, the Scottish Greens and the *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* in Spain, while not officially entering government have engaged in confidence and supply arrangements with the governing party. Such evidence suggests that SNRPs have firmly moved, as Hepburn has described it, from 'the periphery to the mainstream' (Hepburn, 2011). Therefore, there has been not just a superficial increase in the number of registered SNRPs but indeed a tangible rise in the number of SNRPs who have been elected to regional office. The jump to the mainstream of politics is achieved when the SNRP has demonstrated their competence on left-right policy areas and then can utilise such a perception to make the centre-periphery argument that they, in power, are capable enough to use the greater powers of devolution/independence in the nation's interests (Hepburn, 2009). The value then in researching SNRPs stems, not only from their significant rise in number but from the ability of SNRPs to enhance the electorate's perception of their competence in handling traditional left-right issues, and then using this as a platform to make centre-periphery issues a (re)new(ed) cornerstone of western politics.

However, while there has been a general trend of SNRPs assuming office and heightening the saliency of centre-periphery politics in Western states, not all SNRPs have enjoyed the same level of electoral success. The varying degrees of SNRP electoral success are reflected in the disparate amount of literature dedicated to different SNRPs. In territories such as Scotland, Catalonia and Quebec where there has existed a politically successful SNRP, there is an extensive amount of academic work addressing the success of the SNRP(s) in that region. In territories where SNRPs have not achieved such notable electoral success, as in Wales, Friesland and most French regions there exists considerably less literature on SNRPs. Even rarer in the literature is work which seeks to meaningfully compare two or more SNRPs to identify what common/different political strategies, ideologies and opportunities exist between the SNRP party family. Additionally, due to the growing number of

political systems where SNRPs are significant electoral players, at both regional and national elections, the centre-periphery cleavage has a newfound importance not only for SNRP scholars but also for anyone trying to understand wider domestic electoral politics. In other words, our understanding of electoral politics in Western democracies is severely limited if we don't have an adequate understanding of this revived cleavage.

THE EXISTING SNRP LITERATURE

FROM 'NICHE TO NORMAL' - HEPBURN

Much like the work defining SNRPs, there is no theoretical consensus within the literature concerning why certain SNRPs achieve electoral success while others fail. Indeed, most academics focus on one singular dimension of SNRPs without attempting to create a comprehensive explanation for electoral performance: Hepburn, De Winter and Muller-Rommel (definitions of SNRPs); Massetti (ideological development); Elias (internal party disputes); McAgnus (organisational reform). Hepburn's (2009) account of SNRPs, asserted that all regionalist parties undergo a process of changing from 'niche to normal' in their electoral development. Hepburn described this process, stating SNRPs would initially claim 'ownership' over territorial issues, before later broadening their manifestos over time to include typical left-right policies to electorally compete with state-wide parties and thus become 'normal' (Ibid:489). While not strictly speaking invalid, Hepburn's use of the term 'normal' is still ambiguous and her contribution provides no theoretical framework that can help answer the question of how SNRPs electorally succeed. Hepburn fails to explain how a party becomes 'normal' other than the adoption of a left-right position, which most SNRPs had already done by the turn of the 21st century. One theoretical development of Hepburn's idea of 'niche to normal' was given by Elias & Tronconi (2011) who argued that SNRPs, relative to state-wide parties, struggle more acutely with their first experiences of government. They state that an SNRP's success is determined by whether they can use the experience of government as a mechanism to perpetuate an image of competence and undermine negative stereotypes of the party (Ibid; McAgnus, 2016). However, again this falls short of being any theoretical framework we may use to assess SNRPs against, in that it fails to account for how an SNRP manages to garner enough electoral support to be elected to government. Additionally, it fails to operationalise how party elites specifically use the mechanism of government to undermine such negative perceptions of the party.

IDEOLOGICAL DIVISIONS – ELIAS AND JEFFERY

Related to this point of office-seeking, both Charlie Jeffery (2009) and Anwen Elias (2009a) outline how SNRPs face the problem of internal party disharmony when attempting to seek office or upon

gaining office. Both argue in the infancy of an SNRP's development, two opposing factions will form. One faction advocates the party to become more 'mainstream' through a dampening of the regionalist agenda and the party focusing on more typical left-right policies, while concurrently one more zealous faction forms who remain committed to regionalist policy objectives. Such arguments certainly appear to be valid if we observe the case of the SNP during the Swinney leadership years, but more notably such a divide has historically been (and continues to be) an issue within Plaid. As Anwen Elias (2009a) identified in her research on Plaid, the party suffered due to the fact:

'Party traditionalists who favour a more oppositional style of politics within the NAW and a renewed focus on 'core' issues are pitted against pragmatists who favour continuing down the path of moderate consensual politics with a view to transforming Plaid Cymru into a credible party of government' (Elias, 2009a:543)

The risk here is that if an SNRP becomes too focused on becoming a mainstream political actor and loses sight of its regionalist cause, it can become equally perceived as 'part of the system' as unionist parties, which can undermine their raison d'être of constitutional reform (Jeffery, 2009). "One risk in these circumstances is that other SNRPs, 'truer' to the regionalist cause, will emerge" (Ibid: 646). While agreeing with the premise of this argument, in the cases of Scotland and Wales the hypothesised outcome of a 'truer' regionalist party emerging, due to the weakening of the regionalist cause has not transpired. In Wales, there has existed no other significant SNRP that has challenged Plaid's claim to the regionalist cause when there have been numerous occasions on which Plaid has retreated on its regionalist commitments (e.g. one fringe organisation 'Yes Cymru' has criticised Plaid's lack of a formal commitment to an independent Wales). In Scotland, the Scottish Greens (since 2016) and Alba (since February 2021) have started to become causes for concern for the SNP. The Scottish Greens held six seats in Holyrood's 5th term and importantly held the balance of power when it came to voting, as the SNP were 2 short of a majority. The Scottish Greens went on to win 8 seats in 2021 meaning that since 2016 the SNP have been reliant on their support to pass legislation in Holyrood. However, in relation to the hypothesis of a 'truer' SNRP emerging, the Greens cannot be viewed in this way, as the Greens are the less centre-periphery focused of the pro-independence parties in Scotland. For the Greens, independence is an instrumental tool to achieving more important left-right goals such as climate change policy, nuclear disarmament, and progressive taxation. This is opposed to the many SNP members, who view independence as the end goal in its own right. The formation of Alba may prove to be a more serious threat to the SNP going forward (at the time of writing Ash Regan MSP defected from the SNP to Alba giving the party their first MSP), but as the period of analysis for this

thesis ends at the 2021 Scottish election, their formation 22 years after devolution began, on top of their failure to win a single seat in 2021, renders them unworthy of a meaningful case study comparison.

EXTERNAL SUPPLY SIDE FACTORS - STRUCTURE, IDEOLOGY AND ELECTORAL COMPETITION

The work of Emanuele Massetti (2011) develops a more nuanced version of Jeffery's argument, which takes into account the role of differing institutional structures in SNRP electoral competition. Massetti argues firstly that a singular ideological 'broad church' SNRP will exist within majoritarian systems such as the UK. He goes on to argue that only in proportional systems will multiple SNRPs, with different positions along the centre-periphery and left-right spectrums, exist (Ibid). He also states, unlike Jeffery, that a pre-existing SNRP can be threatened electorally not only by the creation of a 'truer' regionalist party but also by a less committed regionalist party (Ibid). However, while Massetti's work is useful in developing Jeffery's argument of other competing SNRPs forming, his assertion concerning how institutional structure affects SNRP electoral competition is refuted by the Welsh case. In Scotland, the Additional Member voting system is used, which is a hybrid system electing half of MSPs proportionally and half via first past the post. The existence of two small Scottish independence party rivals during the devolution period in the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) and Scottish Green Party would support his hypothesis. The SSP were a fleeting phenomenon in Scottish politics winning 6 seats in 2003 before losing all seats in 2007. However, the Scottish Greens seem a more permanent staple of Scottish politics managing to win 7 seats in 2003, 6 in 2016 and 8 in 2021, although only through the proportional regional list of the Additional Member System. With the SNP falling narrowly short of a majority at Holyrood in 2016 and 2021, this means the Scottish Greens' support is vital to the passing of the SNP's legislative agenda. The existence of other SNRPs in Scotland, which occupy ideological space to the left of the SNP and wield some limited influence over the Scottish government's policy, supports this assertion of Massetti's; where there is proportionality in an electoral system, multiple SNRPs occupying different left-right positions will exist. However, in Wales where the same electoral system is used, there existed only one other, insignificant, SNRP: The Welsh National Party (later named Propel), which was only formed in February 2020 by AM Neil McEvoy after he was expelled from Plaid Cymru, and he would later lose his seat in the 2021 Senedd election. So despite half of all AM/MSs being elected to Cardiff Bay via a proportional regional list, only Plaid exist as the sole significant SNRP in Wales.

Additionally, another criticism of Massetti is while he carefully lays out the structural conditions that will determine the number of SNRPs and their positions on the left-right and centre-periphery cleavages, he fails to state how such positions, or whether the number of SNRPs within a sub-national

system, affect the electoral performance of regionalist parties. Also, Massetti fails to consider further structural conditions which may impact SNRP performance. For instance, the Scottish and Welsh median voter in relation to left-right, European and centre-periphery continuums differ considerably, which might actively benefit or disadvantage SNRP electoral performance depending on their ideological positioning. The SNP operating in a context where the majority of Scottish voters are left-wing, makes their ideological positioning simpler and more effective, unlike in Wales where left-right ideological preferences are more heterogeneous, posing a greater problem for the left-right ideological positioning of Plaid. It may also be noted that there is no discussion in Massetti's, or any of the previously mentioned work, of the relationship between agency and structure in SNRP electoral fortunes. How far do the SNRP leadership's choices impact electoral fortunes or are SNRPs more acutely influenced by the structural context they operate within? Therefore, we can see that the generalisations made by Hepburn, Jeffery, Massetti and others concerning the conditions under which an SNRP will electorally succeed or not, are either theoretically underdeveloped or fail to be ubiquitously valid in their assertions.

INTERNAL SUPPLY SIDE FACTORS – ORGANISATIONAL REFORM

One academic who has tried to create a more comprehensive theory of how SNRPs succeed electorally before entering government is Craig McAgnus (2013; 2015; 2016; 2017). As opposed to the other SNRP literature, which fails to create any empirically testable theoretical framework, McAgnus attempts to create an all-encompassing theory for SNRPs and their electoral fortunes. He focuses on the organisational structures different SNRPs have adopted, and the differing decisions made by the political leaderships of SNRPs, in relation to their electoral performance. As opposed to using any form of ideological framework, McAgnus comes at the question of SNRP electoral fortunes from an altogether different angle of agency, focusing on the role of elites within each party. While McAgnus asserts his theory is relevant to SNRPs generally, he uses the case studies of the SNP and Plaid to comparatively illustrate this point, of how the adoption of particular organisational structures by party elites affects their electoral fortunes. Building on the work of Mitchell et al (2012) who stressed the importance of organisational reform only in the individual case of the SNP's electoral success in 2007, McAgnus highlighted the most important difference in the leadership decisions of the SNP and Plaid, as being the decision by 'the SNP to reform its organisation in advance of it entering government, whilst Plaid did it afterwards' (McAgnus, 2015). The argument follows that after both the SNP's and Plaid's poor performances in the 2003 devolved elections, there was a need to change the parties' internal structures to make them more professional and move away from their outdated grassroots structures (Ibid). Here the role of agency is key, as elites within the SNP, most notably John Swinney

who led the SNP between 2000 and 2004, undertook a wide range of controversial organisational reforms in the aftermath of the 2003 election (McAgnus, 2013:184). Such reforms included the 'shifting of strategic decision-making away from local branches upwards to constituency committees, and reducing the influence of the party's National Executive Committee over party strategy' and also, for the first time in the party's history, created a position of greater centralised power in a 'leader' as opposed to the previous 'national convenor' (McAgnus, 2015; Mitchell et al, 2012:40). However, concerning Jeffery's point, due to internal divisions within Plaid between idealists and realist factions, such professionalising reforms were delayed. The existential dispute within Plaid was over whether it existed to contest elections to win governmental office, or whether it stood to be a form of pressure group to campaign on a range of cultural/nation-building issues (Ibid). Plaid therefore didn't pursue reform until after 2011 and subsequently electorally stagnated, while the SNP were able to professionalise the party in anticipation of government.

McAgnus's argument proves to be compelling if we look at the correlation in the chronology of organisational reform with the parties' electoral performances. The SNP, in undergoing organisational reform were able to undertake such changes in advance of 2007, where they reaped the benefits of making a net gain of 20 seats from 2003 and forming a minority government at Holyrood. However, Plaid in failing to undertake such reforms immediately after 2003 due to their internal disputes, fought the 2007 election with a largely unchanged party structure and, while gaining three seats and entering government in coalition with Labour, failed to emulate anywhere near the SNP's turnaround in electoral fortunes in 2007 and went on to lose four seats in 2011. But what is the electoral value of such reforms? McAgnus argues that such reforms convinced the electorate of the SNP's capability to govern competently, as the decision to adopt a top-down organisational structure allowed party elites to adopt policy and make decisions which were more in line with the wider electorate's preferences, rather than policy-purist party activists (McAgnus, 2016). Therefore, for McAgnus, the SNP's electoral success in 2007 and 2011 'was based, largely, on the notion that they were perceived by the electorate as the most competent and able party of government in relation to Labour' (Ibid:642). Whereas Plaid, as a consequence of not undertaking organisational reform straight after the 2003 election, allowed the more radical activists continued influence of the party's agenda, allowing the negative public view of the party as 'a collection of wild-eyed romantics and language zealots' to persist (Wyn Jones & Scully, 2008). Equally as significant for McAgnus, was the fact the 'One Wales' coalition which exposed to the electorate, Plaid's 'significant organisational vulnerabilities and [the party] struggled to formulate a coherent vote-seeking strategy as a junior coalition partner' (McAgnus, 2016). McAgnus therefore provides an argument pertaining (solely) to the importance of party organisational reform

in determining electoral fortunes. Before assessing what other decisions party elites make and their relationship to electoral success, analytical attention will now turn to the literature regarding the individual case studies of Scotland and Wales.

CASE STUDIES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

SCOTLAND AND THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY

Explanations of the SNP's electoral success for the whole period of 1999-2021 are few. Indeed, there are academic works that attempt to explain SNP's performance in particular elections or periods, such as Mitchell et al (2012). In their book they stress that the initial electoral success of the SNP in 1999 was based upon the increased political presence devolution gave the SNP. However, they fail to explain why the SNP were able to win a sizeable number of seats at Holyrood but not at Westminster in 1999 (Ibid). Additionally, they explain the SNP's breakthrough success in the 2007 Scottish election as a result of John Swinney's 2004 professionalising organisational reforms (Ibid). Explaining the recent electoral successes of the SNP such as the 2019 general election, academics such as Mitchell & Henderson (2020) have tended to focus on the issue of Brexit and its relationship to independence. The evident pattern in the existing literature, which attempts to analyse the electoral fortunes of the SNP, is that each election (Scottish or General) is analysed in isolation.

While not refuting such arguments pertaining to specific issues defining each election, it is clear that their analysis is chronologically selective and has not attempted to present a comprehensive explanation of the SNP's broadly consistent rise in electoral support since 1999. This lack of *longue durée* literature on the SNP and their unprecedented electoral success, appears to be due to the widespread acceptance of the seemingly logical explanation of the media and some academics alike, that the SNP's electoral success is a political expression of a 'resurgent Scottish nationalism' (In academia see: Scully 2013; Curtice, 2007. In the Media see: Telegraph, 2014; Reuters, 2015). While of course, national identity is a complex and nuanced concept that is not simply a binary decision for the individual between civic and ethnic forms, it is clear that the SNP's position since devolution has crystallised as a civic party that emphasises the importance of territorial residence and respecting/participating in Scotland's political institutions over factors of culture, location of birth, language or ancestry. Academics have suggested that in promoting citizenship, a centre-left political ideology and Scottish political institutions, the SNP leadership hoped to create an appeal which transcended the boundaries of race, age and religion, avoiding the limitations a traditional, solely ethnic or cultural, nationalism more commonly adopted by nationalist parties (Mitchell et al,

2012:109-110; Zwet, 2015). This is not to say that the SNP cannot benefit from ethnic/cultural nationalist support, but that the party leadership intuitively presents a balanced hybrid of nationalism which utilises both civic and ethnic variations in the hope of creating a wider electoral appeal. So while officially portraying itself as a party of the centre-left, the SNP can appeal to both those on the right, who are primarily concerned with the ethnic/cultural basis of Scottishness, and also those on the left who are more likely to perceive Scottishness in civic terms (Hearn, 2000:56). But has this 'nationalism' had the desired effect of resonating with a larger share of voters?

Some political scientists (for examples see: Scully 2013; Curtice, 2007; Paterson, 2006; Griffiths et al, 2023) have made this assertion that the SNP's electoral success in elections such as 2007, has been predicated on 'Scottish identity' and 'a sense of nationhood' amongst the Scottish electorate which has translated into support for the SNP. Even those academic works which do not suggest this argument of a strict positive correlation between Scottish identity and SNP support, still overwhelmingly portray a picture of Scottish politics which is painted by national identity (see: Bond & Rose, 2002; Leith & Soule, 2011; Mycock 2012). For instance, it is argued by some that a reduction in the percentage of those Scots identifying as 'British' has reduced the unionist vote (particularly Labour's) and bolstered the SNP's (Fieldhouse & Prosser, 2018). Irrespective of which particular explanation is analysed, there appears to be a sizeable proportion of the existing literature based on the assumption that a rise in Scottish identity (or reducing levels of Britishness), is a key reason for the growth in support for the SNP. This is not to say there exist no works that focus on factors outside of national identity and constitutional preferences in explaining SNP success but, that as discussed earlier, these factors are more commonly focused on in SNRP literature that refers to the party family in generalised terms (Jeffery, 2009; Massetti, 2011; Elias, 2011) rather than individual or paired case studies. Even within the literature that exclusively discusses the SNP's political success, there does exist a small number of works that focus on agentic factors of competency and electoral strategy (Johns et al, 2011; Elias, 2019). A further shortcoming of these works is that while they focus on the role of internal supply-side factors in explaining SNP electoral fortunes, they focus narrowly on one specific aspect of SNP leadership decision-making, rather than any form of comprehensive explanation or framework to understand all aspects of the party's vote-seeking and governing strategies (Johns et al, 2016 – valence politics; Elias 2019 – integrating economic arguments into the case for independence). Even so, such works are in the minority compared to the surplus of literature surrounding the relationship between the SNP and national identity.

But how might we empirically measure abstract ideological concepts such as 'nationalism' or 'national identity'? One way to test if a rise in nationalism has occurred is to utilise data from the 'Moreno question' on national identity (Moreno, 2006). If the heightened Scottish national identity explanation

for the SNP's success was valid, we can reasonably expect there to have been a rise in Scottish voters identifying as primarily Scottish, in correlation with the increase in the SNP's electoral support at both Holyrood and Westminster since 1999. However, if we look at the data available from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSAS) we can see that the opposite is true. When asked which option of those shown in Figure 1 best described their national identity ('Moreno question'), the Scottish electorate has increasingly distanced themselves from a purely or predominately Scottish identity.

Figure 1: "Which best describes respondent, on scale from 'Scottish not British' to 'British not Scottish'?"
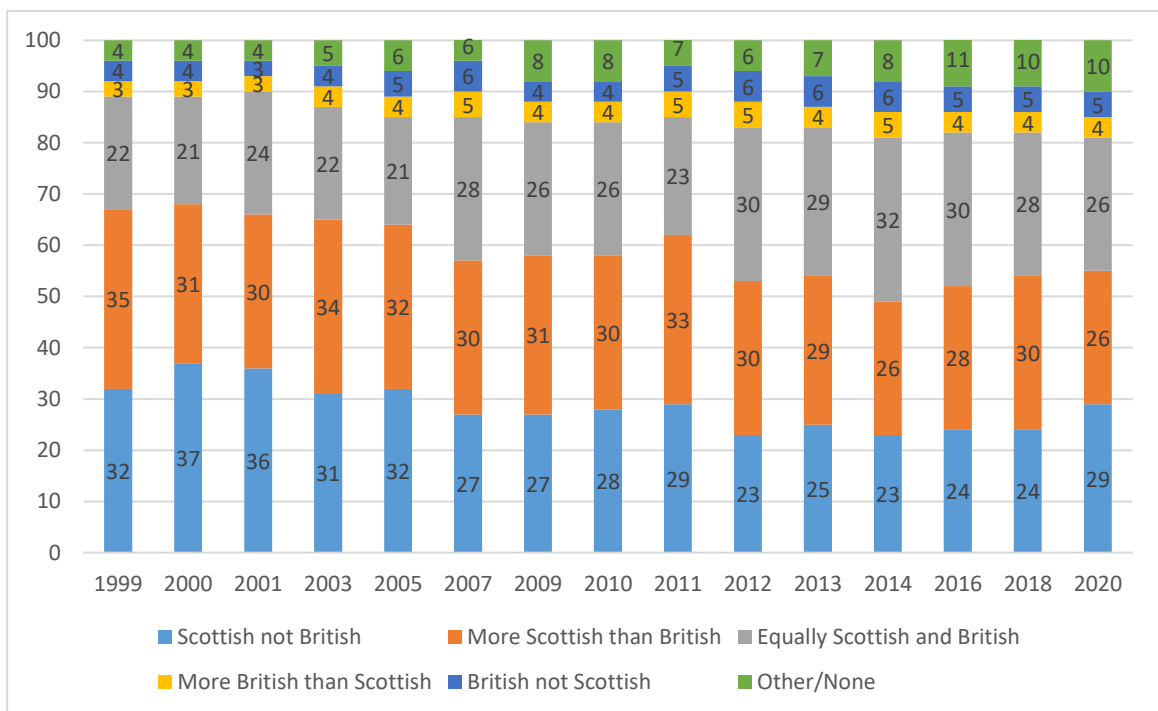
Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 1999-2020

We can see this in the fact that there has been a gradual, yet consistent, fall in those who have identified as 'Scottish not British' and 'More Scottish than British', falling by 12% between 2000 and 2020. If we compare this trend to the electoral fortunes of the SNP in the same period (see Figures 2 & 3) we can see that there exists no positive correlation between the two variables. 'Scottish identity' constitutes those who responded to the Moreno question on national identity as either 'Scottish not British' or 'More Scottish than British'. We should expect then that levels of Scottish identity and SNP electoral support to rise and fall in tandem. However, this is not the case.

Figure 2: Graph tracking the level of SNP support at Scottish elections and the level of Scottish identity, 1999-2021
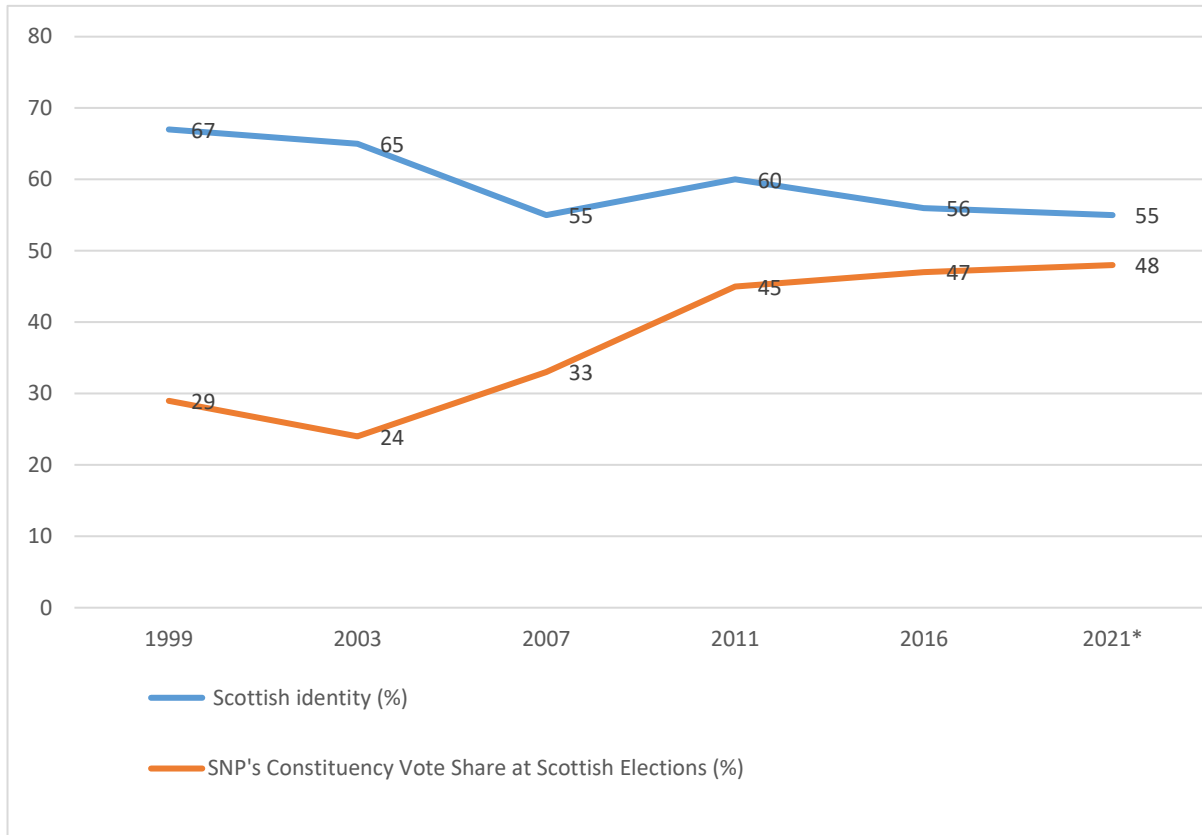
Source: SSAS 1999-2021; Scottish Election Results 1999-2021

Figure 3: Graph tracking the level of SNP support at General elections and the level of
Scottish identity, 1997-2017
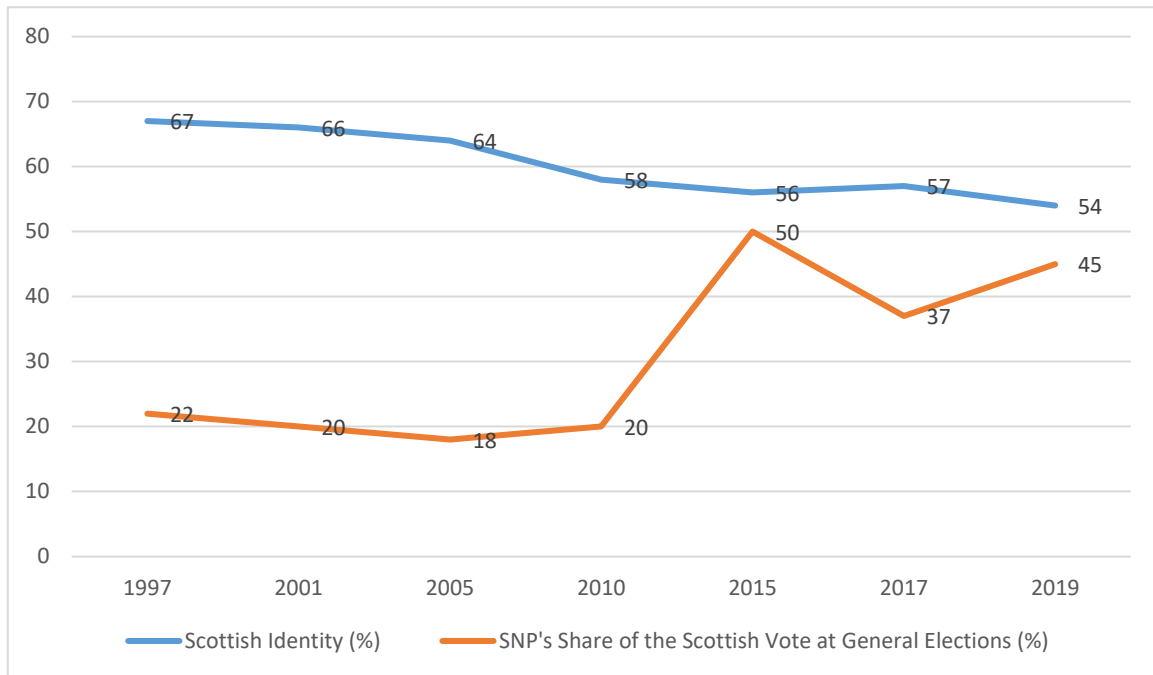
Source: SSAS 1999-2018; Westminster General Election Results 1997-2019

What becomes apparent in these graphs is the lack of a strong positive correlation between electoral support and the strength of Scottish identity. This can be seen most simply in the fact that in the two elections of 1997 and 1999, when nationalism was at its peak, with those identifying as 'Scottish not British' and 'More Scottish than British' averaging 67% of the Scottish public, the SNP only managed to obtain 22% of the Scottish vote in the General Election of 1997 and 29% of the constituency vote in the 1999 Scottish Election. Yet, when Scottish identity was at its lowest amongst the electorate between 2011 and 2016 with those identifying as 'Scottish not British' or 'More Scottish than British' averaging 54% (a fall of 13% from 1999), the SNP managed to gain a statistically unlikely absolute majority at Holyrood in 2011 with 45% of the constituency vote (a 23% increase from 1999) and an even more unlikely 56 out of 59 seats of Scottish seats at Westminster in 2015 with 50% of the Scottish vote (an increase of 28% from 1997). Furthermore, Figure 2 shows that between the 2003 and 2007 devolved elections, there was a significant 10% drop in people identifying as solely or primarily Scottish, yet SNP constituency vote share increased by 9%. Equally, between the general elections of 2010 and 2015 when the SNP's share of the Scottish vote seismically increases by 30%, national identity falls by 2%. Therefore, the perception that an increase in Scottish identity and nationalism has been the basis of the SNP's electoral success appears, based on this data, to be empirically unfounded.

WALES AND PLAID CYMRU

In Wales, even before the advent of devolution, the party struggled to gain seats at Westminster. As Wyn Jones (2007:260) argues 'the cause of Welsh nationalism seemed to be gaining credibility' yet PC still failed to make an electoral impact, describing this as "Plaid's paradox of the 1990s" (Ibid). 1999 can arguably be seen as something of a 'fluke' in electoral terms, in the sense that it was the first Welsh election and unionist parties underestimated the difference in electoral competition/voting patterns between national and regional levels, giving Plaid's more unashamedly 'Welsh' manifesto an initial advantage (Bradbury, 2006:186). The absence of sustained electoral success has resulted in Plaid, receiving even less academic attention than the SNP. But again nationalism is the prevailing ideological explanation which the limited literature understands Plaid's electoral fortunes through.

In contrast to Scotland, a lack of strong national identity is cited as the reason why Plaid have failed to electorally succeed. This argument presented by Roger Scully (2013), is that Welshness is a particularly weak identity, which struggles to challenge the more potent influences on identity in Wales such as class and consequently does not significantly influence the voting behaviour of the Welsh electorate. National identity has been utilised since the earliest political research in Wales (Madgwick et al, 1973; Balsom et al, 1983, 1984) and has been utilised throughout the devolution era (Curtice 1999, Wyn Jones and Lewis, 1999; Wyn Jones, 2001; Wyn Jones et al, 2002; Larner 2019; Larner & Surridge 2021; Larner et al, 2022; Griffiths et al, 2023). Such analyses often present this weak Welsh identity being a consequence of a historical backdrop in which Wales had, and continues to have, close political, economic and cultural ties to England (Bradbury & Andrews, 2010:234). Additionally, class, in particular, is viewed by many scholars as the dominant influence in Welsh politics, as the country's modern popular history is dominated by the idea of working-class communities formed around industrial centres such as Cardiff (Ibid:242-243). Both Wales's strong connections to England and the strength of class identity, to proponents of this explanation, are why Plaid have electorally failed and why Labour have dominated Welsh politics.

In the same vein, it has been suggested in much of the literature that a factor in Plaid's lack of electoral success is that the unionist parties in Wales have been successful in claiming a Welsh-British hybrid identity. Welsh Labour in particular have been successful in presenting themselves as defenders of Welsh interests, while offering a non-union-threatening brand of Welshness which peacefully coexists alongside Britishness, in stark contrast to perceptions of national identity in Scotland (Bradbury & Andrews, 2010). The impact of this is that Plaid faces a much more structurally challenging electoral

context than the SNP. As Welsh Labour can also benefit from any up-turn in Welshness (unlike their Scottish counterparts), making politics in Wales a largely two-horse race between the Conservatives and Labour. This means that Plaid have somewhat been electorally crowded out, as the Conservative party with its associations to the English can adequately represent unionist, anti-devolutionist voters in Wales, and Labour have historically been the vessel for Welsh voters who feel politically distinct from the UK. Historically, Scottish Labour struggled to monopolise Scottishness in the same way Welsh Labour claimed Welshness, and in recent times Scotland has been an SNP-Conservative contest, as Labour have been caught between the SNP who represent those who are staunchly Scottish and the Conservatives who represent those who are unashamedly unionist/'Balmoral Scottish'.

Additionally, Welsh Labour have, as Wyn Jones & Scully (2003:129) argue, "striven to present Plaid Cymru as extreme, with controversies surrounding the cultural impacts of large-scale in-migration from England into poorer, largely rural and traditionally Welsh-speaking areas being used to associate Plaid Cymru with xenophobia and anti-Englishness". Such strategies by Labour appear to have worked in ensuring widespread electoral support from both those who identify as primarily British and also those who identify as primarily or exclusively Welsh. Again, the suggestion here is that the electoral support of the nationalist party (and indeed the unionist parties) is largely dependent on the levels of identification with particular national identities. Again, we can reasonably expect that if such an explanation was valid Plaid's electoral support would broadly follow the rises and falls in the number of people identifying primarily, or solely, as Welsh. However, just like in Scotland, no correlation exists. In Figure 4, we can see that Welsh identity is at its second lowest point in 1999, with those identifying as 'Welsh not British' and 'More Welsh than British' accumulatively standing at only 36%, when Plaid obtained their highest number of seats in a Welsh election.

Figure 4: "Which best describes respondent, on a scale from 'Welsh not British' to 'British not Welsh?'"
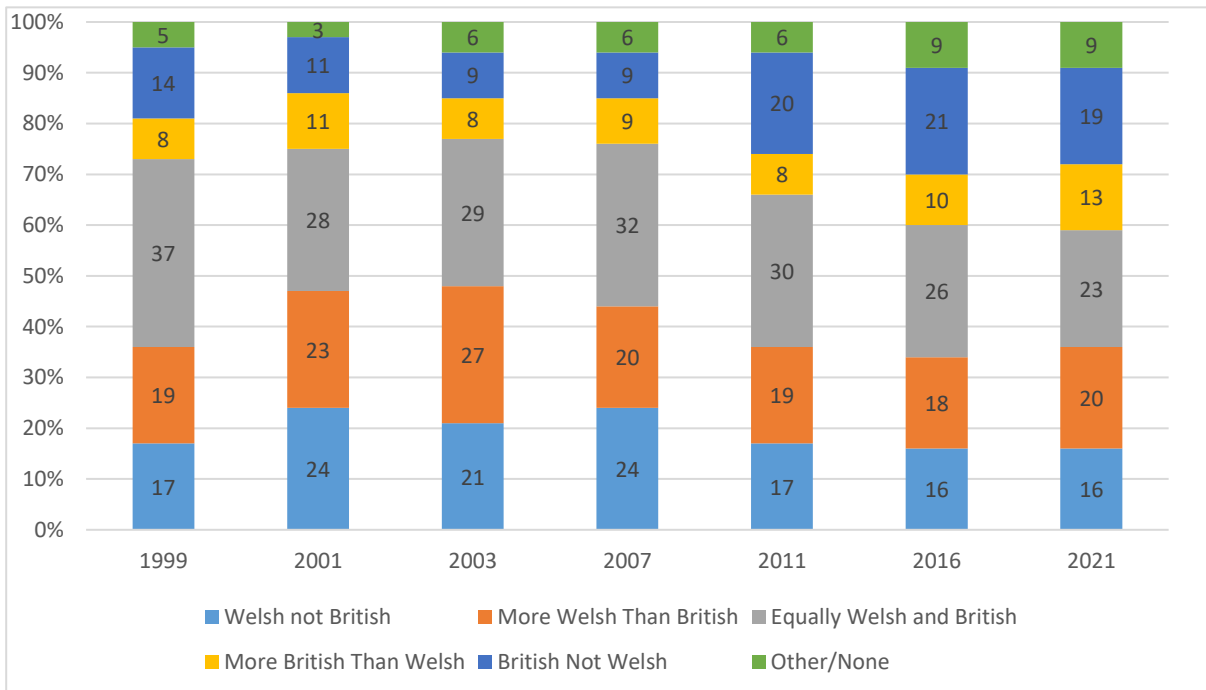
Source: Welsh Election Study 1999; Wales Life and Times surveys 2001, 2003, 2007; Welsh Election Study 2011-2021

In Figure 5, it is clear how between 1999 and 2016, there appears to exist little relationship between Welsh identity those identifying as 'Welsh not British' or 'More Welsh than British' and the level of electoral support for Plaid at Cardiff.

Figure 5: Graph tracking the level of Plaid Cymru support at Welsh elections and the level of Welsh identity, 1999-2016
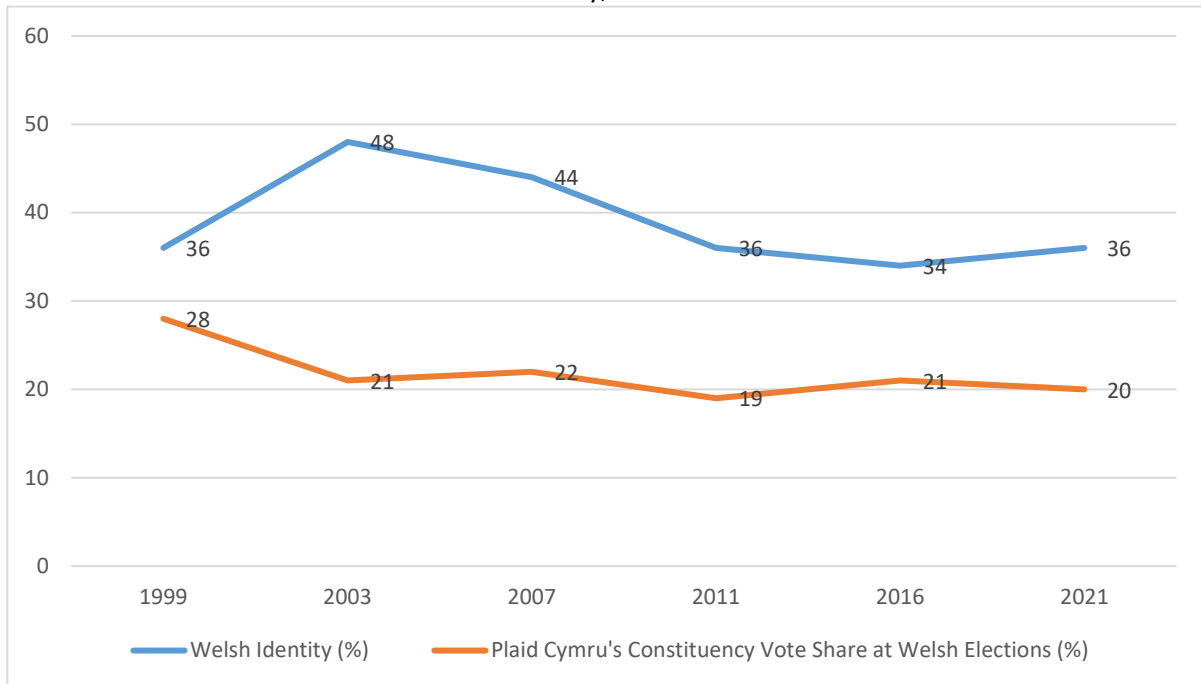
Source: Welsh Assembly election study 1999; Wales life and times surveys 2003 & 2007; Welsh Election Study 2011-2021; Welsh Assembly Election Results. 1999-2016.

If Scully's suggestion is correct, that there is a 'strongly significant association' between Welsh identity and support for Plaid, then surely we would expect to see both rise and fall in tandem. However, as we can see between 1999 and 2003, Welsh identity increased while Plaid's electoral support declined; between 2003 and 2007, Welsh identity then decreases yet Plaid's support increased; between 2007 and 2011, while both identity and electoral support decreased, Welsh identity's decline is far steeper; between 2011 and 2016, we see Welsh identity decrease while Plaid's electoral support increases; while the opposite the occurs between 2016 and 2021. Even if we look at Plaid's performance at general elections, there appears to be no relationship between national identity and their share of the vote, as while the level of Welshness has varied, Plaid has invariably won either three or four seats at every Westminster election since 1997.[1] As was the case in Scotland, national identity appears to have been overstated in its electoral influence on the SNRP.

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[1] Unfortunately no meaningful graph comparing Plaid Cymru's support at General Elections and national identity could be created as the Moreno question data is more limited in only being available in years where elections to the Welsh Assembly/Senedd have taken place.

SUMMARY

The explanation provided in both national case studies is that the level of national identity is the key factor in SNRP performance. This explanation has also been utilised in comparative work between nationalist parties. Roger Scully in his article 'More Scottish than Welsh?' (2013:601-2) argues that:

'In both Scotland and Wales there is a strongly significant association between a strongly or exclusively Scottish/Welsh identity and support for the nationalist parties. The greater strength of Scottish national identity than Welsh may thus help to account for the SNP's greater electoral success.'

At first glance, this explanation seems to hold some validity. If we compare the data from the Moreno question in Scotland (Figure 1) with that of Wales (Figure 3) we can see that there exists a greater sense of Scottishness than feelings of Welshness. Between 1999 and 2016 the average percentage of the Welsh electorate who identified as 'Welsh not British' was 20%, yet in Scotland those who Identified as exclusively Scottish were on average 29% in the same period. In the 2011 devolved elections, where Plaid won their lowest amount of seats (11) at an NAW election, and the SNP won a majority of 69 seats, the difference between those identifying as 'Welsh not British' or 'More Welsh than British' in Wales, and those identifying as 'Scottish not British' in or 'More Scottish than British' in Scotland, was 24%. This has led Scully to argue that nationalist parties' level of electoral success is a reflection of the strength of national identity amongst the region's electorate. However, this hypothesis while seemingly logical does not account for the differing success of regionalist parties as when Scottish or Welsh national identity increases, SNRP support does not necessarily follow.

This is not to say that national identity plays no structural role whatsoever in the electoral support of the SNP and Plaid Cymru, as there clearly exists a threshold of national identity that is a necessary condition for the electoral foundations of an SNRP. For instance, in the two 1974 general elections, which are often viewed as the elections where the nationalists 'broke through' (both parties winning more than one seat for the first time), the SNP polled an average of 26% of the vote, compared to Plaid who polled an average of 11%. This can be, in part, explained by the fact Scotland's regions have historically identified as distinctly more 'Scottish' or 'British' as opposed to 'English', unlike in East Wales where a considerable percentage of the population identifies as wholly or partly 'English'. At this time, national distinctness was the key determinant in someone voting for the SNP or Plaid. Both parties had not established their modern-day positions on the left-right spectrum, opting for a left-right 'catch-all' approach and neither party had elected more than one MP. Therefore, it seems likely that the key reasons somebody would vote SNP or PC at this time would be on the basis of

interconnected factors of feeling alienated from Westminster politics, national identity and constitutional matters. However, after their electoral breakthroughs at Westminster and more importantly with the advent of devolution, both parties professionalised into modern political parties throughout the 1990s/early 2000s, the SNP being quicker and more successful in their endeavours, both in ideological and organisational terms. Therefore, as time elapsed, voters' rationale for supporting the SNP and PC became increasingly less concerned with national identity and alternatively new SNRP voters were attracted to the parties due to left-right issues and importantly, with the creation of the NAW and Scottish Parliament, allowed the parties a structural opportunity to promote a perception of Governing Competence.

Therefore, national identity as a quasi-structural influence on SNRP success is not wholly redundant in any analysis of their electoral performance; national/regional identity and/or distinctness are necessary conditions for the existence of an SNRP but as the data above suggests, national identity alone appears not to be a sufficient explanation of contemporary SNRP performance. This assertion has become ever more relevant as the project of devolution in Wales and Scotland has become a more institutionally embedded part of Scottish and Welsh politics. Such studies as Johns et al (2009; 2013) have found that while historically and even at the start of devolution voters may have rightly characterised devolved elections as second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) where national identity as opposed to performance evaluations where the key determining factor in devolved elections. However, with the incremental further hiving off of powers to Cardiff Bay and Holyrood between 1999 and 2021, voters increasingly treat parties at subnational elections with a more valence-orientated approach. As Johns et al (2009:210) argue as ideological 'dealignment' continues and 'devolved governments reach further into people's lives… voters have a clearer basis for valence choice'.

The trap that some scholars then have seemingly fallen into when assessing SNRP support, is continuing to treat Scottish and Welsh elections as second-order elections determined by factors of national identity. Such arguments are based on the assumption that the nationalist party will succeed as long as there's a high level of national identity, and they can monopolise this national identity. In other words that strong national identity and voting for a nationalist party are synonymous. But as Johnathan Bradbury and Rhys Andrews (2010) argue, an individual's strong sense of national identity does not necessarily make them a nationalist, as unionist parties have been able to win votes by presenting their own unionist, non-threatening versions of Scottishness and Welshness. Equally, an individual who identifies as British may vote for the nationalist party for reasons other than national

identity. This may help explain why no positive correlation exists between national identity and SNRP support. Even outside of those works which suggest a positive correlation between the two variables, the issue of whether there exists alignment or dealignment between identities, constitutional preferences and electoral choices has become oversaturated in the literature. Therefore, the flaw in a considerable share of the literature identified earlier in the chapter is to assume that national identity is the fundamental cornerstone of voting behaviour in Scotland and Wales. So whilst the impact of nationalism is too often overstated, the aim of this thesis is not to dismiss its impact outright but rather to posit an alternative valence/competency-based explanatory framework which builds on, and seeks to overcome the limitations of, these existing national identity explanations as seen in the Moreno data presented earlier. Consequently, the thesis will be more nuanced in giving attention to parties' ability to defend 'Scottish and Welsh interests', over 'Scottishness/Welshness' in influencing voter choice (Johns et al, 2013). However, if devolution has matured to the point where valence/competency is a more significant influence in voting behaviour than national identity, what framework may we use to explain the varying levels of SNRP support in Scotland and Wales?

As has been highlighted, McAgnus's argument emphasising organisational reform is a far more comprehensive explanation of SNRP electoral fortunes compared to previously discussed works by Hepburn and Jeffery, in that develops a clear framework that SNRPs can be empirically tested against. Additionally, unlike the national identity arguments presented, McAgnus appears to be empirically validated. Not only does the relationship between organisational reform and electoral fortunes appear to chronologically 'fit', but also in suggesting Governing Competence as a major influence in voting behaviour, it would explain, where the national identity arguments couldn't, why those who strongly identify as Scottish or Welsh may vote for a unionist party, and why those whose who identify as British would vote for an SNRP. However, while McAgnus provides a compelling explanation which helps explain why the SNP has achieved greater success than Plaid between 1999 and 2011, he importantly omits to mention other differences, particularly those relating to factors of agency, between the two parties. It may also be noted that Plaid, by 2012, had undergone reform and become a professionalised, top-down, government-seeking party. Yet we can see that Plaid, even after reform, has failed to reach the electoral heights of the SNP at Westminster or the devolved level. McAgnus's explanation therefore is incapable of explaining the electoral failings of Plaid relative to the SNP, post-2011, and therefore fails to provide a systematic agency-based explanation to SNRP's performance. This points to the idea that organisational reform, while important, is just one aspect of a broader array of decision-making by party elites. Therefore, if we are to understand the differing performances

of SNRPs, a broader theoretical framework that provides a more comprehensive account of the agentic decisions of party elites is needed.

CHAPTER 2: REFORMULATING STATECRAFT – SUB-NATIONAL STATECRAFT

INTRODUCTION

The following chapter hopes to achieve the following three goals. Firstly, the chapter will give a detailed review of the pre-existing literature concerning Statecraft: discussing Bulpitt's seminal works that formed the basis of the theory; applications of Statecraft to date; and the critiques of Statecraft. Secondly, having identified these general pre-existing criticisms of Statecraft, the chapter will attempt to address and respond to such critiques - simultaneously justifying why Statecraft is the most appropriate agency-based theoretical framework to assess SNRP performance. By bringing attention to two of the key assumptions of Statecraft, in 'structures enhancing agency' and 'the instrumental value of ideology', the chapter will demonstrate the continued relevance of Statecraft justifying the theory's application to the sub-national level. Thirdly, while the thesis advocates Statecraft as a useful and untouched theoretical framework to broaden our understanding of SNRP political success, it acknowledges that the theory (which was intended for use at the UK national level) in its current format is incongruent with many aspects of sub-national politics. Considering this, the thesis presents a theoretical adaptation in 'Sub-national Statecraft', which aims to create an agency-orientated framework compatible with the sub-national politics of Scotland and Wales. Not only this, but 'Sub-national Statecraft' aims to theoretically develop the operationalisations of Statecraft's functions presented by Buller and James (2011) as to more comprehensively assess a party's record against the three functions.

STATECRAFT – THE KEY ASSUMPTIONS

Statecraft is, in a broad sense, an interpretation of how political elites behave and operate within the British political system. The theory itself was created by Jim Bulpitt and he developed Statecraft over a number of works between 1983 and 1996, which varied from territorial politics to Thatcherite domestic policy and foreign policy. The initial assumptions and concepts of Statecraft were presented in Bulpitt's earlier work '*Territory and Power'* (1983) where he utilised a combination of 'behavioural topics' and 'tory historiography' to present an alternative interpretation to what he saw as a field of literature (UK territorial politics) dominated by institutional explanations (Bevir, 2010:443). However, while Bulpitt aimed to provide a comprehensive study of UK territorial politics, this work provided the basis of a macro-analysis that could be utilised to explain the wider behaviour of UK political elites, operating both at the domestic and external levels. He would go on to theoretically flesh out the model in his 1986 seminal work on the Thatcher administrations, and in later works refine and clarify some of the key assumptions of Statecraft presented in 1983 and 1986. Elitist in disposition, Bulpitt (1983)

refers to the 'Court' and the 'Country'. The former refers to 'the centre' of politics; the concentrated circle of power surrounding 'the chief executive plus his/her political friends' (Bulpitt, 1995:518). For Bulpitt (Ibid) 'the court' was 'who governs' and therefore the principal actor for analysis. He was critical of the individualist 'great person approach' of analysis arguing such an approach was overly parochial/reductionist (Ibid). Bulpitt (1989:56) fundamentally disagreed with more pluralistic methods of analysis as he believed even within a political party the leadership/court will often have conflicting interests with other branches of the party. On one occasion, he strongly described backbenchers and constituency associations 'as mere pressure groups' (Ibid). For Bulpitt, a key assumption of British politics is that 'the court' will normally behave in a self-interested, 'unitary fashion' (Bulpitt, 1995:518); the group of elites being behaviourally cohesive due to shared feelings of ambition, fear, party pressures and ultimately their common raison d'etre to win office at all costs (Bulpitt, 1996b:1097). In this sense Bulpitt treated the court as rational 'in the sense that they calculate and pursue their own interests in a consistent fashion' (Bulpitt, 1995:519).

For Bulpitt, the 'Country' refers to the 'periphery' who are typically regional politicians and councils based outside of London and Westminster/Whitehall's sphere. According to Bulpitt (1983), the centre and periphery formed what he coined a 'Dual Polity'; that being a political system where 'the Centre' primarily concerned itself with 'high politics' – foreign policy, defence and macro-economic policy, whilst 'the periphery' would be preoccupied with the issues of 'low politics' which typically referred to the reality of administration and delivering public services. This division of elites (between the centre and periphery) and their respective responsibilities over low and high politics was in the centre's interest, as it was only the issues of high politics that would decide votes at elections, which according to Bulpitt was the primary concern of political leaderships (Ibid). According to Bulpitt, the centre would offload those issues it considered not to be important for re-election purposes to the periphery at most available opportunities. Statecraft certainly is not unique in stating that there exists a Westminster elite who seek to control the electorally pertinent policy areas. Neither is it unique in stating there exists a periphery who deals with the practical day-to-day realities of administration and running public services. However, where Statecraft is distinctive is in viewing the Westminster political elite as reluctant to exercise its power directly. For Bulpitt while the central elite could, with its vast resources and constitutional powers, set up a system where they had direct centralised control over all policy areas, it was not in their interests to do so. As John (2008:6) states in his interpretation of *Territory and Power*, "the centre recognised that attempts to centralise power would be futile given the complexity of the tasks it faced in governing the periphery… [instead] preferring to delegate to

others in the periphery and to act to appease territorial interests… the guiding principle was the wish to offload problems".

Bulpitt argued this 'Dual Polity' existed from 1924-1961, however for two primary reasons after this date 'duality' began to decline. Firstly, an increasingly politicised periphery (Bulpitt primarily referring to Irish, Scottish and Welsh nationalisms and trade unions) sought to commandeer the previously centre-managed issues of 'high politics'. Secondly, alongside this the centre became increasingly overloaded in its attempt to pursue domestic Keynesian economic management; the court was unable to respond effectively to the economic external shockwaves of huge increases in world commodity prices, and the collapse of the international monetary system. The collapse of a stable global economic monetary system represented a significant deterioration of what Bulpitt called an 'external support system', which in turn led to the domestic rise in unemployment, inflation and union militancy; ultimately harming the Governing Competence of both Labour and Conservative governments in the 1970s (Bulpitt, 1983). For Bulpitt, these two factors of a politicised periphery, and a lack of an external support system, ended Duality in the UK polity and made the UK 'ungovernable' during the 1970s: as seen in the problematic instances of government in the IMF crisis and Winter of Discontent in this period. However, Bulpitt argued that Duality (and in turn Governing Competence) partially returned under the Thatcher administrations, as they sought to regain the centre's autonomy over the 'high politics' of macro-economic management, which they viewed as having become overly influenced by the periphery (Bulpitt, 1989:73). The key concept presented by Bulpitt here then is the idea of 'relative autonomy'. Simply put, for Bulpitt, elites were not as concerned with control over many political issues/policy areas as the Westminster model had suggested. The Westminster model depicted the British political system as highly centralised, in other words, 'British politics was equated with British government' (Gamble, 1990:412). However, for Bulpitt 'the centre' was perfectly content for the peripheral elites to have power over 'low politics' as this did not impact their chances of re-election; he called this the 'central autonomy model' of centre-periphery relations (Bulpitt, 1983:68).

If the governing code of elites is to ensure their ability to be able to act autonomously and if all that 'matters is winning, and winning again' (James, 2013), the question becomes what mechanisms/functions allow elites to win? Bulpitt, in his 1986 seminal work '*The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft*', began to theoretically flesh out Statecraft in theorising the four key 'functions' that a party leadership must try to fulfil to be successful in its Statecraft. First is the function of 'Party Management'. This is the party leadership's ability to keep the

party united, or at least keep the party's relations 'quiescent', even in fractious contexts where party splits may arise (Bulpitt, 1986:21). Second is the ability to pursue a 'Winning Electoral Strategy' (WES). This requires the party leadership to produce a policy package which can be readily 'sold' to the majority of the electorate (Ibid). Related to the previous criterion of Party Management, it also must be a manifesto which unites the various components of the party. Third, is the ability to win Political Argument Hegemony (PAH). This refers primarily to the party's ability to win the 'battle of ideas' in a variety of different locations because, 'either the framework of the party's arguments becomes generally acceptable, or because its solutions to a particularly important political problem seem more plausible than its opponents' (Buller & James, 2011:542; Bulpitt, 1986:22). However, it should be noted, Bulpitt believed this function was related primarily to the elite-level of debate, not the public-level. Put another way, PAH was won by a party if their leadership gained predominance in the debate between party elites, regarding who held the most convincing solutions to contemporary significant political problems.

Finally, what Bulpitt viewed as the most important of Statecraft's functions was agents' ability to create an image of Governing Competence. This is the ability of the party leadership to select policies which they will have little trouble in implementing. To be perceived as competent in government, political actors at the centre will often seek to either reject or externalise responsibility for policies that have negative outcomes (Bulpitt, 1986:22). In other words, for Bulpitt, to act autonomously and competently were essentially synonymous for party elites. Additionally, in this way, we can see both Governing Competence as being (in)directly related to the Valence Model of voting behaviour (Clarke et al 2004). The Valence Model prescribes there to be 'positional issues' that require the voter to make a stance on the left-right or other ideological continuums and 'valence issues' where there is broad agreement in ideological terms, in achieving a desired policy outcome. For proponents of Valence theory, electoral choice is characterised by the universal desirability of goals such as effective public services and economic growth and contrary to Down's spatial model, voters 'debate which party, which party leader, and which policies are most likely to achieve the outcomes that virtually everyone wants' (Ibid, 23). In short, the voter makes their decision based on the party they perceive to be the most likely to achieve such universal goals, not the nature of the ideological goals themselves (Buller & James, 2011:541). 'Most likely to achieve this outcome', ultimately boiling down to which party is viewed as most competent to deliver on universal goals such as economic growth.

Several other key assumptions were added, clarified and refined in Bulpitt's works post-1986. A key assumption of Statecraft outlined in Bulpitt's 1988 work *'Rational Politicians and Conservative Statecraft'* concerns the agency-structure debate. As opposed to a majority of academic works at the time, which viewed structures as constraining in their influence on agents, Bulpitt (1988:185) argued that 'political management of external forces on domestic politics yield both constraints and opportunities'. In terms of defining what 'structure' constituted, Bulpitt opposed utilising specific temporal definitions such as 'the environment actors operate within, or the broader definition of 'everything out there' outside the agency of the actor (Bulpitt 1995:519). Statecraft alternatively adopted a dynamic definition: "it may be convenient to leave the definition of structure at any one time to the designated principle actors… they will choose which structural features preoccupy them and in what sequence they will be tackled" (Ibid). Put simply, for Bulpitt a neglected aspect of the agency structure debate was how important it was for researchers to fully understand how actors *perceived* structures, rather than trying to paint an objective picture of political actors' relationship with their structural context. In this sense, there is a possibility actors may subjectively misperceive the structural context they operate within, which is a key concept to understanding how political leaderships can fail in their Statecraft.

Another key assumption of Statecraft developed in Bulpitt's later works in the 1990s was the idea of the 'instrumental value of ideology'. Statecraft is again distinct in how it criticises political science's tendency to aggrandise the role of ideology in understanding politics, suggesting ideology is more commonly instrumentally used as a 'political support mechanism… to facilitate polity management and assist objectives' such as Governing Competence (Bulpitt, 1995:520; Buller, 1999:701). While Bulpitt did not judge ideology as useless in analysing political actors' choices, his assumption was that ideology merely held instrumental value in how it helped politicians in polity management. Ideas, in of themselves, are not salient; their importance stems from how they are 'used' and 'abused' as tools to achieve objectives such as a perception of Governing Competence (Bulpitt, 1996a:226). Again Bulpitt's argument here is not that a successful politician must be devoid of principles and entirely adaptable in ideological terms, as after all 'conviction politicians' who are staunchly ideological (e.g. Thatcher) have succeeded in 'Statecraft terms'. However, for Bulpitt political science often overlooked that it was 'the art of governing and practical politics that concerned governments rather than following pre-formulated ideational ideals'; ideological policies were always part of a broader 'governing code', and if such an ideological position began to hinder the primary objective of the party winning elections, such a position could be altered (James, 2013; Bulpitt, 1995). The governing code - that being a 'set of relatively coherent principles or rules underlying policies and policy related

behaviour' - was of far greater analytical importance to Statecraft relative to ideological considerations in policy making (Bulpitt, 1996b:1097). Specifically, Bulpitt was concerned with how governments practically protected this code through the political support mechanisms of WES, PAH, Party Management and most importantly Governing Competence.

It is also necessary to explore these points in relation to the methodological, ontological and epistemological positions of Statecraft, to understand Statecraft and situate its place within wider political science/theoretical approaches. Methodology refers to the precise methods through which political scientists carry out their research; Ontology is defined as the nature of the world around us, our existence within it and how we perceive this reality; Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge (Hill, Abercrombie & Turner, 2000:147, 292). Statecraft is interpretivist, providing a parsimonious description of British politics through which generalisations can be made, as opposed to any kind of deductive exercise of testing hypotheses (Hay, 2002). As will be discussed later, epistemologically Statecraft leaves itself open to analytical problems. This primarily stems from the fact that if there are governing codes, politicians are going to be reluctant to divulge such strategies publicly. 'Governing codes are latent structures' and as opposed to discovering such strategies through methods of positivist empiricism, some degree of inference will have to take place in the 'clues' of rhetoric, ideas and the behaviour of the elite (Buller, 1999:704). The criticisms of these epistemological and methodological positions will be discussed below after an exploration of Statecraft's previous applications.

PREVIOUS APPLICATIONS OF STATECRAFT

Bulpitt's (1986) original application of Statecraft was only domestic; assessing the merits of the Thatcher administrations' Statecraft at the national level. Other academics' applications of Statecraft have developed the model, but again these applications have been at the national level. Buller and James's (2011) assessment of the leadership of New Labour, theoretically developed Statecraft in illustrating how to operationalise and test UK administrations against Statecraft's functions. Anthony Hopkins (2013) employed Statecraft to analyse a party in opposition in the form of the Conservatives under the leaderships of Smith, Howard and Cameron. His contribution to the Statecraft approach was applying the theory to a party leadership that was not in power, something which had not been addressed. However, there has been little effort to address the self-evident Westminster-centric character of Statecraft, except for Alan Convery's (2014) article which utilised Bulpitt's centre-periphery relations to explore relations between Conservative party HQ and the Scottish and Welsh

Conservatives. As previously discussed, there now exists various sub-national and European nuclei of power, and Statecraft has been utilised on many occasions by both Bulpitt (1988, 1996a) and Buller (2000a, 2000b, 2006), to explain how domestic actors navigate the structure of European politics. Buller himself states 'Statecraft gives analytical priority to the domestic level', but equally can be 'adapted to apply to the study of British foreign policy' (Buller, 2000b:5). Pre-existing uses of Statecraft focus on the use of Europe by national actors to achieve *domestic* goals of Statecraft, rather than any attempt to analyse the leadership of those operating at other levels. Even then, while the application of Statecraft may have moved up a level of governance within the existing literature, the model has yet to be moved down a level of governance to analyse the politics of the devolved parliaments. This is peculiar if one bears in mind that political scientists have now had over 20 years to apply this model to the sub-national level. It is made even more perplexing by the fact sub-national politics, has taken something of a front seat in UK electoral politics since both nationalist parties entered government in 2007, the political maelstrom of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the prospect of 'Indy2' that Brexit has birthed.

Additionally, as well as being Westminster-centric, Statecraft is almost entirely UK-centric. As a theoretical framework, it has only been applied to a party or political system outside of the UK twice: once in a comparative piece by James (2011) on the reform of election administration in the UK, US and Ireland; the other time Statecraft was used by Stacey (2013) to assess the political leadership of Nicolas Sarkozy. Of course, there do exist partially similar theoretical frameworks and similar 'Statecraft concepts' that have been used to assess the relationship between political leadership and electoral performance, in differing political contexts. For instance, Fred Greenstein (2000;2009) formulated a framework to assess the political leadership of US presidents which comprised six functions, which all were roughly similar or synonymous with the four functions of Statecraft. However, while broadly UK-centric in its applications, the theory itself is by no means redundant outside of its UK context. A considerable amount of academic work on Statecraft emphasises the 'peculiarities' of the UK political system, and this supposed distinctness is presumably why the theory has only been applied in the UK (Buller & James, 2011).

Bulpitt testified that the unique nature of UK politics was typified in three ways. First, the first past the post electoral system meant UK politics had a uniquely two-horse race character to it and was very unlikely to produce anything but a majority government. However, out of four general elections since 2010, first past the post has only produced two majority governments. Second, according to Bulpitt, the UK's uniquely adversarial party culture means politics is a more competitive game and played at a faster pace. As Buller and James (2011:539) state "parties are almost permanently on electoral

'standby', in one very real sense; a party's whole term of office (or opposition) is a practice game for the next general election". This seems an odd justification for the novelty of UK politics as, in any democracy with a set parliamentary term, the looming next general election would impact the activities/decision-making of all political actors. Thirdly, Bulpitt believed that the UK was unique in its unitary highly-centralised institutional structure, citing evidence of this in the lack of an elected second chamber. Bulpitt believed that, as a result of this lack of institutional pluralism, political parties were always primarily concerned with national elections above all else. However, since the advent of devolution in 1999, and the further devolution of powers to Holyrood and Cardiff Bay in the time that has elapsed since then, the UK system has become decidedly more decentralised. It may also be added that Bulpitt failed to consider that for nationalist parties, the primary focus may not be national elections but to monopolise regional politics, and in doing so focus on capturing the new centres of power outside of Westminster. All of this points to the idea that Statecraft potentially is not quite as UK-orientated as Bulpitt would have us believe. The four Statecraft functions for political party leaders, of presenting the party as united, gaining and maintaining an image of Governing Competence, creating a WES and achieving PAH with opposition elites, would appear universally desired functions that any political leadership would hope to achieve.

CRITICISMS OF STATECRAFT

Methodologically, it is an onerous task to find empirical evidence to test the assertions of Statecraft (Buller, 2000b:12). As Rod Rhodes outlines in his criticism of Statecraft, it is difficult to prove Bulpitt's suggestion that 'the centre' has its own hidden governing code, when 'the court' would naturally keep such motivations secret, only presenting ideological embellishment to the electorate (Rhodes, 1988). The methodological criticism here then is that much of Statecraft's arguments are predicated on non-observable phenomena, so the theory can neither be fully validated nor refuted. Bulpitt (1988) acknowledges this criticism but argues that the non-observable nature of the subject does not result in this form of interpretative analysis being any less valuable. Just because empirical data may be hard to find, to test Statecraft's assertions, this should not hinder political science from trying to answer the 'difficult questions' in politics (Ibid). Otherwise, as Peter John (2008:11) argues, political scientists would only 'choose the easy topics', pushing research 'toward the less interesting but measurable aspects of political behaviour'.

Statecraft has been accused by academics such as Marsh (1995) of reductionism, creating an overly parsimonious account of British politics that ignores its multidimensional and nuanced nature. For

instance, an issue raised by Buller (1999) is that if the role of ideology is downgraded to a 'political support mechanism' and analytical primacy should be given to how political leaderships navigate and perceive their structural environment, why would a government's Statecraft ever collapse due to structural factors? After all, if the ability of political leaderships to manipulate ideas and navigate structures determines the success of their Statecraft, how do we explain the collapse of governments that happen on a purely external level removed from the governing process? Buller (1999:703) rectifies this ontological shortcoming by arguing future applications of Statecraft should state more explicitly that while structures, agents and ideas are in a tripartite dialectal relationship, each variable is 'relatively autonomous and capable of exerting causal power over the others'. Put simply, political leaderships may face a structural or ideological context where there is no scope for agentic navigation/manipulation to benefit the governing code. While incongruent with Bulpitt's original overly agentic account of Statecraft, this provides us with a more robust theoretical foundation for Statecraft.

Another related inadequacy of Bulpitt is that while laying out an abstract framework of what party elites must achieve to gain and retain power, he fails to operationalise Statecraft's four functions. This leaves political scientists unable to empirically test whether a party's leadership has succeeded or failed in 'Bulpittian' terms (Evans, 2006:53). However, Buller and James's (2011) article sought to rectify this criticism by operationalising the functions of Statecraft, identifying the empirical evidence which can be utilised to assess whether a party's leadership has excelled in its Statecraft. While useful in providing the basis to which Statecraft can embrace positivist methodology and become more sensitive to empirical testing, many of the operationalisations are underdeveloped, still relying on a heavy degree of inference. For instance, Party Management is operationalised solely through the prism of rebellions in parliament. An obvious caveat with both Bulpitt's original account of Party Management and Buller & James's operationalisation of it, is they fail to state the purpose of keeping quiescent relations in the first place. Of course, one can deduce a fractious party would negatively impact a party in the polls. But this raises questions neglected in Buller and James's operationalisation. Rebellions give us some limited insight into party relations, but they fail to give us any understanding of the electorate's perception and understanding of party disharmony. Do voters care about the parliamentary rebellions of the party they vote for? Do other forms of visible disunity negatively impact the party in the polls? Does the specific matter over which disagreement had formed make the disunity more or less important to the voter? Bulpitt and Buller & James neglect such questions and how public-level perceptions of party disunity may differ greatly from elite perceptions, in their level of significance. While this is just one example, this thesis argues that most of Buller & James's

operationalisations can be developed further, not only to suit the differing sub-national level but also to make Statecraft generally more sensitive to empirical testing.

Equally, a related criticism of Buller and James's operationalisation of Statecraft (one that Buller himself admits), is that while they provide some useful avenues of empirical research to observe whether a party has achieved one of the four key 'functions' of Statecraft (e.g. Party Management), they offer little insight into the methods available to party leaderships to be successful at such Statecraft functions. Put simply their operationalisation of the four functions is more concerned with *where* we can determine in Statecraft terms a party has been successful, rather than *how* they got there. For instance, when discussing WES, Buller & James (2011:540) illustrate how polling data can give an insight into whether there has been a shift in voting intentions during the campaign, and thus 'we may start drawing inferences concerning the relative effectiveness of the electoral strategies of each political leader'. However, there is no elaboration on exactly what kind of strategies/decisions party leaderships may pursue to 'achieve crucial political impetus in the lead-up to the polls' (Ibid). It seems essential in order to fully operationalise Statecraft, that there should be an understanding of the particular options and strategies available to parties to achieve these functions. This thesis will seek to develop these operationalisations to concern themselves more explicitly with how parties achieve the functions of Statecraft.

However, the principal criticism, which the later proposed 'Sub-national Statecraft' hopes to resolve, is that Bulpitt ignores the concentrations of power outside of 'the centre' (John, 2008:11). As discussed earlier, Bulpitt (1983:67,196) suggested that the UK 1924-61 existed as a 'Dual Polity' and argued this duality began to return under the later years of the Thatcher administration. In this Dual Polity there existed a 'centre' at Whitehall/Westminster which held a monopoly over the issues of 'high politics'; and there also existed a 'periphery' which was handed concessionary issues of 'low politics', often hived off by the centre. This assertion, however, is no longer relevant in a modern UK context of devolution, as new 'centres' of power have emerged that have challenged the centre's monopoly of high politics. As Alan Convery has argued, Westminster administrations are increasingly finding their power constrained by the devolved governments which, with electoral consent, are entering the previously safeguarded arena of high politics (Convery, 2014). In defence of Bulpitt, he was writing throughout the 1980s when devolution had not yet occurred. However, any application of the original framework of Statecraft in a contemporary UK context, without mention of the devolved level actors now also operate on, would be a theoretical anachronism. Furthermore, such an application would

treat 'the centre' as entirely autonomous and therefore would be open to the accusation of Westminster-centrism. Any UK contemporary application of Bulpitt's theory cannot therefore follow his assertion that Westminster should be the sole object of analysis due to its monopoly on issues of high politics, as increasingly the periphery gains responsibility over 'high politics'.

While acknowledging that Bulpitt's 'dual polity' may no longer exist in a UK context, this thesis still rejects pluralist accounts of British politics. This theoretical rejection is predicated on the fact that, while the UK government may have lost a degree of *power* to peripheral elites at different governing levels, its *relative autonomy* has remained unaffected, if not enhanced in certain contexts, by the multitiered institutional structure that devolution and Europeanisation has created. Bulpitt's concept of *relative autonomy* differs from that of *power*, in that it does not refer to governments controlling all aspects of policy, but instead legislating in only those areas of policy that can aid their electoral fortunes (Bulpitt, 1996a:229; Buller, 2000a:320). Therefore, what may appear like Westminster sacrificing its power to the devolved and European levels, may actually be the 'hiving off' of problematic decision-making responsibilities (Buller, 2000a:320). The aim here then is to 'externalise responsibility' for potentially problematic policy areas, so 'the centre' can become absolved of political blame if policy outcomes are electorally unfavourable (Burnham, 2001:134). Therefore, Westminster is not, as Rhodes (2007:1244) suggests, in an 'interdependent policy network' in which it is dependent on the devolved administrations and the EU for 'legitimacy' and 'resources'. Alternatively, it appears that the centre exploits the UK's multileveled structure of government to off-load decision-making responsibilities to other levels, in an attempt to enhance their relative autonomy and, in turn, their governing credentials. This is not to say agents at the devolved level are unable to gain the decision-making responsibilities of 'high politics' from the centre, but that the UK government will only 'hive off' those decision-making powers, of high or low politics, where they perceive it makes electoral sense to do so.

WHY STATECRAFT?

To understand why Statecraft was selected as the theory to understand what determines SNRP success, David Easton's conceptual framework presented in 'A Systems Analysis of Political Life' (1965) will be utilised. Easton in his seminal work purported that a political party's electoral fortunes were determined by three categories of factors. Firstly, there are demand-side factors which relate to the electorate's attitudes and preferences in determining electoral performance – the agency of the voter. Secondly, external supply-side factors relate to how political-institutional and party system factors

affect elections – the role of structure. Thirdly, internal supply-side factors relate to the role of parties' strategies in shaping electoral preferences and garnering electoral support – the agency of political leaderships/elites.

As explored earlier, the existing literature in Scotland and Wales has placed too much emphasis on national identity in a demand-side explanation of SNRP success. Equally, a vast amount of the SNRP literature is reductionist, as such articles only focus either on one solitary aspect of structure or alternatively focusing on only one aspect of agency such as McAgnus's argument relating to the internal supply-side factor of organisational reform. While all limited explanations, out of those listed above, it was the internal supply-side argument of McAgnus that appeared to make the most convincing case of what makes an SNRP succeed. McAgnus did establish, in the case of the SNP, that there was some form of chronological relationship between organisational reform, garnering Governing Competence and subsequent electoral success. Therefore, Statecraft provides a theoretical framework capable of providing a more comprehensive account of the internal supply-side factors and potentially explain, where McAgnus could not, why even after professionalising organisational reforms certain SNRPs still electorally suffer. The salience of internal supply-side factors in SNRP success, evident in McAgnus's study, shall be explored and developed further through three functions of Statecraft (GC, PM, PAH), alongside the more general assertions of Statecraft concerning the role of ideology and the relationship of structure-agency. Statecraft therefore was chosen, in part, because it allows an exploration into internal supply-side factors relating to agency, but equally Statecraft's assertion that structural constraints can create the space for 'courageous leadership', will allow a test of the interplay between internal supply-side (governing strategies) and external supply-side (structural) factors.

Another question that has not been answered in the existing literature, is the effect of government on SNRP political success. This theme was touched upon in the SNRP literature by Elias & Tronconi (2011) who argued that the key challenge for SNRPs who entered office was to use government as a mechanism to perpetuate an image of competence and undermine negative stereotypes of the party (Ibid; McAgnus, 2016). However, they fail to give any operationalisation of how party elites specifically use the mechanism of government to undermine such negative perceptions of the party. Here, Statecraft proves to be useful in suggesting the concept of a structural insulating framework (Buller, 2000b:320). One way Statecraft could explain how SNRPs use their experience in government to bolster an image of Governing Competence is how SNRP elites can use the multileveled structure of

their political system as a structurally constraining framework, to 'insulate' themselves from criticism and defer blame onto the national government when policy outcomes are unfavourable (Ibid).

Governmental office may prove to act as a useful mechanism which SNRPs can use to increase their support electorally and for independence by claiming, that if their party operated full legislative control in an independent nation, negative policy outcomes would be averted. Such a strategy helps SNRPs in two ways. Firstly, it frames the state-wide party in government at the national level as incompetent, boosting the SNRP's image of competency. Secondly, such a strategy also tarnishes the union that the territory is part of, which rallies further support not only for the SNRP itself but also for the party's aim for independence. An implicit assumption here is that sub-national and national political leaderships ultimately act in a broadly similar fashion when it comes to their Statecraft. While some academics (such as Elias and Tronconi) are keen to paint a picture of a vastly different structural environment for sub-national politicians, that results in differing electoral behaviour when compared to the national level, ultimately the existence of an electoral cycle at both levels results in both sets of actors being driven by the same desire 'of winning elections and achieving some necessary degree of Governing Competence' (Bulpitt, 1986:21). Structures may indeed differ and even political leaderships' responses to these structures may do also, but at both levels agents will still be driven by a universal desire to achieve competence, looking to maximise political opportunities when facing a favourable structural context and nullify the negative outcomes of unfavourable structures. The use of the level above, to structurally insulate policy outcomes by both national and sub-national governments is just one example of this similar governing behaviour.

Another aspect of SNRP's electoral success that is neglected in the literature is their vote-seeking strategies when they are in opposition. Massetti (2011) does give some attention to vote-seeking in relation to the ideological positioning of parties, stating that in majoritarian systems, a single ideological broad church nationalist party, anchored in a centrist left-right position, is beneficial to SNRP success. Massetti's argument here is that the structural/institutional format of a territorial system pre-determines the ideological positioning, and the number, of SNRPs in an electoral system. Statecraft alternatively does not depict the relationship between structure, ideological positioning and electoral success as rigidly as Massetti. Judging ideology to only have 'instrumental value' in how it is 'used and abused' by politicians, Statecraft would explain more adequately the relationship between ideological positioning and electoral success. For Statecraft, it matters not whether a system is majoritarian or proportional but what electoral vacuums exist within the system, and importantly

whether agents can identify these spaces and exploit them by the adoption of a particular position on the left-right, European-integration or centre-periphery cleavages. This would better explain, where Massetti's framework couldn't, why the SNP presented themselves as a more decidedly social democratic party in reaction to New Labour, to capitalise on disenfranchised Scottish voters. Therefore, in placing analytical priority on the interaction between political actors and electoral context, Statecraft can advance our understanding of the instrumental use of ideology in SNRP success.

The use of Statecraft and its relation to theories of voting behaviour may at first seem contradictory here. Governing Competence, as previously mentioned, seems to be underpinned by the Valence Model of voting behaviour. However, it would appear implicit in its assertion that ideology is 'used and abused' by politicians that Downsian (1957) shifts in ideological positioning can impact a party's electoral performance. Bulpitt is not clear what model of voting behaviour is informing Statecraft and here the thesis will attempt to clarify this position. The Valence and Downsian models of voting behaviour are often depicted as theoretically incongruent (Stokes, 1963:372). This thesis will attempt to argue otherwise, using the 'Selective Evaluation model' of voting behaviour (Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). In areas such as Scotland, it is irrefutable that the majority of voters naturally favour parties who offer a left-of-centre policy programme, with the SNP and Labour having always returned the highest vote share at both the national and sub-national level since 1955.

Figure 6: Table tracking the level of left-wing party vote share in Scottish General Elections since 1997

	SNP	Labour	Greens	SSP	Combined Vote Share
2019	45%	18.6%	1%	0%	64.6%
2017	36.9%	27.1%	0.2%	0%	64.2%
2015	50%	24.3%	1.3%	0%	75.3%
2010	19.9%	42%	0.7%	0.1%	62.7%
2005	17.7%	39.5%	1.1%	1.9%	60.2%
2001	20.1%	43.3%	0%	3.1%	66.5%
1997	22.1%	45.6%	0%	0%	67.7%

Figure 7: Table tracking the level of left-wing party constituency vote share in Scottish Elections since 1999

	SNP	Labour	Greens	SSP	Combined Vote Share
2021	47.7%	21.6%	1.3%	0%	70.6%
2016	46.5%	22.6%	0.6%	0%	69.7%
2011	45.4%	31.7%	0%	0%	77.1%
2007	32.9%	32.1%	0.1%	0%	65.1%
2003	23.8%	34.6%	0%	6.2%	64.6%
1999	28.7%	38.8%	0%	1%	68.5%

For instance, the Scottish left-of-centre vote (including SNP, Labour, Green and Scottish Socialist party votes) at general elections since 1997 has averaged 65.6%, with Labour's lowest vote share contributing 18.6% in 2019 and the SNP's lowest share of 19.9% in 2010. The vote share itself has also been very consistent, as only in one election year did the left-wing voter share fall outside the range of 60-68%. In addition to this, we can also see Scottish voters have an even greater social democratic tendency when voting in Holyrood elections. In Scottish Parliament elections, the combined 'left-wing vote share' average since the advent of devolution has been 69.3%. This would suggest there is a majority bloc of left-wing voters that exist in Scotland. However, what does more typically fluctuate is the level of voters switching from Labour to the SNP. This would suggest that a Scottish majority of left-wing voters decide who best represents their social democratic values on the basis of competency. While only being one specific example, this would suggest that potentially both partisanship (Downsian) and Valence (competency evaluations) models can work in unison to explain different parts of the same picture. As Denver et al (2012:106) argue, competency judgments are inextricably bound up with pre-existing ideological preferences.

As Down's (1957) economic theory of electoral competition posits, elections are comparable to marketplaces where political parties 'sell' and voters 'buy'. In Down's rational choice framework, the party that offers the ideology closest to voters' own preferences will 'buy' their vote and therefore, parties respond to voters' preferences by adapting their ideology to satisfy electoral demands (Ibid: 98-100). Down's however fails to consider that a voter may not only make an initial judgment regarding *ideology* but will then discriminate between parties who are not ideologically incongruent with the voter's beliefs, based on performance evaluations/competency. In other words, if two similar ideologies are being offered by two political parties, a voter will undoubtedly make a judgement of which party is most likely to fulfil the promises of their ideology/manifesto; an assessment of competency. This theory of voting behaviour, which highlights how voters first make an ideological assessment before then making judgements concerning competency in voting choice, is known as the 'Selective Evaluation Model' (SEM).

Figure 8: The Selective Evaluation Model

Partisanship ⟶ Performance Evaluation ⟶ Vote Choice
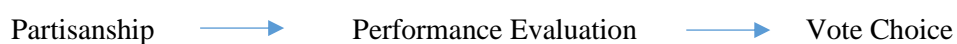
Studies such as Tilley & Hobolt's (2011) have demonstrated that in the area of economic policy, there is considerable evidence in UK elections that voters prescribe to the SEM, where ideology and competency evaluations are made almost simultaneously. Equally, Tilley & Hobolt raise another important consideration on voting behaviour models; that being the institutional context voters find themselves in. Voter choice in this sense could be viewed as a process of two-step refinement; the first being spatial and the second relating to competency. The voter first assesses the ideological space the party occupies. If, fundamentally, this is at odds with the individual's ideology/worldview, they will refuse to vote for this party. However, multiple parties often sit in an ideological space in which voters may consider more than one party to represent their interests in some capacity. It would then be at this point that the degree of Governing Competence, and the perceived ability of the party to solve the valence issues of the day, that voters will discriminate on to make their final decision. The adoption of the SEM here may explain voting behaviour in a useful way to clarify the previously contradictory theoretical foundations of Statecraft.

Therefore, in Downsian terms social class and socialisation do determine the ideological preferences of voters that lay down the spatial-ideological parameters of what parties they can vote for, without undermining their own beliefs. However, in most (but not all) cases this does not result in a sole party to choose from, so voters are required to make a judgement relating to parties' competency to deliver on valence or ideologically significant issues. This would suggest that while ideology may only hold instrumental value for political elites, ideological belief is not a redundant concept for public-level analyses, and therefore ideological-spatial awareness and positioning by political leaderships is a key component of Statecraft. This is one of the peculiarities of electoral competition in a system with a significant SNRP. In national political systems without an SNRP, parties will often position themselves across the left-right spectrum in positions that put ideological daylight between them and their main competitors. However, an SNRP may occupy very similar left-right ideological ground to their state-wide competitors, seeking to win support either through arguments relating to the centre-periphery continuum or competency. Additionally, Tilley & Hobolt state in their suggestions for future avenues of research, that in systems with clearly defined political structures with centralised responsibility, performance evaluations may be a more influential factor in voter choice as voters clearly know which actors are responsible for which policies (Ibid:328). However, another hypothesis presented here in the same vein, is that parties at the sub-national level may be able to benefit from the complexities of an MLG system to shake responsibilities at the devolved level and redirect them upwards to the national level, benefiting from a relative perception of competency to the national government.

THE CONTINUED RELEVANCE OF STATECRAFT AT THE SUB-NATIONAL LEVEL

While the criticisms of Statecraft have already been established, this thesis wishes to highlight how on a fundamental conceptual basis, two of the most central assumptions to the Statecraft approach remain very much relevant at the sub-national level: 1. the 'instrumental' value of ideology; 2. structures enhancing agency. Firstly, the thesis diverges from the SNRP literature in not giving analytical primacy to ideology in the explanation of SNRP's political fortunes. The assumption here will be that the realisation of particular ideological goals is not the 'endgame' for SNRP leaderships. Alternatively, in line with Bulpitt, ideology will be understood in relation to its *instrumental* importance in achieving more significant strategic goals for political actors.

This may occur *directly*, in the Downsian form of SNRPs ideologically occupying left-right space because either the leadership *believes* that is where a large share of the electorate exists and/or is not being represented by the other significant political parties in the system. Alternatively, the rationale as to why parties may ideologically reposition themselves to gain votes may be more implicit. For instance, it has been argued that many social democratic party leaderships have watered down their progressive ideologies to attract inward capital investments (Wickham-Jones, 1995). The fear being, that if they did not and capital flight occurred, the economic downturn that would naturally follow as a consequence of the globalised neo-liberal system, would leave voters questioning the economic competence of the government (Przeworski and Wallerstein, 1988). In this sense ideology is primarily 'used and abused' by political party leaderships as 'a political support mechanism' for governments in their pursuit of more significant objectives in: A. 'polity management'; such as the attraction of capital for economic competency; or B. office-seeking, in explicitly adopting an ideological position to appeal to a particular key sub-section of voters in elections (Bulpitt, 1989; 1995; 1996b). However, as we shall see in Chapter 7, it should be noted that political actors may misperceive the electoral context they operate within and adopt an ideology which either makes, key polity management goals harder to achieve or, simply puts them at odds with a key section of the electorate needed to win an election. This assumption is central to understanding whether a party has been able to achieve PAH, as if an SNRP erroneously locates themselves in ideological waters which precludes support from a sizeable chunk of the electorate, irrespective of how competent they are perceived to be, on a Downsian basis they will not be able to win PAH.

While the example of structural dependency on capital above, depicts structures in a typically constraining fashion, Statecraft posits structures can enhance, not inhibit, the agency of political actors. This is the other key assertion of Bulpitt's which remains relevant at the sub-national level.

While structures may be perceived as constraining in character, they also 'can provide the space for active, creative and courageous leadership' for political actors, providing an opportunity for them to portray themselves as competent (Buller & James, 2011:538). This thesis shall give attention not only to how the structure of devolution in the UK can constrain the agency of SNRP leaderships but will also 'give analytical primacy to the ways in which [SNP & Plaid] politicians deal with those constraints' (Bulpitt, 1986:23). Bulpitt's (1983; 1989; 1992; 1996a; 1996b) and Buller's (2000a; 2000b; 2006; 2011; 2014) analyses of national politics have always focused around how external institutional structures, such as local government, the European Union and the Bank of England, have paradoxically enhanced the relative governing autonomy of actors at Westminster. Unlike these analyses, this thesis will look at the reverse side of this coin, moving the analytical focus onto how those actors operating at the lower sub-national level, work within the multileveled structure of British devolution. Therefore, Chapters 4 & 5 will explore Buller's idea of decision-makers deliberately highlighting 'external constraints on policy control' and how SNRP leaderships may be able to discipline electoral expectations and 'insulate' themselves from broader societal pressure and political criticism (Buller, 2000b:320). Put another way, it will be argued that SNRPs take advantage of the multileveled structure of UK politics, in a fashion akin to how Westminster administrations have used higher European institutions such as the Exchange Rate Mechanism, as a structurally-constraining framework to 'insulate' itself from criticism, and defer blame onto a higher level of government when policy outcomes are unfavourable (Ibid). This assumption of the existence and exploitation of a 'structural insulating framework' has been essential in whether the two SNRPs and Welsh Labour, have been able to cultivate a degree of Governing Competence.

'SUB-NATIONAL STATECRAFT'

While the use of a more comprehensive, agency-based approach that assesses political leadership would fill a considerable gap in the literature on SNRP performance, Statecraft in its original form is incongruent with many aspects and dynamics of the regional level of politics. This is not to say that the theory needs a complete theoretical overhaul to be used at the sub-national level but that before any application of Statecraft is undertaken, the appropriateness of the key assertions and functions of the theory should be reviewed. It may also be added that in his few works, Bulpitt did not operationalise many of the key concepts and functions of Statecraft. As previously discussed, Buller & James (2011) considerably developed Statecraft in operationalising the four functions and, in turn, made the theory more sensitive to the kind of empirical testing synonymous with positivist methodology. This has been the only effort to systematically operationalise Statecraft to date and while Buller & James's contribution enhanced the utility of the theory, some of their suggested

methods to operationalise the theory could be developed further as many 'functions' rely on a heavy degree of inference. This would help address criticisms that Statecraft is unopen to criticism/empiricism and make the theory more responsive to such critiques. Therefore, the thesis will both take the opportunity to revise Statecraft as to be suitable in its application to the differing structural features of the sub-national level and also in more general terms theoretically develop the operationalisations offered by Buller & James (2011).

GOVERNING COMPETENCE

The first function of Statecraft, which is arguably the most fundamental in determining the success of a party is Governing Competence. For a government, or an opposition party, to be perceived as possessing a necessary degree of Governing Competence, the party's leadership are required to pick those policies which can be implemented easily and without controversy (Buller and James, 2011:541). For Bulpitt competency was a relative concept, meaning that elites within a party could still pursue more ideologically driven policies which would typically damage their governing credentials due to difficulty in their implementation and/or due to controversy, as long as such policies were perceived by the electorate as relatively less problematic/controversial than their opponents' policies (Bulpitt, 1986:22). Put another way, when the opposition was weak in the sense of either being divided or struggling in implementing and/or explaining its policies, the governing party could pursue more challenging policy goals and, providing they didn't oversee an economic or political catastrophe, still appear competent (Ibid). In terms of operationalising Governing Competence, Buller & James (2011:541) suggested the use of survey data, which included questions asking about voter's perceptions of parties' economic competence. Equally, they suggested that the use of survey data could be used to identify which party was perceived as most competent in a particular 'valence' policy area (e.g. NHS) but that ultimately economic management was paramount (ibid). They finally stressed that for this operationalisation, it was important to cross-reference the quantitative survey data with qualitative data from political leaders themselves, to answer the questions of A. Are party elites concerned with fostering an image of Governing Competence?; B. What strategies do they pursue to create such a reputation? (Ibid).

Two issues with this operationalisation will be raised here. Firstly, their point pertaining to the supremacy of a perception of competency in economic management over other policy areas may not always be the case. For instance, in UK politics, the classic indicators of competent economic management: economic growth; low inflation; and low unemployment have become less salient in

the face of non-(strictly)-economic valence issues. Issues in recent times such as COVID-19, have become the supreme valence issues by which governments will be assessed as 'fit to govern' on. Secondly Buller & James, in giving analytical primacy to competency in particular policy areas, fail to consider the role of statesmanship perceptions in forming an image of Governing Competency. Studies such as Sejits and de Clercy's (2020) have highlighted the increasing salience of voters' perceptions of character and statesmanship in voter choices in the US, Canada and the UK. In their study, they discovered that 30% of UK voters ranked 'character (personality traits)' as the most important consideration in assessing political leaders, while 44% prioritised 'competence (skills and knowledge in policy)' and only 23% prioritised 'commitment to their job (careerism vs unselfishness)' (Ibid:138). So while competence in policy areas is the most important consideration for 44% of UK citizens, a still sizeable 30% of voters base their vote on the personal character leading the party. Therefore, to address these concerns, competency can perhaps be understood through a tripartite categorisation.

1. 'Economic competency' - In times of relatively harmonious politics this will be the primary way the government and opposition parties are judged. 2. 'The Valence issue' – in more turbulent political times, a particular policy area may become more salient than the economy in determining voter's perceptions of a party's competence. Though even in more harmonious times there tends to exist a secondary issue to the economy which still is influential in determining votes (due to political narratives created by political parties). 3. 'Personal competency' – the individual statesmanship/character of an individual has been shown to affect perceptions of political leadership. This operationalisation of 'Governing Competence' will be favoured in that it better explores the relative significance of different policy areas/categories of competency for the voter and allows for an exploration of how different parties may be more successful at generating images of Governing Competence in particular policy areas/around certain leadership individuals.

However, for the purpose of this thesis, Governing Competence still needs to be altered to reflect the differences at the sub-national level. Statecraft posits that at the national level, a party's governing credentials are always relative to the main opposition party's perceived competency. However, this is not the dynamic at the sub-national level, as it appears that the electorate's perception of SNRPs' fitness to govern at the sub-national level is equally if not more so, determined by the perceived Governing Competency of Westminster administrations (this will be showcased in Chapters 4 & 5). Of course, this is not to say that the electorate's views concerning how competent the SNRP's unionist opposition at the sub-national level has no bearing upon SNRP's own level of competency, but that the UK government's influence is far greater in determining sub-national perceptions of competency. This might partially be explained by the fact that even now devolved politics is in its relative infancy,

and the centrality of Westminster politics is still felt in how the Scottish government is judged against Westminster, more than the official opposition at Holyrood. Therefore, we would expect that when the national government is perceived by the Scottish and Welsh electorates as having acted ineptly in its governance, SNRPs will enjoy a more prevalent perception of competency, especially if they are in regional government themselves.

Therefore, the operationalisation this study will use is to gather available opinion poll data towards both sub-national and national administrations concerning: 1. economic perceptions of competency; 2. (after identifying it) perceptions of competency concerning the Scottish/Welsh valence issue; 3. The perceptions concerning the competency of individual political leaders at both levels. In Scotland, such surveys have been conducted by the SSAS. In Wales, such polls have been conducted by the ICM/BBC in the St David's Day poll, by NatCen Social Research and the Welsh Election Study. Comparing attitudes towards the parties on the economy, the valence issue and leaders at both levels will allow us to determine whether there exists any form of relationship in the perceived competency of both devolved administrations and Westminster governments. Using a combination of interviews with key SNRP Figures and documentary analysis of manifestos, speeches, parliamentary debates and existing media interviews, the thesis will then chronologically cross-reference the survey data to ascertain what particular decisions made at the elite level, may have impacted the party's public perceptions of competency.

PARTY MANAGEMENT

Another essential Statecraft function for any party is to be effective in its Party Management. This refers to the ability of the leadership to present the party to the electorate as unified, even if such solidarity does not exist. This is an often-overlooked point in much of the literature on internal party relations; the fact there is often no distinction made between *the reality* of internal party divisions and *the way that they are communicated/presented* by the media and opposition parties. Bulpitt argued that disunity in political parties was a 'continuous problem for party leaders', as modern-day political parties exist as huge bureaucratically-complexed and ideologically heterogeneous entities, comprising of different groups such as the membership and parliamentary backbenchers, who would commonly have different aims from the leadership, 'certainly in policy terms' (Bulpitt, 1986:21; Buller & James, 2011:542). Bulpitt was clear that intra-party relations did not have to be harmonious as realistically this would be practically impossible to maintain, but as long as relations were 'quiescent', and the electorate and media were unable to detect divisions, then the leadership would have been successful in their Party Management (Buller & James, 2011:542). However, the function has become more complex in that UK political parties, since the advent of devolution, have had a more complicated

multileveled task. In competing at both sub-national and national levels, parties since 1999 have had two different leaderships, backbenchers and bureaucracies operating at each level, which has created a greater potential for internal disagreements as often the aims of the party at either level differ.

An important point to address is exactly how we define 'unity' and related concepts such as 'cohesion' and 'discipline'. While Bulpitt eludes to such concepts in his work, Ulrich Sieberer (2006) fully fleshes out the important distinctions between these concepts. 'Unity' refers to 'the observable degree to which members of a group act in unison' (Sieberer, 2006:151). When analysing parties, unity can be brought about via two different means. The first is 'cohesion' which, simply put, is the shared preferences of party members (ibid). The second is 'discipline' where unity results from 'sanctions or positive incentives that make members vote together even though their preferences differ' (ibid). Therefore, in scenarios where cohesion is absent, we would expect the party leadership to play a more active disciplinary role in forcing unity in voting. Equally, the SNP's and Plaid's leaderships may play a far more active role in disciplining members due to the parties being left-right ideological broad churches.

One way we might measure the success or failure of an SNRP's Party Management is to borrow Phillip Cowley's (2007) method used by Buller and James's (2011:542) operationalisation of Party Management by analysing the number, size and nature of parliamentary rebellions in voting. However, this will be adapted to not only include revolts that have occurred within Plaid and SNP at Westminster but also those rebellions that have occurred at Holyrood and Cardiff. However, one major shortcoming in using this operationalisation of Party Management, is that unlike at Westminster where (see: Cowley, 2002; 2015) there exists extensive data collection of rebellions and voting records (Irving & Todd, 2001-2021), voting records at Holyrood, and even more so at Cardiff Bay, are exceptionally hard to compile. Holyrood does store a log of all voting records in their archives, but the only way to access them is by searching for individual MSPs by name. Bearing in mind the high number of SNP MSPs that have been elected since 1999, and also the sheer amount of legislation being voted on (including votes on amendments), means that any exhaustive analysis of SNP MSP voting is beyond the scope of this thesis due to time constraints. Comprehensive analysis of all the voting records in the case of Plaid AM/MSs is even more difficult as in their parliamentary archives, voting records can only be searched for by the Bill itself. Equally, in the earlier terms of the NAW, AMs were not classed as a public authority and therefore not subject to the Freedom of Information Act, so many voting records pre-2016 cannot be accessed. What the thesis alternatively identifies is the key divisive issues for both parties as shown in interview data and as reported in the media, and then analyse how SNP

MSPs and Plaid AMs/MSs voted in their respective parliaments on the contested matter with available Scottish Parliament/Senedd voting records. Westminster voting will still be analysed, as a potential key source of intra-party conflict, as a party operating at two political levels may produce drastically diverging interests for the central and peripheral SNRP elites.

Equally, it is therefore important to fully specify what exactly party leaderships' are managing within the party. A criticism that can be levelled at Buller & James's operationalisation of Party Management is that in only looking at official revolts in parliamentary voting, they neglect not only other key branches of the party where unity/disunity can be observed. The primary issue here then is that the party, in Statecraft terms, is viewed purely through a parliamentary lens without consideration of extra-parliamentary groups. To understand how any party leadership attempts to manage unity within the party, it seems essential to draw upon the wider literature on party organisation to disaggregate the party into its component parts and assess how and why the preferences of these groups may converge or differ. As Katz & Mair (1993) demonstrated, a useful analytical disaggregation of the party is to adopt a tripartite division of faces of the party: the *party in public office* - PPO (in parliament or government); the *party on the ground* - POG (members/activists); the *party in central office* - PCO (the national leadership of the party – national executive committees and central party staff). While of course not denying, as Buller and James outlined implicitly through their operationalisation of Party Management, that disunity can occur within the confines of an individual 'face' of the party, it seems perhaps more likely that party disunity will occur between these faces of the party by virtue of their differing purposes and constraints upon their decisions. The simplest example of this would be the fact that the PPO would have far less autonomy than the POG, due to the electoral constraints of being attentive to public perceptions, whereas the party on the ground are voluntary members/loyal voters and are largely free to make their own private decisions as their roles are largely 'symbolic' and 'solidaristic' (ibid). This difference in the level of autonomy/constraints each face of the party has will naturally be reflected in their differing preferences.

May's Law (1973) is the usual paradigm through which intra-party relations are understood: the POG will be more idealistic, while the PPO acts as the more pragmatic force in the party, and the PCO usually consists of both idealists and pragmatists depending on their bureaucratic role and in what proximity this places them to the other faces of the party. Studies such as Bäckersten's (2021) on the Swedish parties' intra-relations have found May's law to still apply when looking at the left-right axis. However, in one particularly pertinent study to this thesis by Baras et al (2015), they showed that while Catalan parties did prescribe to May's law on the left-right axis, this was not the case concerning

the centre-periphery axis. Therefore it seems essential to assess any party against the criteria of Party Management, there needs to be some understanding of the relative power of each of the three faces, the internal diversity of preferences within each face and also the bureaucratic overlap/ties between the faces.

Using Katz and Mair's framework the thesis will propose that the Party Management of SNRP leaderships can be holistically assessed using a two-part analysis. First, to ascertain the ideological or strategical divisions within the PPO, Cowley's (2007) operationalisation of Party Management analysing the number, size and nature of parliamentary rebellions in voting will be used. This will be adapted not only to include revolts that have occurred within the SNRP at the national parliament but also those rebellions that have occurred at the sub-national parliament. To understand *how* the leadership has then managed such disputes, or attempted to prevent such disputes from 'rising to the surface', the thesis will analyse what 'discipline', in the form of Sieberer's sanctions or positive incentives, the leadership has utilised to create the impression of parliamentary unity. To understand the intra-party relationships between the PPO and the other two faces in the POG and the PCO, this thesis will analyse the key institutional mechanisms through which these three faces interact: the National Executive Committee; Candidate Selection; and Conferences. The benefit of incorporating this analysis is gaining an insight not only into the disputes that arrive on the parliamentary floor but also into those disputes which relate more directly to party affairs. This thesis generally sympathises with the idea that the 'leadership' is mostly situated within the PPO. As Katz & Mair (1993;2009) argue in their 'Cartel Thesis' the general trend in Western European political parties over the last 30 years has been the transferal of power to the PPO, usually from the POG, as parties seek to professionalise through top-down reforms.

In this sense, a key aspect of Party Management for the leadership would be *how* they attempt to regulate the power each respective face of the party holds and how they manage the relationship between each face. We therefore may consider parties' organisational reform a key tool available to the leadership to prevent and regulate party disputes. For instance, if the POG is ideologically at odds with the majority of the electorate and enjoys sizeable influence within the party's institutional structure, the leadership may adopt reform which allows for the circumvention of the POG in matters relating to the formulation of party policy, party strategy and selection of candidates. The fear is that if they fail to do this, observable party disputes may come to harm the party in the polls and also that the party policies may be dictated by the over-idealistic party on the ground, ideologically alienating the party from the wider electorate.

POLITICAL ARGUMENT HEGEMONY

Bulpitt described a party achieving 'Political Argument Hegemony' (PAH) if the party's leadership had gained 'predominance in the elite debate regarding political problems, policies and general stance of government' (Bulpitt, 1986:21). The victor in this 'battle of ideas' was largely determined by the political context party elites operated in, as this would influence whether the party's policies were perceived as plausible solutions to the most pressing political problems (Buller & James, 2011:542). In Bulpitt's original description of PAH at the national level, there exists a singular paramount political argument that defines party competition, as could be seen for instance in the 'austerity vs public borrowing' debate of the post-financial crash period in British politics (Gamble, 2015). Statecraft has always defined a single political argument of the period in macro-economic left-right terms. Covering varying periods of post-war British domestic politics, Bulpitt (1986:33) characterised the 1960s period as the victory of Labour's arguments of the post-Keynesian 'white heat of technological revolution', only for Heath's lesser government intervention of the 'Quiet Revolution' to be enough to win the political argument in 1970, before finally the emergence of Thatcher's successful Statecraft of Monetarism in the 1980s. Equally more contemporary uses of Statecraft have also focused on a singular macro-economic political argument, such as Buller & James (2011:550) who argue New Labour were the achievers of hegemony in the 'investment vs cuts' debate of the 1990s/2000s.

All the political debates presented above relate to left vs right ideological solutions to pressing economic problems (e.g. modernisation, inflation, balance of payments). However, there are two criticisms of Statecraft in this respect. Firstly, Bulpitt (1986; 1996a) and Buller (2006) seem to hold an instrumental view of the issue of Europe and how it related to more important macro-economic goals; i.e. how it helped elites achieve predominance in the political debate around how to achieve economic objectives (e.g. lower inflation). Statecraft in this sense does not give much credence to the political debate of European integration outside of its relationship to domestic economic policy, which increasingly became about non-economic factors such as sovereignty, populism, English nationalism and immigration (Corbett, 2016). Secondly, in only defining the political arguments as those macro-economic debates between broad narratives of Keynesianism and fiscal conservatism, Statecraft in its current form seems to overlook a scenario whereby which a non-economic political argument may come to define politics.

But what may we understand to be the pressing political arguments in the cases of Scotland and Wales? As we shall see in the Governing Competence chapters, the issues index has allowed us to identify what valence/salient issues concerned voters. However, here attention shall be given to the broader battle of normative ideological arguments and importantly where and how SNRPs position themselves within them. As Massetti (2011:502) identifies, western European SNRPs have to primarily position themselves within the three ideological debates that dominate such politics: A. centre-periphery arguments; B. left-right arguments; C. arguments concerning European integration. As previous studies on the matter have shown, there is no general rule or trend to SNRP's positioning within such debates, due to the factors affecting such positioning being deeply contextual to each party (Newman, 1997; Erk 2005; 2009). These previous studies of Newman and Erk theoretically occupy similar space as Bulpitt and Statecraft, in the emphasis they both place on the saliency of context in determining political arguments and importantly who wins them.

There is little doubt that constitutional questions have been a significant dimension of both party elites' and voters' debates in Wales & Scotland (although more acutely in Scotland), since the election of nationalist parties to government in 2007. However, SNRPs are not immune from the left-right or European debates of domestic politics, and SNRP elites have to take policy positions and demonstrate competency in policy areas without a strict centre-periphery dimension such as taxes, healthcare and pensions (Elias & Tronconi, 2011). We might expect, as SNRPs define themselves in relation to their position on the centre-periphery spectrum, that their adoption and articulation of a left-right position would be more difficult than state-wide parties, who naturally define themselves on the left-right continuum. However, paradoxically this is not necessarily the case. In smaller geographical territories, where there exists a more ideologically homogenous electorate, it may be easier to adopt policies and create a manifesto that addresses issues specific to the area or are more in tune with the region's broad ideological preferences (Massetti, 2010). Equally, the policy autonomy SNRPs possess enables them the freedom to pursue policy ideologically as close to the Scottish or Welsh median voter, providing SNRP leaderships accurately understand their 'median voter'.

However, state-wide parties have limited policy autonomy in Scotland and Wales, due to having to try to avoid policy incongruence between the national and sub-national wings of the party – although as shall be seen later in Chapter 6, Welsh Labour seemed to have driven a harder bargain in this regard, relative to other state-wide party branches. In Downsian terms then, SNRPs who compete in a more ideologically homogenous territory such as Scotland, with such policy autonomy, can converge on a

single Scottish 'median voter'. However, state-wide parties such as the Conservatives, in competing for seats in three ideologically divergent territories, need to appeal to the English, Welsh and Scottish voters who sit far apart spatially on the left-right ideological continuum. This results in the Scottish/Welsh leadership of state-wide parties: A. appeasing their party in London and adopting an ideology that makes the party consistent in their policy across the UK but risks alienating the Welsh/Scottish median voter; or B. pursuing divergent policies to that of the main party, and suffer the potential negative electoral impacts of disunity or even worse central party discipline. Therefore, unionist parties will have a considerably harder task in winning widespread support in Wales, Scotland and England as they have to try win votes from both regions' electorates who often have incompatible preferences (Massetti, 2010).

To further develop the idea of PAH, a consideration of what level the debate takes place on, needs to be factored into any operationalisation. As Buller & James (2011) argued in the case of Margaret Thatcher's tenure, she did not win PAH at the public level. As Ivor Crewe's (1988) public research outlined, ideological preferences had not shifted rightwards during the 1980s. However, after shifting analysis to the elite level, it becomes clear that Thatcherism had won the political argument as Labour began to ideologically gravitate rightwards in the *belief* that Thatcherism *had* significantly realigned the electoral preferences. In the case of the centre-periphery political argument, one ready way we might understand if SNRPs are winning this argument at the public level is to use data from the widely available polls concerning support for independence and other constitutional options. As this argument is a key feature of Scottish and Welsh politics there exists a plethora of available polls in the UK (Ipsos Mori, YouGov, NatCen). In terms of operationalising the left-right argument and European arguments at the public level, polls pertaining to both debates can be assessed using SSAS and BSA survey data on levels of Euroscepticism and the average left-right median position. Alternatively, at the elite level, the thesis operationalises PAH by looking at what policies and ideological positioning, both relating to centre-periphery and left-right arguments, have been co-opted by parties. Documentary analysis primarily in the form of comparing manifestos but also in the analysis of speeches and existing interviews shall be used to establish where policies/narratives have been co-opted. Adopting this method of both using survey data and identifying convergence or even co-option between parties on issues, both territorial and ideological, allows us to see if political arguments have been won at the public or elite level.

A WINNING ELECTORAL STRATEGY

Finally, Statecraft posits that the function of a 'Winning Electoral Strategy' (WES) requires a party to adopt a manifesto which can be readily 'sold' to the majority of the electorate, and helps to give the

party 'political impetus in the lead-up to the polls' (Buller & James, 2011:540). Bulpitt stated that this function of Statecraft was important as it allowed for the party to excel at Party Management, Governing Competence and achieve PAH. The party's policy package at an election needed to 'unite the party' to make for easier Party Management and convince the electorate, that such policies were realistically implementable, as to ensure an image of competency (Bulpitt, 1986:21). It is for this reason that this thesis, contrary to previous works and applications of Statecraft, views a WES not as a function in its own right, but as an instrumental 'support mechanism' to help maintain the three essential Statecraft functions. Therefore, no updated operationalisation of the function will be presented in this thesis, as essentially a WES is a micro-analysis of the impact of the adoption of a particular manifesto upon the three other functions in the immediate run-up to the polls. A. Governing Competence - are the policies of the manifesto concerning the economy and the valence issue perceived as realistic and implementable by the electorate? In relation to personal competency, the focus would simply become narrower, looking to whether the performance of the leaders in televised debates inspired a degree of trust in voters. B. Party Management - did the ideological profile of the manifesto both in left-right and centre-periphery terms unite the party or cause public divisions during campaigning? C. PAH - Did the manifesto land within the Downsian goalposts to appeal to the median Scottish and Welsh voter? Did other political parties adopt manifestos occupying the same ideological space? If so, who presented the more plausible solution to such ideological goals? Therefore, analysis of SNRPs manifestos shall be incorporated into the discussion of the other three key Statecraft 'functions'.

CHAPTER 3: CASE STUDY SELECTION & METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will provide a robust justification for a comparison between the SNP and Plaid Cymru, arguing the cases allow Statecraft to explore the interplay of internal and external supply-side factors in determining SNRP success. Thereafter, the chapter will discuss the methodological approach of the comparative case study used. The thesis, in primarily relying on (sub-national) Statecraft as its theoretical framework, adopts a qualitative approach. However, substantial pre-existing secondary quantitative data in the form of survey data on various public attitudes, are included as part of the analysis in an effort to triangulate both qualitative and quantitative data. The thesis will justify not only the comparative case study method but will also justify and discuss the use of documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews to complement existing secondary data. An issue when attempting to compare the electoral strategies and fortunes of different SNRPs is which parties to compare and the justification for their selection. However, in the pre-existing literature which uses the comparative case study method as a way to better understand SNRPs, there is little to no justification for why certain parties are chosen for analysis (See: Elias, 2009a; McAgnus, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017). Therefore, at the start of this project, it seemed essential to analyse the plethora of SNRPs to see which would be suitable for an exploration of agential factors in their success. As the relative electoral fortunes of SNRPs and what makes them succeed is the primary empirical focus of this thesis, it was clear that one SNRP needed to have enjoyed considerable success electorally, while one needed to have a far poorer electoral record. In comparing the two, the expectation would be that there were discernibly different decisions made by the leaderships of each party in relation to Statecraft's functions.

OTHER CASE STUDIES AND WHY THEY WERE NOT USED?

As this study wishes to focus on the role of agents in determining SNRP electoral success it was important to isolate two parties that experienced starkly different electoral records yet operated in broadly similar structural contexts. The SNP was the obvious candidate for a successful SNRP, as they had achieved considerable success at both national and devolved elections. Additionally, the fact the SNP had been in office for 3 terms by 2021 was an essential prerequisite for any SNRP analysis. This was so both *vote-seeking* strategies and *governing* strategies could be compared and assessed. Therefore, an essential requirement for the successful party choice in this comparison, was that they had entered government for at least two terms. When picking the successful SNRP this, in itself, dramatically reduced the shortlist of potential and appropriate comparisons. The following parties

remained against such criteria: Scottish National Party; Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU); Basque Nationalist Party (PNB); Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (CDC); Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC); Parti Quebecois (PQ).

In the case of the PNB, while they have entered government at every Basque parliamentary election since the parliament's creation in 1980 (bar the election in 2009), they have always failed to garner enough seats to form a majority and nearly always formed a governing coalition with other parties (Basque Parliament Election Results, 2019). Similarly, the ERC has entered office in Catalonia five times between 1980 and 2019, but every time as a junior coalition party and while the CDC has secured a majority government in Catalonia, this has always been in coalition with other parties such as the ERC and/or Democratic Union of Catalonia (Catalonian Parliament Election Results, 2019). These are not considered useful comparisons, as the aim of the comparison is to identify similarities and differences in the vote-seeking and governing strategies of SNRPs and determine the role of structure/agency in SNRP electoral success. During the period of analysis of 1999-2021, the SNP has opted when in government to 'go it alone' meaning their governing strategies have *been their own*, unlike the parties above who have only governed in coalition or as powerless minority governments. A comparison to these parties as the successful SNRP, would not be useful as when analysing governing strategies of these coalition governments, it would be very difficult to determine the extent to which one party was more important in the creation of such strategies and which party was more pivotal in their implementation.

Finally, the CSU and PQ at first glance appear to be an apt choice as an SNRP for analysis. They both operate in federal political systems yet, similar to the SNP, have enjoyed a sustained period of electoral success and consequently have entered regional government on multiple occasions as a majority stand-alone government. However, in the case of the CSU their electoral success borders on hegemonic dominance within the state of Bavaria, having only missed out on office in one regional election since 1946 and in most instances have ruled as a majority. They polled an incredibly high average of 57% between 1970 and 1990 (Bavarian Landtag Election Results, 2019). Even since the reunification of Germany up until the Bavarian election in 2018, despite a trend of gradual falloff in performance, the party have still averaged 50% in the polls (Ibid). Firstly, this far outweighs the electoral performance achieved by the SNP. Secondly, and more significantly as Eve Hepburn has highlighted, parties such as the CSU can be such well-established hegemons in their electoral system that they 'do not respond to their local political environment but are products of that environment with deep historical roots' (Hepburn, 2010:542). In other words, there can be contexts whereby a

party could essentially pursue any form of Statecraft and, due to their overwhelming support amongst the electorate, can still be elected to office regardless of the decisions made by the party leadership. The CSU's success is therefore primarily dictated by demand-side factors and being so secure in its political position of dominance, can always be elected with little consideration of its structural environment, which is of no interest to this study. The CSU also only compete in Bavarian elections and does not compete at national German elections (although they have informal links to the CDU at the state level). In the case of PQ, they have achieved a degree of electoral success that would make them a suitable candidate for comparison, having won office at the provincial level five times since its formation (1976, 1981, 1994, 1998, 2012). However, similarly to the CSU, the PQ (while previously having de facto links to Bloc Quebecois) do not compete at national elections as well as provincial elections; 'it is the unwritten rule of Canadian politics…. politicians at one level stay out of politics on the other level... provincial politicians don't get involved in federal politics on a public partisan level (Hazel, 2000: 193). This means in both cases they would not be a suitable case study as we cannot analyse SNRPs' approach to practising Statecraft at different levels of electoral competition and the problems/opportunities this can create.

WHY SCOTLAND & WALES?

The SNP are one of the most electorally successful SNRP in recent times, having performed both successfully at the regional level (being the largest party at Holyrood in every election since 2007) and at the national level (winning 56/59 seats in 2015 and still winning the most Scottish seats in 2019). Within the same multileveled system of devolution in the UK, Plaid however have electorally stagnated at the regional level in never winning more than 17/60 seats and at the national level has failed to break the ceiling of 4 seats at Westminster. The SNP and Plaid therefore serve to be interesting cases to analyse, in that one has been hugely successful while the other has electorally stagnated, with both operating within a broadly similar structural context of UK devolution. Of course, there is a legitimate argument that the structural context faced by the SNP is more favourable, both in a quasi-structural sense of Scotland being historically a more culturally distinct nation compared to Wales in the UK but, more importantly to this thesis, because devolution in the UK is asymmetrical, with Holyrood possessing considerably more powers than Cardiff. However, in relative terms, the structural context is far more similar between these two parties, compared to other SNRPs operating in other vastly different institutional contexts (e.g. Parti Quebecois in Federal Canada). But what is the worth of comparing two SNRPS who have performed very differently within a similar political system? The fact that purely structural (external supply side) factors are at least minimised as a factor in determining the difference in electoral fortunes between these two parties allows us to focus on

political actors' decisions in determining SNRP electoral fortunes. In other case study comparisons, such as those outlined above, structural considerations would dominate any explanation of the electoral fortunes of SNRPs in different political systems. The fact that the SNP and Plaid have experienced such differing levels of political success would suggest that SNRPs electoral fortunes are determined, at least in part, by agentic factors. The SNP and Plaid synchronic comparison, therefore allows us to isolate which governing strategies and decisions adopted by the party leaderships have led to electoral success/failure. Furthermore, the selection of two UK SNRPs seems a fitting first outing for Statecraft to explain politics at the sub-national level, as after all the theory was formulated as a parsimonious interpretation of British politics. Therefore, the selection of Scotland and Wales as case studies gives us a greater chance to isolate individual agentic factors, but also how SNRP and regional elites decide to navigate their similar structural contexts, in determining SNRPs' electoral fortunes.

METHODOLOGY

This section of the chapter aims to justify the use of the comparative case study approach in exploring SNRP success and, in particular, justify the use of elite interviews as the primary research method of this thesis. It argues the use of the comparative method is the most appropriate research design for a deeper comprehensive understanding of SNRP leaderships' decision-making, as opposed to a single case study or a large N cross-sectional study. Elite interviews are employed, both in their own right as a tool to uncover the motivations of political elites in their decision-making, but also the insights from such interviews will be used in a process of triangulation, alongside pre-existing secondary documentary data in the form of memoirs, party documents, manifestos, speeches, policy announcements to see if there exists significant overlap/disparity between private and official reasoning for pursuing decisions (Berry, 2002). Also, the use of secondary data in the form of election results and public attitude surveys may enable us to establish a causal relationship between political leaderships' decision-making and political success/failure. The chapter then discusses some of the logistical issues encountered when conducting elite interviews and finishes by discussing the limitations of this kind of data.

THE COMPARATIVE METHOD APPROACH

The research method of the case study is, as John Gerring (2004:342) has described, 'a definitional morass'. Yin (1994) states that a case study might mean (a) that its method is qualitative, small-N; (b) that the research is ethnographic, clinical, participant-observation or otherwise "in the field"; (c) that the research is characterised by process tracing (George & Bennet, 2004); (d) that the research investigates a single case; (e) that the research investigates a single phenomenon, instance or

example. Researchers have many things in mind when they refer to case study research. However, as Gerring (2004; 2007) argues, the list of case study definitions above seems to be more of a list of the subtypes of case studies (e.g. single case study, comparative method etc.) that exist rather than definitive definitions. Applying Yin's definition to the research of this thesis, a small N case study – i.e. the comparative method - is used. In only using three case studies the research here is neither a single case study nor a large N cross-sectional study. A single case study was not chosen as the research design as this would have defeated the point of trying to generate an explanation that could apply to the whole SNRP party family and their varying levels of political success, which was the initial source of interest to research this topic. A single case study research design would have precluded any generalisation to explain SNRP success more generally and also would have precluded any kind of exploration into the relative weight of structure and agency in SNRP political fortunes. Equally, a large N cross-sectional study was deemed to be an incongruent research design for the purposes of this thesis, as while such a study would have given a greater deal of validity to any generalisations concerning SNRP leaderships and their political fortunes, the focus of Statecraft upon elites decision-making against the four 'functions' requires the research to go into a degree of qualitative depth that a large N study would not have allowed for.

However, while the small N comparative method is deemed to be the most suitable research design for this study, one of the principle problems with the design was succinctly put by Lijphart (1971:685) 'many variables, small number of cases'. This can result in what Galtung (1969) calls 'the traditional quotation/illustration methodology' where researchers search for and handpick certain case studies to match their hypothesis or alternatively reject the hypothesis as soon as one of their select few case studies does not match the hypothesis – this usually due to the high complexed nature of the differing variables in the study. However, as Lijphart (1971:686) argues social science 'should be aimed at probabilistic, not universal, generalisations'. In line with Lijphart's resolution, any generalisations concerning SNRPs produced in this thesis will be probabilistic and may be refuted by SNRPs in other nations. He argues another way to avoid the problems of 'many variables and small number of cases' is to pick cases that are 'similar in a large number of important characteristics (variables)' but importantly different on the particular variable(s) a researcher wants to measure (Ibid:687). In this case, the paired comparison of SNP – PC seems to be on sound methodological ground. This is because it allows a tighter focus on the role of agency due to the reduced significance of any structural variables as SNP and PC face a much more similar structural context relative to any other potential SNRP pairing.

SEMI-STRUCTURED ELITE INTERVIEWS

The purpose of the interviews for this thesis was to gain perspectives on decision-making by senior figures within the SNP and PC who had first-person knowledge and influence of/over the party decision-making process. Non-random probability sampling was used to identify the interviewees. The interviewees were selected based on the researcher's judgement rather than randomly selecting members of the parties. For each case study a list of both politicians and party officials were identified within each party and what specific function of Statecraft an interview with them would best elucidate. Equally sometimes due to the nature of an interviewee's wide-ranging role within the party, a more generic set of varied and open-ended questions were asked to try to lure out answers relating to any of the three Statecraft functions. The process of choosing appropriate interviewees for either party slightly differed, due to the SNP being a much bigger party bureaucratically and with a much larger parliamentary presence at both the devolved level and Westminster, than Plaid. This meant there was a larger pool of potential desired interviewees in the SNP's case. However, despite a smaller number of desired respondents, most Plaid candidates did agree to an interview.

The key factors that guided the selection of particular interviewees were related to the three functions of Statecraft. Elected politicians in particular could give accounts that spoke to all three functions of Statecraft, especially those who have served as MSPs/MSs/MPs for a long time. In both parties, the key individuals who headed the policy bodies of the parties (the National Policy Convenor – SNP; Director of Policy - Plaid) were sought after to help better understand the rationale for key policy decisions (e.g. significance of ideological positioning in PAH). NEC members while useful in their responses to questions concerning Governing Competence and PAH, were instrumental in understanding the broader party dynamics of unity as they were part of the party's organisation where the PPO, POG and POC all coalesced for meetings. Previous academic works on the parties were also used to identify key individuals who, historically, were intimately involved or responsible for a particular area in the party system of interest to this study. For instance, in the case of the SNP and the function of Party Management, Michael Russell was sought out for an interview due to his instrumental role in organisational reform.

When interviewing non-elected party officers such as NEC members, it is a well-noted tendency in literature on methodology that officials are usually more willing to divulge all potential influences and motivations in the decision-making process, due to the absence of any electoral considerations. In this sense, when asking non-elected party officials questions relating to Governing Competence and PAH, the data was often used in a supplementary fashion to corroborate, or they were asked to further elaborate on, the responses given by MSPs/MSs/MPs. While many of the invited interviewees declined or did not respond, in total 12 interviewees kindly agreed to take part (6 SNP interviewees):

Michael Russell – Party President, former Chief Executive Officer (1994-199), former MSP (1999-2003 & 2007-2021); Chris Law MP (2015-2019); Chris Hanlon – Former National Policy Convenor and NEC member; one anonymous former MSP and two anonymous former party officers and NEC members. The 6 Plaid Cymru interviewees were: Hywel Williams - NEC member and Plaid MP for Arfon (formerly Caernarfon) since 2001; Elin Jones - Llywydd (speaker) of the Senedd & MS for Ceredigion since 1999; Dafydd Trystan former Chief Executive (2002-2007) and Chair (2013-2019); John Osmond – Director of Policy on the National Executive Committee (2018 onwards) & Political Advisor to Adam Price as leader; and two senior Plaid MSs who chose in their accounts to remain anonymous. Some interviewees were kind enough to agree to multiple interviews. Interviews were almost exclusively conducted over Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic precluding in-person interviews.

The existing interview literature has established that different modes of sampling can be suitable depending on the nature and objectives of the research project. Tansey (2007: 768-769) argues that non-random probability sampling (any methodology where there is a targeted interviewee) is particularly suitable when interviews are intended to reconstruct political events; this is because the interviewees are those who are judged to be best placed to provide information about the events relevant to the interviewer's research. The interviews themselves followed a semi-structured format and this was chosen to ensure that the key themes of interest to the thesis were covered, while also providing ample opportunity to 'poke' for more information if the interviewees' responses warranted it. In practice, such a format required the writing of a list of questions (specific to the particular interviewee) in advance, but also the flexibility within the timeframe to go 'off-script' and ask any supplementary questions the interviewer deemed relevant. Burnham et al (2008:240) suggest that a list of topics is preferential, compared to a list of questions for semi-structured interviews. However, in conversations with my supervisors and colleagues who have a wealth of experience in elite interviewing, they found it beneficial to use a list of numbered questions so any specific issues arising from memoirs, documents and speeches can be raised.

When conducting interviews, Leech (2002) suggests using a 'Grand Tour' question which requires the interviewee 'to describe their typical day or working environment'. While such questions are well-suited to interviewing current politicians, party elites who are no longer within the party system/decision-making process do not benefit from such an approach. Nonetheless, including a 'Grand Tour' question (changing the question to the previous working experiences of the interviewees where necessary) gained insight into the decision-making process, in tandem with questions assessing the extent of their involvement in key decisions under analysis. Additionally, Leech (2002:666)

recommends that any question which might be threatening or upsetting to the interviewee should be avoided near the beginning of an interview. The ordering of the questions was curated to attempt to make interviewees feel comfortable before later reaching the more adverse questions. Practically, this meant that the sequence of questions in the interviews began with biographical questions before moving to the specific issues of interest. This approach was deemed a suitable way of making the interviewee feel comfortable, yet still obtaining relevant and potentially even more sensitive/shielded information from the interviewees towards the end of the interview.

There are some obvious limitations involved in conducting elite interviews. Firstly there exists a plethora of practical problems with interviewing politicians. 1. They are busy people, even the most junior elected politicians will have an almost infinite set of demands on their time; 2. Politicians are bombarded with requests to partake in projects by schoolkids, university students, lecturers and pressure groups; 3. Many politicians are suspicious of academia and researchers – they think what good can come from an interview? Why wash dirty laundry in public?; 4. Politicians are skilled in avoiding answering difficult questions – if they dislike the direction or even aggression of your questions they can simply leave; 5. They are skilled at debating and challenging ideas – the best-prepared researchers may turn up with a script of questions central to their research, only for them to unpick the underlying assumptions of the questions and question your understanding of the subject (Cowley, 2022:237).

Beyond these practical problems in arranging and conducting interviews, there also exist several conceptual issues with semi-structured elite interviews. Firstly, politicians or their advisers are unlikely to directly admit to making public policy based on political careerism/electoral self-interest rather than genuine ideological and generally agreed policy, goals. Unless interviewees are comfortable sharing self-interested motivations and think of their actions as political retrospectively, the utility of interviews is limited relative to documentary research for evaluating the political strategies of SNRPs and how they performed against the four functions of Statecraft. Secondly, Berry (2002:680-681) talks of the unwillingness of lobbyists to criticise their own organisation and the interviewee's tendency to exaggerate their power within it. He warns that when conducting interviews, bias can be troublesome to detect, sometimes leading to the issues of 'exaggeration, omission and general unreliability' in interview accounts (Ibid, 2002:680-681). These problems may be even more acute in the case of a single stand-alone interview, where it is extremely difficult to recognise either exaggeration or omissions. Thirdly, due to the fact some of the events discussed in the course of the interviews occurred a sizeable number of years ago (the earliest being anecdotes of Scottish/Welsh politics pre-

devolution over 25 years ago), interviewees may fail to accurately recall discussions/decisions surrounding a particular policy/strategy. This problem is particularly relevant for research such as this that hopes to uncover the more clandestine agendas of party leaderships.

Lilleker (2003:212) argues that, while it is uncommon for respondents to make deliberately false statements, it can be straining for any person to correctly remember specifics from a long time ago, meaning that even those facts which are supposedly recalled may be incorrect. Therefore, 'interviews cannot be relied upon as the sole methodology… the data collected must be reinforced by other forms of empirical data' (Ibid:208). Likewise, Richards (1996:196) warns against forming conclusions solely on the basis of interview data. Bearing in mind these limitations of interviews outlined above, the thesis will use interview data alongside documentary analysis in an effort to triangulate both sets of primary data and secondary documentary data, in the form of party documents, manifestos, speeches, and policy announcements. This way the thesis can establish if there exists any significant overlap/disparity between private and official reasoning for pursuing party decisions. While acknowledging the drawbacks of interviews, Lilleker (2003) notes that they can provide information on decision-making processes which is unlikely to be available in official party publications/speeches or newspapers. Informal conversations are not likely to be recorded, but a respondent can recall them (if remembered) in an interview. By asking tailored questions in interviews, there is the possibility of gaining direct insights into operations outside of the public eye. Finally, it may be noted that interviews can also provide an opportunity for the interviewer to be pointed towards alternative documents and secondary data to help their analysis that they may have not been aware of by existing literature on the topic.

DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH

Documentary research was a fundamental part of the empirical evidence for this thesis. In particular, the Scottish Government, WAG, Scottish and Welsh Assembly/Parliamentary archives were instrumental in finding evidence of the narratives and strategies adopted by the SNP, Plaid and Welsh Labour. FM's Questions in both case studies were particularly useful to understanding the narratives of sub-national parties but also the role and mechanism of government in developing an image of competence in particular policy areas. Equally the UK, Scottish and Welsh Parliamentary records of voting were particularly important when exploring the extent of divisions in the PPO of both the SNP and Plaid. Analysis of manifestos of all the parties under analysis was also the bedrock of much of the analysis in Chapters 4, 5 and 7. Cross-referencing policies adopted in Scottish and Welsh elections since 1999 allowed the tracking of the ideological development of parties between elections at the

subnational level. Equally, in the case of Wales in particular, the analysis of the level of detail surrounding the budgeting and funding of policies was key to understanding the salience of specific policy areas; for instance the role of EU structural funds in Welsh politics during the first few terms of the NAW. Speeches and memoirs also formed a key part of the secondary analysis of this thesis, particularly in relation to the discussions concerning personal competency in Chapters 4 & 5. When assessing personal competency and the particular narratives different sub-national elites adopted, manifestos being primarily compromised of a party's policy commitments, offered little insight here. Alternatively, speeches and memoirs here allowed an insight into the particular rhetoric and narratives mobilised by different subnational party leaders when addressing non-policy-based matters such as Rhodri Morgan's and Carwyn Jones's very different approach to the politicisation of the role of FM and the NAW/Senedd's relationship with Westminster. Party documents were also utilised where necessary for the analysis of subnational 'Party Management' in Chapter 6. Specifically, in the case of Wales where interviews in of themselves were not as insightful into Plaid's organisational reforms throughout devolution relative to SNP interviews, the internal report on the party's organisational structure *Moving Forward: Renewing Plaid for Wales* proved to be an invaluable alternative secondary source to ascertain the organisational reforms suggested (and eventually implemented) in the wake of Plaid's disastrous 2011 Welsh election.

However, similar to the research method of interviews, documentary analysis involving memoirs, party documents, manifestos, speeches, and policy announcements have inherent limitations which should be acknowledged and if possible minimised. Burnham et al (2008) explored this topic and created four criteria to evaluate such documents against authenticity; credibility; representativeness; and meaning. Admittedly, the first criterion is somewhat irrelevant to this study, as the focus is on modern political papers so it is unlikely there will be forgeries. However, the other three criteria are of more serious concern to this research. Greenstein and Immerman (1992) highlight these issues clearly in the case of a disagreement in 1965 over conflicting accounts between John F Kennedy and Dwight Eisenhower of a meeting that had occurred in 1961. The competing claims concerned whether Eisenhower had told Kennedy to intervene in Vietnam or not. In the meeting, notes were taken by four different attendees and each account differed; a reflection of their political loyalties. This called into question the credibility of all 4 accounts of the meeting and required any historian analysing the notes, to carefully cross-reference the notes to understand their meaning (Greening & Immerman, 1992:577-583). This example also draws attention to the problems surrounding representativeness, as if only one account of the meeting had survived, analysts (and for that matter the whole disciplines of history and political science) would have a vastly different understanding of the meeting. The point

Greenstein & Immerman wish to make is that political elites have a vested interest in creating particular perceptions favourable to their own interests/causes.

Such doubts concerning the reliability and interpretation of an individual document, speech, or memoir can often be resolved through data triangulation with interview data and source analysis. When discussing elite interviews in relation to intelligence studies, Davies (2001) argues that political scientists should use a combination of memoirs, documentary evidence and interviews to support their arguments, cross-referencing within and between different types of sources. Within the field of intelligence studies, Davies (2001:78) endorses this position that at least two independent forms of empirical evidence are necessary to treat any interview claim with any degree of trust. This thesis at every available opportunity will try to follow such a 'rule' when interview evidence is used, as it is necessary to verify when factual information is recorded in an interview. Equally, there will be an effort to corroborate conclusions drawn from secondary data with interview data. The hope is therefore, that the use of a variety of documentary evidence in memoirs, speeches, manifestos and other sources, in tandem with primary interview data will provide a concrete empirical foundation for this thesis.

Memoirs are an important source of evidence for this research (to name a few: Salmond, 2015; Morgan, 2017). Much like interviews, memoirs are typically written/produced wholly by the SNRP politicians and officials who are the subjects of research. Therefore, much like with the tendency of politicians in interviews, they tend to typically portray themselves as a selfless public servant – serving the national/regional interest in one form or another. This raises a question as to whether evidence from memoirs can be used to fairly identify whether the motivations of an actor were electoral, ideological or some other influence entirely. Gamble (2002:142) argues that the usefulness of political memoirs invariably differs and that some politicians' memoirs are purely a product of the author's self-interest. In using memoirs, this thesis will be sensitive to the fact that there is a high chance the author is portraying themselves in a deliberately positive narrative when recalling key political events and bear in mind that the reality of such events will have been far less 'rose-tinted' than their memoirs suggest.

SECONDARY DATA

While of course, primary data collected in the form of interviews and documentary analysis of speeches, memoirs, parliamentary plenaries, voting records, and party/government documents are essential to understanding the motivations and strategies that occurred at the elite level, secondary data relating to public perceptions is a key part of any Statecraft analysis. In simple terms, this data

allows us to observe if a particular strategy has had the desired response at the public level, allowing us to analyse the relationship between elite strategy and public discourse. The use of available secondary data in the form of public attitudes surveys, in particular the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSAS), the Welsh Election Study and the Scottish Election Study, were of instrumental importance in tracking Scottish and Welsh voters' perceptions of the devolved administration and Westminster's administration of the economy, public health and COVID. Furthermore, these surveys were important in understanding the differing perceptions of personal competency of Welsh and Scottish party leaders since the start of devolution, relative to general perceptions of competence. Secondary qualitative data available in the form of Ipsos Mori's Issues Index polls was also essential in the identification of the valence/salient issues in Wales and Scotland.

The use of statistics in this thesis are descriptive only and no advanced statistical analysis was undertaken. One limitation of this thesis is the imbalance between the quality and breadth of data in the two case studies of Wales and Scotland. For instance, when identifying the valence issue in Scotland, in addition to the issue index which asks voters in Scotland 'what is the most important issue in Britain today?' the SSAS insightfully collected data (almost yearly) in relation to voters' perceptions of what should be the Scottish Government's highest priority. This importantly allows us to see what Scottish voters specifically view as important for the Scottish government (not just politics in general), however, no such equivalent data exists in the case of Wales. Efforts were undertaken in such instances to obtain alternative supplementary data to try to address such an imbalance, in this case obtaining Welsh-only responses to the *other important issues* facing Britain today, as well *as the most important* issue. Undertaking such surveys was outside the scope of this thesis, particularly during COVID when in-person fieldwork that would achieve a credible high sample size, was largely out of the question. This is not to say the findings of the thesis are not useful but that such findings and assertions of this thesis could be more rigorously tested in further research, not limited by time constraints, funding and a global pandemic.

CHAPTER 4: GOVERNING COMPETENCE – SCOTLAND

INTRODUCTION

In the next two chapters, the attention will turn to Governing Competence. To Bulpitt, Governing Competence was the most fundamental function any party had to achieve to enter government (Bulpitt, 1986:22). For a party to be perceived by the electorate as possessing a necessary degree of Governing Competence, the party's leadership are required to adopt those policies which can be implemented readily and with little controversy (Buller and James, 2011:541). As outlined in Chapter 2, Bulpitt always asserted that at the national level of politics, a party's governing credentials are relative to their main opposition party's perceived competency. However, a key difference in dynamics at the devolved level is that the electorate's perception of devolved parties' fitness to govern is equally if not more so, determined by the perceived Governing Competency of Westminster administrations. Of course, this is not to say that the electorate's views concerning how competent the SNP and Plaid's unionist opponents at Cardiff Bay and Holyrood have no bearing upon SNRPs' own level of competency, but that the UK government's influence is far greater in determining public perceptions of devolved parties' competency, particularly when in devolved government. Equally, the chapter acknowledges the salient role in particular turbulent contexts whereby which voters attribute blame/credit not to particular parliaments but to 'external shocks/forces' such as a global financial crash or pandemics (Buller, 1999;2000). Acknowledging these key differences, 'Sub-national Statecraft' seeks to explore data concerning the relative perceptions of either government concerning the economy and identified valence/salient issues. Therefore, we would expect that when the UK government is perceived by the Welsh and Scottish electorate as having acted ineptly in their governance, the SNP and Plaid will enjoy a more prevalent perception of competency, especially if they are in devolved government themselves. In other words, the national governments in Wales and Scotland compete directly with Westminster for competency. However, a key question is how conscious are the political leaderships of the SNP and Plaid of this political dynamic of devolution? And if so, how successful have they been in utilising strategies to take advantage of the structure of devolution to further their own interests electorally?

Chapter 4 will begin by giving an overview of the structural context of devolution in both Scotland and Wales and the bearing this has upon Governing Competence. Chapter 4 will first outline how one of the fundamental assumptions of Statecraft, that being that structures are not just entities that constrain but also provide opportunities for actors to pursue strategies and achieve objectives, is of particular relevance to the devolved level of politics (Bulpitt, 1988:185). One key concept this chapter,

and indeed the thesis itself, wishes to contribute to the SNRP literature is the 'structural insulating framework'. In essence, the concept relates to how regional governments can use the multileveled structure of devolution to take credit in the form of issue ownership when positive policy outcomes occur but, more importantly, how parties can shift political blame upwards to Westminster when negative policy outcomes occur. Analysing the structural context of both Wales and Scotland, the chapters argue that the SNP have benefitted from operating in a context more favourable to garnering a perception of Governing Competence. To validate such an assertion, Chapter 4 will assess the SNP's success in creating an image of Governing Competence before, in the following chapter, assessing the reasons why Plaid has had a more trying time in cultivating such an image.

Analysing interview transcripts, media appearances and sessions at Holyrood, this chapter identifies that although most SNP politicians may be reserved in admitting the use of the 'insulating framework', it is still implicitly evident that the use of strategy has been a staple of the SNP's approach to garnering a perception of Governing Competence since 2007. Against the criteria of economic competence, which for proponents of Statecraft such as Bulpitt and Buller was the central foundation on which Governing Competence was built, the SNP upon the advent of devolution initially struggled. In the first period of 1999-2007, the SNP went through a transformative period in their economic agenda, seemingly yo-yo-ing between centre-left and centre-right economic agendas in an attempt to align with both Scottish voters and business alike. However, by the time of the financial crash of 2008, it became clear to the leadership that only the use of a Keynesian economic agenda would demonstrate competence in contrast to Westminster. With what limited macro-economic powers the first term SNP government had at their disposal, they adopted policies that they framed as efforts to offset the consequences of the crash and more importantly the negative impacts of antithetical policies of austerity being pursued by Westminster. This strategy of relating their economic policy to Westminster's, whether the policies' outcomes were positive or negative, strengthened the already pre-existing competitive dynamic between Holyrood and Westminster to be perceived as competent. As will be seen in the data utilised in this chapter, the SNP administrations have undoubtedly succeeded in this endeavour, being perceived as considerably more economically competent than Westminster and also more than their Scottish Labour predecessors. The vertical relationship of competency at the sub-national level, and how SNRP elites have been able to manipulate this to their own ends, therefore is a key neglected aspect of the SNRP literature.

The chapter will then go on to illustrate the importance of the valence issue in Scottish electoral politics. One obvious caveat in many (but not all) explanations of Scottish elections so far is the obvious

absence of academics identifying in any meaningful way what the valence issue is for Scottish voters (see most recently: Johns, 2021). Using available data from the issues index conducted by Ipsos Mori, the chapter explores how the SNP were able to similarly use the structural insulating framework in the salient policy areas of the management of the NHS and later the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so they were able to not only boost their governing credentials as the most competent party in Scotland to manage public health but also were able to deflect blame by characterising Conservatives at Westminster as inept when it came to the valence issue of the NHS's management. Finally, the chapter will assess the SNP's, or more specifically, John Swinney, Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon's personal ratings as competent politicians. Utilising available data from the Scottish Election Studies we can see that while John Swinney lacked the necessary degree of statesmanship to be viewed as 'a competent FM', Nicola Sturgeon and particularly Alex Salmond have been electoral assets to the SNP. While the saliency of personal competency at the elite level is clear such as in instances like 2011 when the SNP leadership opted for a strategy of putting 'Alex Salmond for First Minister' rather than the party's name on the ballot, data regarding the Conservative party leaders personal competency scores casts doubt on the ubiquity of personal competency in overall perceptions of sub-national party competency and voter choice.

STRUCTURES ENHANCING AGENCY – THE STRUCTURAL INSULATING FRAMEWORK

The electoral context an SNRP competes in is just one facet of the structural constraints SNRP leaderships must navigate. For both parties the most seemingly obvious constraint on both their policy creation and their decision-making if they are in/part of a devolved administration, is the superior national executive of Westminster. While the general direction since 1999 has been a gradual shift of power from Westminster to the devolved administrations, the UK government still reserves a whole host of primary legislative powers in the areas of defence, taxation and welfare (Devine, 2016:267). Additionally, the fact that Scotland and Wales are tied to the same currency as the rest of the UK, means both parties have had little influence in decisions relating to macro-economic policy when they have been in government (Ibid). In the case of the Welsh government, Cardiff have been given considerably less powers than their Scottish equivalents (e.g. tax-raising powers). Since 1999 there have been three Wales Acts (2006; 2014; 2017) which have all extended the powers of the NAW. There have also existed two Scotland Acts since 1999 (2012; 2016) which granted greater powers to Holyrood. However, devolution has always remained asymmetrical in its structure as, at every point since 1999, Scotland's legislature and executive have held a greater amount of relative power than Wales's devolved institutions. This has resulted in legislative limitations on what Welsh political parties can claim to the electorate they can deliver on within the Welsh devolution settlement, relative to

Scottish parties. However, what has been perceived as an explicitly constraining structure for SNRPs, in competing at a lower level within a multitiered political system and ultimately in only being able to create policy in certain limited areas, has also provided the parties with their greatest opportunity to electorally succeed (if utilised correctly).

As was discussed previously, Statecraft posits that Westminster elites will devolve decision-making to other institutions/levels of government only where they deem such decision-making powers to be politically problematic (Buller, 2000a:320). However, Bulpitt and Buller in giving analytical priority to the nation-state have only focused on the effects of 'hiving off' powers by Westminster elites, and not given attention to how those peripheral elites then go on to use such decision-making responsibilities. An often unexplored aspect of devolution is the idea that Westminster elites may have been receptive to ideas of devolution, not only to satiate demands of Scottish and Welsh self-government but also because elites believed the 'hiving off' of such powers allowed them to be rid of the responsibility of politically problematic policy areas (Buller, 2000a:320). As Lowndes & Gardner (2016:364) argue 'Devolution can be seen as a diversionary tactic', by further complicating and blurring the lines of governance responsibilities central government can 'distract' the electorate from 'negative policy outcomes such as public spending cuts'. In Bulpittian terms then, devolution can be seen as another attempt by the centre (alongside PFI, operational independence for the Bank of England, the increased use of NGOs) to re-impose the Dual Polity where Westminster 'hive off' those policy responsibilities for 'low politics', in the hope it can have greater relative autonomy of 'high politics' (e.g. macro-economics) and thus have a greater opportunity to demonstrate competence on the salient 'vote-winning' matters (Bulpitt, 1983). However, policy areas which Westminster perceive to be problematic, or with little voter salience at the national level, do not necessarily hold the same qualities at the sub-national level. In this sense, the creation of devolved governments, and the subsequent further transferal of powers since 1999, have provided a huge structural opportunity to SNRPs and, to a lesser extent all devolved parties, to demonstrate competence in office.

In the case of Plaid, from a Statecraft perspective, there have existed few opportunities for them to take advantage of the MLG structure of devolution, in only entering government for one term as a junior coalition party with Welsh Labour. In relation to Plaid's ability, when in office, to demonstrate competence through positive issue ownership, they were inhibited by two key factors. Firstly, the Welsh Government had no primary legislative power until 2011, having to consult Westminster concerning near enough all legislation (Wales Act, 1998; 2006). This severely limited any Welsh parties

in government prior to 2011, to meaningfully diverge in their policy from Westminster as a means to demonstrate competence. Secondly, the fact that Plaid only contributed 15 seats to the 'One Wales' coalition, compared to Labour's 26, meant that Plaid's influence in the coalition was limited. Plaid here suffered a similar fate to the Liberal Democrats in their coalition with the Conservatives at the national level, where their influence was 'squeezed', serving to only be the 'fall guy' when policy outcomes were negative (McAllister & Cole 2014:175-6). Having never occupied government as a majority or minority administration, Plaid has never received the opportunity to independently pursue policy and flaunt their governing credentials.

Unlike Plaid, the SNP have electorally succeeded, in part, due to the opportunity they have had to take ownership of those decision-making responsibilities devolved by Westminster, which were deemed controversial or too difficult to implement at a national level and succeeding in their execution at the sub-national level. An empirical example of this which shall be explored later in the chapter is the Scottish NHS. When Blair devolved the issue of health in the Scotland Act (1998), he and the party leadership believed they had rid themselves of (the Scottish) part of the responsibility for a contentious policy area. While the Scottish Labour Executive (SLE) in the first two terms of devolution felt constrained to pursue meaningfully different policy to UK Labour, so as not to create internal party contradictions over health policy, the SNP were free in 2007 to pursue meaningfully divergent NHS policy to Westminster. Secondary data on NHS satisfaction discussed later in the chapter, shows how the SNP were able to take advantage of a more ideologically homogenous electorate to adopt strongly supported NHS policies such as free prescriptions. This scenario is perfect for the SNP, when Westminster are unable to competently manage an area of policy and, in turn, externalise responsibility for it to Holyrood, only for the SNP administration to successfully implement policies in that area at the devolved level. This aids the SNP's two primary goals of winning elections and increasing the likelihood of achieving independence, as it highlights the SNP's capacity to govern competently, while simultaneously framing the union as flawed and Westminster as incompetent. Bulpitt did not explore this idea that Westminster elites at 'the centre' may sometimes misconstrue the complexity of policy areas and hive them off to 'the periphery' in the confidence that at the sub-national level, they will prove equally as problematic. However, as outlined in the instance of NHS policy, what may be a troublesome policy responsibility for Westminster, can often become an opportunity for actors at the sub-national level, due to a less constraining structural context, to prove their Governing Competence.

However, such a beneficial scenario does not always occur. So how do devolved administrations then utilise the policy areas hived off by Westminster, where policy is practically impossible to implement or is too politically controversial to pursue? Here the logic of Peter Burnham's (2001) and Buller's (2000a) suggestions that 'the centre' can hive off tasks of government to externalise responsibility and thus become immune to political blame, can be reversed. While the sub-national administrations of course can't return those devolved decision-making powers which prove to be onerous, there is no reason, if policy outcomes are negative, blame for such decisions cannot be redirected back up to Westminster. Buller's arguments in favour of Statecraft have always stressed the point, that Westminster administrations externalise responsibility and become absolved of political blame when powers are 'hived off' to other levels/institutions (Buller and James, 2011:541). However, what such an argument fails to account for is the possibility that responsibility can be forced down to a lower tier of government, but importantly it can also be *redirected* back up to the national level. Put another way, SNRPs are perfectly positioned to use the multileveled structure of UK politics, in a fashion akin to how Westminster administrations have used higher European institutions, as a structurally-constraining framework to 'discipline expectations' and 'insulate' itself from criticism, deferring blame onto a higher level of government when policy outcomes are unfavourable (Buller, 2000b:320).

This idea has been touched upon in Sandra León & Lluís Orriols's (2019) paper, which looked at the responsibility dynamics in devolved contexts. Arguing due to the UK's more complex institutional structures, voters affiliated with certain parties would be more likely to blame or credit the different levels of government in Wales and Scotland. However, while a useful exploration of a neglected concept of blame avoidance within the devolved context, the paper has three primary limitations. Firstly, there is no exploration of the precise mechanisms by which agents within devolved governments can deflect blame for negative policy outcomes. Secondly, related to this, the study only analyses the credit/blame attribution amongst voters concerning the NHS, a policy area that for most of the devolution period played second fiddle in salience to the economy for voters (see: 'The Valence Issue'). Equally, the selection of public levels of satisfaction with the NHS is a strange choice to test their hypothesis that in policy areas where it is unclear where responsibility lies, politicians may be able to benefit more from structural opportunities of blame avoidance, as health policy is one of the more clearly defined areas of devolved power. A more insightful analysis of blame avoidance strategies would be in policy areas where Westminster and devolved governments both hold significant responsibility (e.g. economic policy).

In the case of Plaid, they were junior partners in a coalition with Welsh Labour whose counterparts concurrently occupied office at Westminster for 3 out of 4 years of their time in office. This made it difficult for Plaid to politically attack 'the centre' for negative policy outcomes, as to do so would be to attack their coalition partners. Even after their coalition with Labour, when Plaid were free to criticise the Conservatives at Westminster, the party was outcompeted in using such a strategy by a WLG keen to insulate themselves, while concurrently incriminating the Conservatives at Westminster. However, unlike Plaid, the SNP in government have been very successful in utilising this strategy of insulating itself from criticism, by blaming Westminster for negative policy outcomes. The challenge the SNP leadership faced once entering power as a minority government, was the need to prove their competency with the devolved powers at their disposal at Holyrood, while simultaneously highlighting the flaws and constraints of devolution, as to promote independence (Cuthbert & Cuthbert, 2009:105). The SNP were able to resolve such a predicament by pursuing a strategy of pinning negative outcomes on Westminster and presenting independence as the only plausible way to circumvent Westminster's incompetence. James Mitchell describes such an argument as 'Devolution without Self-Government': as long as Holyrood is financially reliant on Whitehall, Scottish interests can never be fully realised (Mitchell, 2011:35).

Therefore, Bulpitt's assertion that structures are not necessarily constraining in character and can provide opportunities for actors to realise governing objectives appears of the utmost importance to understanding sub-national politics. This strategy is utilised by the SNP, Welsh Labour and to a lesser degree Plaid when in government, to highlight positive policy outcomes as a consequence of their *divergent approach* to Westminster, but equally bringing attention to negative policy outcomes *as a consequence* of Westminster (or in Welsh Labour's case just the Conservatives at Westminster) as a blame avoidance strategy, shall be referred to as the 'structural insulating framework'.

THE STRUCTURAL CONTEXT OF SCOTLAND

In the case of Scotland, the SNP have been in power from 2007 to 2021 and in this period have been unsupported by an official coalition partner (although in certain instances have relied on Scottish Green party support to pass budgets/legislation). This has allowed the SNP to use 'governmental office to promote its primary goal, by relaying the impression of governmental competence which would boost support for the SNP and independence' (McAgnus, 2016:643). The governing strategy that SNP administrations have adopted to promote their governing credentials, is that when Scottish government policy outcomes are positive they will often frame this success relative to

Westminster, hoping to highlight how the UK government has not achieved such success in the same area. In the case of when negative policy outcomes in Scotland occur, the SNP often suggest they are not accountable due to the limits on their legislative capacity, and that with what limited devolved powers they possess, they are trying to limit the damage being imposed by Westminster. As the devolved Scottish government does not possess full legislative control of all aspects of Scottish policy, SNP administrations have something of a blank cheque in being able to frame the UK government when negative political outcomes occur. As Chris Hanlon (Interview, 2021), the former Policy Development Convenor for the SNP remarked "we do try to capitalise on it [negative Westminster policy outcomes] and it has certainly helped us… there's an old Garfield cartoon where he says if you want to look thin, stand next to a hippopotamus and certainly, if you want to be viewed as a credible party of government, stand next to Boris Johnson and the Conservatives".

In the next three sections, the thesis explores two central questions: 1. how prevalent is the use of this strategy by the SNP?; 2. how well does this strategy serve the SNP in the three specific categories of competence: 'Economic Management'; 'The Valence Issue'; 'Personal Competency'?

ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT

The most fundamental cornerstone of any party's perception of Governing Competence in stable political circumstances will be its economic management, as 'it is this more general reputation that will be decisive at the ballot box' (Buller & James, 2012:541). Therefore, it would be logical to first assess the SNP's use and efficacy of the structural insulating framework in the area of macroeconomics. In terms of taxation, the Scottish government between 1999 and 2012 had very limited powers only being able to vary income tax by plus or minus 3 pence for every pound. Following the Scotland Act (2012), the Scottish government was allowed to vary income tax by a margin of 10 pence in the pound. Following the Scotland Act (2016), the Scottish government was given full control of income tax on non-savings and non-dividend income. Despite the general trajectory of a transfer of macro-economic powers from Westminster to Holyrood, over half of all taxes in Scotland still remain under the direct control of Westminster in 2021. The fact the majority of macro-economic levers have remained under the direct control of Westminster since 1999, has allowed the SNP since 2007 to exploit blame avoidance strategies; specifically helping the SNP combat unionist parties' criticisms of the SNP's budgetary spending since their election in 2007. This allows the SNP, when criticised over their shortfalls in spending on policy areas such as education, to easily point the finger at Westminster; either claiming the Scottish government is only able to spend the money afforded to them by the

Barnett formula, or that targets and policy outcomes have not been met due to the need to offset harmful Westminster policies in Scotland.

IN OPPOSITION 1999-2007

In terms of economic policy, the SNP underwent a transformative period while in opposition at Holyrood. Originally in the first devolved elections in 1999, the party stood on a platform which emphasised its pro-public expenditure credentials, criticising New Labour as the party of low tax and consequently lower investment in public services (Cuthbert & Cuthbert, 2007:109). As the SNP's 1999 manifesto stated: 'New Labour has taken on Tory principles. Tax cuts, rather than public services, are New Labour's priority' (SNP, 1999). However, following the SNP's defeats in the 1999 and 2003 Scottish elections, the party leadership became acutely aware that the SNP had something of an anti-business reputation and sought to undermine this by the adoption of a distinctly more neo-liberal economic agenda. Such an economic vision was thought of as far from Margaret Thatcher's neo-liberal agenda in the 1980s, as the SNP did not seek to privatise any of the sizable state-owned industries of the time, such as Scottish water or healthcare provision. Instead, the emphasis was on lowering taxes to make Scotland more competitive and provide economic growth by attracting more capital investment. In the context of the increasing globalisation of capital, the SNP leadership sought to pursue an economic vision close to that of the 'Celtic Tiger' that had been adopted in Ireland to lower taxes (specifically corporation tax), as a means to deliver 'accelerated rates of economic growth through developing, attracting and retaining mobile capital and labour' (Scottish Government, 2007:6). These efforts to woo business seemingly paid off in the fact that in the 1999 election campaign, 100 prominent Scottish business leaders signed a publicised open letter supporting Scottish Labour, but by 2003 only 17 of the same leaders still endorsed Labour's economic agenda (Cuthbert & Cuthbert, 2007:110). The SNP's strategy at this point was very much reactionary, orientated around how they could damage the SLE's economic credentials while simultaneously presenting economic policies that would increase trust in the SNP amongst business and voters.

On the flip side of this coin, the Scottish Labour Executive struggled with maintaining their image of competence, acutely so in their 2nd term of 2003-2007. One of the key prerequisites for exploiting the structural insulating framework of devolution is that the party in Westminster must be your political opponents. In the entire time Scottish Labour was in office at Holyrood, the UK Labour Party also held office at Westminster. This meant that the Scottish Labour Party leadership were unable to shift blame onto the higher level of government when negative economic policy outcomes occurred

in Scotland, as to do so would be to attack their UK colleagues. The primary economic problem that troubled Scottish Labour in their two terms in power, was the relatively slow growth (and the sometimes outright decline) of the Scottish economy. As the Quarterly Economic Commentary report concluded, 'Over the period 1995 to the third quarter of 2002, Scotland's economy grew at only two-thirds of the rate of the UK, a gap of 6 percentage points in total…. from 2000 to 2002 the UK grew by 3% more than Scotland' (McLaren, 2003:43-44). Of course, most of the economic levers that could have combated Scotland's relatively slow economic growth compared to the UK resided with the Westminster government. This left Scottish Labour vulnerable to attack from the SNP who could claim that, if elected, they would seek greater powers for Holyrood in order to halt the economic decline of Scotland. As stated in the SNP's 2003 manifesto 'Unless Scotland can start taking key decisions in Scotland, our economic decline will continue. To reverse that decline the SNP believes we must address the single core problem facing the Scottish economy - the limited powers of the Scottish Parliament' (SNP, 2003).

This was a line Scottish Labour could not adopt, as to do so would be implicitly suggesting that Labour at Westminster were at least partially responsible for Scotland's poor economic growth. Labour was also further impaired by the structure of devolution, as with the advent of a semi-autonomous Scottish Labour Party in 1999 which could pursue different policies to that of Westminster within those devolved powers, created public ideological rifts over economic policy between a more distinctly collectivist SLE and the 'Third way' of New Labour at Westminster. Against such a backdrop, Scottish Labour increasingly found itself at odds with Blair and Brown over the funding of diverging policies north of the border such as 'top-up fees' (additional entrance fees for university) and free prescriptions (Faucher-King & Le Galés, 2010:67). The perception here was very much of a harmful division between Scottish Labour and UK Labour, rather than in Wales where Welsh Labour policy divergence was viewed as a defiant Welsh Labour standing up for Wales and putting 'clear red waters' between themselves and UK Labour (Morgan, 2017).

IN GOVERNMENT (PRE-REFERENDUM) 2007-2014

Perhaps unsurprisingly Scottish Labour did not remain in power after the 2007 election and the SNP were elected as a minority government. This resulted in the first time, since the advent of devolution, that opposing parties had held office at Holyrood and Westminster. Not only did this allow the SNP to pursue a differing economic agenda in 'Neo-liberalism with a heart' (Cuthbert & Cuthbert, 2009:109) but also opened the door for a Scottish administration to shift political blame upwards to Westminster when negative economic policy outcomes occurred. Upon first entering government, the SNP administration adopted several economic policies which sought to garner both the trust of business

and voters. In terms of improving their economic credentials with Scottish business, the SNP delivered a bonus scheme to reduce or remove rates bills for approximately 150,000 small business properties in Scotland (Ibid:110). In terms of the regular voter, the SNP adopted two key policies in their first term in government which sought to garner economic trust. The SNP successfully negotiated a 2-3 year council tax freeze with Scottish councils, reducing the monthly outgoings of Scottish voters during an economically squeezed context after the financial crash (Ibid). More significantly, the SNP were able to claim they had successfully offset some of the worst negative impacts of the 2008 financial crash, by introducing an additional £293 million of capital spending going towards schools, colleges, universities, roads and infrastructure capital projects – with £120 million of this sum for the affordable housing investment programme (Ibid: 113).

The financial crash somewhat toned down the neo-liberal elements of the SNP's economic vision of their 2007 manifesto. As Gordon Brown summarised the de facto UK political consensus: 'laissez-faire has had its day… the idea that markets were efficient and could work things out by themselves are gone' (Winter & Watt, 2009). While the 2007 manifesto earned the SNP in opposition a necessary degree of economic competence amongst voters and business in the run-up to the election, the adoption of distinctly Keynesian economic policies post-2008 was aimed to demonstrate the SNP were playing an active role in trying to offset the negative economic impacts of the crash. However, with the SNP now in office, they were able to use the mechanism of government and specifically the structural insulating framework to pin the negative economic impacts of the financial crash (e.g. unemployment) on Westminster. Equally with the adoption of a more Keynesian economic approach with what limited economic powers Holyrood held, the SNP were able to attack both the Conservatives and Labour for their support of austerity (in the case of Labour, 'austerity-lite'). As can be seen in the following FMQ exchange between Alex Salmond and the then leader of Scottish Labour Johann Lamont in 2012, when the SNP's governing record concerning unemployment was attacked, Salmond was keen to highlight the SNP's inability with the powers they possessed to meaningfully change rates of employment. After being accused of overseeing 200 Scottish job losses per day for 3 months by Lamont, Salmond replied:

"These unemployment figures are extremely serious… but Johann Lamont should also understand that we do not have at the present moment in Scotland the ability to increase demand in the Scottish economy. That power lies with the Westminster government, which is exactly why… [I] over the last month have repeatedly called for the UK government to change economic direction in order to give us either that increase in demand now or the economic tools to do the job for Scotland"

Lamont: *"Last summer he claimed then that the unemployment figures demonstrate, and I quote, 'that the economic policy of the Scottish government is delivering and is continuing to create and safeguard jobs across our communities'. So when the figures are good he's fabulous, when the figures are bad, where is that alibi?"*

Salmond: *"The people of Scotland know where the economic power lies at the present moment, which is precisely why they are demanding the economic powers from Westminster… See we believe that Scotland needs investment in the economy now. That is precisely why… we have been jointly calling for the change in economic costs from the UK government which will allow us to deploy these funds. While we have been calling for that change of course, naturally the UK Labour party have decided to back the Tories pursuit of austerity".*

(Scottish Parliament, 2012)

This exchange highlights two key competency dynamics. 1. When Scottish unemployment figures would typically tarnish Holyrood's governing record, the SNP are able to use the structural insulating framework to deflect political blame, claiming that only Westminster had the necessary economic powers to take corrective action. 2. The exchange illustrates how opposition parties in Scotland were aware that the SNP were able to take credit for positive policy outcomes, which they were only partially responsible for, but also blame Westminster in the same policy areas when outcomes were negative. However, the question then becomes who did the Scottish electorate favour in terms of the debate showcased above? Did the use of the structural insulating framework between 2007 and 2014 work effectively in terms of heightening and protecting the SNP's reputation for economic competence? Was there a discernible difference in the perceived economic competency of the Scottish Labour Executives (1999-2007) and the SNP administrations (2007-2021) thereafter?

Unfortunately, the SSAS's question regarding economic competency only began in 2006 (see Figures 10 & 11), not allowing a meaningful comparison of the perceived economic competency of the SNP and SLE. However, another SSAS survey concerning the levels of 'trust to work in Scotland's best interests' by the respective bodies of Holyrood and Westminster began in 2000, allowing for such a comparison between the two governments. Figure 9 clearly shows, irrespective of who is in office at Holyrood, the Scottish electorate has consistently trusted the Scottish government to act in the 'best interests' of Scotland when compared to the UK government. Firstly, relative to Westminster, SNP administrations in their time in office at Holyrood, have on average been judged by 65% of Scots to

act in Scotland's 'best interests' compared to an average of only 24% who believed Westminster to act in 'Scotland's best interests' in the same period.

Figure 9: How much do you trust the Scottish and UK government to work in Scotland's best interests? (%)
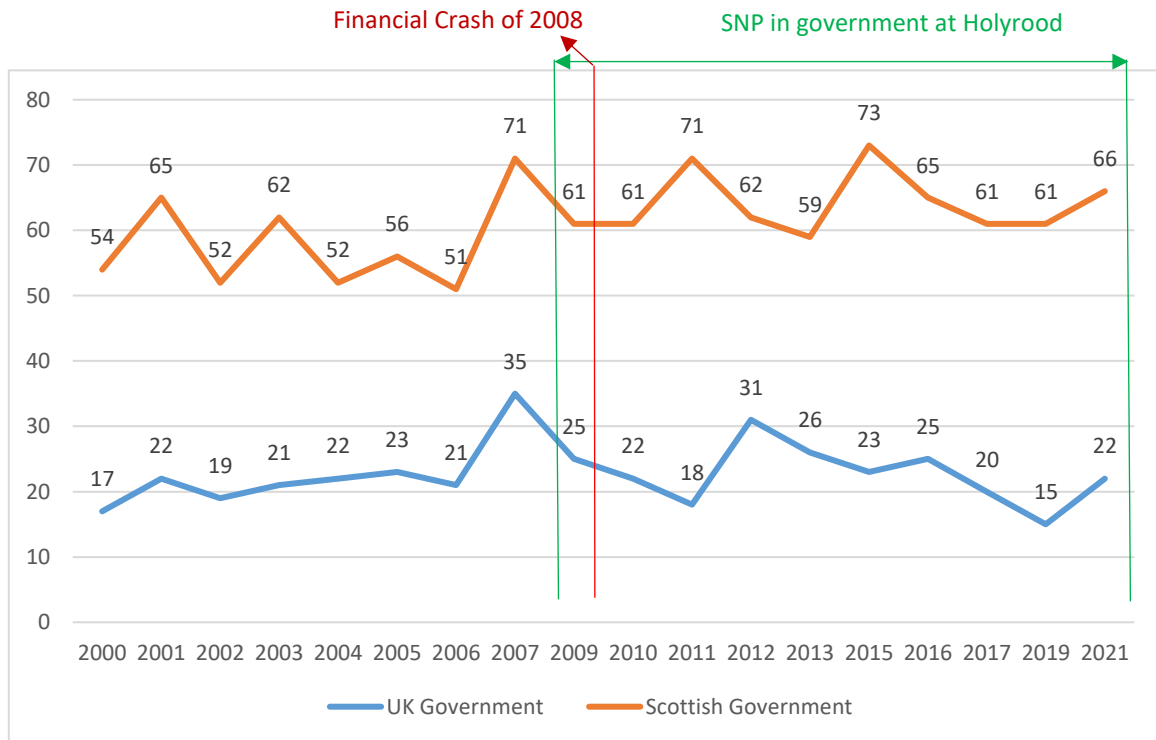
Source: ScotCen Social Research: Scottish Social Attitudes 2000-2021

On first glance, Figure 9 might lead us to conclude that the competitive vertical relationship of competency is a feature of multileveled governance that both Scottish Labour and SNP administrations have been beneficiaries of. However, if we look at the average percentage of voters who trusted the SLE between 2000 and 2007, compared to the SNP government between 2007 and 2021, there is a clear disparity in favour of the SNP. On average 56% of Scottish voters, between 2000 and 2006, trusted the incumbent Labour administrations at Holyrood to act in Scotland's 'best interests'. This compared to a significantly higher average of 65% of Scottish voters who believed the SNP government to have acted in Scotland's 'best interests' between 2007 and 2021. It would appear that the electorate's perception of the SNP's fitness to govern has benefitted hugely from having the opposing parties of Labour (2007-2010) and the Conservatives (2010-2021) in government at Westminster. This allowed the SNP to use the mechanism of Scottish government and turn Westminster into something of a scapegoat in order to achieve a more widespread perception of themselves as an economically competent administration. However, the preceding SLE was not afforded such a useful mechanism to boost their own level of competency and trust amongst the

electorate. In holding power both at Westminster and Holyrood, when negative policy outcomes occurred between 1999 and 2007, Scottish Labour could not take advantage of the structural insulating framework to use Westminster as a fall guy and boost their competency, as to do so would be to attack their own party.

IN GOVERNMENT (POST-REFERENDUM) 2014-2021

As we can see the SNP leadership have been effective in taking advantage of the vertical and competitive dynamic in competency between Holyrood and Westminster. Utilising this dynamic, the SNP have portrayed economic successes in Scotland as snapshots of what a prosperous independent Scotland would look like, while simultaneously framing negative economic outcomes as a consequence of a broken Westminster system that places legislative constraints on the SNP's economic agenda. This strategy has served the party well, but many commentators doubted after the SNP were elected to office for their third consecutive term in 2016, whether such a strategy would 'wash' with voters. The logic here was that the SNP, in now firmly being a party of government at Holyrood, would have to answer for the shortcomings in their own governing record, as opposed to always shifting the blame onto Westminster. However, in an economically challenging environment in the aftermath of Brexit and COVID-19, there appears to be no let-up in the use of such a strategy.

One example of this was in 2017 when the Scottish Government's record on taxation was brought into question by the Scottish Conservatives. Having originally supported lower rates of income tax for the highest band of earners, the SNP changed its stance on taxation with the highest earners to pay an extra £6 of tax per week. As Ruth Davidson asked at FMQ's:

"The SNP told us that lower taxes would send the message that Scotland is open for business. Now, that same SNP wants to put business taxes up. The SNP then told us that higher rates would send the wrong message for indigenous businesses and businesses coming to Scotland. Now, that wrong message is the SNP's only message. The SNP told us that business tax cuts would protect Government revenue because they would drive economic growth. Now it says that the opposite is true. The SNP used to get it—why not now?"

(Scottish Parliament, 2017)

This is an interesting exchange as it seemingly illustrates how the unionist opposition at Holyrood are aware of the advantage SNRPs, like the SNP, have in not being primarily defined in relation to the left-right continuum. In other words, opposition parties attempted to criticise the SNP for what has been one of the SNP's major electoral advantages in Statecraft terms; their 'instrumental use of ideology'. When speaking to Scottish business, the party can boast its pro-business credentials in

macroeconomics while, when discussing policies in relation to low-income families, they can boast of their commitment to not increase income tax for lower bands. Nonetheless, Ruth Davidson in this exchange tried to paint such flexibility in left-right terms as ideological flip-flopping. Sturgeon responded:

'I have been very clear that the Government will not increase income tax rates... I am equally clear that, given the pressure on public services as a result of Westminster Tory austerity, it would be wrong to cut taxes for the top 10 per cent of income earners. We will not do that either... I cannot believe that Ruth Davidson has come to the chamber today to talk about tax cuts for the rich after the Resolution Foundation said just this week that Westminster Tory tax policy is going to make the poorest quarter of ... households up to 15% worse off and "the highest quarter, 5% better off. The Resolution Foundation said that there will be "the largest increase in inequality" since the days of Margaret Thatcher'.

(Scottish Parliament, 2017)

Here we clearly see how when a traditionally harmful decision by any government, to U-turn on a policy would negatively impact the image of a government, the SNP are able to deflect criticism onto the higher level of government in Westminster and portray themselves as protectors of the Scottish interest, from a Conservative government hell-bent on austerity. This is a pattern common in the SNP leadership's media appearances and proceedings at Holyrood, that when criticised by the Scottish Conservatives, the counter from the SNP is seldom directly in relation to the Scottish Conservatives, but the reply is always related to their Westminster counterparts. Additionally, to follow up the blame avoidance of the structural insulating framework, the SNP will claim positive issue ownership, usually comparing the positive impact of the SNP's divergent economic policy to those negative outcomes in England. As seen in Sturgeon's later response from the same debate:

'We have the most competitive business rates regime in the whole UK, with 100,000 small businesses having been lifted out of business rates altogether... the employment level is rising much faster than it is in the rest of the UK. We are also the best-performing part of the UK outside Southeast England for inward investment. Those are the success stories of the Scottish economy, and we will continue to invest in the success of our economy. We will also protect our public services and those on low incomes from Tory Westminster austerity.'

(Scottish Parliament, 2017)

We can see in such exchanges the SNP, ostensibly, instrumentally uses a left-wing ideology in combination with the structural insulating framework as a strategy to put down unionist elites at Holyrood. However, how effective is such a strategy in forming a perception of economic prudence amongst the Scottish electorate? In terms of economic management, two useful surveys were conducted by ScotCen on the electorate's perceptions of which parliament was to be 'credited' or 'blamed' for the 'strengthening' or 'weakening' of the economy. If we look at the data presented in Figure 10, we can discern that Scottish voters have consistently been more likely to 'credit' the Scottish Government, over the UK Government, with 'the strengthening' of the Scottish economy since 2006. By the same token, Figure 11 clearly shows that Scottish voters have consistently been more likely to 'blame' the UK Government over the Scottish Government for 'the weakening' of the Scottish economy since 2006.

Figure 10: 'Who is credited for the perceived strengthening of the economy/standard of living over the past 12 months? (%)
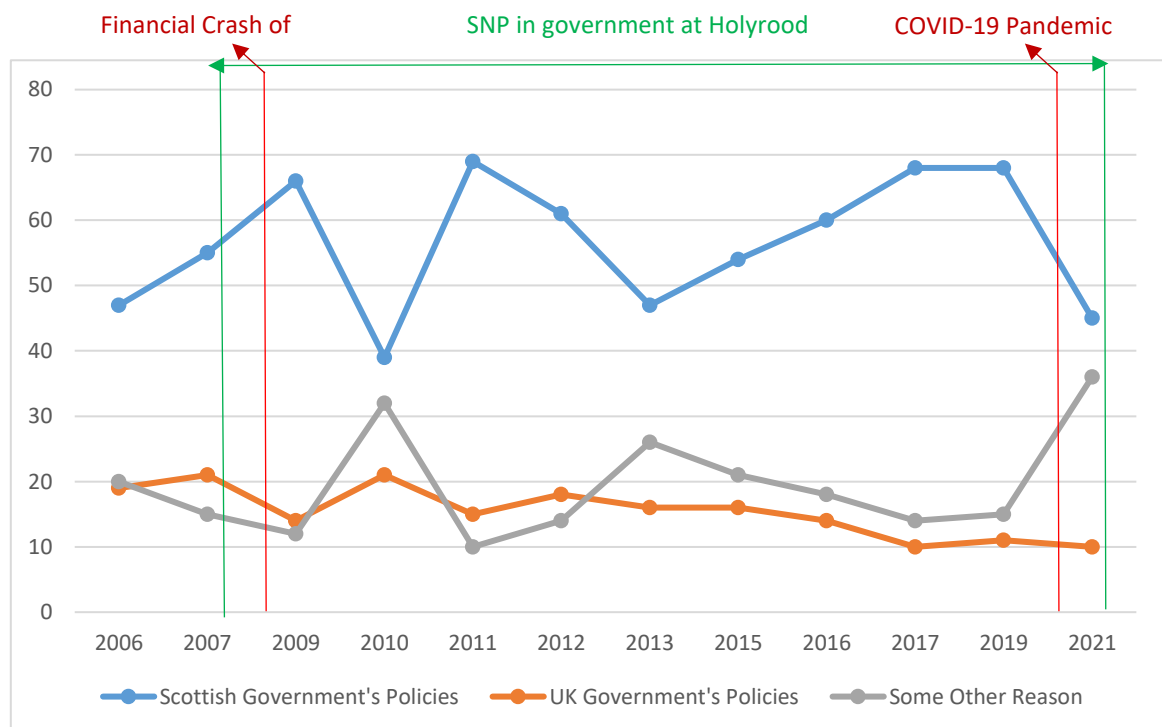
Source: ScotCen Social Research - Scottish Social Attitudes 2006-2021

Figure 11: 'Who is to blame for the weaker economy/standard of living over the past 12 months?' (%)
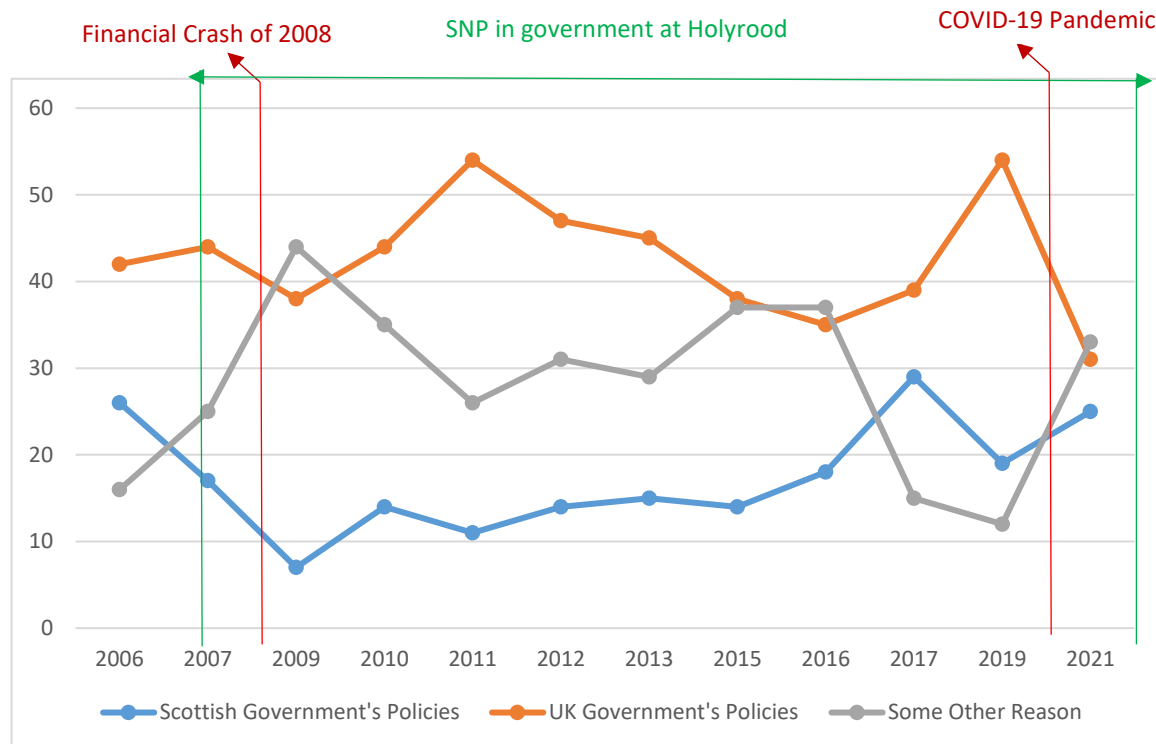
Source: ScotCen Social Research - Scottish Social Attitudes 2006-2021

*Question was not asked in 2008, 2014 and 2018

Outside of the obvious conclusion that the SNP government have regularly been viewed as the more competent in their economic management relative to Westminster since 2007, there are two more implicit conclusions to be drawn from the data. Firstly, the data in Figures 10 & 11 when compared, supports the idea of a vertical multileveled competition for competency between Holyrood and Westminster. For instance, we can see that when Scottish voters were most willing to 'credit' the Scottish government with the strengthening of the economy in 2011, it was simultaneously the same year in which the highest percentage of voters were pointing the finger at Westminster for any perceived weakening of the economy. The correlation between blaming Westminster and accrediting Holyrood is uniform and clearly evident in the graphs - with the exceptions of 2010 and 2021/22 (Figure 10) and 2009, 2016, 2021/22 (Figure 11). These anomalies can largely be accredited to the third option on the questionnaire of 'some other reason'. In Figure 10, the only times there were significant drops in the number of Scottish voters who believed the Scottish government to be responsible for improvements in the economy, there was simultaneously a spike in those who believed the economy had strengthened due to 'some other reason'. The 2010 anomaly to the general rule of 'Holyrood vs Westminster' vertical competition can be seen as a reflection of the recession

being officially deemed as over in the media in early 2010. Voters believed improvements in global markets were the cause of the improving Scottish economy, therefore reducing the number of respondents accrediting Holyrood or Westminster.

Secondly, the anomaly of 2021 was due to the COVID pandemic where voters were seemingly aware that both governments, in economic terms, were at the mercy of the pandemic's impact on global markets. In terms of Figure 11, the reduction in those blaming Holyrood or Westminster for a worsening economy and the large increase of respondents blaming 'some other reason' in 2009 can be ascribed to the global financial crash in the previous year (when the survey had not been conducted). The 3rd anomaly in 2016, can be ascribed to the impact of the Brexit referendum vote in the same year which saw 'some other reason' as the highest recorded response.

What is clear to observe is that the SNP in government have been successful in presenting themselves as competent managers of the Scottish economy, and are very much willing to take issue ownership of the economic policies that they can readily succeed with. Simultaneously, the SNP have been very successful in their blame avoidance, framing Westminster as the 'fall guy' for negative economic outcomes in Scotland. If we look at the average percentage of respondents willing to accredit Westminster since 2006 for any perceived strengthening of the economy, we can see a general trend of decline – falling from an average of just below 20% pre-2010 to an average of just above 10% post-2017. Equally, we can see that while the percentage of people accrediting the Scottish government for perceived improvements in the economy does somewhat yo-yo, they always considerably outweigh those willing to credit Westminster. The Scottish government continues to be effective in taking credit for positive policy outcomes, consistently receiving anywhere between 30% and 40% more credit than Westminster. However, the data relating to who is to blame for the perceived weakening of the economy paints a less clear picture. This data shows that in their first two terms in office (2007-2016), the SNP administration was only blamed on average by 14% of Scottish voters as responsible for perceived downturns in the economy. However, by their third term in office, an average of 24% of voters blamed the Scottish government. This would suggest that while the SNP continue to benefit from taking credit for the positive policy outcomes, the tactic of pinning negative policy outcomes on Westminster is perhaps less effective than it once was. This most likely being a consequence of over a decade in government and the fact that, since 2007 the Scottish government has slowly but surely acquired more control over macro-economic policy through the various Scotland Acts.

THE VALENCE ISSUE

As discussed in Chapter 2, one of the shortcomings of Buller & James's (2011) operationalisation of Governing Competence was its emphasis on the supremacy of economic issues in a party's perception of competency. While the thesis agrees in a more politically stable context this is true, in more politically turbulent times, non-strictly economic issues may become the key determinants in voters' perceptions of Governing Competence. Issues such as the management of the NHS and COVID-19, have become the supreme valence issues by which governments will be assessed as 'fit to govern' on. We may understand both the running of an effective NHS and during the latter part of this analysis, the reduction in the number of COVID cases and deaths, as 'goals that nearly everyone shares' and consequently are, by necessity, valence issues in that they "involve comparative judgements about party performance in areas on which public opinion is skewed heavily towards 'good' outcomes" (Clarke et al, 2004:23). While of course such valence issues still have an economic dimension to their impact, they encompass significant political debates/aspects that are not economic. It might also be noted that even in more harmonious times, there tends to exist a secondary issue to the economy (usually due to political narratives created by parties) which is still influential in determining votes.

Therefore, it seems essential to identify which issues were the most important to Scottish voters in the period of analysis and then assess the electorate's perception of the Scottish government in this policy area. In the case of Scotland, the SSAS and Ipsos Mori have each carried out surveys which have helped in identifying what the key valence issues were for Scottish voters between 2004 and 2021. In Figure 12, Ipsos Mori asked voters (in May of every year*) 'what they believed to be the most important issue facing Britain today?

Figure 12: Scottish perceptions of the most important issues facing Britain today?
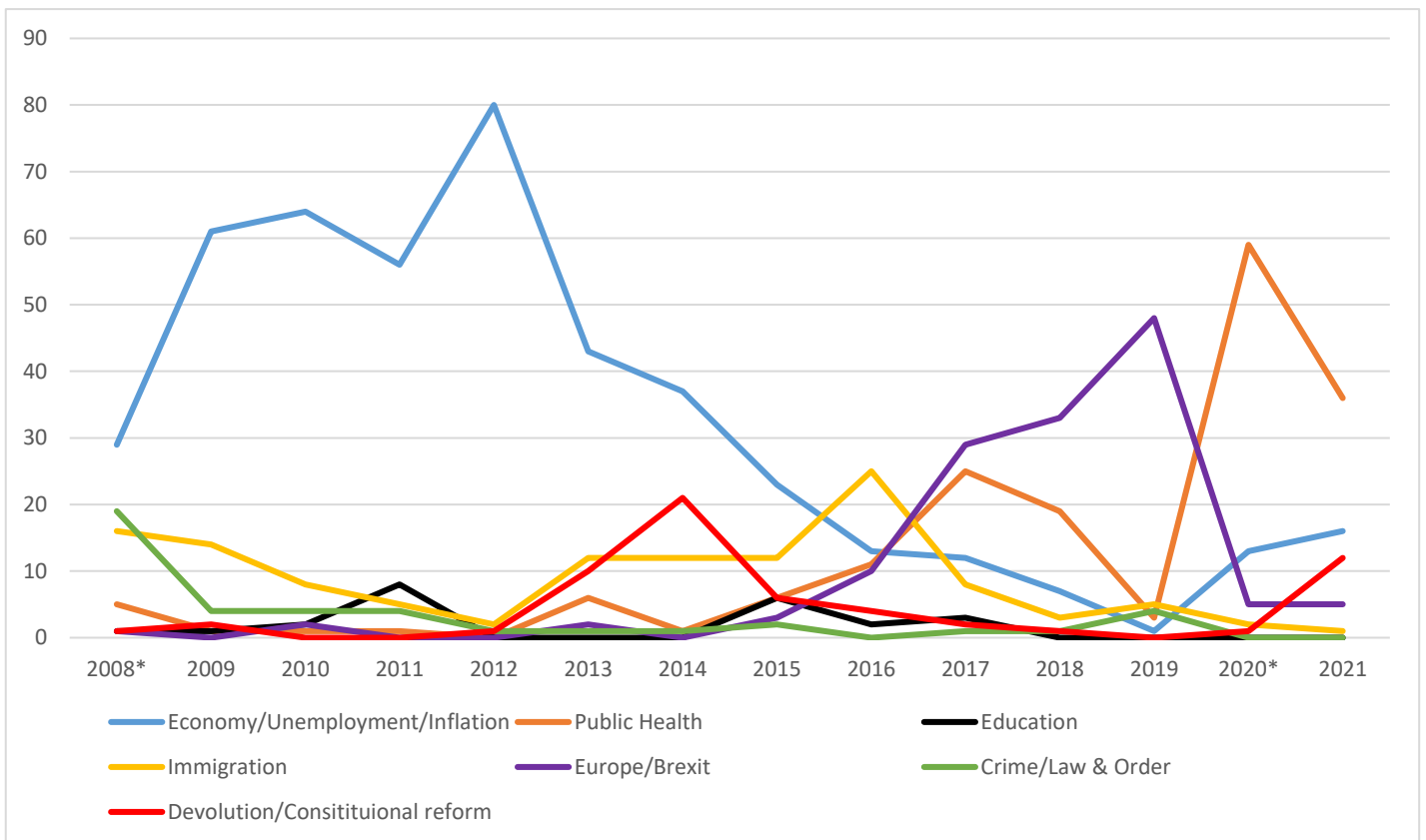
Source: IPSOS MORI Issues Index 2008-2021

*In 2008 and 2020 issues index were not conducted in May, so June's were used instead.

Figure 12 paints a clear picture that Scottish voters between 2008 and 2015 very much viewed the economy and related matters of unemployment and inflation as their paramount political concerns. However, from 2016 onwards the economy lost its electoral salience as Brexit and then COVID-19/Public Health became the key issues for voters. Unfortunately, Ipsos Mori's recording of Scottish-only responses to the issues index only began in 2008, which does not allow for an analysis of the SNP's handling of valence issues before 2008. However, the SSAS conducted a similar survey starting much earlier in 2004, which asked Scottish voters a slightly different question: 'What should be the Scottish government's highest priority?'. This changes the nature of voters' responses as it implicitly asks the voter to focus on the issues that are within the Scottish Government's purview, unlike the Ipsos Mori responses which may pertain to issues outside the scope of Holyrood. Figure 13 shows the results of the SSAS below.

Figure 13: What should be the Scottish Government's highest priority? % (2004-2021)
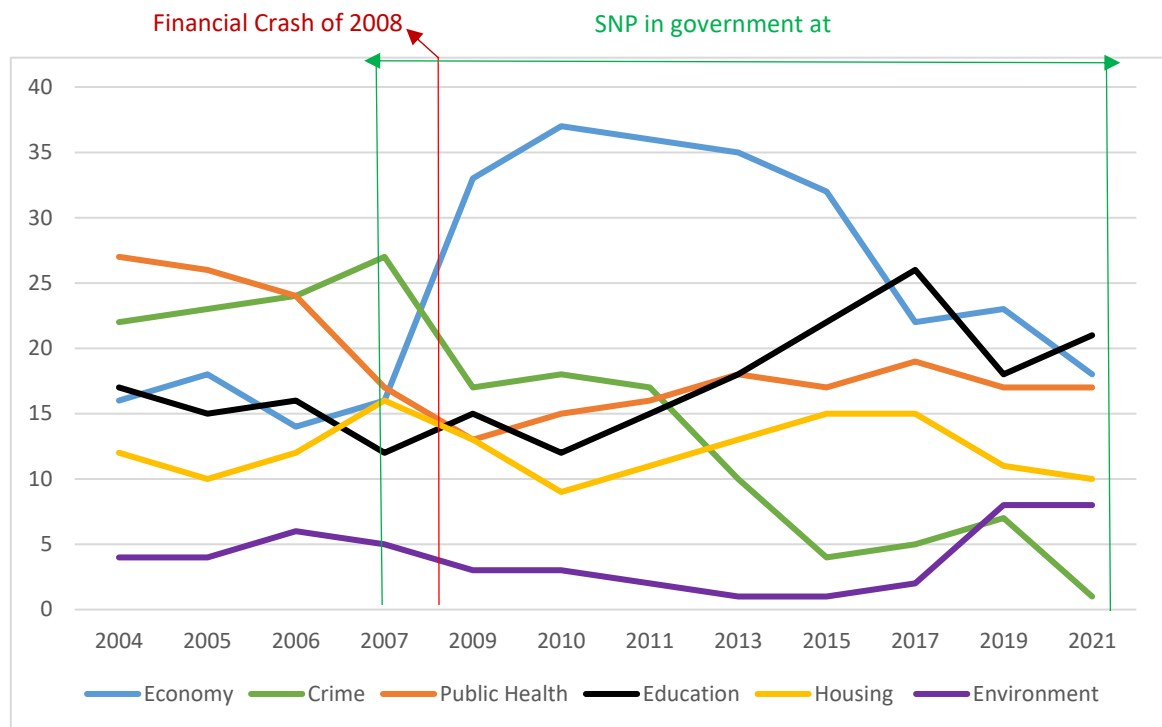
Source: ScotCen Social Research – Scottish Social Attitudes 2004-2021

One of the most striking observations in Figure 13, not apparent in Figure 12, is how the economy only becomes a priority for voters in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. Prior to 2008, the devolved policy areas of public health and crime jostled for importance for Scottish voters. However, despite the difference in the focus of the questions posed by the Ipsos Mori and SSAS survey, Figure 13 nonetheless corroborates the aforementioned findings of Figure 12. We see that between 2008 and 2016 voters were chiefly concerned with economic issues, but thereafter the economy lost its place as the most salient issue for voters. While Europe and Brexit were not options for respondents in the SSAS, we can reasonably assume that the dramatic fall off in the saliency of purely economic issues by 10% in the 2 years between 2015 and 2017, can be explained by the Brexit vote in 2016, where Scotland was pulled out of the EU, despite voting to remain. The conclusion from Figures 12 & 13, is that we can reasonably assume that the valence issue for the SNP when in opposition, and upon first entering office, was public health. Between 2009 and 2015, the economy became the paramount issue for the Scottish government in the wake of the financial crash of 2008. Thereafter, Brexit and then COVID became the supreme issues the SNP government was judged upon by Scottish voters in their 3rd term in office. As will be discussed later in the chapter, Brexit will not feature in this

discussion for both operational and definitional reasons in: A. not being a valence issue; B. being a 'reserved' policy area the devolved administrations had no control over. As the SNP's economic policy was discussed in the previous chapter, the SNP's handling of public health (pre-COVID) and COVID-19 will be discussed here.

PUBLIC HEALTH (PRE-COVID)

A key political problem in Scotland at the advent of devolution was the standard of public healthcare and specifically the inequalities within Scottish healthcare depending on geographical location. While inequalities in healthcare was not an issue unique to Scotland, 'Scotland's appalling healthcare record' was something that Scottish newspapers were more than happy to point the finger at Westminster over (Davidson et al, 2003). When Blair pursued devolution within healthcare, the aim was to 'reverse the dynamic of local paternalism and national accountability to local accountability and national paternalism'; in other words, Blair made the state 'extract itself from taking any blame for the delivery of healthcare' (Greener & Powell, 2008:631-632). While in England this was mainly achieved through new public management-inspired policies such as Private Finance Initiatives, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland devolution was viewed as another convenient mechanism to blame someone else when healthcare went wrong (Greener, 2008:225).

What is clear from interviews with SNP elites, is that one of the seminal policies the party wished to adopt upon entering government in order to demonstrate their understanding of their electorate's wishes, but in general terms their competency, was free NHS prescriptions. As Chris Law MP remarked, 'people in Scotland were unsure in 2007 whether the SNP could handle these secondary power responsibilities, particularly the NHS… one of the key things that demonstrated our governing record was the adoption of free prescriptions for all' (Interview, 2021). Unlike on a UK-wide basis, there existed a much clearer consensus in Scotland on how the NHS should be run. We can see this in data obtained from the Scottish Public Opinion Monitor. In 2010, the survey found that 66% of Scottish people believed in reducing spending in other areas in order to maintain current NHS spending and that 59% of Scots supported the abolition of prescription charges (Ipsos Mori, 2010). Within the more ideologically diverse polity of the whole UK, Westminster administrations would struggle to adopt such policies without alienating a large section of the electorate. This was not only in ideological terms but also because by 2008 any UK government adopting such policies of high public expenditure would be open to accusations of economic incompetence, as antithetical policies of austerity were increasingly being perceived by the English electorate as economically sagacious (Gamble, 2015). Equally, the Scottish Labour Party would have struggled to adopt such policies at Holyrood before 2007 without creating intra-party policy contradictions, as to do so would have created a huge degree

of policy divergence between Labour's health policies at Westminster and those in Scotland. However, when the SNP entered government in 2007, they were able to exercise the same devolved powers to implement the policies of prioritising NHS funding and abolishing prescription charges in order to combat the reputation of Scotland's health inequalities and 'appalling record in healthcare' (Davidson et al, 2003). Alex Salmond knew in hindsight that an SNP government could responsibly fund both policies within the fixed sum from the Barnett formula, but most importantly that these policies in dealing with health inequalities would be popular with the majority of the left-leaning Scottish electorate (Maxwell, 2009:128; Mitchell, 2012:34). Such an argument is empirically validated if we look at the Scottish electorate's level of satisfaction with the NHS between 1999 and 2019 in Figure 14.

Figure 14: Satisfaction with the way the health service runs nowadays in Scotland (%)
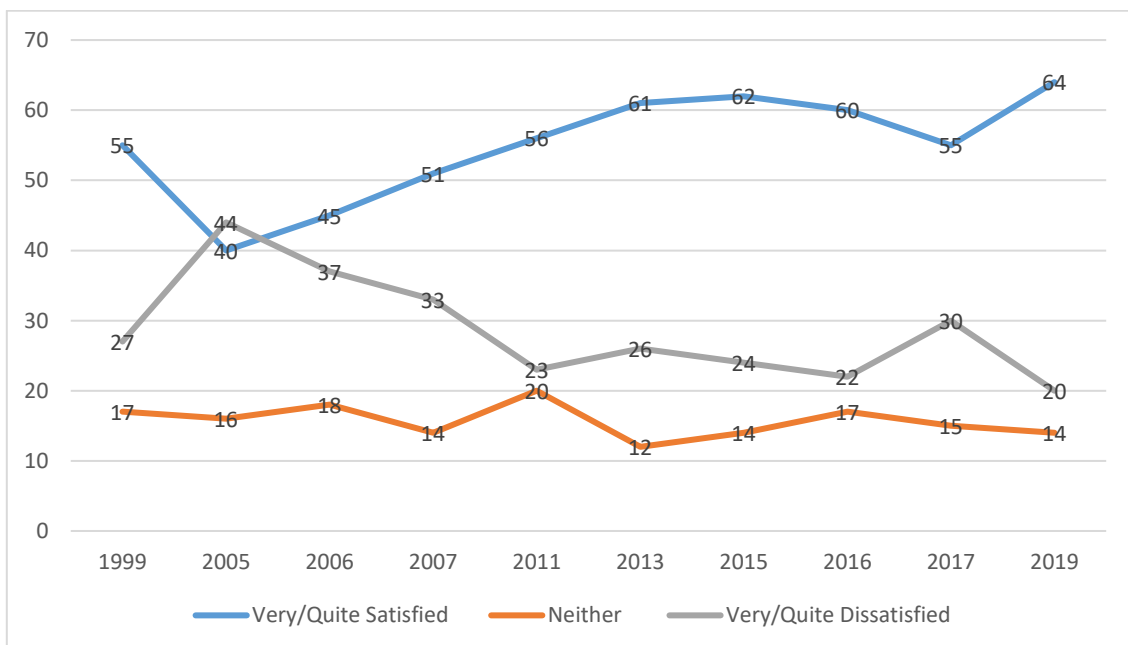
Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 1999-2019

Between 1999 and 2006, when Labour were in power at both Holyrood and Westminster, the average level of those either 'very' or 'quite' satisfied with the health service was 47%. Compare this to the level of those satisfied with the NHS under the SNP between 2007 and 2019 and we see a much higher average level of satisfaction at 58%. Salmond, in adopting such healthcare policies as the abolition of prescription charges, was able to turn the issue of healthcare inequalities, as reported in the media as a political problem for Westminster, into an electoral advantage for his party. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the increased satisfaction with the SNP's running of the NHS relative to Labour's much-reported mismanagement of the NHS, resulted in public health falling from Scottish voters' highest priority for

Labour's Scottish Executive (Figure 13), to only the 4th highest priority for the SNP Government halfway through their first term (Figure 13). Equally, we can see that in the years prior to the SNP's ascent to power, crime was viewed by voters as a key priority for the Scottish executive. As we can see, when the SNP entered government it was voters' key priority at 27% (Figure 13). However, after 14/15 years of SNP in office, crime had fallen to be the issue voters were least concerned by, sitting at just 1% (Figure 13). Therefore, at least part of the reason why public health reduces in terms of issue saliency is due to the increased satisfaction with the SNP's healthcare policies relative to their Labour predecessors.

COVID-19

As was demonstrated in Figures 11 & 12, in the aftermath of the financial crash of 2008, the economy became of paramount concern to Scottish voters between 2008 and 2015. However, as we can see from Figure 11, post-2016 the most politically salient issue for Scottish voters became Brexit and then from 2020 onwards concerns over the management of COVID-19 became paramount. This would suggest that such issues are the most appropriate in assessing the SNP's competency concerning 'the issue of the day'. While of course, Brexit is the archetypal 'positional' issue in the fact that divergent ideological end-goals shape the debate that engulfed UK politics from 2016 onwards, it was an issue that came to dominate all UK politics between 2016 and 2019 as can be seen in Figure 12. This did not exclude Scottish politics but its impact on the SNP's strategy and competence was different to that of the parties operating at Westminster, in the sense that the SNP had very little control over the process/negotiations of Brexit due to it being a reserved matter. This resulted in the Scottish government materially being able to do very little to meaningfully impact the form Brexit would take in Scotland. Brexit in this sense was very much a *political argument* the SNP did engage with, especially the cohort of SNP MPs at Westminster, but couldn't legislate on at Holyrood due to it being a reserved issue. The formal responsibility of the implementation of Brexit therefore lay with Westminster and this allowed for the SNP to criticise the Conservatives' handling of Brexit while being absolved from any counter-criticism. Taking this into account with the fact that 62% (and a majority in every council area) voted to remain in the EU in 2016 and that guaranteed continued EU membership was one of the key reasons many Scots voted to remain in the union, gave the SNP a huge structural opportunity to attack both the Conservatives and more fundamentally the union itself, in Scotland being dragged out of Europe against its will. This was reflected at the public level, in the sense that while Brexit was a political argument the SNP could engage with and earn votes on, in government their competency was not impacted by Brexit. Therefore, Brexit was more of an opportunity for the SNP to win over voters to the cause of *independence* and win the votes of Scottish Europhiles at Westminster elections,

rather than *an opportunity to demonstrate competency* in order to win votes at Holyrood. Therefore, the role of Brexit in the SNP's political success since 2016 shall not be addressed here as a valence issue but instead shall be treated as an important 'positional issue' that accordingly shall be addressed fully in Chapter 7 concerning 'Political Argument Hegemony'.

The other key issues in recent times for Scottish voters has been heightened concerns around public health due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As healthcare is a devolved issue, the pandemic provided a rare opportunity for the SNP to be able to differentiate itself in policy terms from Westminster over the key valence issue. For most of the devolution period, the economy was the valence issue meaning the SNP were unable to put as much daylight between their policies and Westminster's because of the limited macro-economic powers the SNP possessed at Holyrood. However, the arrival of a global pandemic acted as something of a structural opportunity for the SNP government to use their devolved powers over the key valence issue of COVID-19 to create policy divergence between themselves and Westminster. The aim here for the SNP leadership was to take advantage of what the majority of Scottish voters considered a Westminster government perceived as grossly incompetent in its handling of COVID-19. Incompetence here meant, for a majority of Scots, that the Westminster government had not reacted quickly enough to sanction large social gatherings and were slow to impose lockdowns when necessary in 2020/21. Additionally, the inadequacies of Westminster in not providing the NHS with the necessary Personal Protective Equipment, combined with a perception that the Conservative leadership cared more for the health of the economy than public health itself, compounded such an image of incompetence in Scotland. Bearing in mind the vertical and competitive dynamic of competency between Westminster and Holyrood, the SNP not only made the management of COVID-19 its primary concern but also sought to pursue a markedly more cautious strategy in dealing with COVID-19 than Westminster. As one SNP National Executive Council member put it when asked what has been the most important issue facing the SNP government in their 3rd term (2016-2021):

'COVID, absolutely. Brexit is so much seen as a Westminster issue. But I do think clearly the whole handling of COVID was the issue voters judged the Scottish Government on across the whole of Scotland'

It is true that the Scottish government certainly did take a more cautious approach to handling COVID relative to Westminster. The Scottish government took the initiative ahead of Westminster in first announcing a ban on events of more than 500 people on Thursday 12th March 2020, coming into effect on Monday 16th. On the same day (12th) the UK government, justified its decision to not ban mass events such as football matches and in a subtle dig at Nicola Sturgeon, Boris Johnson even went as far

too suggest that Scotland needed to pursue a different policy due to the lesser 'resilience' of their emergency services (Sparrow, 2020). Yet within one day it was the UK government that had U-turned to ban mass gatherings. Another case in point concerns the two government's handling of senior government officials breaking lockdown regulations. The Dominic Cummings Scandal, as it became later known, was a damaging blow to the UK government. When the PM's senior advisor had broken lockdown rules in travelling to Durham and later to Barnard Castle, he was not fired or forced to resign by Boris Johnson. Johnson in a show of support, ignored demands from opposition and Conservative politicians alike who called for the sacking of Dominic Cummings, believing him to be too valuable an electoral asset to lose. In comparison, when the Scottish government's chief medical officer Catherine Calderwood broke lockdown regulations after making two unnecessary trips to her second home, she was forced to resign after a discussion with the FM. Sturgeon commented 'The mistake she made risks distracting from and undermining confidence in the government's public health message at this crucial time. That is not a risk either of us is willing to take' (Scottish Government, 2020). The difference in the approach of each government here to the breaking of lockdown regulations by senior officials was stark.

What was arguably the most important difference in the approach of the two governments was in relation to their relaxation of COVID restrictions. The UK government both initially after the first lockdown and also after the third lockdown, were the quickest of the UK administrations in pulling the trigger on the lifting of restrictions.[2] On the other hand, the Scottish government were much slower to ease such restrictions, taking a more cautious approach.[3] For instance, after the initial lockdown, the UK government lifted the ban on the public in England (2020) on visiting pubs, bars and restaurants on July 4th, while the Scottish government waited until the 15th. Similarly, after the final lockdown, the same difference in approach to the hospitality industry can be seen. The UK government allowed the English hospitality sector to reopen on April 12th, while the Scottish government waited until the 26th before doing so. In terms of face masks, we can also see the same more cautious approach exercised by the Scottish government. Westminster dropped the compulsory wearing of masks in public indoor settings on 27th Jan 2022. Yet in Scotland, the wearing of masks remained mandatory in indoor settings until the 18th April 2022. The natural and obvious suggestion from such a differing approach would be that the percentage of the population testing positive must be considerably higher in Scotland. However, the opposite can be found when comparing the number of cases per 100,000 in England and Scotland when the decisions were made to lift restrictions. On July 4th 2020, the seven-day rolling

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[2] All information and dates relating to the UK government's COVID-19 timeline can be accessed here: https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/data-visualisation/timeline-coronavirus-lockdowns

[3] All information and dates relating to the Scottish government's COVID-19 timeline can be accessed here: https://data.gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19/

average of new COVID cases in England stood at 0.56 per 100,000, while in Scotland the average was only 0.15. Similarly, when the UK government took the decision to make face masks non-compulsory on January 27th 2022, again the average of new cases was actually lower in Scotland than in England. In Scotland, new cases per 100,000 people stood at 67.44, while in England they had a much higher average of 143.54 new cases per 100,000.

Therefore, the political opportunities the pandemic presented were clear and it is implausible for the reasons explored above to think evidence was the only consideration in decisions related to COVID by either Westminster or Holyrood. However, the important point to note is that the SNP's differing approach to COVID was at least partly perceived by SNP elites as a political opportunity to showcase the Scottish government's competency relative to Westminster's. As Dominic Cummings came to remark in a 2021 joint Science and Technology Committee and Health and Social Care Committee inquiry into Westminster's handling of COVID: 'the COBRA room was essentially a Potemkin meeting because it was with the devolved administrations and what happened was as soon as we had these meetings Nicola Sturgeon would just go straight out and announce what she wanted straight afterwards anyway' (UK Parliamentary Archives, 2021). Such COBRA meetings gave the SNP a huge opportunity; knowing what policies the UK government would adopt in advance of them becoming public. In certain instances this allowed the SNP to announce the same COVID restrictions as the UK Government but a couple of days in advance of them, which would help give Scottish voters the sense that it was Nicola Sturgeon, not Johnson, who was taking the initiative. In other instances, particularly the easing of lockdown restrictions, such meetings allowed the Scottish government to outmanoeuvre Westminster by taking a divergent path to the UK government characterised by its caution and prudence. A study conducted by the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford also found that out of the four nations' approaches to COVID-19 in the UK, Scotland held the highest average stringency index value (Tatlow et al, 2021). As one member of the SNP's NEC remarked:

'It was the Scottish Government's crisis management, our support for the economy, that cautious governance, which I think Nicola has really demonstrated to people and has overwhelmingly been welcomed by people in Scotland. I think she's really managed to win people over with that approach. She's probably been, not in any way grateful to have to steer the country through this crisis, but nonetheless quite grateful in a lot of ways for an opportunity to give Scottish people the assurance and peace of mind that their government is strong and robust.'

Further evidence of the fact the SNP viewed COVID as a political opportunity to demonstrate competence, can be seen in the fact that the government suspended all work on constitutional matters. As Michael Russell, Party President stated in an interview: 'I think there are issues that are

dealt with according to their need and their priority. The pandemic is an example - we suspended work on the Constitution. I wrote a letter to Michael Gove in March 2020 saying "we are suspending work on the Constitution because we need to use every resource we have to take care of the people of Scotland during this, this pandemic"' (Interview, 2021). This would suggest that concerns around perceptions of competency are paramount as if independence was the primary motivation in the decision-making of the SNP leadership, such work would not have been suspended. The question then becomes, how effective was the SNP's more cautious strategy in garnering an image of competency in managing COVID? One way we may deduce this is by looking at available opinion poll data in Scotland on how voters perceived each government to have handled the pandemic. One such poll was conducted by YouGov.

Figure 15: How well or badly do you think each of the following have handled the Coronavirus pandemic? (%)
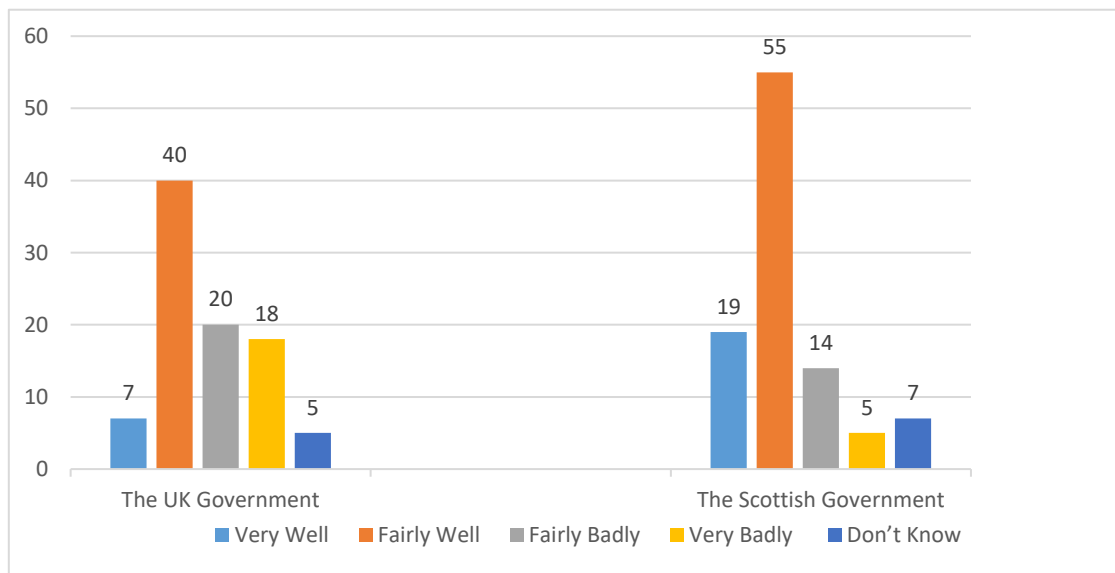
Source: YouGov 2020

Looking at the available data concerning the Scottish electorate's perception of both Westminster's and the Scottish government's competency in handling of Coronavirus it is clear the SNP have come out of COVID favourably relative to the Conservatives at Westminster. 47% of Scottish voters believed the UK government had handled the COVID pandemic very or fairly well, while 74% believed the Scottish government has handled the crisis very or fairly well. Only 19% of people judged the Scottish government to have handled COVID fairly or very badly, while 38% of Scots believed the UK government had handled the pandemic very or fairly badly. The data presented here does suggest that the SNP's decision to opt for a more cautious strategy than that of Westminster has resonated with a majority of Scottish voters. As the SNP MP Chris Law stated:

'On the big issues of the day, you need to be showing competency and be cognisant of the fact that that's what people's concerns are… I don't think anybody worked as hard in these islands as the FM did every single day, getting up to answer questions for an hour and a half about lockdown regulations, consequences of COVID, health safety of how to do X, Y and Z for the best part of 18 months. Of course, any government will make mistakes as we go through an unprecedented global pandemic but there is a huge difference in the way the Scottish government has behaved over this crisis compared to the shambles we see at Westminster'

It appears that caution in this instance was synonymous with competency for SNP elites. In identifying that the valence issue during COVID was centred around its impact on public health in Scotland, rather than in economic terms, the Scottish government were confident in not adhering to a 'four nations approach' and instead adopting a deliberately more cautious approach to COVID-related policy. Such a strategy has allowed the SNP to achieve a much higher degree of Governing Competence in arguably the most important valence issue in Scotland since 1999.

PERSONAL COMPETENCY

So far, the thesis has given analytical primacy to competency in particular policy areas. In this section, the attention will turn to the role of Scottish political leaders in determining perceptions of overall competency and more importantly, votes. Historically, it would not be controversial to state that the relative weight of voters' perceptions of individual leaders was light in determining votes in any UK election. The assumption here being that those voters who were supportive of the SNP were bound to like Nicola Sturgeon/Alex Salmond, while those who were supportive of any of the unionist parties were bound to dislike Sturgeon/Salmond. Therefore, according to this perspective, there was very little potential for the personality of any one leader to swing votes in their party's favour. However, the increasing 'Presidentialisation' of UK elections since the 1990s with the arrival of televised leader debates and the heightened role of the media, has undoubtedly accentuated the exposure and importance of party leaders. As was arguably first shown in Andersen & Evans's (2003) study, Tony Blair (as an individual) was able to win over voters who were not predisposed to Labour. Whilst this could be attributed to Blair's 'third way' ideology over factors of personal likeability/competency, more recent research by Sejits and de Clercy (2020) suggested voters' views regarding the character and statesmanship of political leaders increasingly plays a salient role in determining the competency of political parties in the US, Canada and the UK. In the UK, the study found that while 44% of voters prioritised the 'skills and knowledge of policy' areas in judging a party as competent, a still sizeable 30% of UK voters prioritised character and personality traits of the leader as the most important factor when assessing political leadership (Ibid:138). Therefore, it would be more accurate to argue that

whilst there exists a partisan section of the electorate who are predetermined to like/dislike a particular political leader, there also exists a sizeable share of the electorate who are only inclined to do so.

In terms of Scottish political leaders themselves, the SNP have enjoyed a much more stable and consistent leadership relative to the other parties. Since 1999, the SNP has had three different leaders: Alex Salmond (1990-2000 & 2004-2014); John Swinney (2000-2003); Nicola Sturgeon (2014 –2021). This compared to Scottish Labour who, in light of their internal disputes, have held 10 leaders in the same time frame and the Scottish Conservatives who have had 5 different leaders since 1999. The relatively higher turnover in leaders of the SNP's opponents is by no means a coincidence. Whilst internal disputes in the case of Scottish Labour have undoubtedly contributed to their higher number of leaders, the inability of Scottish unionist parties in general terms to overcome Scottish voters' negative perceptions of their leaders is equally part of the problem. However, the SNP have not always enjoyed having a leader who was perceived as a good fit for the job of FM.

Alex Salmond was first elected in 1987 to the Banff and Buchan seat in the House of Commons, as the only Scottish constituency in that election where Labour's vote share declined; an early indication of the 'Salmond factor'. From there he went on to be elected leader in 1990, where he was successful, among many achievements, in moving his party from a suspicion to an embrace of devolution. Upon the advent of devolution, he led the SNP to their first Scottish parliament election in 1999. However, at this time the general consensus was that Salmond wasn't the best person to be the FM of Scotland. As we can see in Figure 14, when Scottish voters were asked 'Who would make the best First Minister of Scotland?' in the run-up to the 1999 Scottish election, they overwhelmingly perceived Donald Dewar to be the best choice.

Figure 16: Who would make the best First Minister of Scotland (1999)? (%)
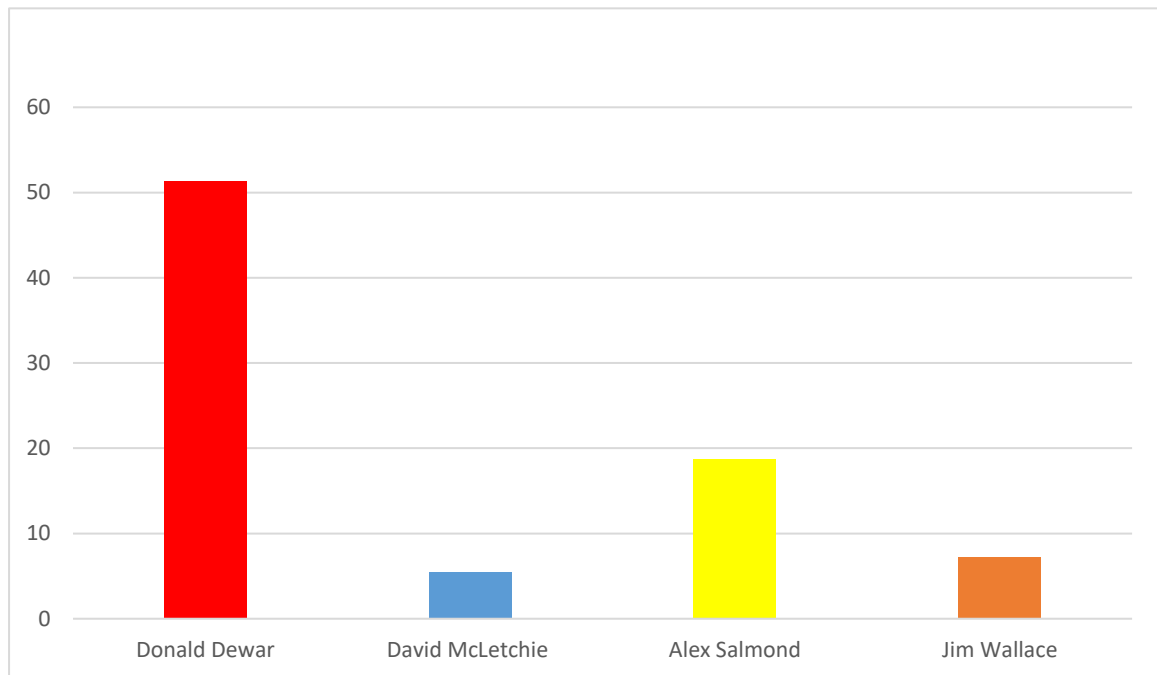
Source: Scottish Election Study 1999

This was not so much a reflection on the perceived incompetency of Alex Salmond, but more a reflection of just how respected and popular Dewar was not only among Labour circles but also Scottish politics as a whole. Dewar had been one of the key figures in initially getting Labour to adopt the policy of devolution and then keeping the likes of Blair committed to it, earning him the title of 'the father of the parliament' (Alexander, 2005). The fact that 74.3% of Scots had voted in favour of Parliament suggested, before any Scottish election even took place, that a majority of Scots were in broad agreement with Dewar. However, a multitude of early problems for Dewar's new government such as the spiralling out-of-control costs of the new Holyrood building and the Scottish exams fiasco, allowed the media to bring into question whether Dewar was up to the task of leading the new executive and indeed whether devolution had achieved anything at all. As Gilles Leydier (2019) argues 'although his integrity, decency and fairness were never contested in the public opinion… he was a reluctant leader suspected of lacking a messianic zeal… he was the right man to *deliver* devolution but Dewar failed to be convincing with regard to the fact that he was the right man to *run* Scotland'. After Dewar's Death in 2000, Scottish Labour's successor Henry McLeish served one year in office as FM before being removed due to a row over his constituency expenses. McLeish was replaced by Jack McConnell in 2001 and served until the 2007 election. McConnell continued to struggle much like his predecessors to impose himself as any kind of national leader. As Leydier (2019) states, the 'absence of personal charisma… [was] striking during the 2003 elections when his "recognition factor" was low…

during the 2007 legislative campaign although Labour and the SNP were neck and neck in the polls, 43% of respondents claimed Salmond would make the best FM, while only 23% supported McConnell'.

While Scottish Labour had been suffering from a public perception of their leaders lacking a personal degree of competency, the SNP had also changed leaders. In 2000 Salmond stepped down as leader, claiming his reasons were due to fatigue as leader but in reality, the resignation was against the backdrop of internal strife with the then-party treasurer Ian Blackford, who threatened to sue Salmond (Salmond, 2015). In his place, John Swinney was elected as leader and was in post until the disastrous European elections in 2004. As we can see in the data presented in Figure 17, no SNP leader received a lower mean average score on personal competency. Indeed in 2003, he was ranked on average as the worst political leader in Scotland for the role of FM. However, when Swinney resigned in 2004 and Salmond was re-elected as leader, we can see that Salmond started to fully take advantage of the public's perception that McConnell was not the best fit for the role of FM. Figure 17 clearly shows just how much Salmond returning as leader improved the perception of personal competency for the SNP leadership. John Swinney's mean average score in 2003 stood at 3.86/10, whereas Salmond's in 2007 stood at 5.36. Salmond's personal competency increased further in 2011 achieving a 5.69 average score; the highest of any leader in Holyrood's history.

Figure 17: Mean average scores of how good/competent a job each leader would do as First Minister (/10)
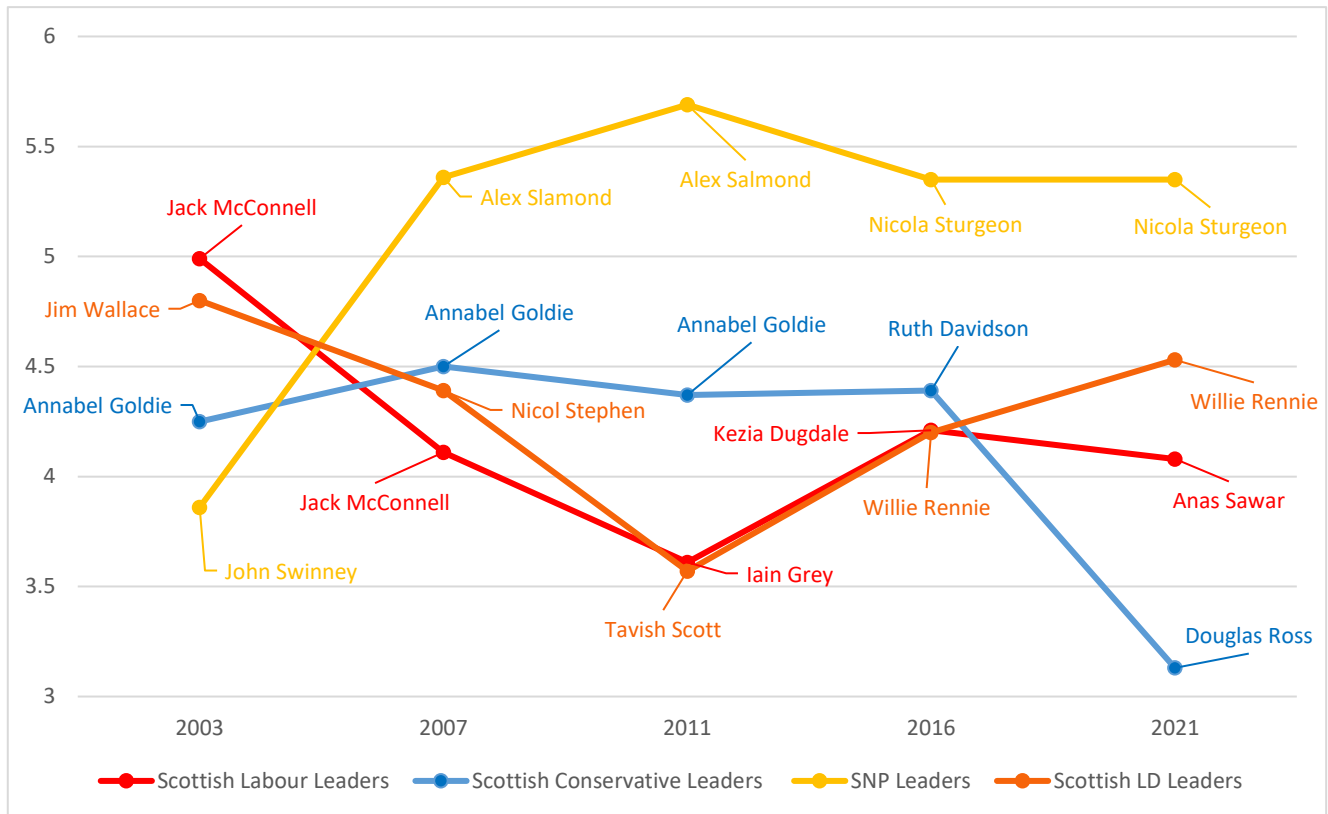
Source: Scottish Election Studies 2003-2021

This reputation that Salmond had managed to culminate as something of a statesman, especially in relation to the struggling leaders of Scottish Labour during this period was something that the SNP were aware of and consciously exploited. The political popularity of Salmond, as someone who had supposedly risen 'above politics' and was a perfect fit for the role of FM, was so prevalent and significant in the eyes of the SNP that in 2011, the party decided to put 'Alex Salmond for First Minister' rather than the party's name on the ballot (Johns & Mitchell, 2016:111). In this sense, it would not be ostensibly controversial to say that at the elite level, there was a perception that Alex Salmond had moved beyond being just an electoral asset to the party and was a considerable factor in convincing people to vote SNP.

With the loss of the independence referendum in 2014, Alex Salmond stood down as leader of the SNP. He was replaced by his former deputy, Nicola Sturgeon. Given her standing in the party, there was never any serious doubt that Sturgeon would succeed him. However, where there was doubt over

how anyone could follow on from a strong and successful leader. As John Swinney had proved 13 years prior, following Salmond was a difficult political challenge. As there had been no leadership contest, Nicola Sturgeon set about a nationwide tour of public appearances. She took advantage of the energy and excitement that had seen in the SNP membership soar post-referendum. Less than a year into her leadership she participated in the 2015 UK general election televised debates, where she introduced herself to those unaware there was the new FM. Her performance here, in what politically is one of the largest events in the UK, was widely well-received. She was praised for her commitment to 'locking the Tories out' of number 10 and backed Labour into a corner over whether they would work with the SNP or allow the Tories back into government. Ed Miliband's failure to answer this question clearly, confirmed to many Scottish voters the line the SNP had been ostensibly pushing for years: that the Labour-Tory alliance wasn't confined to the 'better together' campaign (Johns & Mitchell, 2016:197). All of this allowed Sturgeon to pick up where Salmond had left off in terms of personal competency and statesmanship. This can be seen again in Figure 17, where in both 2016 and 2021 her mean average score stayed consistently at 5.35. In both years this meant she was the most popular candidate to be FM. It also is worth noting in 2021 Sturgeon, beat the Conservative Douglas Ross's mean average score (the SNP's closest competitors at Holyrood in terms of seats) by a margin of over 2 – the single largest difference in personal competency between any two Scottish political leaders since the advent of devolution.

Another factor which has almost certainly aided the perception of Sturgeon as personally competent ties to the aforementioned valence issue of COVID-19. As mentioned before, the daily COVID press briefings in Scotland gave the FM a daily opportunity to present on the Scottish government's efforts to tackle the virus. Not only did this help solidify the image of Sturgeon as a leader whose paramount concern was public health, but also Sturgeon herself personally gave the press briefings every day, unlike her Westminster counterpart Boris Johnson who would often delegate the press conferences in London to other senior UK government ministers. As one NEC member remarked: 'I think that ability to communicate honestly with the population during COVID has probably helped us because Nicola has been given a platform to show where the Tories have been wrong. She was given a platform every single day to communicate, which is her strength' (Interview, 2022). However, what is unclear is the saliency of personal competency in determining votes. Data in Figure 17 would suggest at first glance that personal competency largely corroborates electoral results, as in every election the SNP won, their leader has the highest mean score average, while in their one bogus election in 2003, John Swinney received the worst personal competency score of any SNP leader by some margin. However, personal competency scores for the unionist parties do not follow such a trend of correlation. For

instance, Douglas Ross scored the lowest personal competency score of any party political leader in Scotland since 2003, yet was able to lead his party into a comfortable 2nd place finish in 2021 beating Labour and the Lib Dems despite Anas Sarwar's and Willie Rennie's considerably higher competency scores. This leaves some doubt over the saliency of personal competency, as a criterion by which to assess political leaderships at the sub-national level. One potential reason why research such as Sejits & Clercy (2020) have found personal competency to be salient in vote choice is due to their analysis being conducted at the national level. However, within a devolved electoral system in its relative infancy it appears that the often referred to 'Presidentialisation' of politics has not occurred to the same extent across Scottish politics, as judgements about the lesser-known opposition party leaders at Holyrood, do not necessarily correlate with election results.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed and analysed the extent to which the SNP have been successful in garnering an image of Governing Competence, both in terms of vote-seeking strategies when in opposition and their governing strategies when in office. The findings of this chapter are primarily empirical, as the end of the next Chapter, when having looked at both Governing Competency in Scotland and Wales, will discuss the theoretical contributions of Chapters 4 & 5 to Statecraft and the wider SNRP literature.

A key finding of the chapter is that in Scotland, there appears to exist something of a vertical competency dynamic in the relationship between Westminster and Holyrood. We can see that when Westminster are blamed for negative economic outcomes, Holyrood generally benefits from a heightened perception of competency and vice-versa (in stable political contexts). While this tendency existed before the election of the SNP to government, it would appear that the SNP were cognisant of this dynamic and sought to emphasise this in a strategy which at every opportunity sought to compare the two levels of government. This was primarily achieved by a strategy of taking positive issue ownership when policy outcomes are favourable while blaming Westminster and the system of devolution when negative outcomes are negative; the 'structural insulating framework'. This would help develop McAgnus's (2016) central idea that governmental office can be used as a mechanism to garner competence by defining the precise means/strategy by which SNRPs transition from a public perception as parties of protest to parties of power. Analysing this strategy in the form of interview evidence and documentary analysis such as FMQs, paints a picture that political actors, specifically in the case of the SNP, are far more aware of the structural context they operate in and how this can benefit them politically than the current body of SNP/SNRP literature gives them credit for. To date,

academic discussion concerning competency in Scottish politics are reduced to either organisational reform (McAgnus, 2016) or focusing on a specific valence issue at a particular election (Johns et al, 2009). This analysis suggests that competency, particularly the use of a structural insulating framework, has allowed the SNP to frame politics in Scotland as Holyrood vs Westminster and bring about electoral success. A more comprehensive exploration of sub-national competency dynamics will be given after analysis of Plaid's ability to achieve an image of Governing Competence in the next chapter.

Assessed against a tripartite understanding of competence which assessed the party's ability to be perceived as competent by the Scottish electorate in the areas of economic management, the valence issue and personal competency, the SNP have by all accounts excelled in Statecraft terms. Empirically the contributions of the chapter to our understanding of the SNP are threefold:

1. Economic competence - Using available Issues Index data, it is clear that economic concerns were of central importance throughout the devolution era in Scotland but of paramount importance to Scottish voters before 2016. Upon entering government the recession paradoxically aided the SNP, in firmly creating a consensus that interventionist economic policies were necessary giving the party the ideological clarity in terms of where to position itself on the left-right continuum. Not only this but what is evident from interviews is that the SNP had a clear governing strategy of using the structure of devolution to insulate the party from political blame when inventible economic outcomes occurred. This use of such a structural insulating framework became even more common and effective with the advent of the Conservative government at Westminster in 2010, as the SNP government could add a left-right critique to their blame avoidance strategy. Looking at the data available from the SSAS, it would appear by all accounts as if the SNP have succeeded in using this strategy to cultivate an image of economic competence.

2. A key finding of the chapter is that in politically turbulent times, a non-economic valence issue can supersede economic competency as most salient in performance evaluations, contrary to Bulpitt's (1986) and Buller & James's (2011) arguments regarding the supremacy of economic competency. Not only in economics but also in policies regarding the NHS and COVID, did the SNP use such a strategy. Upon entering government, the SNP pursued a distinctly more social democratic vision of the NHS including free prescriptions, taking credit for the turnaround of

Scotland's NHS. Equally, when it came to the valence issue of COVID the SNP appear to have pursued a successful political strategy of a more cautious approach to COVID than the Conservatives. Key decisions such as the later lifting of restrictions, the pausing of work on constitutional matters and the sacking of regulation-breaking government officials, the SNP adopted a path characterised by caution, which at the public level heightened trust in Holyrood's handling of COVID while tarnishing Westminster's.

3. In personal competency terms, the SNP have benefitted from having two politically stable leaders for the majority of the devolution period, relative to a tumultuous Scottish Labour Party that has had 10 leaders since 1999. This is evident in the consistently higher competency scores Nicola Sturgeon and Alex Salmond were able to receive relative to other party leaders from 2007-2021. It would appear the SNP's personal competency almost exactly correlates with their devolved election results, suggesting such scores at the public level have some influence over voter choice or are at least very accurate indicators of overall electoral performance. Evidence of this perception of personal competency's saliency at the elite level can be seen in the SNP placing Salmond's name over the party's on the ballot in 2011. The fact the leadership did this in the year when Salmond was the most popular leader in Holyrood's history, seems to suggest an awareness of personal competency and was consequently integrated into the SNP's electoral strategy. However, a noticeably different dynamic is observable in the case of the unionist parties, specifically the Conservatives. Douglass Ross was rated as the least fit to be FM in 2021 of any leader since 2003, yet his party in the same year became the 2nd largest party in Holyrood. It would appear then personal competency's saliency in electoral outcomes is entirely dependent on the party in question. This dynamic shall be explored further in the comparative conclusion of Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5: GOVERNING COMPETENCE – WALES

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the focus shall turn to Plaid Cymru's efforts to garner an image of Governing Competence since 1999. The chapter shall first highlight the structural differences between the institutional and electoral contexts that Plaid Cymru faces relative to the SNP. As was alluded to in the previous chapter, PC face a much more constraining structural context than their Scottish counterparts. This has made their ability to use the structural insulating framework as a means to achieve Governing Competency much harder than the SNP's. This is due, in part, to the asymmetrical nature of devolution which has left parties at the Senedd, in every term since 1999, unable to legislate on the same breadth and depth of policy as the Scottish parliament. In addition to this, Plaid have faced competition for the use of such a strategy by Welsh Labour who, when in power, have benefitted from a prevailing perception of competency in part due to their ability to take advantage of a Conservative Westminster government since 2010 and the vertical dynamic of competency. As will be elaborated on later, the structural insulating framework was not only a political strategy available to SNRPs but in certain structural conditions can be utilised by unionist parties too. Therefore, unlike the previous chapter, a large amount of focus shall be given to the ways in which the SNRP's opponent, in this case, Welsh Labour, have been able to achieve competency and preclude Plaid's effective pursuit of the structural insulating framework. Like the previous chapter, Plaid's difficulties in using such a strategy shall be assessed against the tripartite categorisation of competency: economic competency; competency concerning the valence/salient issue of the day; and perceptions of Plaid's leaders' competency.

In analysing interview transcripts, media appearances by key figures of Plaid, and sessions at the Senedd, the chapter concludes that Plaid Cymru have been outmuscled by Welsh Labour as defenders of the Welsh national interest and consequently have struggled to monopolise the structural insulating framework strategy, so successfully used by the SNP to garner competence. Plaid have consequently, acutely struggled to convey themselves as possessing the necessary governing credentials for office. This will be evidenced through available secondary social survey data on different categories of competency. Data concerning economic perceptions of competency highlight how Welsh Labour has enjoyed a much more prevalent perception as economically competent since the advent of a Westminster Conservative administration, to the detriment of Plaid. The chapter also finds Plaid's competency concerning the Welsh valence issues to be lacking, struggling to take issue ownership - particularly when it mattered in government. Plaid's struggles shall also be explored in

relation to personal competency, where they have failed to field a leader who has been perceived as more statesman-like than their Labour rivals since 1999. Furthermore, much like in Scotland, the saliency of personal competency in Statecraft terms appears to be dependent on the party in question rather than a ubiquitously salient aspect of sub-national electoral competition.

THE STRUCTURAL CONTEXT OF WALES

The NAW, as it was called until 2020, was granted considerably fewer powers than its Scottish equivalent in the initial 'Government of Wales Bill' (1998). Upon its opening in 1999, the Senedd was only given secondary law-making powers meaning Welsh policymakers were essentially unable to pass legislation without the permission of Westminster. This remained the case until 2011 when, in a referendum, 63% of Welsh voters supported the proposal of the Assembly to be able to pass primary legislation in the 20 areas of policy already devolved. However, even after the referendum the Assembly still lagged considerably behind Holyrood's powers in not being able to legislate on income tax, policing and the regulatory powers over energy, water and transport sectors in Wales (Welsh Parliament, 2020). The important point to note here is that devolution has always remained asymmetrical in its structure as, at every point since 1999, Holyrood has held a greater amount of relative power than the Senedd. This has resulted in legislative limitations on what all Welsh parties, including Plaid, can claim to the electorate they can deliver on within the Welsh devolution settlement. Relative to the SNP who, in competing for seats at a parliament with considerably greater powers than Cardiff Bay, are treated with a greater sense of pertinence amongst their respective electorate, as can be seen in that at every Scottish election turnout has eclipsed turnout in Welsh elections. The primary impact of this is the limitations it puts on the efficacy of the structural insulating framework for Welsh political parties. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the perfect scenario for Plaid or Welsh Labour (since 2010) is when positive policy outcomes occur they can take responsibility for the now devolved policy area, that was previously perceived to have been politically problematic for Westminster. However, the lesser transference of powers from Westminster to the Senedd has limited the structural opportunities for both Plaid and Welsh Labour to take positive issue ownership of policy areas. This also means we would expect blame avoidance to be a much more prevalent aspect of the structural insulating framework in the case of Wales, as political attention focuses primarily on how Westminster (or in the case of Welsh Labour: Conservative) greater control of Welsh politics leads to negative policy outcomes.

It might also be noted that one central structural difference in the case of Plaid relative to the SNP, is that in Wales the SNRP has faced competition in the pursuit of such a strategy. In the case of the SNP, they have been able to pursue blame avoidance strategies unchallenged against both the Labour

(2007-2010) and Conservative Westminster governments (2010-2021). Scottish Labour's first two terms in office coincided with New Labour at Westminster meaning Scottish Labour were not able to achieve a level of autonomy to pursue differing policy to their Westminster counterparts. Related to this, Welsh Labour (as will be explored in later sections) was less willing to follow the wishes of Labour at Westminster, as demonstrated most notably in Morgan's 'Clear Red Waters' speech. When Plaid entered office in 2007, they did so as a junior coalition partner *with* Welsh Labour. This precluded the pursuit of blame avoidance strategies for three out of the four years they were in office, as Labour were also in power at Westminster and to pin negative policy outcomes on Westminster would be to attack their senior coalition partner's UK counterparts. In the final year of the 'One Wales Coalition', it was more often than not Welsh Labour who would take the lead on attacking David Cameron's policies of austerity. This allowed Welsh Labour an important window of structural opportunity to try to monopolise the use of the insulating framework and present themselves as defenders of Welsh interests against an Anglo-centric Conservative Westminster government (Scully, 2013).

Therefore, there is an important theoretical point to note here in relation to the structure of devolution and Governing Competency. The essential prerequisite for the use of such a strategy is not necessarily *to be an SNRP* but for the party to be *perceived as* defenders of the national interest. Whilst usually, this will be the SNRP, as they sit the furthest towards the periphery on the centre-periphery spectrum, there are instances such as in Wales where a unionist party can be successful in *instrumentally utilising* the ideology of nationalism to claim they are the ardent defenders of the national interest against an Anglo-centric orientated Westminster. As will be explored, the WLG since the advent of the Conservative's time in office at Westminster have also been able to utilise the strategy of a structural insulating framework, to both take issue ownership of positive policy outcomes and pursue blame avoidance when negative policy outcomes occur. The key difference in the use of this strategy in the case of a unionist party is that its purpose was simply to political point score against the Conservatives, rather than being weaponised as the SNP and PC have, to further the cause of independence by highlighting the flaws in the system of devolution. Therefore, unlike the previous chapter, to understand Plaid's use of such an insulating strategy to cultivate an image of competence, it is essential also to analyse how, in many instances both within and out of coalition, Plaid was outmanoeuvred by Welsh Labour in both blame avoidance and positive issue ownership. This chapter will explore to what extent the leaderships of both Plaid and Welsh Labour consciously exploited this insulating structural framework, and if so, empirically measure how successful such strategies have been in garnering: an image of economic competence; competence concerning the main 'valence issue' of the day; any impacts on the perceptions of personal competency of the political leaders of Welsh Labour and Plaid.

ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT

1999-2007

As previously mentioned, in classical Statecraft terms a party's perception of competency will largely be determined by their ability to manage the economy. In Scotland, there was an impetus for all political parties at Holyrood to give some serious consideration to economic policy at the sub-national level, as the Scottish parliament did possess some (albeit very limited) macro-economic policy-making powers in 1999, which were slowly added to in the various Scotland acts, and in turn, economic policy became central to all Scottish party programmes. The NAW between the period of 1999 to 2007 lacked most macroeconomic powers. Additionally, the inability of the Senedd to pass primary economic legislation in 1999, 'made the constitutional settlement precarious, because it is completely dependent on the goodwill of the British government to find legislative time (always in short supply) and their willingness to accommodate Welsh concerns' (Hazell, 2003:298). With the exception of responsibility for economic and industrial development, the economic powers the Assembly were able to exercise were very limited; it existed primarily as a 'social policy body' (Chaney & Drakeford, 2004:121-122). This initially resulted in Welsh political parties adopting ambiguous economic policy goals with very little detail, and Plaid was no different. In both their 1999 and 2003 manifestos, the party was strongly social democratic in its economic goals. The hope here was to blend a more traditional variation of socialism with Welsh nationalism. Plaid Cymru aimed to outflank Labour by being more 'Welsh' and more 'left-wing' than Labour (Wyn Jones & Scully, 2003:129).

In both manifestos, the party leadership discuss of Wales 'suffering economic decline, with all the associated problems of low wages poverty and out-migration of the young and economically active… job losses in the manufacturing sector and poor job security' (Plaid Cymru, 1999;2003). However, there is very little detailed discussion of the precise solutions a Plaid Cymru government would adopt to address these problems. Of the few policies presented by the manifestos, one refers to the 'identification of seven economic regions, each of which will draw up sustainable development strategies tailored to their own particular circumstances' (Plaid Cymru, 2003). Another policy ambiguously presented in the 2003 manifesto is the Growth Companies strategy, which aimed to 'identify those businesses that have both the desire and potential to grow and targeting them with concentrated demand-led support' (Plaid Cymru, 2003). What is strikingly obvious from both these two policies, and indeed the first two manifestos of Plaid, is the lack of any detailed breakdown of the policies would be funded or the amount of capital that would be made available to different regions and categories of business in Wales. Frequently the manifesto makes positive promises to improve economic growth, public procurement, job creation, sustainable development, the labour market and

geographical dispersion of capital/resources in Wales without any discussion of how such policy aims would be achieved or funded (Plaid Cymru, 1999; 2003). It could be reasonably asserted then that in the first two Welsh elections Plaid was setting ambiguous economic goals that within the devolution settlement at that time, they couldn't deliver on.

In this sense, Plaid's economic policies in the first two terms of the Senedd focused more upon ideologically presenting themselves as a more credible social democratic option than that of Welsh Labour, whom they wished to categorise as merely a regional extension of New Labour. As Plaid claimed in their 1999 election manifesto: 'We are the only alternative to the conservative social and economic policies implemented by New Labour' (Plaid Cymru, 1999). The primary concern for both the 1999 and 2003 elections was in Anwen Elias's words 'characterised by Plaid Cymru's position itself vis-à-vis its main state-wide competitors on the territorial and left-right ideological dimensions' (2009:544). If the leadership did give any thought at all to ideas of economic competency in this period, they were primarily understood through the prism of outflanking Labour's rhetoric with their own more traditionally left-wing rhetoric, as opposed to any kind of detailed drawing up of policy. The WLG in this same period did make more of a concerted effort to garner an image as competent managers of the limited powers of economic development available to them. In their 1999 manifesto, there existed a considerably higher degree of detail concerning the drawing up and funding of key economic development policies within the Assembly's purview. Such policies included the expansion of apprenticeships from 9,000 in 1999 to 14,000 in 2001, the increasing of the farmers' relief package from £12 million to £21 million to help the Welsh agricultural sector and pledging to take 30,000 unemployed young people off benefits and into work through Welsh Labour's New Deal welfare-to-work programme (Welsh Labour, 1999). In the run-up to the 2003 election, Plaid tried to undermine their competency by suggesting that 'during its four years in office, the Assembly's Labour government has utterly failed to put in place a credible economic development strategy to lift Wales out of the vicious circle of economic decline… [Labour's manifestos] are little more than wish-lists with unrealistic targets' (Plaid Cymru, 2003). Such economic criticisms of Labour's first term in office seemingly fell deaf on voters' ears, when in 2003 Labour increased their seats to 30 in the Senedd, giving them their first functional majority government of the Senedd. Furthermore, the removal of Alun Michael who was Blair's preferred candidate as Welsh Labour leader in favour of Rhodri Morgan, a man who made it clear Welsh Labour would pursue a more socialist agenda than UK Labour, provided a serious challenge to Plaid's 'out-lefting' Labour strategy.

After the disappointment of the 2003 election, Plaid Cymru sought to detach itself from the ideological debates concerning independence and 'out-lefting' Labour. Instead, after some soul searching in the wake of losing 5 Senedd seats, Wyn Jones and his party in the run-up to the 2007 election sought to focus on 'practical economic policies' over 'abstract ideology' (Western Mail, 2007). This resulted in the adoption of some concrete economic policies with a much greater focus on clarity and detail unlike in 1999 and 2003. Whereas in 1999, Plaid Cymru's election strategy was very much characterised by its attempt to 'ideologically position itself relative to its state-wide competitors, by 2007 the party was more preoccupied with pragmatic politics and valence concerns' (Elias, 2009a:544). One of the new emerging valence issues for the devolved level of Welsh politics was economic development and specifically how money from the EU was used to further this goal. Economic development was one of the very few devolved economic policy areas the Senedd had some meaningful say in and the newly available European Convergence Funds became a central part of Plaid's economic agenda and message to Welsh voters. The EU had made available funds in the early 2000s for the most economically challenged and deprived regions of EU member states to transition into new industries, job opportunities and improved modern housing. In particular, the areas of West Wales and the Valleys suffered from poor economic output and had severely lagged behind most of the UK in terms of research and development from 1995 onwards (Pugh et al, 2018). Consequently, since 2000, West Wales and the Valleys became eligible for £1.2 billion of European support between 2000 and 2006 (Ibid, 2018:1112). The use of these funds and in particular whether Westminster should match these funds became a central political debate within Welsh politics. The saliency of European structural funds in relation to economic development can be seen in 2000 with the vote of no confidence of the inaugural FM Alun Michael which saw him removed from office having failed to secure match funding from the UK treasury to supplement the 1.2 billion. As one Plaid MS remarked in an interview: "The fundamental issue in the first two terms of the Senedd was the huge political argument over how European funding was used in Wales and whether Westminster we're honouring their political responsibility to match these funds… the use of European funds to address the underfunding of Wales is what all parties were judged upon" (Interview, 2022).

During and prior to the 2003 election, the debate was characterised by Labour on one side, who wished to stay clear of debates over the use of European funding, vaguely referencing it once in their 2003 manifesto in relation to 'improving the rural social economy' (Welsh Labour, 2003). This was largely due to how politically toxic the subject had been for the Welsh Labour leadership in 2000 with Alun Michael's resignation but also because the UK Labour government at Westminster were unwilling to wholly match the funds provided by the EU convergence funds for Wales. This meant that ostensibly

Welsh Labour's position was to use the EU structural funds available but not ask the UK treasury to amend the Barnett Formula in order for Westminster to match such funds. Plaid, on the other hand, had since 2000 been openly critical of Welsh Labour's position not to secure matched funds from Westminster for the EU structural funding of 1.2 billion between 2000 and 2006 (Hepburn, 2016). In the first two elections to the Senedd, Plaid had made it clear that they would seek to change the Barnett formula, with a view to making it obligatory that the UK government match-fund any European funding for economic development (Plaid Cymru, 1999; 2003). In this period Plaid's arguments were responsive and critical of Labour's stance on European funding and in their own manifestos focused on how the party, if elected, would seek to obtain the matched funding from Westminster. In their 2003 manifesto for instance, while Plaid were keen to criticise Labour over European funding and how they would seek to legally obligate the treasury (directly appealing to the European Court) to match the structural funds, there is scant reference to what the party in office would do with the additional funds of nearly 1 billion pounds. (Plaid Cymru, 2003). However, by 2007 Wyn-Jones's commitment to 'practical' workable policies over 'abstract ideology' started to materially manifest. In their 2007 manifesto it was outlined how with the extra funding acquired from Westminster matching the 2007-2013 period of EU structural funds, a Plaid government would adopt a number of clearly communicated popular policies such as capping council tax for the elderly, scrapping council tax for low-income families, giving every child at the start of secondary school a laptop, subsidising student debt, offering £5000 grants for first-time home-buyers, cutting business rates by up to 50% and offering a corporation tax rebate of up to a third in West Wales and the Valleys (Plaid Cymru, 2007).

In this sense, there are two key points to note about Plaid's strategy on economic perceptions of competency. Firstly, the party by 2007 seemed to adopt a clear position on economic development. Plaid focused on exactly *what* the party would do with the additional funds policy-wise, rather than their previous efforts to try to convey to voters the somewhat complex process of the EU convergence funds and why the WLG should be doing more to obtain matched-funding from Westminster. Secondly, the adoption of the policies of cutting business rates and also offering a 1/3 decrease on the effective corporation tax, showed how in terms of left-right ideology the party was perhaps muddying the waters slightly in an effort to be more pragmatic in its electoral appeal. Plaid here was clearly attempting to demonstrate their economic competency to Welsh business as opposed to the strict upholding of an orthodox socialism. As the head of Plaid's policy forum remarked, the party moved from 'having debates about left-right dimensions of policy to debates concerning how we could

practically implement economic policy in practical terms… the top of our agenda became what we could do within the powers of the assembly' (John Osmond, 2022, Interview).

2007-2011: THE ONE WALES COALITION

Partially due to the newfound clarity on economic policies mentioned above, Plaid's campaign in the 2007 Welsh elections saw the party increase their share of Senedd seats by 3 and more importantly deny Welsh Labour a majority. The main effect of this was that a coalition would need to be formed for any WAG to govern in the 2007-2011 term. What is clear from interviews with senior figures in the party was that the initial preferred option was a 'rainbow coalition' between themselves, the Welsh Conservatives and the Welsh Liberal Democrats. This serves to be an interesting example of SNRP political leaderships valuing structural political opportunities to demonstrate competency over any form of ideological similitude. The Plaid leadership, aware of the fact Labour held power in Westminster, saw an opportunity to form an anti-Labour coalition at Cardiff Bay (McAgnus, 2014:216). The advantage of such a coalition in Statecraft terms was that Plaid in being the senior coalition partner and with Wyn-Jones as FM, would be able to use the structure of devolution as a structural insulating framework when negative economic outcomes occurred in Wales. Despite having to be in partnership with the Conservatives who, both in left-right and centre-periphery terms, were the anathema to Plaid, the leadership still initially favoured a rainbow coalition (Elias, 2009b). Put in simpler terms, when the Welsh economy suffered, Plaid (in a rainbow coalition) would be able to deflect blame onto the Labour Westminster government boosting their own perception of competency, while simultaneously furthering the agenda for Welsh independence. As Hywel Williams MP (interview, 2022) remarked, 'going into coalition without Labour in 2007 would have given us a chance to be in office and be critical of some of the disastrous policies of New Labour'. Practical concerns of governing and competency outweighed any ideological concerns. However, such a coalition with Plaid at the helm did not come to pass due to the LDs rejecting such a coalition at a special conference. Whilst PC's dreams of installing Wyn-Jones as FM was quashed, they were able to take some conciliation in Labour's concession of a legally binding referendum on an Assembly with full legislative powers in the 'red-green' coalition (Wyn Jones & Scully, 2012).

The 'One Wales delivery plan' was agreed upon by both parties, setting out 228 specific commitments to be delivered by 2011. In relation to competency dynamics, it marked a critical juncture in Welsh Politics, as Plaid for the first time would be in government with their leader Ieuan Wyn Jones being given the ministerial roles of Deputy FM and Minister for the Economy and Transport, Alun Ffred Jones AM being appointed Minister for Heritage and Elin Jones AM being appointed as Minister for Rural Affairs. Another central and controversial aspect of the coalition agreement was the commitment to

hold a referendum before the 2011 election on whether the NAW should be granted primary legislative powers in the twenty policy areas it had jurisdiction over. Being in government therefore now became the key mechanism for Plaid to try to illustrate its governing credentials as opposed to pre-2007 when its primary strategy was to criticise both Labour at Cardiff Bay and Westminster, an option now precluded from them as doing so would be attacking their coalition partners. As Wyn Jones and Scully (2008:64) argue Plaid's 'strategic goals' were clear: 'demonstrable competence in government aims to decontaminate Plaid's image… as a collection of wild-eye romantics and language zealots'. In relation to Plaid's economic credentials, Ieuan Wyn Jones being appointed to the one ministerial role within the One Wales Government that directly related to economic management was seemingly, at first, a huge boost to the hopes of Plaid's endeavour to establish a degree of economic competency. However, Plaid's economic credentials and in particular any hope of positive issue ownership of the economy faded quickly within the first year of the One Wales coalition because of two significant structural constraints.

Firstly, the fact Plaid existed as the junior partner in the coalition resulted in not all of the policies in their 2007 manifesto being adopted by Labour. Secondly, the unexpected economic downturn brought about by the Global financial crash of 2008, severely curtailed the budget the One Wales government could spend on economic policies in real terms. 'While there can be no doubt of the bona fide intentions of the One Wales Coalition partners in tackling the effects of the recession, there have been many instances of existing spending plans being repackaged and launched successively for public relations purposes' (Wyn Jones & Scully, 2009). One notable example of this was Plaid's broadly popular policy of a laptop for every child starting secondary school. Upon entering the coalition, this One Wales commitment was abandoned in favour of a drastically scaled-down trial in only certain areas in Wales, as opposed to the original universal commitment Plaid had made in their 2007 manifesto. As Dafydd Trystan, former Chief Executive commented, in coalition "Labour only allowed for the trial of a few laptops being given out, but if the party had been really full-throated and turned around to Labour and said we want a Plaid deputy minister in education who will exclusively handle the delivery of this policy, we could have engaged with the public on a level where our exposure, and consequently competency, in government would have reaped the benefits. I think that was an opportunity missed in hindsight" (Interview, 2023).

Another example of Plaid being constrained in their ability to take positive issue ownership of economic policies in their 2007 manifesto was the aforementioned £5000 first home grant. While this was vaguely alluded to in the 'One Wales agreement' in the form of "we will provide grants for first-time buyers" the £5000 grant policy never emerged between 2007 and 2011 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2007). These acted as something of the blueprint for Plaid's economic policies while in

office, unable to deliver on the popular policies that saw them make electoral gains in 2007 due to being the junior partner and an unfavourable global economic context. To compound the party's inability to take positive issue ownership over their popular economic policies with Wyn Jones as Minister for the economy, Plaid also towards the end of the term, began to be actively blamed for the more ambitious economic policy commitments impact on an already constrained One Wales coalition budget. For instance, before the 2011 election, the laptop pilot scheme was scrapped due to financial considerations, with Conservative opponents in the Senedd stating 'scrapping the scheme before it's even been evaluated suggests Labour ministers now agree that this was an ill-advised and wasteful scheme made to appease their nationalist coalition partners' (Burns, 2011). Such criticisms were fuelled by the Welsh government's refusal to publish the breakdown of the costs of the 'One Wales' initiatives (Wyn Jones & Scully, 2008).

Therefore, Plaid can be said to have been caught between a rock and a hard place while in coalition. The pursuit of positive issue ownership in relation to economic outcomes was all but curtailed by the structural context of being a junior coalition partner and being responsible for economic development against a backdrop of the largest UK recession since quarterly data has existed. Equally, the pursuit of a structural insulating framework was precluded, as what would have seemingly been the obvious strategy to deflect blame over the increasingly common negative economic outcomes in Wales due to recession, was precluded due to Labour being in government at both Westminster and Cardiff Bay for 3 out of 4 years of the coalition. The fact it was a Plaid minister responsible for economic management at the devolved level; that Wales was disproportionately impacted by the recession due to a lower average economic output (Gross Value Added) to the rest of the UK; and that the use of the structural insulating framework could not be utilised due to their senior coalition powers also being in government at the UK level, culminated in an unfavourable context for Plaid when in government to flaunt their economic management credentials. It is perhaps no surprise then that if we look to the Welsh Election Study data concerning the relative performance of the two coalition parties while in office there is a general tendency for the Welsh electorate to see Welsh Labour as the more competent in government. While there is unfortunately no available secondary data relating specifically to economic competence in the 2011 Welsh election study voters were asked 'how good a job' both Labour and Plaid Cymru ministers had done in the 'One Wales' government.

Figure 18: 'How good or bad a job of running Wales do you think Labour/Plaid Cymru ministers in the Welsh Assembly Government have done since 2007?
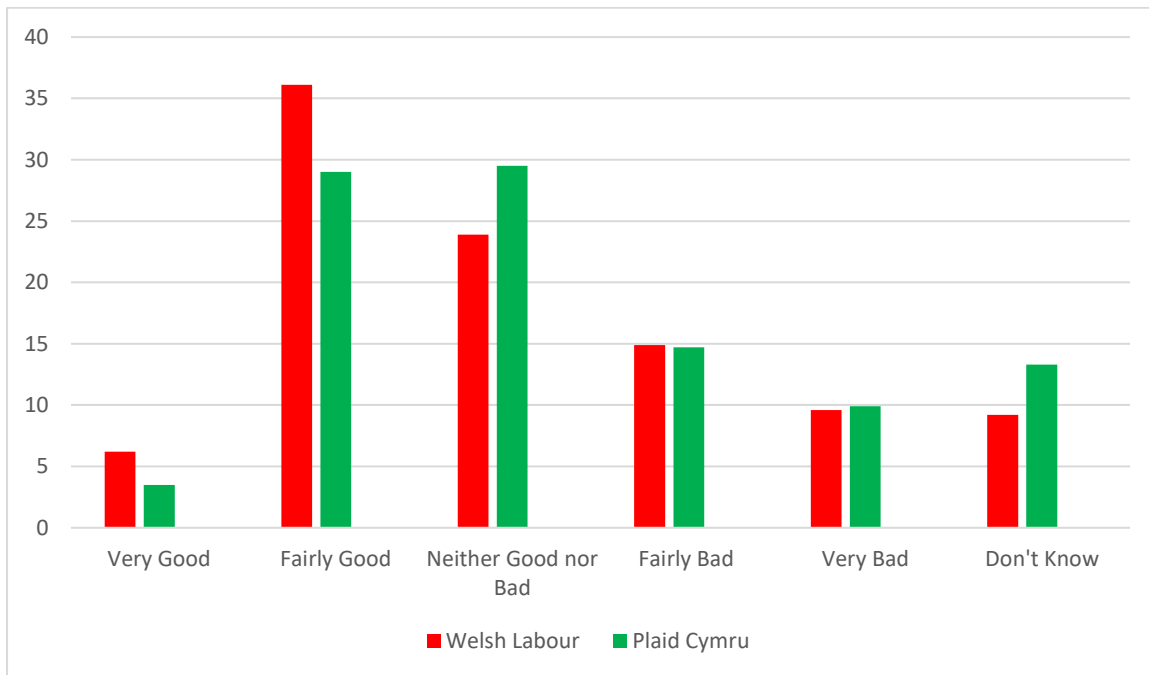
Source: Welsh Election Study 2011

Two key points become apparent from the electorate's perceptions of Plaid and Welsh Labour's time in coalition. Firstly, while blame avoidance strategies of either party seemingly made minimal difference in negative perceptions (fairly/very bad responses) of either party during the coalition, what is obvious is that Labour were able to take credit for positive policy outcomes during the coalition in a way Plaid Cymru couldn't, despite Plaid's leader being responsible for economic policy of the 'One Wales government'. As Plaid MP, Hywel Williams stated 'when we were in government it was hard to convey to the public what we had done well in office, because at that time if anything good happened it was the Labour Party, which took responsibility' (Interview, 2022). Secondly, and perhaps more interestingly, what is striking from the data is just how seemingly indifferent Welsh voters in 2011 were towards Plaid's role in the coalition. Plaid considerably outscored Labour on the 'neither good nor bad' response and the 'don't know' response meaning, at best they thought Plaid's role in government was ineffectual and at worst, a considerable portion of the electorate was unaware of Plaid's policies (and perhaps even presence) in coalition.

2011-2021

In the 2011 election, Welsh Labour won exactly 30 seats and restored the majority they had enjoyed in the Senedd between 2003 and 2007, removing Plaid from government. Plaid recorded their worst election result in their entire time in the Senedd losing 4 seats, bringing their total to 11. To make

matters worse Plaid were overtaken in seats by the Conservatives, who became the official opposition in the Senedd to a majority WLG while Plaid became the third largest party in the 2011-2016 term. In terms of Welsh economic competency dynamics for 2011-2021 there were two discernible differences compared to the first 12 years of devolution. Firstly, from 2010 there existed now a Conservative government at Westminster. Secondly, in the run-up to the 2011 Welsh election, the referendum on the Welsh assembly becoming a primary legislative body was held with 63% of the vote in favour of such a proposal. No new powers were granted to the Assembly per se, but the WAG would now enjoy primary legislative powers in the pre-existing 20 policy areas, it had previously only held secondary powers over. These two developments had some significant implications for the political strategies of both Plaid and Welsh Labour from 2011 onwards.

The 'Yes' result of the 2011 Welsh referendum allowed the WAG to take greater positive ownership of policy issues, as without the need for policy to be rubber-stamped by Westminster, Welsh Labour found themselves able to pursue and take credit for a more distinctive and ideologically divergent economic policy agenda than Westminster. The assumption then would seemingly be that when negative economic outcomes occurred, the use of the blame-deflecting structural insulating framework would be less effective post-2011, as the WAG was now wholly responsible for 20 policy areas. However, the election of a Conservative government at Westminster presented a huge structural opportunity both for Plaid and, more importantly, for the WLG. For Plaid the advantage of a Conservative Westminster government, in strategic terms, was the party could attack not only the UK devolution settlement on a centre-periphery basis but could now more heavily utilise left-right arguments to criticise the union, as successive Conservative administrations adopted policies of austerity (a tactic akin to that used by the SNP – independence as a route to escape the Tories). However, Plaid faced a greater opponent in their competition at the devolved level for the use of the structural insulating framework, as the Conservatives' tenure at Westminster proved to be one of the key assets to the governing strategy of the WLG.

Under the leadership of both Carwyn Jones and Mark Drakeford, Welsh Labour benefited from the primary legislative powers granted in 2011 to the Senedd as they were able to make full-throated claims of credit for positive economic outcomes in Wales. Furthermore, when we would expect the WLG to be more susceptible to criticism in the higher degree of scrutiny that comes with possessing primary legislative powers, they have benefitted from a Conservative Westminster government, who they redirected political blame upwards to when negative economic outcomes occurred. The political timing of the 'yes' vote in the 2011 referendum and the subsequent election of a Conservative

Westminster government therefore created a near-perfect structural context for Welsh Labour to operate within. Plaid has therefore faced a tough opponent in their competition for the use of the insulating structure of devolution, the only discernible difference between the two parties' pursuit of such a strategy being that Welsh Labour use the Conservatives at Westminster primarily to political point score and at times advocate an autonomist position of a reformed union. Alternatively, Plaid, while still considerably sticking the boot into the right-wing policies of the Westminster Conservatives also seek to highlight their Anglo-centric agenda and the flaws of the devolved system (and in turn the solution of independence). As one Plaid MS stated, 'To get into government you have to show you can be trusted, which is difficult. On a Welsh level it is trying to find your niche within that general political landscape and the Labour Party have very successfully tried to portray themselves as another version of us, which in reality is not true at all, Labour is a unionist party but it has tried to park this tanks on our lawns by appealing to those who consider themselves Welsh' (Interview, 2022).

One notable instance of this competitive dynamic for competency playing out in real time between the Westminster Conservative government, the WLG and Plaid Cymru, was the TATA steel crisis in South Wales. In late March 2016, the company TATA Steel announced they would be selling its entire UK business including its main UK steelworks at Port Talbot which employed just over 4000 people (BBC, 2016a). The three political groupings all took different approaches to the steel crisis. Firstly, the UK Conservative government's stance was that they would not seek to interfere in the sale of the steelworks and 'were not favouring one bid over another' and initially the government's position was in David Cameron's own words '[we] don't believe nationalisation is the right answer' (Cameron, 2016). The WLG's approach was perhaps understandably very different to the UK's. Then FM Carwyn Jones had expressed the WLG's position that they would primarily support a workers/management buyout (MBO), as this would ensure the safety of the 4000 jobs at Port Talbot. Not only this but, unlike the UK government, they would provide financial assistance in the sum of £60 million to TATA in order to help facilitate an MBO and ensure the jobs and pension funds of workers were safe (Jones, 2017). Initially, Plaid's response to the steel crisis did not significantly deviate from Welsh Labour's. Then Plaid leader Leanne Wood described the news of the sale as 'devastating' and took the initiative in calling for the recall of the Welsh assembly during its usual recess in order to facilitate a cross-party effort to save the jobs at Port Talbot (The Guardian, 2016). In similar plans of attack, both Welsh Labour and Plaid criticised the fact that UK Business Secretary Sajid Javid, while the crisis had been unfolding for a week, was treating an official trade trip to Australia like a holiday in taking his family with him. Equally, Welsh Labour were able, in the run-up to a crucial Welsh election, to further depict a Conservative government indifferent towards the economic well-being of Wales, when David

Cameron visited the steelworks and the heads of TATA without informing the WLG. The FM expressed he was 'surprised and disappointed' to learn of the PM's visit via Twitter despite having invites by the FM to meet with the PM fall on deaf ears (BBC, 2016b). Furthermore, Welsh Labour were able to exert their authority and take the political high ground when the FM stated 'we are willing to put our political differences aside in the interests of our steel industry, but it does require respect from all parties to make this work' (Jones, 2016) – highlighting to the electorate during the 2016 campaign that Welsh Labour were defending Welsh economic interests against an, at best, apathetic UK Conservative government.

In relation to Plaid's strategy to help propagate an image of economic competence surrounding the TATA steel crisis, they had largely been living in Labour's shadow until a deal was struck with union chiefs to save the steelworks in early 2017. The deal was conditional upon the approval of a new pension scheme by workers that would see them keep their livelihoods but would most likely receive a smaller total pension than pre-2016. Welsh Labour AMs tried very much to highlight the positives of the deal in relation to how, only 9 months ago, 4000 jobs were almost lost. Plaid here saw an opportunity to once again, 'out-left' Labour and demonstrate to the electorate they were the true defenders of Welsh interests compared to a half-hearted Welsh Labour. Adam Price, then a Plaid AM, urged workers to reject the new deal stating it to be 'inconceivable that such a large and powerful conglomerate should be allowed to walk away from its existing pension liabilities… if TATA is not prepared to do this the company should be nationalised' (BBC, 2017a). Plaid came under considerable criticism for its interventions in calling steelworkers to reject the deal with Labour's David Rees AM stating in a press release:

"The mind-games currently being played by Plaid Cymru serve only to undermine the process, by increasing anxiety and spreading confusion. It appears that Plaid AMs are engaged in a crude attempt to score cheap political points. This is cynical opportunism of the worst sort, and we urge them to stop playing politics with steelworkers' livelihoods." (Welsh Labour, 2017).

In any event, the steelworkers opted to accept the deal just a month later, seemingly ignoring Plaid's appeals to reject the deal with 72% siding with Labour in favour of the pension plan (BBC, 2017a). The initial crisis played a central part in the 2016 Welsh assembly elections, happening just 1 month prior to the ballot box. A YouGov poll was conducted in the run-up to the 2016 election and found that in general terms there was a more favourable view of the Welsh Government's handling of the crisis relative to Westminster's. 60% of respondents in Wales believed the UK Government should do more

compared to just 16% who thought it was doing as much as it reasonably could, while 41% said Welsh Labour leaders should be doing more and 29% said they were doing as much as possible (YouGov, 2016). As Roger Scully (2016) commented 'while one could hardly say that these responses constitute a ringing endorsement of the Welsh Government's actions, it nonetheless fares much better in public reactions than does the UK Government'.

The 2016 steel crisis at Port Talbot serves as a classic example in this period of 2011-2021 where Plaid found themselves outmanoeuvred in political terms by Welsh Labour. Labour were able to utilise the mechanism of government to project themselves as competent managers of the Welsh economy, playing a publically proactive role in finding a solution for all sides. As well as positive issue ownership of the economy, Welsh Labour has attempted to firmly pin negative economic outcomes such as Wales's declining steel industry on the UK Conservative government. As seen in the example of the steel crisis, without the instrument of public office Plaid have acutely struggled to take positive issue ownership in economic areas. Equally, their pursuit of a strategy to improve their own economic credentials by pinning negative economic outcomes on the Conservative UK government and indeed the union itself has been somewhat monopolised by Welsh Labour. While Welsh Labour does not utilise the structural insulating framework quite as well as the SNP do in Scotland (see Figures 19 & 20) to project an image of the devolved government as relatively more competent than Westminster, they have been able to use it to frame the terms of political debate in Wales to be Welsh Labour vs UK Conservatives.

This leaves Plaid with the options of replicating Welsh Labour's response to economic outcomes or attempting to adopt a more autonomist (or more social democratic response) to try to differentiate themselves from Labour on a centre-periphery or left-right basis. However, Welsh Labour in themselves adopting a position where they are openly critical, not only of the Conservative's economic policies but also of Westminster's inability to work with Cardiff Bay on economic solutions, have been able to claim they are the defenders of Welsh interests. In adopting this autonomist position, which is critical not only of the ideology of the Conservatives at Westminster but the system of devolution itself, they have dampened the centre-periphery arguments of Plaid and consequently tightly framed the political debate between us 'Welsh Labour' and 'them' UK Conservatives. This has resulted in Plaid, in the period of 2011-2021 having little to no opportunity to capitalise on negative economic outcomes in Wales, as their attempts to blame the UK government will be almost always identical to Labour's. Alternatively, they can attempt to criticise WLG for negative economic outcomes and present a more socialist alternative to differentiate themselves but in such instances as the TATA

pensions deal, Plaid have found themselves too far to the left of the Welsh median voter (this shall be further explored in Chapter 7).

WELSH ECONOMIC PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCY

As seen in the period of 2011-2021, Welsh Labour were able to outmanoeuvre Plaid and monopolise the structural insulating framework in a fashion that was precluded to Labour pre-2010. However, how effective was such a strategy in forming a perception of economic prudence amongst the Welsh electorate? And importantly, was there a discernible difference in economic perceptions of competency pre-2010 and post-2010? Similar to those conducted in Scotland, two useful surveys were conducted by the Welsh Election Study on the perceptions of which institution was to be 'credited' or 'blamed' for the 'strengthening' or 'weakening' of the economy. If we look at the data presented in Figure 19, we can discern that Welsh voters originally did not believe the WAG to be responsible for improvements in the economic situation of Wales. [4]

Figure 19: 'What do you accredit the strengthening of the economy/standard of living to since the last Welsh election?' (%)
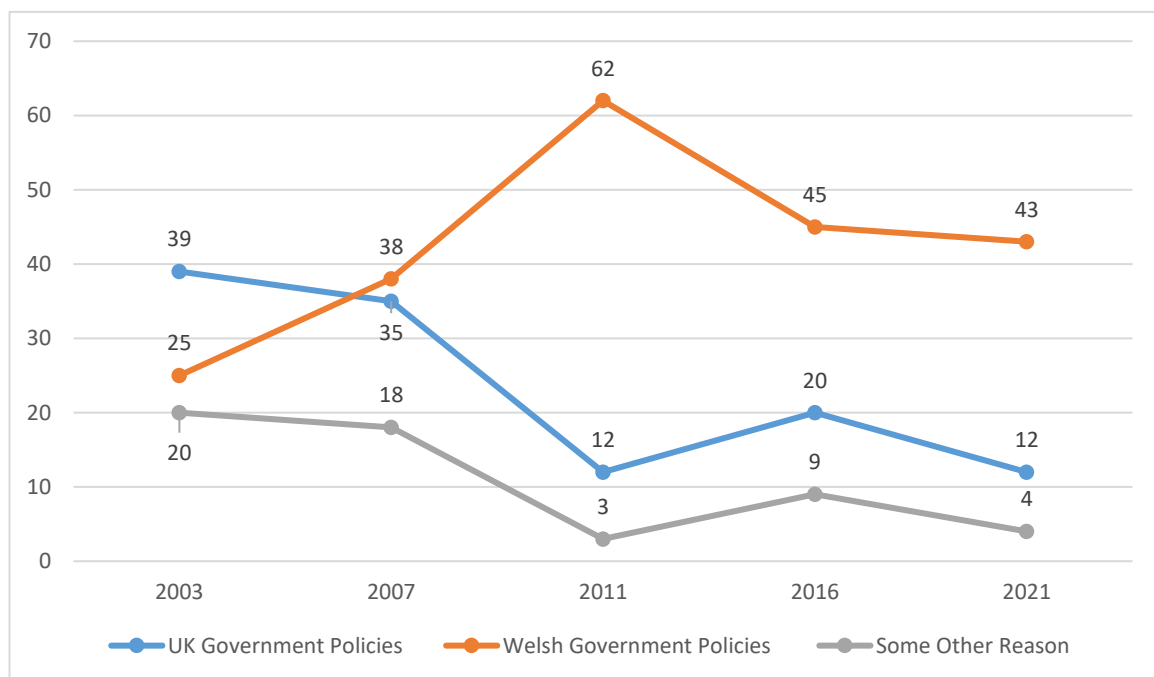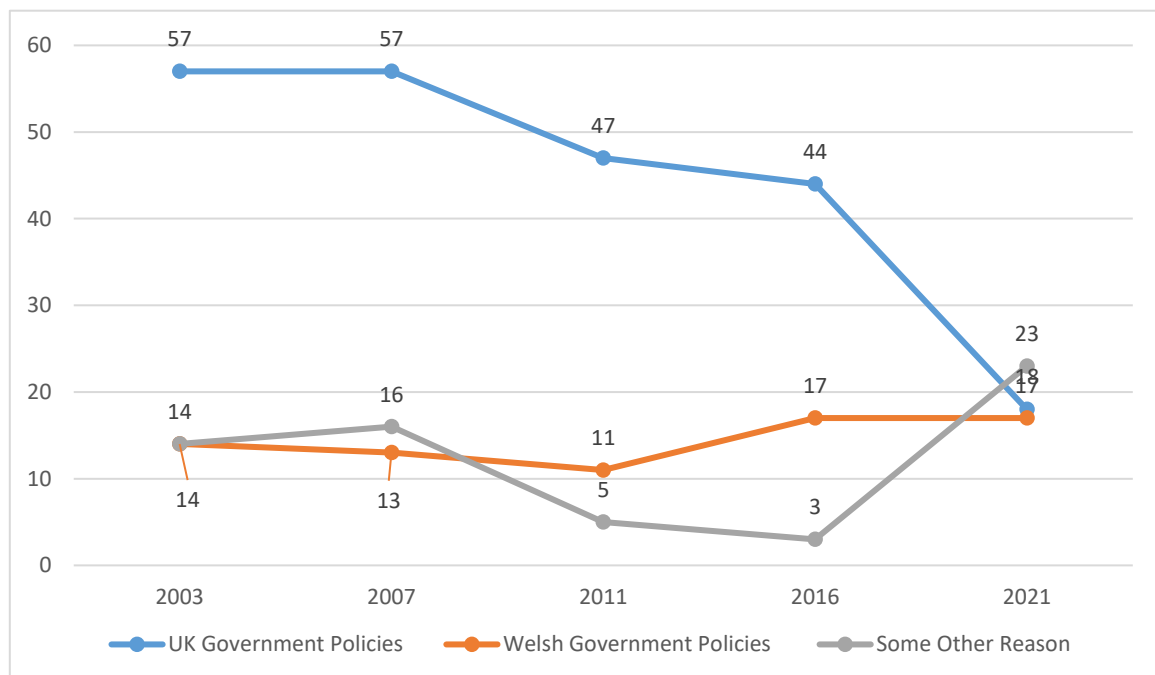

Source: Welsh Election Studies 2003-2021

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[4] No question related to economic performance and who was to blame/credit was asked in the 1999 Welsh Election Study

However, by 2007 the Welsh people appear to have been convinced of the Assembly's economic management credentials, with 13% more people accrediting the devolved administration. Perhaps the most interesting observation from Figure 19 is the difference in the percentage of people crediting the WAG and Westminster for improvements in the economy after the return of a Conservative UK government. The average share of voters who credited the Welsh government in 2003 and 2007 was 31.5%, compared to an average of 50% post-2011. By the same token, the average share of voters crediting Westminster for improvement in the Welsh economy in 2003 and 2007 stood at 37%, before falling to an average of 14.7% post-2011. This would suggest that the WLG have been more widely perceived as taking positive issue ownership of the economy since they obtained greater primary legislative powers in 2011. It is also worth mentioning that after the One Wales coalition involving Plaid, does the WAG receive the highest share of credit for improvements in the economy. The data here also further supports the idea of vertical competency in relation to positive issue ownership of the economy, as falls in Westminster's credit for positive economic outcomes broadly correlate with rises in those crediting the Welsh government with improvements in the economy. In a similar vein, Figure 20 clearly shows that Welsh voters have consistently been more likely to 'blame' the UK Government over the WAG with the perceived 'weakening' of the Welsh economy since 2003.

Figure 20: 'What do you blame the weakening of the economy/standard of living on since the last Welsh election?' (%)

Source: Welsh Election Studies 2003-2021

However, unlike in Scotland, the average proportion of respondents blaming the weakening of the Welsh economy on the Conservative Westminster government, interestingly is actually less than the share of people who blamed the Labour Westminster government in 2003 & 2007. The average proportion of Welsh voters who blamed the Labour Westminster government for weakening the economy was 57%, and the average in 2011 and 2016 fell to 45.5%. It is worth noting here that 2021's anomalous result of Westminster receiving drastically less blame while 'some other reason' jumps above both UK and Welsh governments would seemingly be due to the 2021 election taking place after the COVID pandemic and the accompanying economic downturn of lockdowns. What the data in Figure 20 would suggest, is that while Labour have been able to use the structural insulating framework to maintain around a 30% positive difference in those who blame Westminster's economic policies over the WLG for negative economic outcomes, they are far less effective in the use of the framework compared to the SNP. Looking at both sets of data, it is apparent that Welsh Labour's ability to blame deflect has not been as successful as the SNP's at Holyrood. This would suggest that while the structural insulating framework can be used to some success by an autonomist party (such as WLP) they are ultimately curtailed in pushing the strategy to its full potential. Welsh Labour's use of the structural insulating framework is limited as to use such a strategy to its full competency-maximising potential, would require them to push the constitutional critique too far. However, what the data does suggest, is that Welsh Labour have succeeded in taking positive issue ownership over the economy relative to Westminster in the high level of credit they received for economic improvements post-2011. This would suggest that the acquiring of primary legislative powers in 2011, in addition to the election of a Conservative Westminster government in 2010 who, in instances such as the steel crisis and the broader policy agenda of austerity, made the WLG appear as relatively competent economic managers.

In interviews conducted with key leadership Figures in Plaid, it became clear that the party were aware of Welsh Labour benefiting from a Conservative Westminster government and consequently struggled since 2010 to compete in portraying themselves as defenders of 'Welsh interests'. As one prominent Plaid MS stated 'if you have a Conservative government in Westminster that Wales has not voted for (because we never have) it is easier for a WLG to portray themselves as the good guys and Westminster as the bad guys, and to corral Wales around Labour as the protectors of Wales in Welsh government… [Welsh Labour] portray that criticism of the Tories as being the defender of Wales but actually they're defending Labour politics in Wales'. This made Plaid's ability to appear economically competent at the devolved level a more difficult task post-2010. Pre-existing Welsh Labour voters felt no need to look elsewhere electorally when the WLG were able to present themselves as the

competent defenders of Welsh interests against the backdrop of a perceived incompetent, Anglo-centric, Conservative UK government.

THE VALENCE ISSUE

As mentioned in Chapters 2 & 4, economic competency is a fundamental but not all-encompassing aspect of perceptions of competency. As we saw in the case of Scotland, between 2008 & 2015 economic concerns were paramount for voters. This represents what we might understand as 'normal politics' when the economy is the jewel in the crown of voters' concerns when casting votes. However, as we saw in Scotland from 2016 onwards, certain political debates (Brexit, COVID) can create uncertain political contexts whereby a particular valence or ideologically salient issue (in the case of Brexit) can come to eclipse the economy. Much like in Scotland, Welsh politics came to be dominated by the political issues of Brexit and COVID and while there were economic dimensions to these debates, traditional economic standalone issues (e.g. unemployment/inflation) were somewhat eclipsed between the period of 2016-2021. Even in periods when the economy dominates the majority of voters' concerns, more often than not, there is a secondary valence issue which still holds significant importance in determining votes, as seen in the time of the SLE with concerns around declining healthcare standards. Therefore, it is essential to accurately identify those issues which Welsh voters were most concerned with and likely to assess a party's fitness to govern on. Having identified the key Welsh valence issues, we can then analyse the electorate's perception of the Welsh government in these policy areas through available survey data. In the case of identifying the valence issues in Wales, only Ipsos Mori have carried out surveys which have helped in identifying what the key valence issues were for Welsh voters between 2008 and 2021.[5] In Figures 21 & 22, Ipsos Mori asked voters every year (in May*) 'what they believed to be the most important issue facing Britain today?' and 'What do you see as the main/other important issues facing Britain today?'. As was the case in the Scottish issue index, recording of Welsh-only responses to the issues index only began in 2008, which does not allow for an analysis of Welsh valence issues prior to 2008.

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[5] No equivalent to the SSAS exists in Wales. No data exists in relation to 'What the Welsh Government's highest priority should be?'. While similar polls were conducted by the Welsh Election Study, asking 'What is the most important issue facing Wales today?' they were open-ended questions generating thousands of individually different responses and often relating to overlapping policy areas, so were not suitable for the categorisation of policy areas needed here. To try to better understand the valence issue in Wales, Ipsos Mori's data on Welsh-only responses to the main/other most important issue was used.
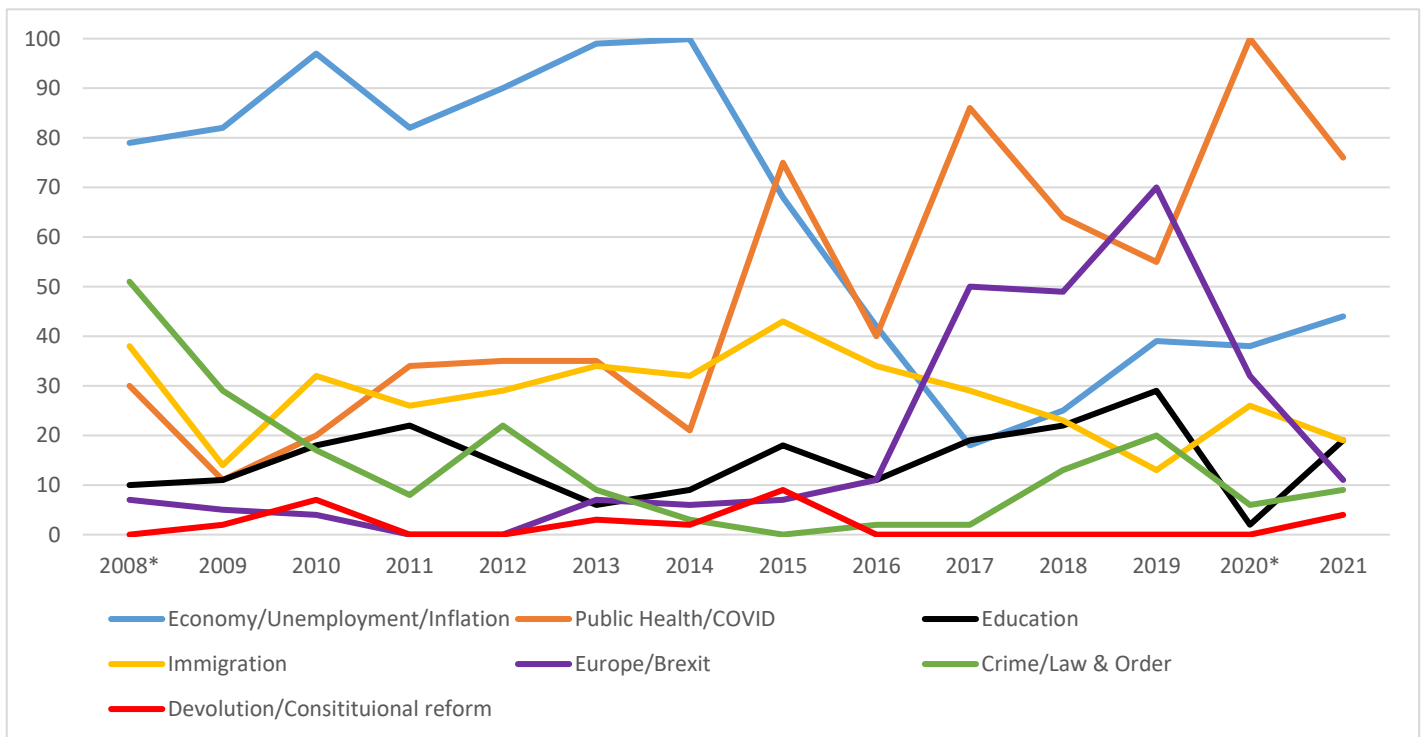
Figure 21: Welsh perceptions of the most important issue facing Britain today? (%)
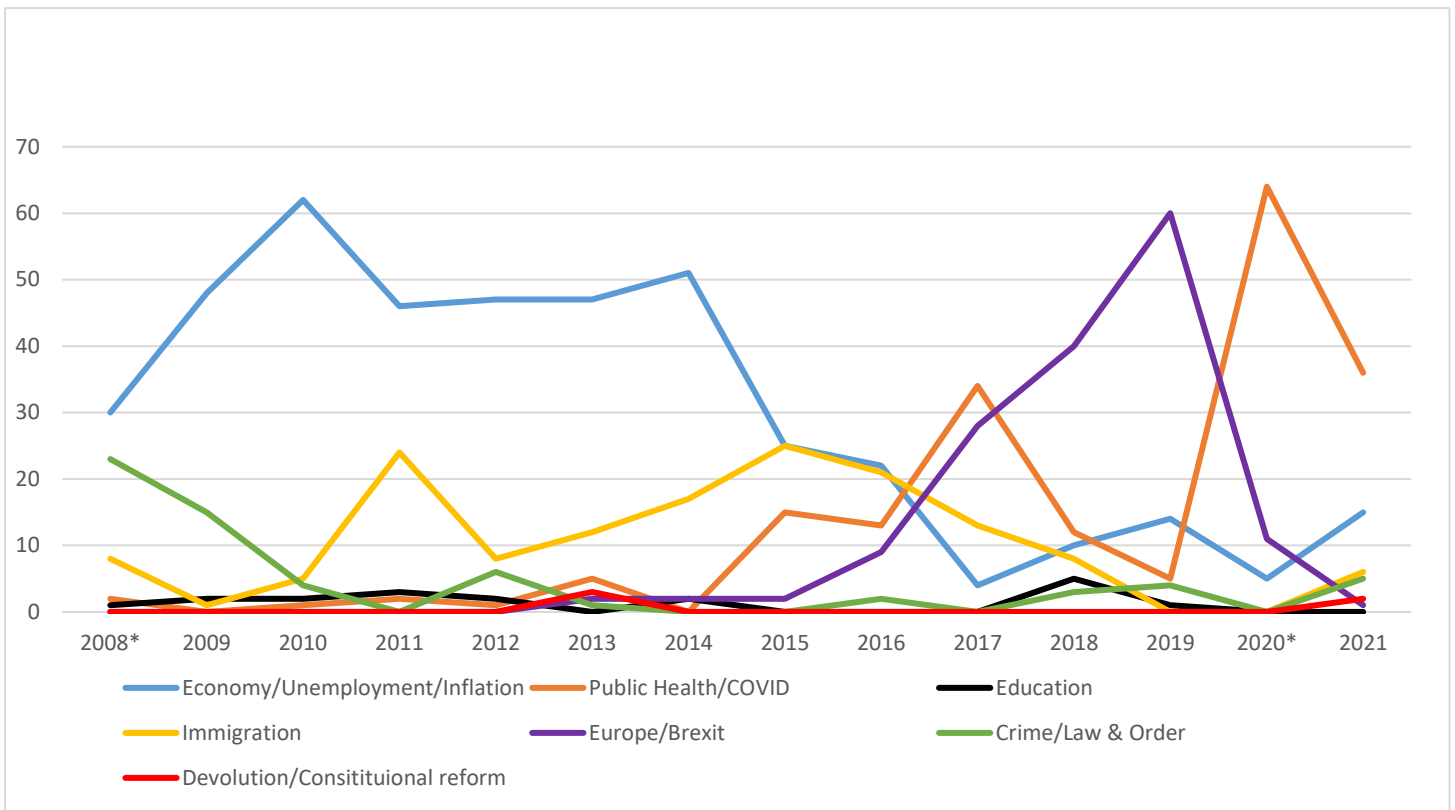
Source: IPSOS MORI Issues Index 2008-2021

*In 2008 and 2020 issues index were not conducted in May, so June's were used instead.

Figure 22: Welsh perceptions of the most and other most important issue facing Britain today? (%)

Source: IPSOS MORI Issues Index 2008-2021

Issue salience in Wales followed broadly similar patterns between 2008 and 2021 to those in Scotland. Perhaps unsurprisingly in the wake of the 2008 financial crash and subsequent recession, economic concerns dominated from 2008-2015. In Figure 21, we see that after 2016 'Europe/Brexit' and Public health/COVID' then jostled for prominence as the most important issue for Welsh voters. Figure 22 allows us to evaluate what were the other significant issues for voters outside of their paramount political concern. However, there also exists some discernible differences between the issue indexes in Scotland and Wales. Firstly, immigration stands to be a much more significant secondary issue in Wales, unlike in Scotland. In Figure 21 we can see in 8 different years the Issue Index was conducted, immigration was the 2nd highest scoring most important issue for Welsh voters. Equally in Figure 22, we can see only once between 2008 and 2018 did immigration not register above 20% as a main/other important issue. Despite this, the only two issues that supplanted the economy as the most important and main/important political issue in Wales since the advent of devolution were again (as in Scotland), 'Public Health/COVID' and 'Brexit/Europe'. While not obviously apparent in Figure 21, Figure 22 highlights how public health was consistently the most significant issue that was a wholly devolved matter in Wales. Therefore, similarly to Scotland, the identified valence issues, in that they were the only issues to supplant the economy as the significant issues in Wales, are Public Health and COVID'.

As seen previously in Figures 21 & 22, Brexit came to dominate Welsh politics in the years from 2016 until 2019 although, in political terms, very differently to that in Scotland. While Brexit existed as an important *political argument* for both Plaid and WLP to engage with in their efforts to pressure the Conservative Westminster government to negotiate a 'soft Brexit', the Welsh government had little to no material input over Brexit negotiations (just like at Holyrood) resulted in Brexit not being an issue relating to the competency of Welsh parties. Consequently, while an important positional issue that parties sought to achieve political argument hegemony over, Brexit (similarly to Scotland) will not discussed here as it is not a valence issue and Brexit's importance is related not to competency but to ideological arguments concerning independence and PAH. Consequently, analysis of Plaid's arguments concerning Europe shall feature in Chapter 7. Additionally, while immigration stood to be another significant secondary issue in Welsh politics (especially pre-2015) it also has been discounted for analysis in relation to competency dynamics at the devolved level. This is because immigration remains a wholly reserved matter for the UK government to legislate on. Equally, the majority of Welsh voters seem to have a working knowledge of which levels of government are in control of which policy areas.[6] Voter judgements relating to the competency of the Welsh parties therefore would not be significantly impacted by the issue of immigration.

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[6] From 2007 onwards the Welsh Election Study has asked voters 'Which level of government has the most influence in devolved policy areas?'. In each devolved policy area, at every survey since 2007, over 60% of

PUBLIC HEALTH (PRE-COVID)

As was elaborated upon in the previous chapter, one of the less commonly discussed motivations for pursuing devolution in the 1990s, from a Westminster perspective, was that the UK state was enhancing its own governing autonomy by shifting responsibility for policy areas to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In particular, Blair wished the state to 'extract itself from taking any blame for the delivery of healthcare' (Greener & Powell, 2008:631-632). The logic here was that by alleviating themselves of the Scottish and Welsh aspects of responsibility for a whole range of policy areas (alongside PFIs) while retaining control of the key macroeconomic powers, they could ensure a greater perception of competency in their economic management. Equally, a further motivation was that devolution presented an opportunity for Westminster elites to offload part of the responsibility for politically problematic policy areas such as health. In this respect, the NHS in Wales bore a strikingly similar resemblance to the NHS in Scotland at the advent of devolution. The Wanless (2003) report commissioned in the first term of the Welsh Assembly, concluded that the NHS in Wales 'was poorer, resources less well utilised, health and social care links weaker than they should be'. Therefore, in Statecraft terms, the hiving off of health policy to the NAW would be beneficial to the governing autonomy of Westminster governments. If negative policy outcomes occurred Westminster elites would be absolved of responsibility for an under-performing Welsh NHS, or if Cardiff Bay resolved the problems later outlined in the Wanless report, they could take credit as the masterminds of the political structures which delivered an improved Welsh NHS.

Prior to 2010, Welsh Labour's rhetoric concerning the NHS was very much comprised of 2 essential parts: 1. the obvious task of defending their management of the NHS; 2. highlighting the policy divergence of Welsh Labour relative to New Labour in relation to the much smaller uptake of PFI contracts. Welsh Labour opposed the extent of the privatising reforms that New Labour and later Conservative administrations would pursue and, to a lesser extent, Welsh Labour were also wary to publically declare the need for a radical overhaul of the NHS (which Plaid were suggesting) in a holistic community-orientated model. As a former Welsh civil servant explained when discussing the challenges facing the Welsh NHS, 'the political environment in Wales is too often the enemy of change… the public are not convinced of the need for major changes… there is a deep suspicion of service changes' (Riley, 2016:41). It is against this backdrop that we see a pre-2010 Welsh Labour ardently defend its record on the NHS by illustrating how self-imposed targets had been met in relation to increasing nurses, hospital consultants and overall funding being put into the NHS (Welsh

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voters have believed the Welsh government to have the most influence. Therefore, while not a perfect working understanding of the division of powers between sub-national and national governments, the majority of Welsh people are aware which government is in control of which policy areas.

Labour 2003;2007). Equally when Welsh Labour would suggest health policy, they were almost always geared towards improving money and resources within the pre-existing system, such as in their 2007 manifesto when committing to increasing the numbers of GPs by 10%, investing over a billion pounds in renovating old healthcare buildings and committing to the building of seven new hospitals (Welsh Labour, 2007). Plaid alternatively pursued a much more radical, yet abstract, vision for the NHS. Their narrative very much focused on an overhaul of the NHS which sought to rectify the 3rd point of the Wanless report that links between social care and healthcare needed to be expanded upon to improve the overall performance of the Welsh NHS. To rectify this, Plaid suggested a new 'community health service' in Wales which would create new links between healthcare and other public sectors such as education (Plaid Cymru, 2007). Plaid also diagnosed the NHS as riddled with red tape with an aim to reduce the 55 separate bodies involved in its governance (Ibid).

After 2010 the competency dynamics surrounding Welsh political parties' policies on NHS changed considerably due to the election of the Conservative Westminster government. Upon returning to government in 2011, the WLG started to see a steady rise in operation waiting list times alongside an increase in Welsh GP waiting times (Moon, 2013). This issue was capitalised upon by then PM David Cameron who hoped to reassert the blame avoidance opportunity of devolution Westminster elites had originally envisaged. The UK government pursued a narrative of an incompetent WLG, who in having devolved control of healthcare had cut funding causing a huge increase in NHS waiting times; 'This is what you get if you get Labour: no money, no reform, no good health services' (Cameron, 2012). This forced Welsh Labour to defend their record not just in left-right terms but also the utilisation of centre-periphery arguments criticising the system of devolution. In response, Welsh Labour adopted an argument commonly associated with Plaid, that under the Barnett formula Wales had been underfunded by £300 million prior to 2010 (information that was previously known but not used to attack their London Labour colleagues) and that due to the further £1.8 billion in cuts to the Welsh budget imposed by the Conservatives, there would be a 42.6% real terms cut in the WAG's budget (Moon, 2013). Despite successful efforts to safeguard NHS funding in cash terms, Welsh Labour claimed that due to UK Conservative austerity measures, there was still an inevitable fall in real-terms spending (Moon, 2013).

Plaid equally after 2010 tried to take advantage of the structural context, to present themselves as the defenders of the NHS. The party's emphasis here changed from the community-based approach which characterised their pre-2010 rhetoric surrounding the NHS to one that strongly emphasised themselves as the party who would pick up the mantel for protecting the NHS against hospital closures that, whilst instigated by UK Conservatives, would not always be stopped by the WLG. From interviews conducted, it is apparent that Plaid here saw an opportunity to eat into Labour's issue ownership of

health and sought to put the NHS front and centre of their messaging. As Plaid's former chair commented: 'Issues around the health service have never been far from the top of the agenda in Wales. For instance, on many occasions we have been in competition with Welsh Labour in constituencies and have renamed our campaigns for AM/MSs to 'Save Cynon Valley Hospital' or 'Save Withybush Hospital' and them campaigns clearly worked in attracting an unprecedented level of Plaid support in these constituencies' (Interview, Dafydd Trystan, 2023).

Here we can see how both Westminster elites, Welsh Labour and Plaid all attempted to capitalise via differing political strategies on the devolution of healthcare. But how effective were these strategies for Plaid and Welsh Labour in garnering a perception of competency in their health policies? Is there a discernible difference in perceptions after the advent of a Conservative government? Whilst there exists no survey data which directly relates to voters' perception of which individual party they think would best manage the NHS, the BSA does have available data on Welsh respondents' satisfaction with how the NHS was run in Wales between 1999 and 2019.[7]

Figure 23: Welsh only responses to satisfaction with the way the health service runs nowadays (%)
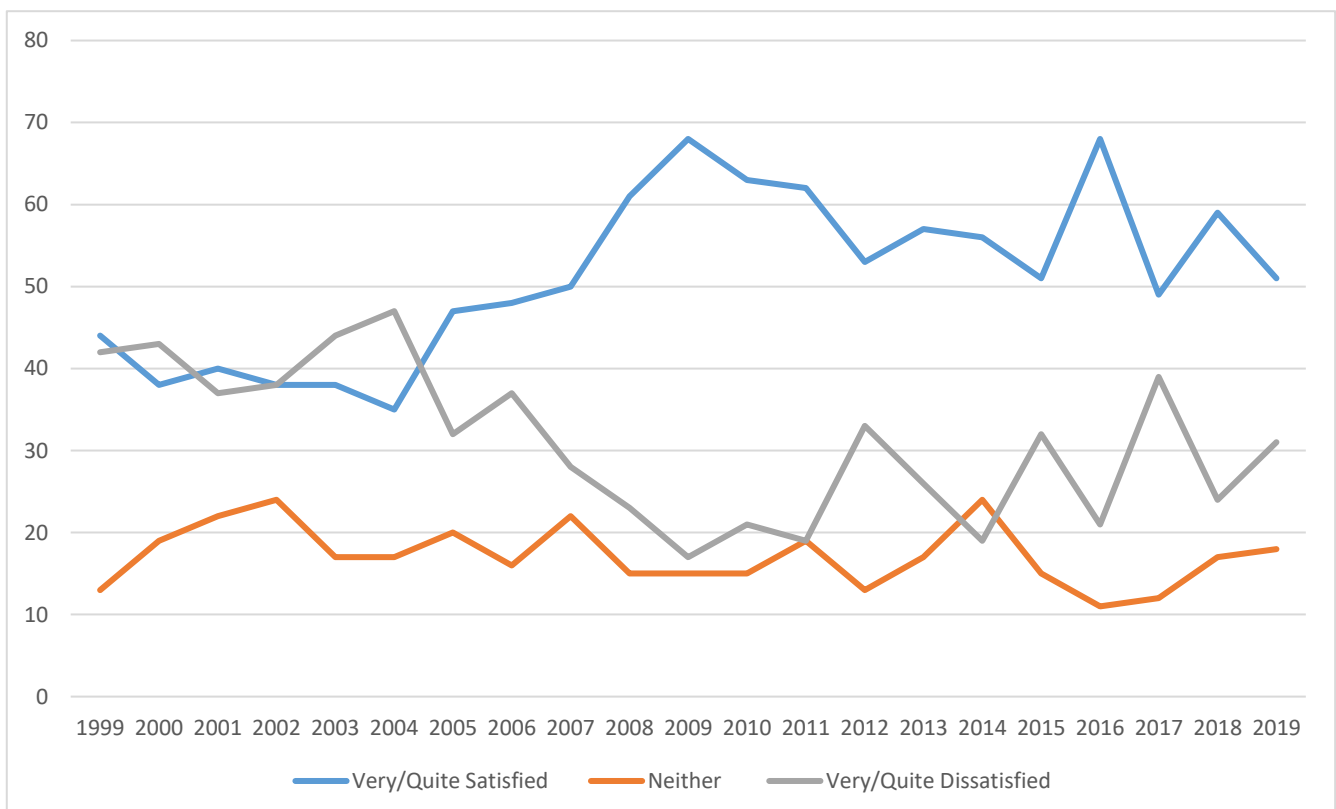

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey 1999-2019

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[7] 2020 & 2021 were not included due to COVID. Separate data shall be used to assess satisfaction in the Welsh government's management of COVID.

There are a number of key observations to highlight in Figure 23. Firstly, we can see that a majority of people since 2005 have been satisfied with the running of the Welsh NHS. Secondly, we can see that when Plaid were in collation government between 2007 and 2011, the average satisfaction in this 4 year period was at the highest at any time since 1999. This suggests that Plaid's role in the One Wales coalition did have some positive impact on perceptions of the Welsh government's running of the NHS. Thirdly, if we look at the average satisfaction pre and post-Conservative Westminster government it would suggest that Welsh Labour have exploited the structural insulating framework to boost their own reputation for competent management of the NHS. However, a key assumption of this argument is that a majority of Welsh voters have an understanding that healthcare is a devolved matter and therefore the Welsh Government's responsibility. Unfortunately, unlike the economic perceptions of competency data, there is no available data on which government Welsh voters credited/blamed for their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the NHS which would allow us to test such an assumption. However, there does exist Welsh Election Study data relating to which level of government has the most influence on the way the NHS is run which alongside the previous data allows us to more validly conclude whether 'satisfaction with how the NHS run' is indicative of a perception of competency for the various WLGs.

Figure 24: Level of Government with the most influence on the way the NHS is run in Wales? (%)
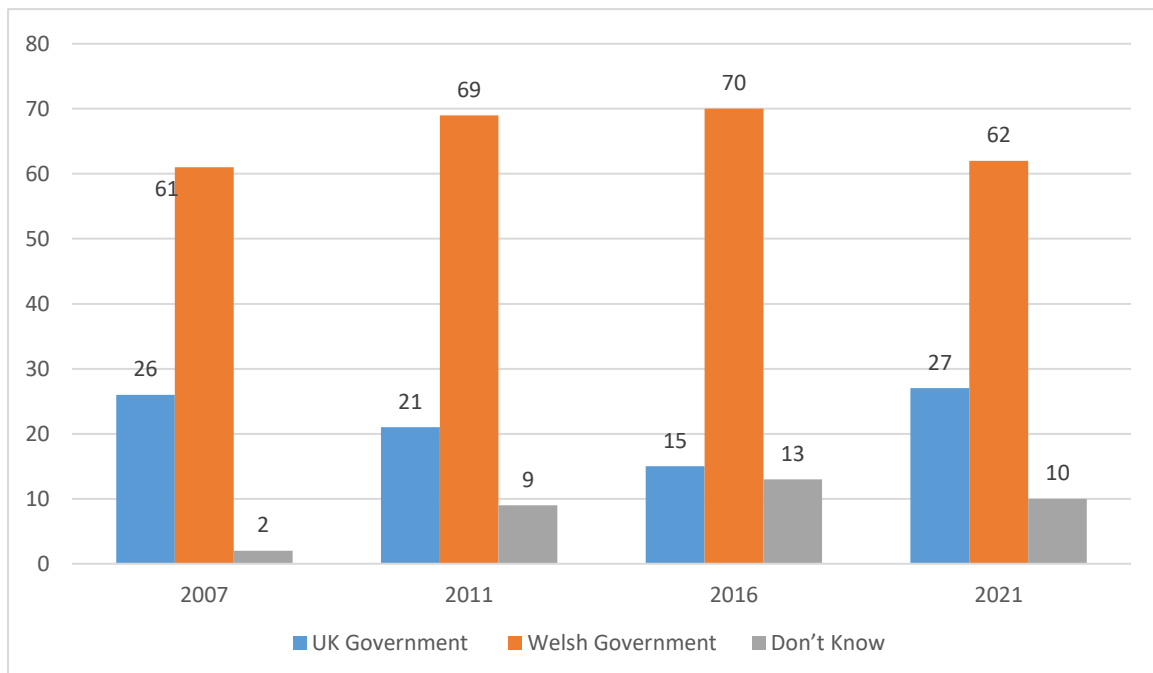
Source: Welsh Election Studies 2007-2021

Unfortunately, the data here is limited in the sense it only begins in 2007. However, the data shows clearly that a majority of Welsh voters were aware that the NHS was under the remit of the Welsh Government. This would suggest that the high levels of satisfaction post-2007 in Figure 23 are indicative of the Welsh electorate's perception of the WLGs and the One Wales Government of 2007-2011 as competent managers of the NHS. The two data sets might also suggest that the initial higher level of dissatisfaction with the way the NHS was run and the gradual trend towards satisfaction might be a consequence of a limited awareness in the early years of devolution of which government managed which policy areas, with satisfaction increasing as awareness of policy divergence became more apparent.

The data presented in Figures 23 & 24 would suggest that the presence of a Conservative government at Westminster, particularly one so committed to pursuing an agenda of curtailing public spending, including the NHS, played into the hands of Welsh Labour in office. While previously, blame surrounding negative health outcomes in Wales would be hard to shake, the Conservatives at Westminster allowed the WLG not only to deflect blame but also highlight the privatisation reforms and lower real-term spending on the NHS per capita in England (Moon, 2013), presenting themselves as competent managers of the NHS relative to the Conservative UK governments. In the case of Plaid, it was clear from interviews conducted that senior figures in the party were aware of the vote-wining potential of portraying the party as the defenders of the NHS and hospital closures in the context of a financially constrained Welsh government from 2011 onwards. As Elin Jones AM/MS remarked: 'There is no issue that touches the Welsh population in the same way as the NHS does, in terms of how it's run. You can't win an election, if you support the closure of a hospital, let's put it that way' (Interview 2022). However, whilst both Plaid and WLP dedicated a significant amount of attention and messaging to the NHS due to its salience in Welsh politics, the mechanism of government and specifically the insulation of a UK Conservative government have enabled the WLG to ensure a high level of public satisfaction with the NHS and consequently eclipse any attempts by Plaid to claim issue ownership as defenders of the NHS.

COVID-19

The only other issue to supersede the economy as the issue Welsh voters considered the most significant, was that of COVID-19. Unsurprisingly, COVID-19 in 2020 scored the highest saliency percentage (64%) of any issue since Welsh responses began in 2008 (Figure 22). The NHS being a devolved matter, in combination with the heightened concerns around public health due to the pandemic, provided a rare opportunity for the WLG to demonstrate its competence over the key valence issue of the day. In the years prior to 2016, where 'politics as normal' was in practice and the

economy was the key issue for Welsh voters, both Welsh Labour and Plaid were afforded little opportunity to pursue meaningfully divergent policy to Westminster over the key valence issue, as the majority of macro-economic powers resided with the UK government. In relation to the structural insulating framework, COVID afforded the Welsh government an opportunity to pursue a divergent policy to that of Westminster regarding the supreme valence issue, with the aim of framing the Conservatives UK approach as incompetent. For Plaid, the structural opportunity COVID presented was less straightforward in the sense they would have to point the finger at both the WLG's management of COVID but also dedicate effort to highlighting the obvious incompetence of the UK Conservative government during the pandemic.

Similarly to Scotland, Welsh Labour under the leadership of Mark Drakeford adopted a more cautious approach to their management of the pandemic than Westminster. Whilst there was a general consensus that all levels of government were ill-equipped to deal with a public health emergency, COVID presented an opportunity for the Welsh government to present themselves as better communicators of important COVID-related decisions and also pursue divergent, more cautious policies to that of Westminster in relation to lockdowns, PPE and vaccines. By adopting this strategy, the Welsh government's aim, while admittedly 'underprepared' for such a public health crisis (Drakeford, 2023), was to appear relatively competent when compared with the UK government's management of COVID. In this sense, COVID was less about demonstrating Governing Competence in the form of positive issue ownership for Welsh Labour but appearing as the lesser of two incompetent evils when Welsh voters would inevitably assess the relative performance of both governments in their management of COVID. In terms of the more cautious strategy adopted by the Welsh government to try to highlight their own relative competency to Westminster, there were numerous occasions when Welsh Labour diverged from Westminster in their decisions.

One example of the WLG's more cautious approach was the adoption of a restriction on internal movement within Wales. In England, there were no distance restrictions on travel, whereas in Wales there existed a 'Stay Local' rule asking people to stay within a 5-mile radius of their home (Tatlow et al, 2021). The fact the restriction was not legally enforceable illustrates how the WLG were keen, despite legal limitations, to create a public perception of themselves as cautious managers of the pandemic. In the same cautious vein, the 'stay at home' order ended in England on May 13th whereas in Wales the government prolonged the order until 1st June, despite the R rate in England standing at 0.75, only 0.05 less than Wales at 0.8 – suggesting the more cautious strategy of the Welsh government was politically motivated (Morris & Brooks, 2020). Equally, the UK government lifted the advice on English vulnerable people to self-isolate on August 1st 2020, whereas the Welsh government carried on advising vulnerable people to self-isolate for a further 15 days (BBC, 2020a). Furthermore,

an area the WLG appear to have outperformed the UK government is the vaccination rollout. Wales was the first UK nation to have offered the top 4 priority groups a COVID jab, 2 weeks ahead of its own self-imposed target of mid-February 2021 (BBC, 2021a). Concurrently to meeting the vulnerable group target, Wales vaccinated 22.7% of its population compared to 21% in England (Ibid). Communication and exposure were equally important positive experiences of COVID for the WLG. The daily briefings given by Mark Drakeford and other key ministers gave the WLG a platform to communicate directly with Welsh voters and highlight their divergent path to Westminster. This was a rare opportunity for the WLG to have the spotlight in the context of a relatively weak Welsh media when compared to the distinctiveness of the Scottish media to the UK media. But did this increased ability to communicate with voters on key COVID decisions garner a perception of Governing Competence for the WLG? Did this impact perceptions of Westminster's competency during COVID? Figure 25 displays survey data regarding Welsh voters' perceptions of who has successfully managed COVID policy areas.

Figure 25: Percentage of respondents agreeing that the UK/Welsh government had done a good job handling COVID-19 policy areas
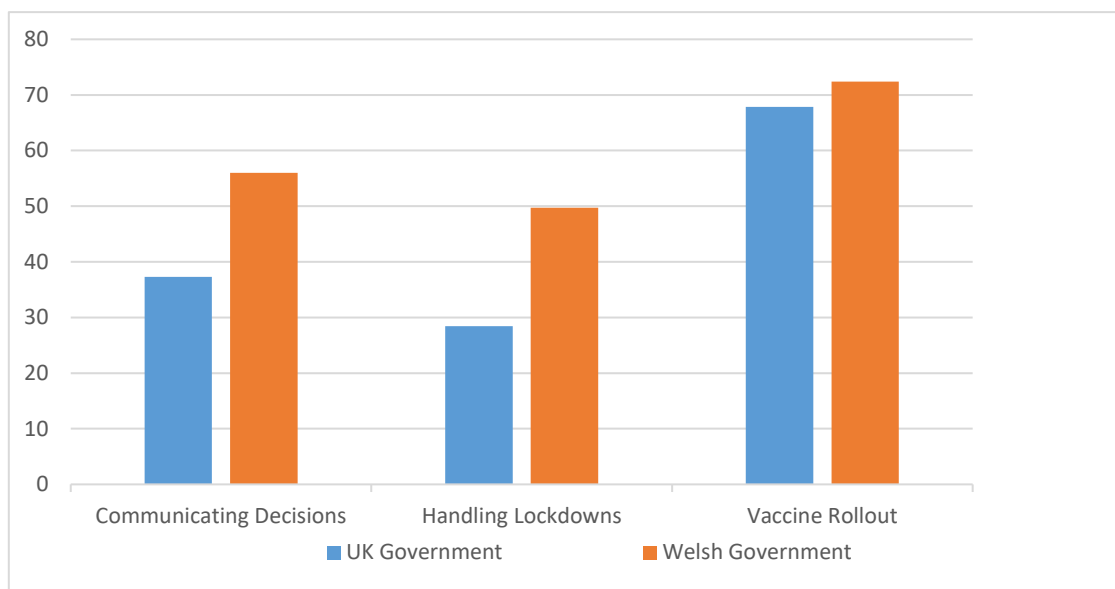
Source: Welsh Election Study 2021

We can see here that across all three categories of 'communicating decisions', 'handling lockdowns' and 'vaccine rollout' that the Welsh government were judged to have outperformed the UK government by voters. Whilst there is only a small difference in the perceived performance concerning the vaccine rollout, there is a much larger discernible disparity in perceptions of how each institution communicated and handled lockdowns during COVID. This would suggest that the cautious approach to lifting lockdown and shielding measures alongside the daily Welsh government COVID press

conferences boosted Welsh Labour's perception of Governing Competency. Equally, the poor performance of the UK government could be partially attributed to their failure, at many points during the pandemic, to distinguish England from the rest of the UK when announcing policies, causing considerable Welsh confusion. As Daniel Wincott (2020) argued: 'some people who live in Wales would be forgiven for feeling confused when a UK Prime Minister talks of rules for British people, without making it wholly clear they apply only in England'.

In relation to Plaid's strategy, the structural insulating framework once again made it difficult to be considered by voters during COVID. More than ever before Plaid struggled to stay relevant in Welsh politics, as COVID had framed the political debate in terms of Cardiff Bay vs Westminster. Plaid on many occasions was quick to highlight the Welsh government's failure in their management of COVID, such as when the Welsh government's COVID testing deal with the pharmaceutical company 'Roche' collapsed leaving Wales temporarily with 5000 fewer tests a day and refusing to publish WhatsApp messages with the company due to the messages' content potentially 'prejudicing relations with the UK government' (BBC, 2020a). Plaid heavily criticised the move with leader Adam Price stating: "why is the Welsh Government so ready to protect Westminster by choosing not to publish this correspondence when the collapse of the deal, and apparent gazumping, left Wales drastically wanting in terms of crucial COVID testing capacity?' (Ibid). However, in a political debate that pitted the UK government against the Welsh government, Plaid struggled to get a look in politically. Interviews with key Plaid politicians illustrated how the leadership were aware of how a perceived incompetent UK government in managing COVID, befitted the Welsh government. As Elin Jones remarked:

'*There is an acceptance by people in Wales that they felt more comfortable with how COVID has been managed by the Welsh government compared to the UK Government. So that shows that Welsh people are comparing and contrasting the two institutions seeing both the good and bad. These weren't necessarily even people who voted for Plaid or more devolution, but they were very happy with the situation as it is*' (Interview, 2022).

In relation to how this impacted Plaid, one senior Plaid MS stated:

'*Even though the Welsh Government made lots of mistakes with their handling of COVID, they were a lot better in terms of their attitude than the UK Government so everybody thought: God, this Welsh government is great. They were on TV every lunchtime and consequently, we didn't have a chance. The really strong language used by Mark Drakeford looks like he is being very critical of the UK Government but of course, in reality, he is just being critical of the Conservatives*' (Interview, 2022).
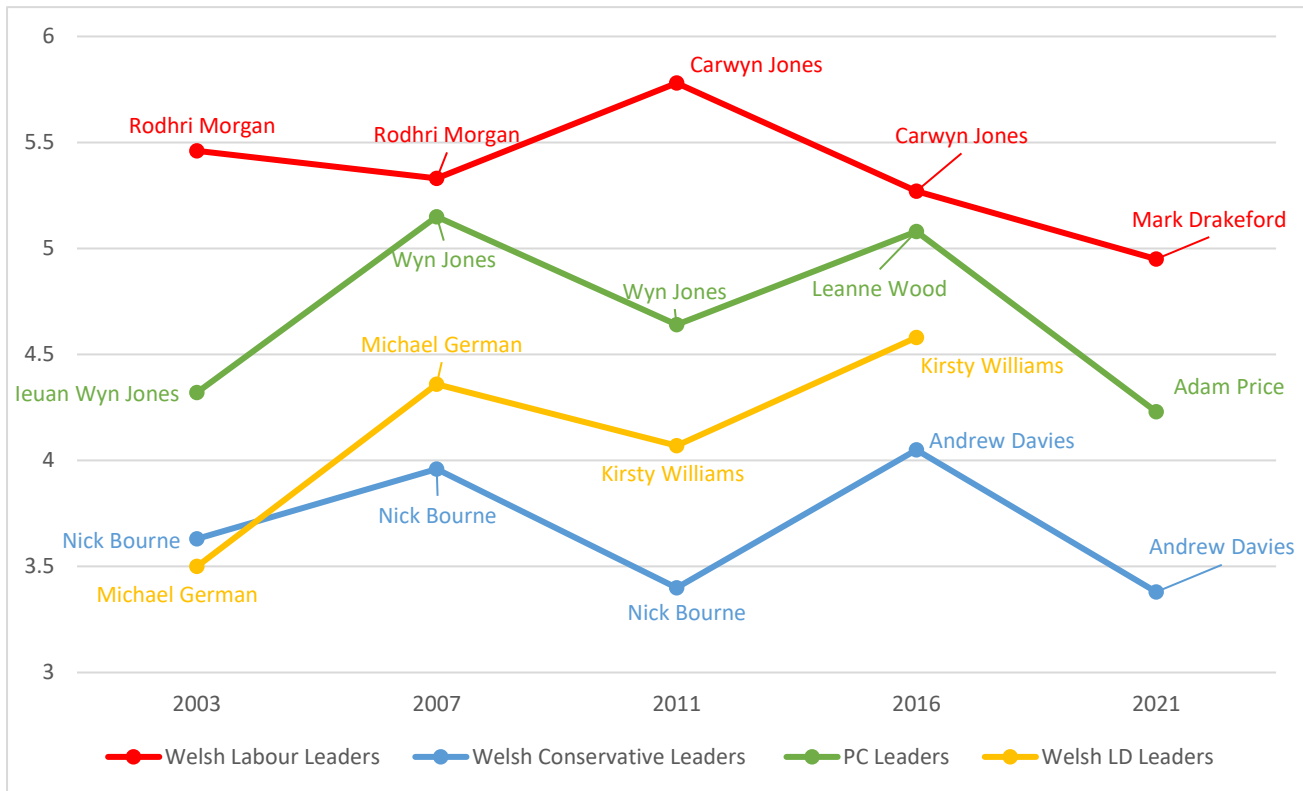
PERSONAL COMPETENCY

So far in this chapter, analytical primacy has been given to the Governing Competency of Plaid and Welsh Labour in relation to particular policy areas. Specifically, there has been a focus on the structures of devolution and how they enhance and constrain the agency of particular actors in valence policy areas to achieve a level of competency. However, in this section of the chapter, attention will turn to more agential factors of personal competency in Wales. As highlighted in the previous chapter, the 'Presidentialisation' of UK elections began to take place in the 1990s. The media and televised leader debates became of growing importance both at Westminster and devolved elections. Consequently, political party leaders and the public's perception of them are now of a heightened salience in determining perceptions of competency (Sejits & De Clercy, 2020).

In terms of political leadership, Plaid held 4 different leaders between 1999-2021, although Plaid's first leader at the advent of devolution Dafydd Wigley only remained in post for just over a year after the opening of the NAW due to health issues. After him followed Plaid's longest-serving leader during the devolution period Ieuan Wyn Jones (2000-2012), then Leanne Wood (2012-2018) and finally Adam Price (2018-2023). Plaid's primary opposition in Welsh Labour has also had 4 different leaders over the period of 1999-2021, following a very similar chronology to that of Plaid. Alun Michael (1999-2000) led the party at the start of devolution but was removed following a scandal in relation to the use of EU structural funds only a year later. He was followed by the candidate whom Tony Blair had originally opposed, Rhodri Morgan who led the party from 2000 to 2009. Carwyn Jones (2009-2018) then took over the party, before being replaced by at the time the relatively unknown outside of political circles, Mark Drakeford who led the party into the 2021 election. The first immediate observation here is that Welsh Labour have had a great deal more stability in their leadership relative to their Scottish counterparts. This has meant that Plaid have had a tougher challenge in characterising Welsh Labour leadership as weak and fragmented, a problem not faced by the SNP. If we look at Figure 26 we can see the average mean score of Welsh voters when they were asked which of the 4 main political parties' leaders would do the best job as FM.[8]

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[8] The Welsh election study only began to ask the question relating to each leaders ability to do the job of First Minister from 2003 onwards. Additionally, (presumably due to their near non-existent electoral support in Wales by 2021) no question relating to the ability of the Welsh Liberal Democrat leader Jane Dodds MS was featured in the 2021 survey.

Figure 26: Mean average scores of how good/competent a job each leader would do as First Minster (/10)

Source: Welsh Election Studies 2003-2021

Figure 26 confirms that the relative stability of Welsh Labour leaders since the advent of devolution has benefitted the personal competency scores of WLG leaders. In every election since 2003, the leader of Welsh Labour has been judged to be the most capable of being the Welsh FM. Personal competency ratings in the case of Welsh Labour broadly corroborate with their electoral dominance. Equally, Plaid Cymru leaders have consistently been judged to be the 2nd most competent in their capacities to be FM, with Wyn-Jones in 2007 and Wood in 2016 coming very close 2nd to the respective Welsh Labour leaders. Additionally, when Plaid has historically performed well in Welsh elections, increasing its share by over 1% in both constituency and regional list votes in 2007 and 2016, these are the two elections when Plaid's leaders achieved their highest average mean score. Indeed in every year apart from 2021, there is a correlation between increases/decreases in the personal competency of the Welsh Labour leader and increases/decreases in the opposition parties' leaders mean scores. This would further support the thesis's assertion regarding vertical comparative assessments of personal competency too.

However, one caveat to note here is the lack of a positive correlation between the personal competency rating of Plaid and Conservative leaders and their parties' respective electoral performances. Unlike Labour, in the case of Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Conservatives voter

assessments of personal competency do not corroborate electoral performance. In the two elections where the Conservatives were the second largest party in the Senedd/NAW, their leaders (Nick Bourne and Andrew Davies) both held significantly worse personal competency ratings than their Plaid rivals. This would suggest that when Welsh voters have been convinced to vote Conservative, that they rarely do so on the basis of personal competency. Equally, it would suggest that while a high share of Welsh voters have a favourable view of the personal competency of Plaid leaders relative to the other opposition parties, this does not compel a majority of them to vote for Plaid in Welsh elections.

Rhodri Morgan enjoyed a comfortable margin of personal competency over Wyn-Jones in 2003 and although Wyn-Jones closed the margin in Plaid's successful 2007 election, Morgan remained the leader judged to be the most capable FM in Wales. Morgan's slight decline in personal competency between 2003 and 2007 can be seen more as a reflection of Labour's decline nationally as the New Labour project wore on. However, Morgan was able to remain a popular figure against such a backdrop of Labour decline mainly due to him being established in Welsh politics prior to his election as leader and his man-of-the-people image. As Stéphanie Bory (2018) explained the popularity of Morgan's leadership style, '[He] enjoys real proximity to the population… he dressed informally and is clearly not English'. Mark Drakeford and Kevin Brennan emphasised this point when highlighting that "For 10 years, Wales had an FM whose address and telephone number remained in the directory" (Brennan & Drakeford, 2017). Equally, in ideological terms, while not explicitly denouncing New Labour, Morgan made great efforts to differentiate how Welsh Labour was ideologically pursuing a different path to that of New Labour in his now infamous "clear red waters" speech (Morgan, 2002). His personal leadership in combination with ideological divergence from an increasingly unpopular UK Labour government made Rhodri a formidable opponent for Plaid. Indeed YouGov polls found that 80% of expected Plaid voters in the 2010 General Election approved of Morgan's leadership, with even 50% of Conservative voters agreeing (Bory, 2018). In personal competency terms, Morgan in pursuing a distinctly more social democratic path than New Labour, being proudly Welsh and deeply down-to-earth, made it hard for Wyn Jones to compete.

Surely a tough act to follow? However, Morgan's successor Carwyn Jones, by a long way, enjoyed the strongest personal rating of any Welsh party leader since 2003, the only leader to achieve a net-positive score of over 5.5. Jones managed to do this through a leadership style which sought to politicise the role of FM to a much greater extent than Morgan. Here, once again, his adoption of the structural insulating framework into his personal narrative appears central to his popularity. Rather than previously where the structural insulating framework was explored in relation to competency dynamics in specific policy areas/valence issues, Carwyn Jones here adopted a more generalised 'the Tories are anti-Welsh' narrative in media appearances, speeches at conference and in the Senedd.

Only one year after his election as leader, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition formed. Jones decidedly adopted a narrative, present in repeated conference speeches he gave, that while giving some very limited attention to their centre-left rival in Plaid, focused overwhelmingly on the Conservatives at Westminster. Moreover, the most repeated criticism of Plaid by Carwyn Jones was to associate the nationalists with the Tories: 'if you voted Plaid, believing them when they said they'd speak up for Wales – only to find them refusing to rule out a coalition with the Tories, then Welsh Labour IS YOUR party' (Jones, 2012). The FM would also rarely directly attack the leader of the Conservatives at the Senedd, Andrew RT Davies, but focus wholeheartedly on David Cameron and Westminster Conservatives, someone himself and Welsh Labour were not in direct electoral competition with. The rhetoric here was different from blame avoidance or the focused attacks on the austerity and incompetence of Westminster governments in specific policy areas that left the most vulnerable in Wales, worse off. Carwyn Jones sought in a deliberate fashion to portray the Conservatives at Westminster as not only anti-working class but also inherently anti-Welsh, accusing them, in instances such as Cameron's criticism of Welsh Labour's management of the NHS, as a 'Tory elite waging war on Wales… day after day we see attack after attack on the NHS, our schools, our teachers, Welsh language, on devolution and Wales itself' (Jones, 2014).

As David Moon (2017) argues, this was a markedly more aggressive strategy than his predecessors who in their criticism of the Conservatives had only focused on their contempt for the working class, which negatively impacted Wales. However, Carwyn Jones sought to advance, not only the typical left-right arguments but also add a national dimension to his attacks on Westminster, seeking to utilise support on a centre-periphery basis – Welsh Labour in this sense were the 'nation's anti-tory strikeforce' (Moon, 2017). Jones during his tenure was able to muster a great deal of personal support and competency in portraying himself as a defender of Wales, using the war cry-like rhetoric of 'Welsh Labour versus the London Tories… a fight for the people of Wales' (Jones, 2014). Therefore, Jones politicised the role of FM through the structural insulating framework, endowing the position with a level of authority that Morgan never achieved and consequently befitted from a greater perception of a statesmanlike competent FM (Bory, 2018).

Equally, the framing of Welsh politics as a battle of individuals of Jones's Welsh Labour versus Cameron's London Tories was equally a good political strategy to shut out Plaid's leaders in Ieuan Wyn Jones and then Leanne Wood from making themselves relevant in Welsh politics. The downplaying of Senedd politics ahead of Westminster politics worked in keeping the political focus on Labour vs 'the nasty party' (Jones, 2012) and deprived Plaid of the attention they needed on their natural political platform. Indeed, Leanne Wood only began to become a household name for voters in Wales after the invitation of both Plaid and the SNP to the 2015 general election leader's debate where, Wood

and Sturgeon performed well in a de facto nationalist team against the Westminster parties (Scully & Larner, 2017). Her relatively high mean personal competency score (Figure 23) in 2016 is indicative of her well-received performance by Welsh voters in the 2015 leadership debates, however prior to 2015 she struggled to make her mark never having been involved in Plaid's leadership prior to her election as leader.

Carwyn Jones resigned in 2018, following accusations of bullying the then communities minister Carl Sargeant a Labour AM who, just days after Jones sacked him, committed suicide. He was replaced by a relatively unknown Mark Drakeford as FM. Coincidentally, in the same year, Leanne Wood was deposed from the leadership of Plaid when Adam Price and Rhun ap Iorwerth triggered a leadership contest, with the former winning 64% of the vote in the 2nd round, with the incumbent Wood finishing third. This resulted in both parties going into the 2021 election and the political crisis of COVID with new leaders. As we see in Figure 26, all leaders of the three main political parties at the Senedd fell compared to their (or their predecessor's) personal competency rating in 2016, yet the Welsh Labour leader still remained on top by a larger margin than in 2016. Unlike Morgan and Jones, Drakeford was an unknown apart from those in academic and political circles. As a senior Plaid MS described Drakeford's time in the Senedd at the start of his tenure as leader: 'when Mark Drakeford became the leader of the Labour Party in Wales for the first year he was in a very, very difficult place. He just was the wrong kind of leader for Labour and Wales, relatively unknown to voters and lacking in charisma and just not making any impact, it just wasn't working' (Interview, 2022, Plaid MS). In the period of 2018-2019, this was a promising situation for Price to capitalise on and, to some degree, he managed in this period to do so. A YouGov (2020) poll found that although 75% of Welsh voters in January 2020 could not or would not say who would make the best FM of Wales, only 8% picked Drakeford, with a slightly higher 12% backing Price. In the same poll, only 21% of Welsh Labour voters supported Drakeford as FM (Ibid). However, COVID sizeably changed the personal competency dynamics in Welsh politics. The quieter, reserved and calm style of leadership of Drakeford was seemingly respected by the Welsh public during the political turbulence of COVID. As Richard Wyn Jones (2021) argued after the 2021 election:

'The low profile accorded to him in his party's 2019 general election campaign would suggest he was not regarded as an electoral asset… Since then, however, COVID has changed everything. While Drakeford's detail-oriented, carefully considered approach to policy may not excite, it turns out that, when the going got tough, this was exactly what most of the Welsh electorate wanted from their political leader'

From interviews conducted with figures in Plaid's leadership, Mark Drakeford's personal competency in tandem with his calm management of the COVID pandemic meant the 2021 election was all but a

foregone conclusion. One senior Plaid MS remarked: 'suddenly we had a pandemic, where his kind of leadership was perfect and his stock now, we haven't seen anything like in Welsh politics and because of that and his rise in popularity, well that screwed us, and Labour were in charge of everything, the entire agenda after COVID' (Interview, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The last 2 chapters have assessed the Governing Competency of both the SNP and Plaid during the devolution period. In relation to economic competency, there exists a common trend in both cases whereby both parties when in opposition pre-2007 put a particular emphasis on their ideological positioning as part of their vote-seeking strategies. When in opposition during the first terms of the devolution, the method by which SNRP elites sought to initially achieve an image of economic competence was ideological, attempting to demonstrate to their respective electorates the parties' social democratic credentials by outflanking an increasingly centrist UK Labour in left-right terms (Elias, 2009a). As devolution was in its infancy, it is perhaps no surprise that competency was less of a salient factor in determining electoral outcomes as voters got to grips with the responsibilities of either parliament. However, in both cases in the 2nd term of Holyrood/Cardiff Bay, both parties appear to have prioritised demonstrating economic competence in efforts to convince Scottish and Welsh business that with the limited macro-economic powers they had they would adopt pro-business policies such as the lower of business rates and tax rebates. However, either parties' experiences of entering government in 2007 considerably differed, resulting in divergent outcomes on their economic and valence issue competency in the 2007-2011 period.

In either chapter using issue index data is clear that economic competency was the most salient to Scottish/Welsh voters, pre-2016. However, a key finding for Statecraft and indeed wider SNRP studies going forward is that this economic saliency will only define electoral competition in relatively stable political circumstances. In contexts of political instability, we see in such case studies that non-economic valence issues such as COVID can become the key valence issues by which voters become concerned with. In either context SNRPs' ability to appear competent appears to have been fundamentally decided by their success in using the governing strategy of the structural insulating framework.

In the case of the SNP, the greater macro-economic powers they held at Holyrood, meant they were perfectly positioned to capitalise on the financial crash, taking positive issue ownership of economic relief packages aimed at alleviating the worst negative economic impacts of the crash. Equally, as seen in the extracts of FMQs, Alex Salmond was able to use the structure of devolution to deflect blame for

some of the unavoidable negative economic outcomes of the crash such as high levels of Scottish unemployment, onto Westminster. The SNP could then pursue the argument that such negative economic outcomes could have been avoided if the Scottish government had full control over macro-economic powers; essentially independence. SNP elites were therefore successful in the use of such a strategy as they were able to use the structural insulating framework as a way to not only insulate themselves from political blame but also simultaneously relate the constitutional issue (PAH) to economic debates.

In the case of Plaid's time in office, there existed considerable constraints on the pursuit of such a governing strategy. Firstly, the fact Plaid existed as a junior partner in the One Wales Coalition severely limited their ability to take positive ownership of policy. Interviews indicate that Plaid's leadership were aware of the negatives of such a coalition with Labour, originally desiring a rainbow coalition with Ieuan Wyn Jones as FM. In this arrangement, although Plaid would have been in office with more ideologically dissimilar partners, they would have positioned themselves as to take full advantage of the structural insulating framework to boost their perception of competency as they could have taken credit for positive policy outcomes. However, the collapse of the rainbow coalition resulted in a coalition where Plaid equally could not defer blame to a higher level of government, as it would be to attack their coalition partners' UK counterparts. Furthermore, the advent of the Conservative government in 2010 further hindered Plaid's ability to use the multileveled, vertical dynamic of competency, as it enabled Labour as the senior coalition partner and thereafter up until the end of this period of analysis to deflect blame onto the Westminster government, a strategy not available to them prior to 2010. 'The electoral landscape began to change almost as soon as the ink dried on the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition deal. Labour in Wales was no longer tarnished by association with an unpopular Westminster government' (Scully & Larner, 2016:508). The data relating to economic public perceptions of competency at the devolved level would suggest that the SNP from 2007 and Welsh Labour from 2010 have succeeded in the use of such a strategy as the devolved administrations have been judged to be prudent in their economic management at the expense of Westminster who have been judged more ubiquitously to have mismanaged the economy.

On the specific valence issues, a similar trend is apparent whereby the devolved administrations after 2007 in Scotland and after 2010 in Wales were able to demonstrate competence in the issue index identified valence issues of the NHS and COVID. Looking at public satisfaction data with both how the NHS was run and how COVID was managed, it is clear to see that the Welsh Labour and SNP devolved administrations performed considerably better than the UK government. The deliberate adoption of divergent policies such as free prescriptions in Scotland and the criticism and lesser use of PFI in Wales resonated with their respective electorates. Equally, the more cautious approach to the management

of COVID by the devolved governments in lockdowns, vaccine rollouts and communicating decisions reflects a deliberate political decision by the devolved governments to heighten their own perception of competency at the expense of Westminster. Therefore, Statecraft's interpretation that devolution was part of a broader Westminster strategy to offload political responsibility appears to have tremendously backfired in Scotland, where the SNP have utilised the structure to enhance their competency at Westminster's expense. In the case of Wales, while the means to achieving Welsh Labour's dominance is far from what Blair, Smith and Brown had envisaged for the devolution project, the policy divergence of Welsh Labour and their use of the structural insulating framework since 2010, has seemingly secured Labour hegemony in Wales and importantly precluded Plaid developing into a party of Governing Competence. In this sense, a key contribution to the SNRP literature is the importance of the awareness of structural conditions and how all sub-national agents manoeuvre within it. The key difference between the cases is that Labour in Wales was able to use a governing strategy, typically associated with SNRPs.

In relation to personal competency, while it is outside the scope of this thesis to determine the precise weight it has in overall perceptions of competency and indeed voter choice in general, it is clear that both the SNP and Plaid (with John Swinney an exception) have chosen leaders who have appeared statesperson like. The SNP and Welsh Labour have perhaps unsurprisingly since 2007 held the leader judged most competent in being FM. What is surprising and perhaps casts doubt on the salience of personal competency is the fact in Wales and (particularly) Scotland the Conservatives have often held deeply unpopular leaders to be FM yet have often been the 2nd largest party, while in Wales Plaid leaders have consistently been the 2nd most popular candidate yet haven not consistently finished 2nd. This would suggest that while personal competency should be a feature of any academic assessment of SNRP performance, its relationship with unionist party performance remains unclear.

CHAPTER 6: PARTY MANAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, attention will turn to the SNP and Plaid leaderships' management of the party. As outlined in Chapter 2, Statecraft asserts that an appearance of party unity is an essential prerequisite for any party hoping to electorally succeed (even if such unity does not materially exist). The primary theoretical and methodological discussions of this chapter are therefore related to the contributions the pre-existing literature on SNRPs can make in developing Statecraft's understanding of Party Management. Katz and Mair's (1993) framework will be utilised to understand the SNP and Plaid's organisational structures. The extent to which divergent preferences exist between the Party in Public Office (PPO), Party in Central Office (PCO) and Party on the Ground (POG) shall be analysed, with unity being achieved where there exists either *cohesion* (i.e. ideological convergence) between the different institutions of the party or *discipline* has been exercised to achieve an image of unity despite ideological differences (Sieberer, 2006). Equally, as Buller and James (2011) identified disunity may also arise within the individual confines of an individual 'face' of the party (e.g. a split in the PPO when voting in parliament).

Therefore, to holistically assess the extent of unity and disharmony in the SNP and Plaid the chapter will employ two empirical methods of analysis:

1. To understand the extent of policy divisions within the PPO, Buller & James's (2011) operationalisation of Party Management will be used, analysing the number, size and nature of parliamentary rebellions in voting at both the devolved parliaments and the UK parliament (Cowley, 2007). In terms of the divisive issues in both the SNP and Plaid, there are certain common issues that both parties have suffered from, namely fundamentalism (policy-purists) vs pragmatism (vote-seeking) around constitutional goals and in more recent times, gender recognition legislation (Müller & Strøm, 1999). Plaid have struggled more frequently with disagreements surrounding personalities in the party (namely McEvoy & Ellis-Thomas) in combination with the nuclear power issue. The SNP (specifically in the last term of Holyrood) has struggled to mask divisions over the Gender Recognition Act in tandem with Plan A (Pragmatism/Gradualism) vs Plan B (Fundamentalism).

2. Second, to understand the intra-party relationships between the PPO, the PCO and the PGO, the chapter will analyse how the three faces of the parties interact through the institutional mechanisms of: the National Executive Committee; Candidate Selection; and Party Conferences. The primary motivation of this analysis is to develop Buller and James's (2011)

operationalisation of Party Management, granting insights into the disputes that occur outside of the parliamentary party and within/between the different faces of the party. In the case of the SNP and Plaid, the chapter generally believes both parties fit within the argument presented by Katz & Mair (1993;2009) in their 'Cartel Thesis'; in European politics, the PPO has strengthened its power over the last 30 years as parties have pursued professionalising top-down organisational reforms at the expense of the POG. In this sense, organisational reform can be seen as a tool of Party Management discipline by elites, by restructuring the party in such a way that benefits SNRP leaderships' interests. However, the extent to which these professionalising reforms of the parties' structures were undertaken, and also critically the timing of such reforms, had differing implications for either party. The SNP were able to adopt such professionalising reforms in anticipation of government in 2004, unlike Plaid who only pursued such reforms having learnt from the internal party weaknesses they suffered upon being in government (Bolleyer, 2007; McAgnus 2016). Finally, the chapter will draw attention to the relative nature of party unity and highlight how in both cases the relationship between Scottish and Welsh Labour with their UK counterparts had significant yet different impacts on their own party unity but also on the SNRP's relative perception of unity.

The SNP

Unity in The PPO – Holyrood vs Westminster

In the case of the SNP, the PPO is comprised of both Westminster MPs but also Holyrood MSPs. The SNP leadership, in de facto terms, have performed exceptional Party Management in the PPO rarely displaying any form of tension or disagreement in voting rebellions at either Westminster or Holyrood. At Westminster, the SNP's parliamentary group has exhibited an extraordinary level of unity. In only one vote between 2010 and 2015 did more than one SNP MP vote against the majority of the party? Even in this one instance, it should be noted that the division occurred on a free vote, on the second reading of the Assisted Dying Bill, where there was no whip in place (Cowley, 2015). Not only this but as Louise Thompson's (2017) study into the SNP parliamentary group showed, this unity 'is not manufactured artificially by the party… [but] natural cohesion'. On only one occasion between 2015 and 2017 did the SNP whips issue a three-line whip and SNP whips do not mandate their MPs' attendance to votes (Ibid). The only instance of a serious SNP division at Westminster was in 2009 when the then-six SNP MPs split on a report stage vote for the Equality Bill (Cowley & Stuart, 2009). Three MPs towed the party line voting for the bill, while two defied the party whip and one MP abstained (Ibid). However, such divisions among the Westminster parliamentary group pre-2015

should not be overstated. In every general election of the devolution period (1997 onwards) the SNP failed to break the ceiling of 6 seats until the momentous 2015 election where the party won 56/59 seats. Therefore, the role of 6 SNP MPs was relatively insignificant compared to the greater number of Holyrood SNP MSPs; 'Holyrood was the party's sole focus before 2015' (SNP MP, 2021). In this sense, at Westminster, the SNP leadership have been gifted an easy task in their Party Management, as only after 2015 did the party hold enough MPs for any serious division to occur. Even after the new influx of 50 MPs, there was little direct management for the party to undertake at Westminster due to ' natural cohesion, facilitated by the overarching policy aim of independence and exacerbated by the unique circumstances of the new MPs' arrival at Westminster' (Thompson, 2017).

However, the increase to 56 seats in 2015 had ramifications at first for the relationship *between* the devolved and Westminster parliamentary wings of the party. What is clear from interviews with those in the SNP, is that the new cohort of 50 MPs were inexperienced politicians and were initially disjointed from the party, largely as these were new members of the party that had joined after the independence referendum (just one year before). As one SNP MP remarked on the issue of fox hunting 'As new MPs 50 out of 56 of us didn't know how to go about it, so we had this group discussion. The first two people who spoke were of the 6 original SNP MPS of the view that we shouldn't get involved because it was an English-only matter. I stood up, as a new MP and said I disagree because it's a matter of welfare, and welfare does not stop at Berwick-upon-Tweed' (SNP MP, 2021). This minor division was more of a consequence of varying levels of experience in Westminster and the former group of 6 MPs respecting the Westminster culture to a greater extent than the new cohort. The difference here did not relate to ideology but more 'to the differing tactics and purpose of the Westminster parliamentary wing of the party, relative to Holyrood' (SNP MP, 2021).

The SNP's near-perfect record of unity at Westminster has been mirrored at Holyrood also. SNP divisions in voting at Holyrood are infrequent and, when they do occur, are mainly minor. The only instance in which more than 9 SNP MSPs have voted against the majority of the party was in 2015 when, again on a reading of a bill in favour of 'assisted suicide', 22 SNP MSPs voted against the party line (BBC, 2015a). However, the significance of this division should not be overstated as while there was an official party position on assisted suicide, on this particular vote SNP MSPs were allowed to vote freely (BBC, 2015b). One instance in which there appears to have been genuine discord was in 2012 when John Finnie and Jean Urquhart, two unilateralist SNP MSPs, resigned from the party over Alex Salmond advocating that Scotland should join NATO in the event of Scottish independence (Carrell, 2012). As one MP noted, 'the last real argument I would say in the SNP that really was divisive

was back in 2011 over NATO, when we lost two MSPs one independent and one to the Greens. That was fairly divisive' (SNP MP, 2021).

However, one key division that was discernible from interviews was a wedge between the two parliamentary groups at Westminster and Holyrood. Within a short period of time after the referendum over 100,000 new members joined the party taking the membership from 20,000 pre-referendum to 120,000 within a couple of weeks of the referendum. The new cohort of 50 SNP MPs came from this new pool of members and consequently had little connection to Holyrood or the 'old guard'. As the SNP's former Policy Development Convenor remarked:

'[Before 2015] we had what half a dozen MPs in Westminster; they'd all known each other for years… and they knew everybody at Holyrood. So that was a unit that worked quite well together. But suddenly there's 50 more of them, none of whom are actually part of that group and I don't think they really gelled very well with them being 400 miles apart all the time. There's not really much opportunity for them to form connections that are necessary to work well as an organisation' (Interview, 2021).

What was equally clear when interviewing NEC members who were witnesses to the initial rare meetings where MPs and MSPs convened, was the presence of an accompanying ideological divergence between the new cohort of MPs who were described as 'slightly to the left' and holding 'much more traditionally socialist values' than the 'centrist professional old guard' of MSPs at Holyrood (NEC Member, Interview, 2021). This would very much support the idea that the SNP has operated as a left-right ideological broad church, with its members seemingly bounded together by a common centre-periphery ideology of independence (Massetti, 2010). The left-right ideological variance within the party can be clearly seen between former key members of the Westminster parliamentary group, Tommy Sheppard and Mhairi Black being socialist republicans, and those on the right, such as Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh who as a former Conservative party member professed her preference for the party to adopt 'centre-right economic policy' (Kutchinsky, 2015).

In terms of Party Management, the SNP appears to have successfully managed this influx of MPs and their ideological distinctiveness. Having identified the new ideologically more radical cohort of 100,000 new members, who began to occupy senior roles in the party such as MPs and MSPs, the leadership altered the party's organisational structures to ensure that tensions between the old guard and new influx were limited and kept out of the public domain. Such an example of this reform was Nicola Sturgeon's addition of a rule in the party's constitution which states that no SNP MPs or MSPs

'shall, within or outwith Parliament, publicly criticise a Group decision, policy or another member of the Group' (Gardham, 2015). The threat to SNP MPs or MSPs that if they were to vote against the party whip they would be running the risk of being expelled from the party, appears to have curbed any significant rebellions at both Westminster and Holyrood. The party, also in light of the initial difficulties of inexperience the new Westminster cohort faced, established weekly meetings between constituency MPs and their MSP counterparts. 'Those weekly meetings brought in by the party leadership, between Holyrood and Westminster cohort of MPs are now ongoing all the time so it is not like the left hand is not speaking to the right hand anymore, there is very much a strong engagement' (Interview, SNP MP, 2021). Equally SNP MPs while admitting there does exist some ideological divergence between SNP MPs and MSPs also say this is somewhat because of the different roles MPs perform relative to MSPs: 'I think you've got a lot more opportunities to push a left-wing agenda down here, in a way that the Scottish Government… tends to struggle with as they've got to hold their cards back a bit, but we don't have to do that… my experience here is being in opposition gives you the freedom to test policy' (Interview, SNP MP, 2021).

Swinney's Reforms – Professionalisation

Before any discussion of the 2016-2021 SNP term which saw heightened divisions, the incredible party unity displayed by the SNP up until this point can be partially explained due to the reforms undertaken by the often-forgotten leader of the SNP, John Swinney. In the run-up to the 2003 election, there was much intra-party conflict, primarily as a consequence of a candidate selection system that gave regional branches an inflated role in the process. Candidate selection for Scottish elections at this time was by branch delegates at regional selection meetings. This left the important task of candidate selection in the hands of the committed activists who ran regional branches. As Mitchell et al (2012:37) described the problems with this system: 'considerable time and effort was expended by SNP activists in battles over ranking candidates, depriving the SNP of effort which would otherwise have been spent campaigning amongst the wider electorate'. As one Minister put it, members who wished to be elected before 2004 had to be 'focussed on working with activists' which led to an 'internal focus rather than an external one' (McAgnus, 2013:181). As Koelble (1996) suggests a dividing line between an office-seeking leadership and those grassroots activists in favour of policy purity, is a common one.

Michael Russell Chief Executive from 1994-1999 had suggested the need for professionalising reform in this area, suggesting One Member, One Vote (OMOV) at repeated conferences throughout the 1990s, but his demands fell on deaf ears. The hope of those in support of OMOV was that, while on first appearance an organisational reform that would decentralise power away from the party

leadership, extending membership voting would dampen the influence of those hardliner SNP activists who were out of tune with the wider Scottish electorate. In this sense "reform to candidate selection may emerge as weapons in internal battles between rival factions or 'faces' of an organization… extending membership participation may also be a strategy for shifting the internal balance of power between rival groups of party elites" (Hopkin, 2001:345). It would only be after the SNP's sole disappointing Scottish election in 2003, did the leadership become fully convinced of Russell's motivations for internal reform; 'After 2003, we probably needed to pinch ourselves, and it did increase the impetus for organisational reform and for modernisation' (Michael Russell, Interview, 2021). While it is outside the scope of this thesis to empirically test the existence of May's Law (1973) among the SNP membership, in a fashion akin to Meg Russell's (2005) study of New Labour, the eventual adoption of OMOV by the leadership in 2004 supports the notion that the party leadership came to terms with the negative influence of hard-line activist 'sub-leaders' and their inflated role in organisational structures. In this sense OMOV enabled 'the wider membership as a legitimising mechanism, the party can front a message which is more likely to appeal to a larger number of the electorate… producing a softer message' (McAgnus, 2013:187). In relation to May's theory (1973), the motivations of the SNP in adopting OMOV would support the idea that the interests of 'top-leaders' and 'non-leaders' are much more closely aligned, compared with 'sub-leaders'. Such reform itself created divisions in the short term when Bill Wilson an SNP Glasgow activist challenged Swinney's leadership in what he, and grassroots members, saw as the 'New Labourisation' of the party (Mitchell et al, 2012:38).

In addition to OMOV, two other key internal reforms were adopted in 2004 with the aim of professionalising the party and limiting potential public disputes. Firstly, the size and the number of parliamentarians in the NEC wad considerably reduced, resulting in a body that reflected a wider cross-section of the membership and whose role was to 'simply administrate because cabinet makes the big decisions with regards to party strategy' (McAgnus, 2013:188). Finally, reforms to the Standing Orders and Agenda Committee (SOAC) were adopted by the leadership which were key to presenting an image of party unity, even if it did not necessarily exist. The SOAC was a key body of the party when it came to the adoption of policy, as although it was the party conference that had the final say on the adoption of policy in most instances, in order to go to a vote at conference, the SOAC has to first vet and approve motions. Prior to 2004, the National Council determined who sat on the SOAC, meaning that a majority was possible on this committee and thus control of what motions were allowed on conference floor. As party conference is one of the most important and media-covered events in the political calendar, it is an essential task of the leadership to control the agenda and consequently

present an image of unity. However, prior to the 2004 reform any ideological faction could hold a majority of the SOAC - and if at odds with the leadership's interests – could bring forward Conference votes on politically thorny issues being debated such as NATO and the party's commitment to Republicanism (Ibid:190). The reform removed the appointment of SOAC members by the 'sub-leaders'/activists on the national council and allowed the leadership to thoroughly vet SOAC candidates before allowing conference to vote on them. In de facto terms the leadership essentially now held indirect control over SOAC. Swinney viewed such professionalising reforms as essential to the future of the party:

'I am absolutely determined that the party must grasp the thistle of internal reform now. For too long we have been trying to work with an uncertain and unwieldy internal structure, we cannot delay change any longer' (Swinney, 2004).

At the heart of these reforms was a primary agenda to create an internal party structure which removed power from the POG and instead centralised it in the PPO, allowing the leadership to set the political agenda and control party affairs. As Michael Russell honestly recalled:

'Representative democracy was what people had been brought up within the SNP, but it wasn't working for us, and we needed to be very, very clear that those reforms were what we needed. So, I think John did what was required as it helped the relationship between the actual leadership of the party and party members. It's been mercifully free of fracture or factionalism, most of the time' (Interview, 2021).

While the proposal of such reforms may have initially caused short-term divides in the party, in the long term, Swinney's reforms made the seizing of internal party power by a particular faction within the SNP such as 'Common Weal' almost impossible. It also should be noted that from interviews, most NEC members, seemingly cared little about the hierarchical nature of the party's structures as long as the SNP electoral machine kept winning. As one NEC member commented on the party's internal structures in relation to May's Law:

'SNP membership is to the left of where general opinion is in Scotland... [therefore] the leadership has to temper the radical impulses from the membership that the electorate is unwilling to swallow… we don't get independence unless the SNP keeps winning elections and the SNP will stop winning elections if we stop catering to where mainstream Scottish opinion is' (Interview, 2021).

In short, the longstanding impact of Swinney's reforms is a party that today exists as a more valence, competence and vote-seeking orientated SNP (Johns et al, 2009; Johns, 2011).

While public divisions in the form of parliamentary rebellions at Holyrood and Westminster have been infrequent within the SNP, in the last Holyrood term under analysis (2016-2021) the SNP has struggled more acutely than in the previous 4 parliamentary terms to maintain an image of unity. As with all SNRPs pursuing independence, the SNP has always contained two factions. The pragmatists/gradualists – those who wish the party to pursue a more moderate path of further convincing Scottish voters of the party's governing credentials before revisiting an independence referendum. The fundamentalists – those who favour a more oppositional style of politics to Westminster and wish to force the independence agenda as soon as possible. While these factions have always existed within the party in the post-devolution period, after the Brexit referendum the saliency of the debate was magnified. Divisions began to publicly spill over amongst the leadership and membership over whether to use Brexit as the rationale to hold a de facto second independence referendum ASAP despite Westminster's refusal to grant one (Plan B), or to hold a referendum at a later date when enough time had passed that the SNP could gain Westminster's cooperation on a legally-binding 2nd referendum (Plan A).

Such rumblings were first reported in the *Financial Times* when an argument had occurred between Alex Salmond, who wished for a second referendum soon in the hope that the majority pro-EU Scottish electorate would vote for independence as to remain part of Europe, and Kenny MacAskill, a SNP former Justice Secretary, who believed Salmond and his supporters were being 'impatient' and needed to wait longer before holding such a referendum (Dickie, 2016). However, it would only be the unlikely catalysts of the scandal of Alex Salmond and the Gender Recognition Act that would cause pragmatism/gradualism vs fundamentalism, a long-dormant debate, to erupt. When charges were brought against Salmond in 2018, the party were understandably quick to try to distance themselves from their former leader and Salmond quit the party on the grounds he wanted to 'avoid internal division' and rejoin once his name was cleared (BBC, 2018a). However, after being found 'not proven' on account of 12 sexual assault charges, Salmond accused the Scottish government of misconduct in handling the accusations against him. Specifically, he believed key SNP figures had put pressure on the police to investigate him in order to deliberately tarnish his name and thus remove him from the party (BBC, 2020b). An inquiry was ordered into Nicola Sturgeon's, alongside other senior SNP Figures' and

government civil servants, handling of the accusations, although Sturgeon was found to have not broken the ministerial code just 2 months before the 2021 Scottish election (BBC, 2021b).

Concurrently to the Salmond scandal, the Scottish government began a process in 2019 of reviewing the Gender Recognition Act in Scotland with a view to making it easier for those wishing to obtain a gender recognition certificate. The reform sought to remove the need for a psychiatric diagnosis in order for someone to change their gender and reduce the age of people able to apply from 18 to 16 (Scottish Government, 2019). This proved to be a divisive matter for the SNP. Many senior figures in the party both at Holyrood (Kenneth Gibson, Fergus Ewing, Annabelle Ewing) and at Westminster (Joanna Cherry) publically spoke against the bill. The second stage reading of the bill even provoked Ash Regan MSP the then Minister of Community Safety to quit her role in government (BBC, 2022). The final vote (while technically held outside of the period of analysis of this thesis), showcases its divisive nature as on final reading, 9 SNP MSPs voted against the government. In light of the rulings of both the courts and the inquiry, Salmond (still not a member of the SNP) founded the Alba Party. Aware of the rifts that had emerged across the SNP in relation to Plan A vs Plan B, the GRA and to a lesser degree the EU, Salmond sought to poach those disenfranchised with pragmatism over constitutional matters, those against gender reform and those Eurosceptics in favour of European Free Trade Association (but not the EU) while still providing them with a political platform to campaign for independence; claiming the party's creation could herald in an independence 'super majority' in combination with the SNP and Greens after the 2021 election. From a Statecraft perspective, it is incredibly peculiar to see how a pragmatist vs fundamentalist debate on independence, gender recognition reform and a former leader's resignation all aligned to create what seemingly at first looked like the most divisive political crisis the SNP had experienced since 1999.

However, how did this political maelstrom of different factors impact the image of SNP unity and importantly how did the SNP leadership seek to control and manage such a crisis? Firstly, it is important to note that Alba failed to win a single seat in Holyrood and importantly did not erode the SNP vote share enough for them to lose any seats, the SNP actually gaining a seat in 2021. Secondly, the creation of Alba may have inadvertently been the greatest electoral gift the SNP could have wished for in the run-up to the 2021 election. While the position of the party was clear on GRA, the leadership did realise the need to (officially) tolerate MPs, MSPs and members' divergent views on gender reform and also sought to downplay the division. As one MP stressed:

'There are two levels of the disunity around GRA; social media analysis and then what's actually going on within the party. Looking at social media, you would think that we were falling apart because you have a few loud voices that wish to make their point clear and that's understood... but Joanna Cherry is still a valued member of our group here in London and that's despite the fact that her views on GRA are actually contrary to what we agreed at conference' (SNP MP, 2021).

Equally, the party while officially supporting Plan A in the run-up to 2021, did not banish or seek to silence those who supported Plan B. Michael Russell, SNP President summarised the party's strategy towards the divisions: 'Your strategy should be always not to make things worse. In the Alba situation, I think it would be very foolish to get involved in a slanging match… If people want to leave, the party is not compulsory. Go off and do something else, they're absolutely entitled to do. It is a voluntary body' (Interview, 2021). While seemingly not much of a governing strategy, what is clear from interviews is that the *laissez-faire* approach to Alba conveniently gave the party a way of offloading those dissatisfied with the party over GRA and Plan A:

'We've seen with the Alba split that some people have left who were very critical of the leadership's commitment to Plan A and, perhaps in a sense that, has taken also some of the pressure off because those people who remain are largely uncritical' (Michael Russell, 2021).

'The discourse was at some points being really dominated by those members who did not believe in the Gender Recognition Act. I think now we have purged a lot of those people – obviously, Alba have taken a lot of those away from us' (NEC Member, 2021).

'Concerns around GRA reform have largely been dealt with by postponing the moving forward with legislative changes - Party Management problems in relation to that have been resolved by people leaving for Alba' (NEC Member, 2021)

Equally, many of those interviewed who were more strongly on the left of the party even expressed how the advent of Alba had allowed some of the more centrist politicians, such as the aforementioned Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, to exit the party. As one MP remarked 'I broadly think those who are on the centre-right, primarily due to the advent of Alba have probably left by now. So I wouldn't say we are an ideological broad-church per se but now a broad-church of social democrats' (SNP, MP 2021).

Therefore, what on paper should have theoretically been a significantly challenging context in 2021 of fighting an election with a divided party, failed to materialise into a disaster for the SNP. The creation of Alba inadvertently acted as something of a temporary pressure valve on divisions which had previously stirred over GRA, constitutional matters and to a certain extent left-right divisions. However, while it gave the SNP an impression of unity in the critical period of the time in the run-up to the 2021 election, such ideological conflicts would resurface after 2021 when Sturgeon resigned and the aforementioned dividing lines would be mirrored in the three candidates to be her successor.

PLAID CYMRU

UNITY IN THE PPO

In the case of Plaid Cymru, the party leadership has struggled to keep party relations harmonious and have allowed intra-party conflict to be exposed publicly. In purely numerical terms we might expect that Plaid would have an easier task in their Party Management as their membership and number of elected members have always been less than that of the SNP's. However, the opposite can be said to be true. If we again use the operationalisation of Party Management by the numbers of revolts at Westminster, we can see that Plaid have suffered from a far more frequent number of divisions on votes compared to the SNP. Plaid MPs have at times failed to act in unison, as between 2001 and 2021 there have been a total of 43 separate revolts on votes in Parliament (Irving & Todd, 2001-2021). In most instances this is only one or two MPs voting against the party line, but because Plaid between 2001 and 2021 have only held 3 or 4 seats in parliament, even one defection in voting represents a significant division. Additionally, it would appear that longstanding Plaid MPs such as Hywel Williams (2001-present) and Elfyn Llwyd (2001-15) have felt more comfortable in openly rebelling against the party, who collectively have voted against the party 30 times from 2001-2021 (Ibid). Importantly, unlike the SNP, Plaid rebellions have occurred on significant policy issues which have suggested serious ideological differences within the party. For instance, Hywel Williams went against his party, by voting in favour of a banking levy which raised a tax on banks based on their total applicable liabilities and equities (Irving & Todd, 2011). This suggests there exist differences concerning the most significant of any political party's policy: macroeconomics. As mentioned in previous chapters, the collation of voting records of Plaid AM/MSs has proved a difficult task. When operating prior to 2016 as the 'NAW' the voting records of AMs were not subject to FOI requests as the Senedd, at this time, was not classed as a public authority. From 2016 onwards the Senedd voluntarily started to publish voting records, allowing for some limited analysis of Plaid MSs in the last term of the Senedd. Consequently, there was a greater need in the case of Plaid elite interviews and media discourse analysis, to ascertain what

the key divisive issues for the party have been throughout devolution. Equally, due to such limitations in looking at the extent of divisions through Senedd voting records, greater attention was paid to other windows into that state of party unity such as conference motion voting.

When asked about the key divisions in the party, disputes were often characterised as 'a clash of personalities more than anything else' (Plaid MS, Interview, 2022). The two most cited instances of such personal disputes were the two AMs who left the party during the 5th Senedd term Neil McEvoy AM and Lord Elis-Thomas AM. The latter's departure from the party was a particular blow to Plaid, as Elis-Thomas was a former leader of Plaid, who left the party for Leanne Wood's overly critical stance towards the WLG and her failure to be 'sufficiently critical of the Conservatives' (BBC, 2016c). Furthermore, in becoming an independent, he opted to work with Welsh Labour in government and assumed a ministerial role (BBC, 2017c). Outside of divisions surrounding personalities, one commonality between Plaid and the SNP has been the divisions that Gender Reform caused in the 2016-2021 term. One Plaid NEC member (Interview, 2022) described the matter as typical of the 'cultural wedge issues' that have plagued the party in recent times. Such divisions have been scantly reported in the media, but those interviewed within the party said such 'wedge issues caused, the party to suffer problems around unity, democracy and also representation. We, of course, haven't had the same level of divisions as the SNP… [but] certain individuals will become totally preoccupied by those concerns for a particular time and sometimes those things are very difficult to manage in the party' (NEC Member, Interview, 2022). It would seem the fact that Plaid were not in office legislating on such matters has meant the divisions over the Gender issue have not been magnified in the same fashion as those faced by the SNP. From interviews conducted the most referenced divisions over policy by Plaid elites was the party's failure to have a definitive stance on nuclear power which appeased all members. Wales has since the 1960s operated two power stations at Trawsfynydd and Wylfa, however, the former was closed in 1991 and the latter was entirely shut down by 2015. However, the Welsh government in both cases has sought to reopen the stations in some capacity. As Hywel Williams MP states:

'The nuclear issue has been a big split in Plaid over the years. We are substantially a Green Party, but we've got two nuclear sites in Wales, both of which are now shut but the people who the stations employed, are keen to get new ones for their livelihoods and some believe nuclear power is genuinely the way to go. So there's just a substantial disagreement, which we've struggled to come up with solutions to. So the official position is we are anti-nuclear except where the new two sites have already been green lit and the local people support it' (interview, 2022).

The truly divisive nature of the nuclear issue for Plaid can be seen in the fact that at the party's 2011 conference when a motion was brought forward for the party to ubiquitously adopt the line that Plaid 'opposes nuclear power stations at all levels', it was defeated by just one vote (Plaid Cymru, 2011). The party alternatively passed a motion which has remained in place since that Plaid is 'opposed to the construction of any new nuclear power stations. If the Westminster Government gives the go-ahead for a new nuclear power station at Wylfa, we should make sure that the investment recognises the need to employ local people, invest in training to maximise local employment and make sure that indigenous companies benefit from supply chain opportunities' (Plaid Cymru, 2011). This tactic ostensibly fits in within the structural insulating framework in that Plaid looked to highlight the reserved nature of the nuclear issue and remove themselves from the divisive political debate. However, the issue was not resolved with the adoption of the aforementioned position as the halfway-house left those pro-nuclear members and elected representatives in the constituencies of Ynys Môn and Dwyfor Meirionnydd, and those anti-nuclear members in other constituencies, both dissatisfied. As Plaid MEP Jill Evans described the party's position as 'hypocritical'; 'People are confused on how we stand. If we oppose all new nuclear power stations we should say so clearly. Our own members aren't clear about where we stand' (Evans, 2011).

Such divisions arguably reached their zenith, when similarly to how in Scotland, divisions between personalities corroborated ideological splits. Whereas in Scotland, independence strategies, GRA and left-right divisions were exacerbated by the personal rift between Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon, in Plaid's case the nuclear division became more prevalent in the aftermath of the suspension of Plaid MS Neil McEvoy. While his numerous suspensions (his final one arriving in January 2018 due to 'bullying behaviour') were never strictly on ideological grounds he, after having left the party, started to open the wound in Plaid over the nuclear issue (BBC, 2017b). On numerous occasions in the 5th term of the Senedd, he sought to bring forward amendments to the floor, relating to Wales's use of nuclear power. If we look at Senedd voting records on nuclear power during the final term under analysis, we can see an obvious pattern of abstention from Plaid MSs sceptical of nuclear power. McEvoy here seems to have been able to stoke divisions within the PPO itself. For instance, in two separate votes on amendments to energy bills brought forward to 'oppose the use of nuclear power as a means to achieve a low carbon energy system', McEvoy exposed the split within the Plaid Senedd group. In the first vote on such an amendment in October 2018 a total of 8 Plaid MSs abstained (including then Leader Adam Price) on voting on the amendment, while 3 voted against (Welsh

Parliament, 2018a). On the second occasion in November 2018, 8 Plaid MSs abstained (this time including Rhun ap Iorwerth but excluding Helen Mary Jones) while 3 voted against (Ibid, 2018b).

PROFESSIONALISATION – TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE?

As was the case with the SNP, the role of organisational reform and particularly the timing of such reforms, played a fundamental role in the leadership's management of party unity. In the first two terms of Plaid's involvement at the NAW, 'the party was small and tight-knit; there was a general closeness between the leadership and the members' (Elin Jones MS, Interview, 2022). In this period little to no organisational reform was undertaken by the party, which meant the party did largely exist as one MS described as 'a collection of branch offices, some working effectively and some not functioning at all' (Interview, 2023). What is clear from interviews with Plaid leadership figures was their dissatisfaction with how branches operated in the party in the first three terms of the Senedd. To compound this, in the party's constitution prior to 2011, the local branch (not the constituency) was the primary organisational unit of the party where decisions relating to party spending, resources and local campaigning were made (Plaid MS, Interview, 2023). Further evidence of this can be seen in the fact that at conference it was delegates from local branches, not ordinary members who were allowed to vote on motions (McAgnus, 2013:166). In this sense, the party during this time was very much decentralised with the POG having a large degree of power within the party. It is clear from interviews that during this period the most active members/activists, who dominated the branches, were difficult to control to the point where Plaid elites increasingly were forced to make decisions to either 'win elections or please the most noisy, active members of the party' (Plaid MS, Interview, 2023). As McAgnus concluded in his research 'this means Plaid behaved like a pressure group on the periphery... rather than a political party that wants to govern Wales' (McAgnus, 2013:159). During the same period, there also existed some other significant organisational weaknesses, such as the inflated role of the party president. As Dafydd Trystan described from his time as Chief Executive, 'the party leader and president during this time were two alternative sources of authority' (Interview, 2023). The leadership arrangements at this time confused where responsibility lay and were criticised by those in the party such as Simon Thomas former Plaid MP who stated the need for the leader to be a 'single person around which they can identify in the Assembly... who has the potential to unite – not just Plaid Cymru members but also a broader coalition' (BBC, 2005).

Such organisational deficiencies were not unique to Plaid and in many ways mirrored some of the internal organisational issues in the SNP. However, the discernible difference in the case of Plaid was the inability to adopt a comprehensive overhaul of the party's organisation to make it a more vote-

seeking and professional political party in *anticipation* of government and not *during/after* office (McAgnus, 2016). What was striking from many interviews with key figures in Plaid was just how little they had believed the party's organisational structures to have changed from their time in the party. Elin Jones AM commented: 'I've noticed almost no changes to the way that Plaid Cymru's internal management works. There's almost nothing' (Interview, 2022). With the exception of the adoption of a national direct debit scheme which resulted in the more centralised management of party funds and the abolishment of the Party President in the latter years of the coalition, Plaid had undertaken little in the way of professionalising reforms for the first 3 terms of the Assembly (Interview, Dafydd Trystan, 2023). However, the few times organisational reform was discussed in interviews, the 2012 report *Moving Forward: Renewing Plaid for Wales* was mentioned numerous times. In the aftermath of the poor 2011 election result for Plaid, such an internal party review reviewing organisational structure was undertaken. The review came to several key conclusions and recommendations regarding the party's organisation. Firstly, the report concluded implicitly that the active members of the party (branches) wielded too much power and often used this to work against the party's overall objectives:

'It is vital that the leadership team sets a clear strategy as to how to keep the party focused on the prize and the members and elected representatives devote their energies to these defined matters. Members and elected representatives should… not be tempted to become too involved in campaigns or issues that are not directly relevant to the party's objectives' (Plaid Cymru, 2012).

In this sense, it appears as though in Sieberer's (2006) terms that the party leadership's discipline of the membership was somewhat lacking in the first three terms of the Assembly. The report in its suggestion to address such tensions suggested that the party needed to better educate its members on the constraints that being in office put on the pursuit of policy goals. Plaid elites often suggested how unrealistic Plaid members were in their views about what could be achieved in the One Wales Coalition, leading to needless tension between the PPO and POG (McAgnus, 2013). Equally, another practical measure suggested by the report to remedy such tension between the leadership and the activists in branches was the adoption of OMOV at conference, as mentioned earlier only branch delegates were eligible to vote at conference (Plaid Cymru, 2012). This was almost a carbon copy of the SNP's reform to the conference system, hoping to take power away from a handful of committed activists and place it in the more electorally-respective hands of the wider membership. Having identified the branch as the unit with a disproportionate share of influence and also the unit of the party where most fundamentalist activists resided, the report further suggested that 'the constitution be amended to make the constituency committee the primary level of organisation for the party'

(Ibid). Again, similarly to the SNP reforms of 2004, the report suggested considerable reform to the NEC making the body smaller by 'removing all regional coordinators and National Section representatives' (Plaid Cymru, 2012:43). The report also suggested a transferal of some of the day-to-day decision-making responsibilities and quick responses to political events required by the party, from the NEC to 'a small leadership team' with the NEC's to 'scrutinising the decisions' of the leadership afterwards (Ibid:71). The reforms suggested by the report would be completed in full by 2013 and as McAgnus (2013:178) argues 'at least theoretically made Plaid a more professional political party. Key decision-making structures, campaign capacities and leadership functions have been placed into fewer hands at the apex of the party's hierarchy.' Many of the reforms did 'professionalise' explicitly through centralising power in the hands of the leadership but some reforms such as OMOV at Conference motions were adopted to take power away from policy-purist activists and place it in the hands of ordinary members whose ideological preferences were more in line with the leadership's pragmatism and more importantly Welsh voters (Ibid).

Organisational reform undertaken by Plaid can be viewed as an attempt to firmly put power in the hands of 'the pragmatists who favour continuing down the path of moderate consensual politics with a view to transforming Plaid Cymru into a credible party of government' and weaken the 'traditionalists who favour a more oppositional style of politics within the NAW and a renewed focus on core issues' (Elias, 2009a:543). While such reforms did not (in the short term) create internal party divides in the form of a resentful activist wing of the party they also did not seemingly result in greater part unity or management of divisions. In relation to the relationship between the leadership and the branches there still does at times appear to be considerable tensions between the two faces of the party, particularly when it comes to candidate selection. As Hywel Williams MP elucidated:

'We have difficulties in some constituencies where the local party was unhappy that the candidate is imposed from our side [the party leadership]. There was a certain amount of disaffection in one example during the 2015 election as the local party viewed the candidate as somebody we had parachuted in and now she's a leading light in the party but there was animosity from the local party at the time as it was someone they didn't know' (Interview, 2022).

Further to this, the reforms also failed to address the question of what the role of Plaid's leader was within the party and how they should operate within it. From interviews, it is clear that Plaid elites believed the reforms failed to create a structure in the party whereby the Senedd group, Westminster group, constituency committees, and branch committees could all unify around a single leader. Every

Plaid leader since such reforms have each taken a different approach to the leadership which has left the party still divided between membership and leadership. Former Chair and Chief Executive Dafydd Trystan explained that while such reforms were useful in professionalising the party: 'I don't think the party has ever truly thought about what it expects its parliamentary leader in the devolved context, to do' (Interview, 2023). What was clear from interviews is just how differently Plaid elites perceived the two leaders after the 2012 *Moving Forward* reforms. Leanne Wood was viewed as taking a very grassroots-orientated approach, which Dafydd Trystan stated:

'did not serve the party well, as there was a lack of leadership… She did not particularly believe in leading which was a strange attitude for someone who wanted to be party leader. Because she did not take a particularly active view of party leadership, it opened up the space for a successful challenge to her leadership and consequently led to public divisions as leadership figures in the party were pitted against the grassroots with the incumbent leader ironically on their side' (Interview, 2023).

Such divisions came to a head regarding Wood's leadership, when two AMs challenged her leadership. The first challenger AM Rhun ap Iorwerth believed Leanne Wood to have suffered from being perceived as too close ideologically to Corbyn's Labour; believing the party should 'test Tory waters' and believing rhetoric surrounding independence should be curbed while the party focuses on pragmatic policies (BBC, 2018b). The second challenger, AM Adam Price believed that Plaid should be 'equidistant' in left-right ideological terms between Labour and the Conservatives so as to not be negatively associated with either and to more aggressively push for Welsh independence (Ibid). In this sense, the lack of clarity in the party's constitution concerning the role of party leader helped facilitate the ideological divides and consequent leader challenges seen in 2018, according to Trystan. Comparing Wood's leadership to Price's leadership, Dafydd Trystan argued that her successor went too far the other way:

'With Adam, it was a warrior king type of leadership… there was great rhetoric with Adam but again there was no thought-through model of how that leadership might work in practice… it was a fairly narrow traditional form of leadership that Adam then followed. He certainly centralised staff resources around his office but all they then did was organise more speeches, rallies and talks but neglected the broader management of the party' (Interview, 2023).

We can see here then that while structural reform adopted in 2013 by Plaid Cymru theoretically made the party more professional in its operations, the agency of leaders since such reforms has not helped

settle the debate on who should have the primary operational power in the party. As Dafydd Trystan stated, 'unlike most parties who tend to have divisions over ideological matters and policy, Plaid's main source of divisions has come from leadership issues' (Interview, 2023).

WELSH LABOUR – A MORE UNIFIED OPPONENT?

So far the chapter has illustrated how the SNP leadership have enjoyed greater success in its Party Management than Plaid. However, similarly to Governing Competence, success in achieving an image of party solidarity is also a relative concept. For both Plaid and the SNP, their main political opponents at Holyrood and Cardiff have been Labour. For Plaid, they have faced a more formidable, unified opponent in Welsh Labour. It is telling that since the creation of the devolved parliaments in 1999 Welsh Labour have had only 4 leaders, compared to Scottish Labour's 10 different leaders in the same period. Welsh Labour were brave enough in the early years of devolution to risk causing serious divisions between UK and Welsh Labour by stressing their need for ideologically divergent policy. Rhodri Morgan between 2000 and 2007 adopted a strategy of distancing Welsh Labour from UK (and specifically New) Labour in multiple speeches and media appearances stating the need for an ideological difference of 'clear red water' (Morgan, 2002). However, this was not unique to Welsh Labour, as Scottish Labour too has an ideological agenda considerably to the left of New Labour. The fundamental difference was that while Scottish Labour acquiesced when Labour HQ had judged them to be too divergent in policy; Welsh Labour did not. For instance, in the devolved policy area of health, Welsh Labour pursued a much more left-wing agenda. Welsh Labour, were not in favour of NHS PFI contracts, and the Welsh Labour leadership prioritised the views of the majority of their members over London HQ's preference for PFIs to be adopted in Wales (Laffin et al, 2007). Importantly, this translated into policy divergence as between 1997-2007 'out of a UK total of over £48.4bn in PFI projects, Wales totalled £555m compared to England's £43.5bn' (Moon, 2012:309). Some academics have gone as far as to state that it was the presence of 'clear red water' with Welsh Labour and the absence of it in the case of Scottish Labour due to fears concerning party unity, that explains the dichotomy in the political fortunes of Scottish and Welsh Labour (Gwalchmai, 2019). This has helped Welsh Labour be perceived as separate from Westminster but in the long-term not antagonistically so, allowing for stability in only having three leaders from 2000-2021.

In the case of the SNP, the party has benefitted from an opponent in Labour who have suffered from major intra-party disputes. Scottish Labour have found the two-level dynamic of devolution troublesome, as differences in ideology have been exacerbated by organisational factors. Scottish Labour, have been more committed to a social democratic agenda than their colleagues in London,

due to the greater influence of trade unions in Scottish Labour's policy-creation process (Hassan and Shaw, 2012:269). Tensions first arose in Scotland over the adoption of PFI in the first term of devolution, as unlike in Wales, Scottish Labour ostensibly towed the UK party line on PFI for capital investment in public sector buildings. Tensions on this matter boiled over at the Scottish Labour Party conference in 2002, where Unions publicly attacked the Scottish leadership for blindly following Westminster (Laffin et al, 2007). Tensions did not dissipate on the matter of PFI and more worryingly for Scottish Labour by 2003 their own Health Minister rejected the 'privatisation and consumerism' in the Scottish NHS, claiming the Scottish public had 'no appetite for it'; only to have to sign up to such market-friendly schemes in 2005 (Ibid:99). This highlights how Scottish Labour were very much ideologically distinct from UK Labour but that due to fears concerning the unity of the state-wide party, the Scottish leadership did not feel confident in defying London HQ and adopting diverging policies (Ibid:100). This pattern continued to hinder Scottish Labour, coming to fruition in 2014 when Scottish Labour Leader Johann Lamont resigned, stating 'the Scottish party has to be autonomous and not just a branch office of a party based in London', claiming Labour HQ did not understand 'the needs of working-class people in Scotland' (Lamont, 2014). In resigning in such a public fashion, Lamont 'burned down the house and walked out the front door' (Pike, 2015:187).

It should also be briefly noted that since the Scottish Conservatives became the 2nd largest party in 2016, they have existed as the SNP's main political opponents at Holyrood. However, they have equally suffered from poor Party Management and even greater multileveled disunity than that of Labour. Ideology is a significant factor in such divisions with Brexit, COVID and the rightward lurch of the UK Conservatives amalgamating to stoke such tensions. One SNP MSP remarked 'I have worked with various Conservative MSPs on committees and these people are not Brexiteers, these are one-nation Tories… they're embarrassed by what has gone on at Westminster with Boris, Brexit and COVID… the Scottish Conservatives are starting to increasingly look like a branch office, as Scottish Labour did before them' (Interview, 2022). Evidence of this is not in short supply, as both Ruth Davidson and Douglas Ross have publically criticised the PM, the latter resigning when he was a minister over the Dominic Cummings scandal and when leader, declaring in an ITV interview that 'most objective people would say the FM is a more effective communicator than the PM' (Smith, 2020). The SNP have had a relatively simple task in appearing more unified relative to their two unionist party opponents at Holyrood.

Therefore, Plaid have firstly suffered on the criterion of Party Management in failing to keep their own intra-party relations harmonious but equally have been unfortunate in that they've competed with a

Labour party who we would usually expect in Statecraft terms to suffer electorally from such disunity. However, Welsh Labour appear to have prioritised their autonomy over ideological unity. The SNP have benefitted from a Scottish Conservative and Scottish Labour party who have failed to manage their relations between levels of government. All the SNP need to do to succeed on this criterion is to keep party relations 'quiescent' and they can appear relatively unified compared to the unionist parties unable to manage multileveled, intra-party relations.

CONCLUSION

Empirically this chapter has explored the extent to which rifts existed in both the SNP and Plaid Cymru and their ability to manage the negative political consequences of such public divisions. Firstly, assessing the unity in both the Westminster and Holyrood/Senedd groups of either party, it is clear the SNP have benefitted from a more organic ideological cohesion within both parliamentary groups. Voting records at Westminster suggest that the SNP group rarely split prior to 2015, while Plaid had fewer seats than the SNP, the 3/4 Plaid MPs more frequently split on votes on such matters as economic policy. In the case of voting at the devolved level it appears for the majority of the Scottish Parliament the SNP have voted in near perfect unison, only significantly dividing over the free voting issue of assisted suicide and towards the end of the period of analysis when some SNP MSPs did not tow the party line in voting against gender recognition reform. While the limited access to Senedd voting records severely curb the ability to draw conclusions about Plaid's unity over the longue durée, one of the most contentious policy issues for Plaid as identified by interviewees was the nuclear issue. Looking at the specific Senedd voting records on the nuclear issue it is clear that Plaid's Senedd group is not unified on the matter, as on numerous occasions Plaid AMs have abstained from voting on the issue while others have voted against attempts to put an end to nuclear power in Wales.

In terms of the relationship between the two parliamentary groups, while from interviews it was made clear Plaid seemingly does not have any rift present, in the case of the SNP after 2014 a generational rift began to form in the party. The new cohort of 50 MPs in 2015 did create a division between the centre-left old guard at Holyrood and the more radical group at Westminster. The question then became 'how a leadership committed to moderation can manage the ambitions and those new members and voters who seek a more radical approach' (Johns & Mitchell, 2016:247). In practical terms, the leadership's response to the near five-fold increase in party size and the impact this had on

broadening the pre-existing left-right broad church, was to alter the party constitution to try to curb intra-party criticism by threatening elected members with expulsion for doing so (Gardham, 2015).

Outside of the PPO of either party there have also existed intra-party divisions that have in more general terms engulfed the parties. While the SNP have generally, bar a slight blip during 2012 over the party's stance on NATO, had little significant party conflict, the last Scottish parliamentary term created some more existential threats to party unity. As noted both parties suffered from common causes of disunity such as personal matters, in Plaid's case McEvoy and Ellis-Thomas and in the SNP's case the accusations and trial of Alex Salmond. In both cases, ideological issues had a coattail effect in attaching themselves to the renegade figures of the party, with McEvoy championing anti-nuclear policy after leaving the party and Salmond representing those dissatisfied with the party's commitment to Plan A and Gender reform legislation. However, the creation of Alba initially posed a more existential threat to the SNP than Propel did to Plaid, as it was a former leader of the party, who washed the SNP's dirty laundry in public. However, the effect Alba had in attracting a large share of those SNP members dissatisfied with the leadership over Plan A and GRA, followed by Alba's failure to win a single seat in 2021 acted as a pressure valve for SNP divisions for a short time. So while seemingly at first an existential threat to the unity of nationalism in Scotland, Alba in de facto terms allowed some short-term resolution to the intra-party divisions of Plan A vs Plan B and GRA in the crucial timeframe of the run-up to the 2021 election. In simple terms, it took the 'discipline' aspect of Party Management out of the leadership's hands and still resulted in a positive outcome for the SNP, in this sense we may consider the leadership fortunate.

Theoretically, one significant contribution to the Statecraft literature this chapter has pursued is the idea of organisational reform being a tool of Party Management when potential divisions may arise. While there were slight differences in the specific details of the reforms, both parties followed a broad theme of professionalisation. There was an effort to divert power away from regional activists to either the leadership itself or the wider membership who were more aligned with the leadership's 'softer' interests (McAgnus, 2013). Common reforms pursued by both parties included OMOV at conference. However, the fundamental difference between Plaid and the SNP's organisational reforms related to the timing, not the specifics, of reform. As has been argued by McAgnus (2013; 2015; 2016) Plaid's failure to adopt a comprehensive overhaul of the party's organisation prior to entering government, left the party ill-placed to take advantage of government and exposed divisions within the party between gradualist and fundamentalists when entering coalition in 2007. However,

the pursuit of professionalising organisational reform by John Swinney in the aftermath of the poor 2003 election result for the SNP, allowed the party to adopt a more top-down hierarchical structure in anticipation of government. The key point to note here is that the SNP in adopting such reforms in 2004 were not as susceptible to divisions such as radical activist standing orders (e.g. NATO) at conference, upon entering government. However, Plaid in failing to adopt reform until after their poor election in 2011, found themselves often debating the same issues at conference brought forward by activist regional branches (e.g. Welsh Language & Nuclear), rather than being a unified competent coalition partner between 2007-2011. Even after such reforms were adopted from Plaid's *Moving Forward* report, tensions still existed between the leadership and regional branches over candidate selection and the precise role of Plaid's leader within the party in the devolved context. The timing of the SNP's reforms made it a more vote-seeking and professional political party in anticipation of government, whereas Plaid failed to take advantage of the mechanism of government by only realising the need to fully professionalise after their time in office (McAgnus, 2016).

Finally, the chapter has sought to contribute to a neglected aspect of the SNRP literature; that being the relative nature of public perceptions of party unity in the devolved context. The argument presented here is that Plaid faced a considerably more proactive opponent, in Party Management terms, in Welsh Labour than the SNP did in Scottish Labour. The early push by the Welsh Labour leadership to achieve autonomy from the UK party, while causing some political turbulence in the first two terms of the Assembly, in the long run, enabled Welsh Labour to pursue policy more in sync with the Welsh electorate but still keeping a quiescent set of relations with the UK party in spite of its distinct ideological profile. Paradoxically then, in the case of Scottish Labour, the decision of leaders to prioritise party unity and acquiesce to the wishes of UK Labour in the long run created a considerable degree of ideological tension which would culminate in Johan Lamont's resignation in 2014 over the UK Labour party's treatment of Scottish Labour as 'a branch office'. In this sense, the SNP, for the larger part of devolution have had an easier task in appearing unified relative to their main unionist rivals than Plaid.

In Wales, the ability of Welsh Labour to appear ideologically divergent yet not significantly suffer electorally suggests that, at the sub-national level, voters might not consider ideological divisions between levels of a party's electoral competition as damaging to their perception of the party as Bulpitt depicted it at the national level, as long as the regional branch of the party is perceived as standing up to London HQ. The extent of disagreement of course has some bearing upon this and also

the fact Scottish Labour were originally seen to be acquiescing to London for 15 years, meant by Lamont's resignation when the party started to stand up against London HQ in Scotland's interest, it was too little too late. Therefore, it was a failure of agency on the part of the Scottish Labour leadership to establish a relationship with London where they had the autonomy to pursue divergent policy (unlike Rhodri Morgan and Welsh Labour), that allowed the SNP to attack their unionist rivals as broken and divided.

CHAPTER 7: POLITICAL ARGUMENT HEGEMONY

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, attention will turn to the SNP's and Plaid's ability to achieve PAH. Unlike in Statecraft's original prescription of UK politics where a single politically-defining political argument existed, the use of 'Sub-national Statecraft' in this chapter shall argue in the devolved contexts of Wales and Scotland there have existed 3 political arguments that have characterised periods of devolution. Using Massetti's (2011:502) tripartite categorisation of the political positioning, the chapter shall assess the SNP's and Plaid's ability to win the political arguments concerning: A. left-right arguments; B. arguments concerning European integration; C. centre-periphery arguments. SNRPs are in something of a unique category in Western political competition as unlike most political parties, their primary defining characteristic does not relate to the left-right spectrum. As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, one of the principle assumptions of Bulpitt's Statecraft is that ideology, while important in the study of political actors, should only be understood in terms of its *instrumental* value to political parties' leaderships. In this sense, Bulpitt (1989:57) did not believe the realisation of a particular ideology was the end goal for politicians, but instead selected ideologies were utilised as the means to achieve more important goals relating to polity management and, more significantly, winning elections. Statecraft's 'instrumental' value of ideology appears equally relevant (if not more so) at the sub-national level, particularly in relation to SNRPs' positions on the left-right and European integration continuums. This leaves SNRPs in a somewhat privileged position of having considerable freedom to change their ideological positioning relative to their state-wide competitors (Massetti, 2010). This helps the SNRPs achieve PAH in two ways:

1. SNRPs' ability to more freely position themselves both on the left-right and European integration continuums, has given them a significant competitive electoral advantage in being able to position themselves closer to the median voter on left-right and European spectrums. Therefore, if an SNRP can accurately understand the electoral context it operates within it can flexibly adopt left-right and European positions which, according to the SEM of voting behaviour, will make SNRP's ideology compatible with a larger share of voters at the ballot. In terms of the parties' ability to win PAH at the public level, available polling data shall be used to explore left-right attitudes and attitudes concerning European integration in Scotland and Wales. It appears that Plaid pursued a preference-shaping strategy both in relation to their left-right and European arguments. Alternatively, the SNP were at a significant structural advantage to Plaid as in Scotland there was a much higher extent of homogeneity of social

democratic attitudes amongst the Scottish electorate and importantly there also existed a majority in favour of EU membership. The chapter explains how the SNP's ability to win PAH in left-right terms and in terms of European integration was significantly aided by this context and the SNP leadership's decision to pursue a 'preference accommodation' strategy (Hay, 1994).

2. More importantly for SNRPs, their ability to tactically adopt positions along the left-right and European continuums allows them to use such ideologies to try achieve hegemony in their central political argument of independence. This is the principal metric by which we can assess if SNRPs have achieved PAH or not; their ability to successfully weaponise left-right and European arguments to further their constitutional goals. In order to assess either parties' ability to make Scottish and Welsh politics refract through a centre-periphery lens, support for constitutional options shall be analysed in the form of polling data. Prior to 2016, the SNP had some success in integrating left-right arguments into constitutional arguments, presenting independence in instrumental terms to 'get rid of the Tories' which saw support for independence rise but not get over the threshold of 50% in 2014. After the Brexit referendum, the SNP were able to further amalgamate European integration arguments into their constitutional arguments presenting independence as a means to re-enter the EU. Polling would suggest the SNP have now potentially achieved hegemony with the linking of Europe to secession, with the SSAS showing independence to be the most popular constitutional option post-2016. However in the case of Plaid, there was a failure of agents in the party to adopt a preference accommodation strategy that would have seen Plaid exploit the more centrist left-right ideology of Wales, and also a more common Euroscepticism, not just for electoral purposes but as to increase the support for Welsh independence which has remained stubbornly low throughout devolution.

Therefore, in Statecraft terms the fundamental difference between Plaid and the SNP was their ability to accurately perceive the electoral context they operated within and accordingly adopt a suitable preference accommodation strategy in relation to left-right and European arguments to further both their electoral performance and constitutional goals.

LEFT-RIGHT ARGUMENTS

It is generally agreed that both the SNP and Plaid have embraced a centre-left agenda, which featured typically social democratic policies such as their commitments to no tuition fees for university students (Plaid Cymru, 2021; SNP, 2021). However, until the 1990s, both parties adopted a strategy of not clearly defining themselves on the left-right continuum in the hope that they could attract votes from both traditionally Labour and Conservative voters. Plaid's leadership 'conceived of the Welsh nationalist project as one that sought to transcend the established left–right ideological debate that determined the parameters of party competition' (Elias, 2009a:536). The nationalist parties before devolution believed that to define themselves on the left-right spectrum would be 'unhelpful for [the electorate's] understanding of the realities and needs' of Scotland and Wales, instead believing that they only needed to define themselves on the centre-periphery cleavage (Wyn Jones, 2007:192). The SNP's decision to not adopt a position on the left-right continuum allowed their unionist opponents to define them in negative terms: the Conservatives branded them as 'tartan Socialists'; while Labour tarnished them as 'tartan Tories' (Mitchell, 2009:38). In Wales, Plaid's failure to adopt such a position allowed them to be branded as 'nationalist extremists', fixated on the Welsh language and showing 'fascist tendencies' (Wyn Jones, 2014). Here neither the SNP nor Plaid excelled in their Statecraft, with the critical juncture coming in 1979 when both parties had disastrous elections and failed in their respective campaigns for a devolved legislature. However, both Plaid's and the SNP's leaderships learnt an important lesson in the value of a known left-right ideological position. After 1979 the SNP began to gradually shift leftwards adopting social democratic policies and 'by the 1990s became self-consciously left-wing' (Michael Russell, Interview, 2022). In a similar fashion Plaid slowly gravitated towards the left after 1979 and by 1990 Plaid located itself 'unambiguously on the left… the notion of decentralized socialism was adopted to reflect a new synthesis between the territorial goals of Welsh nationalists and the economic struggle of the Welsh working class' (Elias, 2009a:538).

SNP

In the SNP's case, their socialist repositioning, as James Mitchell (2009:38) has argued, was 'more tactical than deep-rooted, reflecting the rhythms of [Scottish] politics'. Therefore, the tactical advantage the SNP gained from adopting such an ideology was that the Scottish electorate is markedly more receptive to social democracy than elsewhere in the UK. This was largely due to both the socio-economic make-up of Scotland and a consequence of UK Conservative governments (namely Thatcher) who appeared to economically neglect Scotland in failing to support the Scottish manufacturing sector and using the Scottish people as 'guinea pigs' for their controversial Poll Tax in 1989 (Maxwell, 2009:123). As Chris Law MP stated 'Scotland has a radical tradition when it comes to politics because many people were employed in heavy industries… so you had a lot of that left-leaning

tradition anyway, so it made more sense to change the ideological direction and I think was the right thing to do because if you're going to reflect the views of your citizens, you need to really be listening and adopt what is being looked for' (Interview, 2021). Therefore, the literature has claimed 'Scotland is a centre-left nation' with Thatcherism being the primary mobilising factor in creating this 'progressive Scotland' (Hassan & Ilett, 2011:17-18).

To empirically test whether such an assertion is valid during the period of analysis, research conducted by the SSAS shall be used. The left-right positions were derived from voters' responses to 5 questions that asked respondents how much they agreed or disagreed that: (a) Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well-off; (b) Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers; (c) Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth; (d) There is one law for the rich and one for the poor; (e) Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance. Responses to these questions were combined to give an overall position on the left-right scale.

Figure 27: Scottish voters' position of the left-right scale at Scottish Elections (derived from other variables - %)
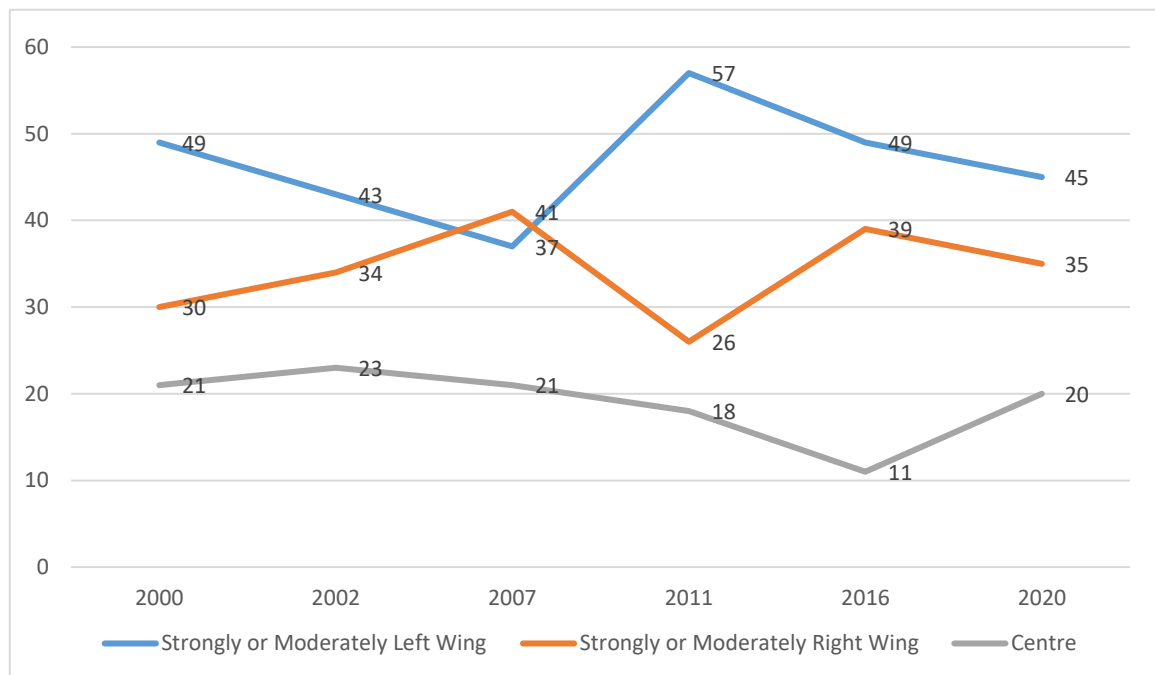
Source: ScotCen's Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2000-2020

The data presented supports the assertion of Hassan and Ilett (2011) that post-devolution Scotland is 'firmly on the left'. We can see that, with the exception of 2007, at every election since devolution began there has existed a majority of left-leaning voters in Scottish elections. However, this data still raises numerous questions about the role of ideology in Scottish voter choice. Firstly, it draws into

question the role of left-right ideology in the first SNP election victory in 2007. On this anomalous occasion, a majority of voters had expressed right-wing preferences, up 7% from 2003. We would expect to see this translate into Conservative votes as the only significant right-wing party in Scotland. Yet, in 2007, the Conservatives remained the third party at Holyrood, equalling their 16.6% share of the constituency vote at the 2003 election and losing 1.6% of the regional list vote from 2003 (Scottish Parliament, 2021). Equally, the data would suggest the SNP's first victory in a Scottish election in 2007 was not strongly influenced by left-right considerations, as despite Labour's and the SNP's combined constituency vote share of 66%, only 37% of people in that same year were categorised as moderately or strongly left-wing (Ibid). Such a disparity would support the idea that left-right ideological factors alone do not provide a sufficient explanation of Scottish elections. However, SSAS data in conjunction with the fact a majority of Scots vote for left-wing parties in Scotland at both General (average of 65.6% since 1997 – Figure 6) and Holyrood elections (average of 69.3% - Figure 7) does certainly point towards 'Scotland as a centre-left nation' (Hassan and Ilett, 2011).

The SNP's leadership appear to have been able to acknowledge this widespread approval of progressive politics amongst the Scottish electorate and consequently have presented themselves, as a social democratic party for electoral benefit. This became an even greater advantage when Labour drifted towards the centre under Blair which alienated Scottish Labour voters who alternatively voted for the more 'traditional socialism' of the SNP who had filled the electoral vacuum on the left (Hassan, 2009:4). It is no coincidence that as New Labour played out, Labour's vote share and number of seats fall at every Holyrood election between 1999 and 2011. However, the important point is that the SNP's leadership made a conscious choice to portray themselves as a party of the left, despite the fact the party is comprised of members, MSPs and MPs who would fall into the category of centre-right. As Mitchell et al (2012:124) showed in their study of SNP members, while the majority of SNP voters are left-wing, it would not be inaccurate to say the party historically has been an ideological broad church bound together by independence. Evidence of this is forthcoming in the same study, which found a sizeable minority of 25% of SNP members and a slightly higher percentage of SNP voters occupy ideological space to the right of the centre (Ibid). Equally, many senior figures within the party have been known to occupy political space considerably to the right of the official party's ideology but acquiescently accept the SNP's centre-left policies. This is due to the fact that those on the right in the party, such as Kate Forbes MSP and former SNP MP Conservative Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (formerly a Conservative), realise that it would be virtually impossible within the structural context of a left-leaning electorate to gain votes, never mind independence, through a right-wing iteration of nationalism. Such SNP members accept the social democratic position, as they realise this is the most viable route to independence, which is prioritised as their fundamental goal. Therefore, the SNP

leadership have chosen to frame independence in terms of the opportunity to create a social democratic Scotland or, more commonly, the chance to permanently get 'rid of the Tories' (Fusco, 2014:39).

PLAID CYMRU

Plaid Cymru followed a similar left-right ideological path as the SNP and during the 1990s under the successive leaderships of Dafydd Ellis-Thomas and Dafydd Wigley, became an 'explicitly socialist party in an effort to broaden its appeal in Labour-dominated South Wales' (Lynch, 1995). Similarly to the SNP, while the party officially presents itself as a party of the left, the party stands more as a left-right ideological broad church tied together by constitutional issues. While there exists no survey of Plaid members and voters assessing left-right tendencies similar to Mitchell et al's (2012), evidence from interviews suggests 'there are people who are centre-right within the party as well, but officially we are a party on the left' (Plaid MS, Interview, 2022). In their first Welsh election, Plaid tried 'out-lefting' New Labour by filling, the same space as the SNP, in the electoral vacuum on the left. In their manifesto they aimed 'to portray the party as being more Welsh and more left-wing than the Labour Party, its main competitor' (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2003:129). The party claimed to be the only alternative to the "conservative social and economic policies" implemented by New Labour at Westminster (Plaid Cymru, 1999). While not beating Labour, Plaid performed extremely well, winning 31% of the regional vote and gaining 17 seats, becoming the second-largest party and the official opposition in the NAW (Welsh Assembly, 2021). However, this result seemed more as a consequence of the enthusiasm around devolution, which Plaid had prominently pushed for, and the fact the Welsh Labour Party were suffering from the divisions of a fierce leadership battle in 1998 (Wyn Jones & Scully, 2003:126).

Plaid continued in both General elections and Welsh elections to occupy ideological space to the left of the Labour Party, criticising UK Labour's reliance on Private Finance Initiative schemes to fund the NHS and other public services (Plaid Cymru, 2003). However, ideological positioning alone was not enough to see Plaid go on to enjoy the level of success the SNP did at both devolved and Westminster elections. This can partly be expounded by the fact the Welsh electorate is not as ideologically homogenous as Scotland's with a considerable right-wing sub-section of the Welsh electorate. While there exists no equivalent of the SSAS which tracks the left-right position of Welsh voters, evidence of this larger right-wing share of Welsh voters can be seen in the consistently more successful performances of Conservatives and UKIP in Wales, than in Scotland. Figure 28 shows at every devolved election (apart from 2016), the Welsh Conservatives have electorally outperformed their Scottish counterparts. The exception of 2016 can be explained by a sizeable share of Welsh Conservative voters

leaving to vote for UKIP, a trend nowhere near as strong in Scotland (Scully & Larner, 2017). Furthermore, those further right along the ideological spectrum exist in a greater quantity in Wales, as UKIP has performed considerably better there than in Scotland since competing for Holyrood and Senedd seats in 2003.

Figure 28: Constituency Vote Share for Right-wing parties in Wales and Scotland (%)
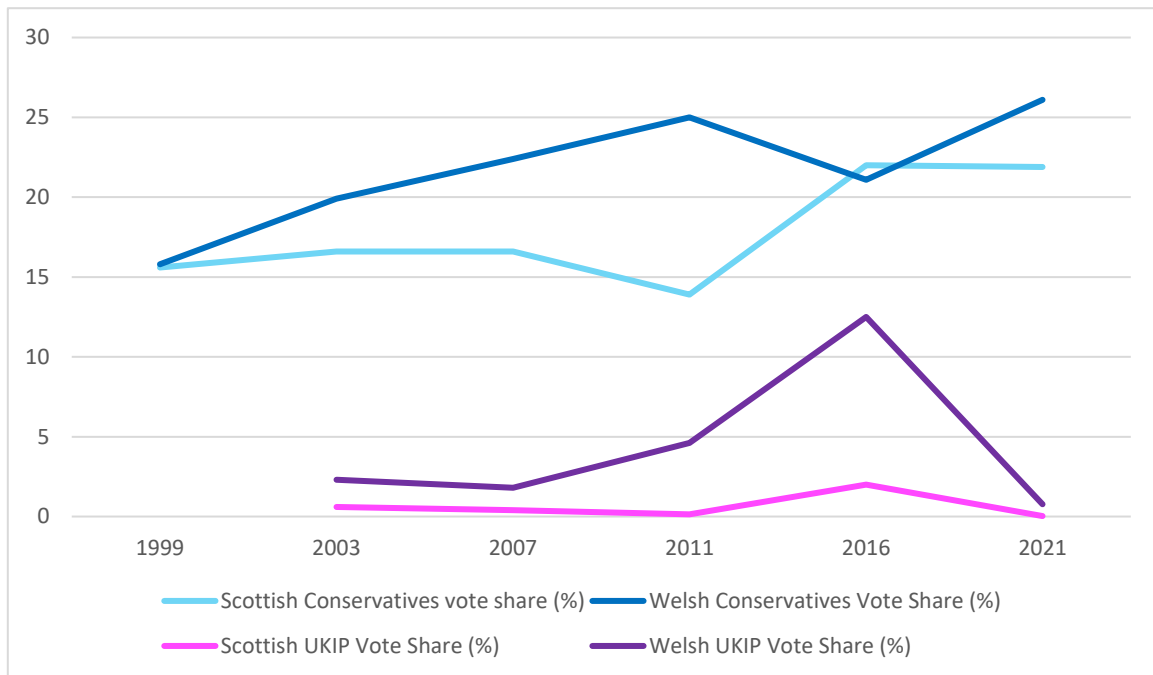
Source: Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly/Senedd Election Results 1999-2021

The question then becomes: why did Plaid's leadership choose to adopt a social democratic ideology that was incompatible with a large sub-section of the Welsh electorate? Interviews with senior Plaid figures suggest that many believed the party had moved too far to the left during the devolution era and that Plaid's leadership had mistakenly adopted a 'preference-shaping' strategy. Such a strategy was based on the idea that a left-wing homogeneity in Wales could be achieved by ideologically realigning centre-left and centre-right voters leftwards. One MS was critical of the party's adoption of an ardently social democratic agenda in the devolution era stating "I don't think that trumpeting 'I'm a socialist' is particularly useful in Welsh politics… we are currently neglecting the centre voters" (Interview, 2022). Interviews also showed how many in the party believed the party to be struggling due to the pursuit of a preference-shaping strategy in attempting to win over voters to the left and win them over to independence too:

"We need to be a party that appeals to university students on the left of politics but also business people who are in favour of Welsh independence who don't consider themselves socialist… So, why

would we as a party say actually no, we only want those on the on the left. Essentially telling voters, you need to see the world our way and I just don't think we need to operate in that in that way" (Plaid MS, Interview, 2023)

What was also apparent from interviews with senior Plaid figures was that 'post-Ieuan Wyn Jones the party has probably hardened its left-wing credentials, under both Leanne Wood and Adam Price' (Elin Jones MS, Interview, 2022). Plaid had at the onset of devolution and more definitively since 2011 pursued a strategy of 'out-lefting Labour' hoping not only to appeal to the more traditionally socialist voters of Labour but also hoping to shift the Welsh median voter in Downsian terms significantly to the left. There is also an explanation that Plaid, simply put, misread the electoral context they operated within, believing Labour's hegemony to be symptomatic of a social democratic hegemony in Wales. Unsurprisingly, in interviews Plaid politicians were less than forthcoming about this explanation but whatever its origins there exists a view in Plaid that "senior figures in the party say we have to 'out-left' Labour. To me it's just not about that" (Plaid MS, Interview, 2022). In this sense then, Plaid ostensibly adopted a similar left-right ideological agenda as the SNP, but unlike the SNP did not compete in an electoral context with the same level of social democratic homogeneity. Without the mechanism of office for all but one term as a junior coalition, Plaid were in a position whereby preference shaping was a tall order under such electoral constraints. For SNRPs then a key criterion appears to be pursuing a preference-accommodating strategy of accepting and adapting to the left-right hegemony you compete within, rather than trying to achieve a new left-right hegemony through preference shaping. SNRPs' primary purpose, and how they are perceived by voters, is in relation to the constitution. This means they are more likely to achieve electoral success if they adapt their left-right arguments to the electoral context they work within rather than attempting to create a new hegemony in both left-right and centre-periphery terms.
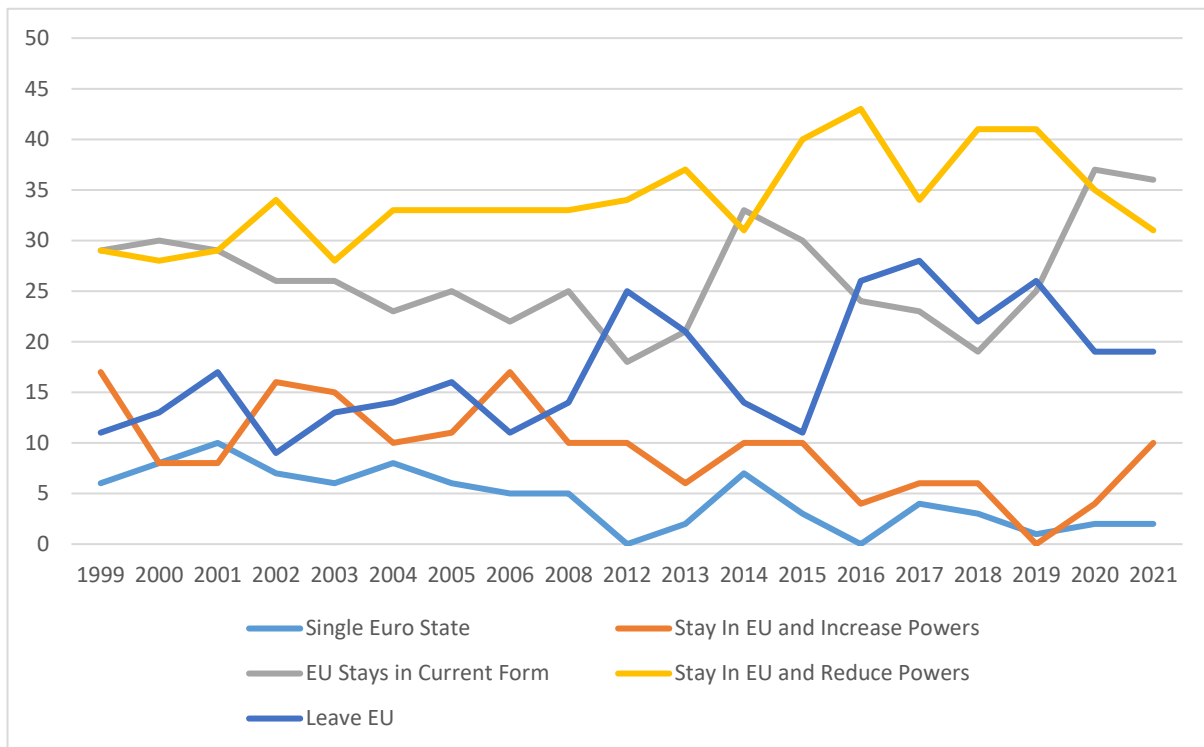
EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

As with left-right positioning SNRPs have a considerable degree of freedom to define themselves on the European integration continuum (Massetti, 2010). There has been a general but not universal trend for SNRPs to adopt a pro-European ideology in the last 30 years and various explanations for this tendency exist. Keating (2001:225) presents European integration as an 'opportunity structure' for SNRPs to 'spatially rescale' at the European level as to enhance regional autonomy. SNRPs involvement in the European project has been perceived as a further opportunity for regionalist parties to achieve their central aim of undermining the power of the nation-state (Marks & Wilson, 2000). Jolly (2007) argues that the market integration of the EU also provides SNRPs with an important basis to argue that small states can be viable economic entities. The EU has also aligned with many

SNRPs aims of promoting minority languages and cultures (Lynch, 1996). In tandem, the literature has argued that it is for these reasons that SNRPs have generally adopted a pro-European ideology. However, while undoubtedly significant factors the literature has failed to consider whether the adoption of European position was influenced by electoral factors.

SNP

In the case of the SNP, the party prior to 1975 originally adopted a Eurosceptic stance being deeply suspicious of the EEC. 'The EEC was centralist and elitist and it was unclear how Scottish interests would be represented if the EEC operated on an intergovernmental basis' (Hepburn, 2009:193). However, after the 1975 referendum, where 58.4% of the Scottish electorate voted in favour of the UK's continued membership of the EEC, the party began to reassess its ideological positioning regarding Europe both due to electoral factors of preference accommodation but also due to other Statecraft concerns. Throughout the 1980s the party began to acknowledge the social character of Europe and, alongside the development of Thatcher's increasingly Eurosceptic position, the party began to see European integration as a useful mechanism to oppose and bypass Westminster (Massetti, 2010:135). By 1988 the SNP had formally adopted the policy of 'independence in Europe', believing European integration provided a shield from accusations that an independent Scotland would be economically dislocated from the UK due to their shared membership of the single market (Hepburn, 2009). Thereafter, the SNP became an explicitly pro-European party but with the caveat that as the EU developed throughout the 2000s, they supported the widening not the deepening of EU integration as seen in their opposition to the EU constitution due to the Common Fisheries Policy (SNP, 2007). This ideological repositioning appears to have been another example of the SNP accurately following a preference accommodating strategy, in changing their ideology to fit a pro-European majority at the public level. But did such a majority exist into and throughout the devolution period? Figure 29 shows Scottish attitudes towards European integration throughout the period of analysis, as tracked by the BSA.

Figure 29: Scottish Attitudes towards Europe 1999-2021[9]

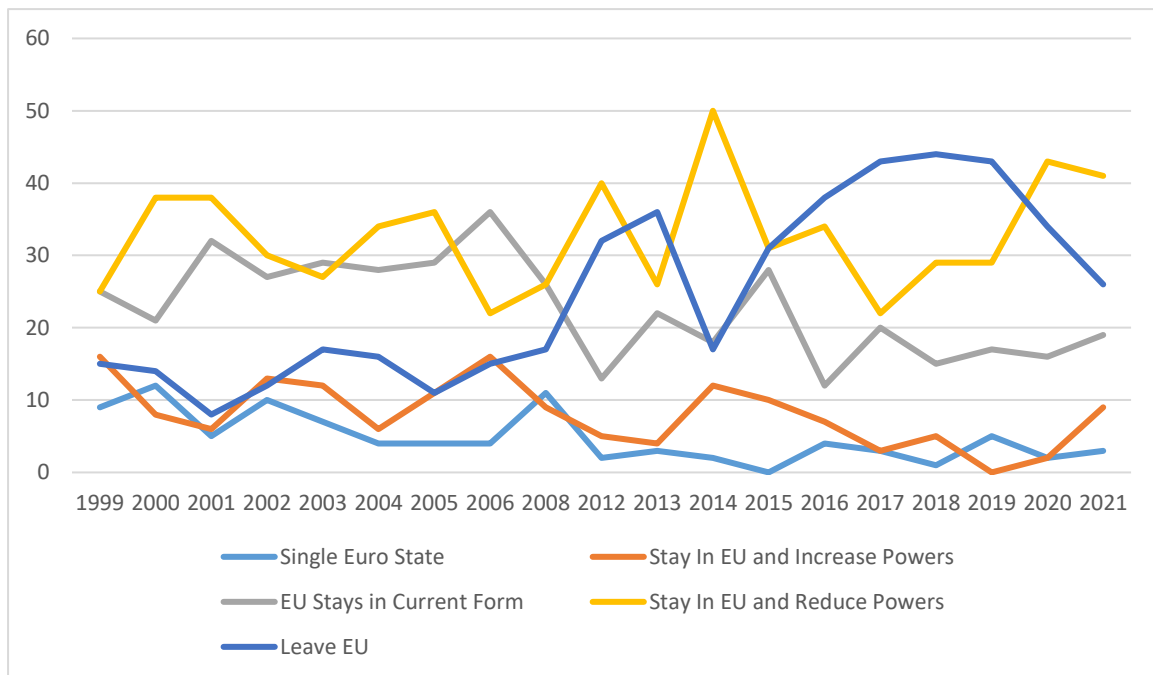Source: British Social Attitudes Research 1999-2021

Figure 29 demonstrates that the referendum result in 1975 was not a fleeting pro-European integration majority but a more permanent fixture of Scottish politics. We can see that at no point throughout devolution do a majority of Scots believe in leaving the EU and that in every year a majority either preferred to keep the relationship with the EU unchanged or more commonly to stay in the EU but reduce their powers. It would appear then that the SNP leadership in being pro-European integration but with the caveats of opposing the EU constitution and the Common Fisheries Policy, have mirrored the majority public attitude of wanting to remain in the EU but reduce European powers. After the Brexit vote and even after the UK's formal exit in 2020, the SNP appear to have been vindicated in sticking to a pro-European ideology as a slightly higher percentage of Scottish voters support remaining in the EU in some form in the years following 2016. This has been of considerable instrumental importance to their constitutional arguments. As we will see below, the linking of pro-European and independence ideologies appears to have had a reciprocal reinforcing effect in increasing EU and independence public support since 2016.

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[9] The wording of the question changed after 2016 from 'What should the UK's long term relationship with the EU be?' to 'Leaving the EU aside, what should be the UK's long-term relationship with the EU be?' (also the case in Figure 30)

PLAID CYMRU

In the case of Plaid, the party followed a broadly similar ideological development to the SNP in relation to European integration. Throughout the 1960s, and in the run-up to the 1975 referendum on the UK's continued EEC membership, Plaid adopted an anti-EEC position arguing that Welsh interests would not be represented at the European level, citing concerns over how the common market would impact Welsh farmers and the steel industry (Massetti, 2010:74). Additionally, at this time the party were 'taken over by fit of viewing the EU as a capitalist club' (Hywel Williams MP, Interview, 2022). Equally, another Eurosceptic motivation in electoral terms was to decisively differentiate between state-wide parties who at the time supported membership, in order to catch the Eurosceptic voter (Plaid Cymru, 1970:23). However, as was the case with the SNP, the 1975 EEC referendum was a rude awakening to the party leadership who had badly misjudged the public mood concerning Europe. In the referendum an even higher 64.8% of Welsh voters voted in favour of the continued membership of the EEC, forcing the party to rethink its position concerning Europe. Reinforcing electoral factors, the domestic development of Euroscepticism increasingly becoming associated with the New Right of Thatcher led to the eventual adoption of an agenda of 'both deepening and widening' European integration by the 1990s (Plaid Cymru, 1994). Equally, the creation of the European Free Alliance (EFA) in the European Parliament gave a voice to SNRPs such as Plaid and the SNP, and consequently 'the EU started to be perceived in the UK context as a way for the SNP and Plaid to bypass Westminster' (Hywel Williams MP, Interview, 2022). Like in Scotland, the SNRP's ability to reposition itself on the European integration continuum in a Downsian, preference-accommodating fashion was to electorally benefit from (at this time) a Europhilic consensus in Wales. However, unlike Scotland, in Wales, European attitudes would shift during the devolution period. Below in Figure 30, we can see Welsh attitudes towards European integration throughout the period of analysis.

Figure 30: Welsh Attitudes towards Europe 1999-2021

Source: British Social Attitudes Research 1999-2021

As we can see in the first 10 years of devolution it appears Plaid were entirely justified in their adoption of pro-EU ideology as a clear majority of Welsh voters wished to remain in the EU. Ostensibly, if we compare Welsh attitudes with Scottish attitudes on the EU prior to 2012 there is a striking level of similarity in either electorate's preferences. However, a general rise in Euroscepticism was evident in both Scotland and Wales after 2012, but in the case of the latter, this trend was much stronger. Indeed, already by 2013, the Welsh electorate started to exhibit a majority of voters who wanted to leave the EU and by the time of the referendum in 2016, a more consistent Eurosceptic majority existed that would last for 4 years according to the data in Figure 30. However, while there was a discernible shift in the latter half of the devolution period in public-level attitudes towards Europe this was not mirrored at the party political level. Indeed, prior to 2016 none of the parties in Wales, with the exception of UKIP, explicitly supported the UK's exit from the EU explaining their success in the 2016 Welsh elections where the party won 7 seats. Analysed through the Statecraft prism, all Welsh parties fought a losing battle in their arguments concerning Europe. Once again, it would appear the failure of Plaid here was in not accurately understanding the electoral context they operated in either because: A. they underestimated the extent to which Euroscepticism had grown in Wales after 2008, leaving their pro-EU preference accommodation obsolete; or B. they believed that through their own preference shaping strategy (and in the immediate run-up to the referendum their joint efforts of

campaigning alongside Labour), the party could revive the former Europhilic consensus that had existed in Wales.

In any instance Plaid elites could be forgiven for embracing a pro-EU ideology, as Wales had received proportionally a higher share per capita of EU structural funds than any other region in the UK, obtaining £1.2 billion in funds between 2000 and 2006 and a further £5.3 billion in the 2014-2020 period (Pugh et al, 2018; Bell, 2018). It is somewhat surprising then, that considering the scale of structural funds the Welsh government were able to obtain in the devolution period, that in the EU referendum of 2016, 52.5 % of Welsh electorate voted to leave the EU. However, while state-wide parties (excluding the Lib Dems) after the result gradually transitioned towards a Eurosceptic ideology either in the form of a 'hard' or 'soft' Brexit, Plaid remained in favour of re-entry into the EU. This appears to have been a misjudgement on the part of Plaid's leadership as the data in Figure 30 suggest that a Eurosceptic majority in Wales persisted in Wales after 2016. However, moving forwards from 2020 Eurosceptic attitudes appear to be falling sharply and while only across two years of the BSA's survey, if this trend continues it will be interesting to see if Plaid can take advantage of this increase in pro-European integration attitudes in the 6th Senedd term in being the only major party to be advocating the long-term re-entry into the EU. Nonetheless, the perseverance of a Europhilic ideology after the country voted by majority to leave the EU appears to have been a misjudgement by Plaid, specifically in how it curtailed their ability to link the party's European arguments instrumentally to their centre-periphery goals, which shall be the next subject of discussion.

CENTRE-PERIPHERY ARGUMENTS

The final and most important argument both Plaid and the SNP have sought hegemony over during the devolution period are their arguments concerning the centre-periphery spectrum, and specifically how they have been able to link their left-right and European arguments to constitutional matters. Unlike the two previously discussed arguments, here both parties do not have the same extent of freedom to flexibly adopt a position on a centre-periphery spectrum to try to mirror public constitutional attitudes, as their raison d'etre in electoral terms is to be the party closest to the periphery on this continuum. Both parties here due to ideological constraints were forced to pursue a preference-shaping strategy of trying to convince, in both Scotland and Wales a largely anti-independence majority (although considerably higher in Wales) that exiting the UK was in the Scottish/Welsh interest. In both cases, as has been alluded to in previous chapters, there existed two schools of thought on how to convince voters of the merits of their constitutional goals. While the

ideology of fundamentalism and gradualism has existed in either party since 1999, the meaning of the term had nuanced differences depending on the party and period in question.

SNP

In the case of the SNP, up until the 2016 Scottish election, the ideological distance between either centre-periphery ideologies was minimal. Prior to 1999 fundamentalists had believed that the party should only gun for independence and nothing less on the back of the SNP's own success, believing Westminster proposals for devolution to be a trap to try to derail the nationalist cause (Massetti, 2010). Alternatively, gradualists believed in supporting the halfway house Labour elites were increasingly considering throughout the 1970s and 1980s Scottish self-government within the union (Levy, 1990:60-61). However, with the reality of devolution in place by 1999, the old-school variation of fundamentalism began to dissipate and gradualism became fuller-throated in its assertion that devolution would develop to the point whereby Scotland would have de facto independence (Massetti, 2010:111). As Michael Russell states 'In 1999 we all became fundamentalists and pragmatists… we came gradualist because no one rejected working within the new Scottish Parliament and we became fundamentalist because we all realised that the parliament was a stepping stone to independence' (Interview, 2022). The party's official position for most of devolution has therefore been a new iteration of gradualism; using elections as a platform to try to achieve a democratic mandate for the holding of a yes/no independence referendum. In 2007, the SNP won enough seats to form a minority administration, and subsequently, the party conducted 'the national conversation': a public consultation on constitutional preferences which led to the creation of The White Paper on the Constitution. In this document, we can see that despite being the largest party in Scotland, the SNP were still reluctant to call for a referendum on independence as the document did not claim a mandate for such a vote. Equally, the ruling out of a referendum being granted by Gordon Brown meant that the SNP's first term in office was an opportunity 'to build credibility with the electorate and work to create a reputation for competence' (Johns & Mitchell, 2016:187).

Again, gradualism here seemed to be the guiding influence in the SNP's centre-periphery arguments with the focus on governing competently rather than constitutional matters. However, the SNP after being elected as a majority government in 2011, found itself able to adopt a more fundamentalist line of argument. In the wake of the 2011 majority, David Cameron granted the Scottish Parliament permission to arrange a referendum on the condition the question would be a simple 'Yes/No'. Salmond had initially wanted to have a third option of further powers/devo-max but it was Sturgeon

who convinced the leadership to accept the binary choice referendum. While the pro-independence campaign of 'Yes Scotland' was aimed to be larger than just the SNP, the campaign was largely the SNP's in terms of organisation, messaging and general campaign activities (Ibid). At the time of 'Better Together' and 'Yes Scotland's' formation, polling placed 55% against independence, 32% in favour and 13% undecided, yet by the time of the referendum 45% voted in favour of independence while 55% voted against (Ipsos Mori, 2012). While the SNP in 2014 ultimately failed to achieve hegemony regarding the centre-periphery argument, the fact that over the 2 years of campaigning the SNP were able to swing 13% of undecided voters to the cause of independence is testament to the success of constitutional arguments the party pursued. However, in the immediate aftermath of the No result, the party had to rethink its constitutional arguments. A No vote in combination with 'The Vow' as promised by the three major UK state-wide parties in the run-up to the referendum, resulted in the SNP having to drop the independence agenda and instead pragmatically suggest that in the 2015 GE and 2016 Scottish election that a vote for the SNP would ensure that Westminster would deliver on their promises of devo-max (Salmond, 2015:244). However, as will be explored below the Brexit vote in 2016 would have a seismic effect on the constitutional arguments of the SNP, allowing them to return to a more fundamentalist agenda.

PLAID CYMRU

Plaid's arguments relating to the centre-periphery spectrum for much of the period prior to devolution and indeed until 2003 remained ambiguous. In this period multiple labels were attached to Plaid's constitutional goals such as 'self-government', a 'democratic Welsh state', 'decentralised socialism' and 'full national status' (Massetti, 2010:49). This confusion, and at times contradictory nature of Plaid's centre-periphery arguments, was a consequence of an uneasy synthesis between gradualism and fundamentalism. Plaid's gradualism (unlike in the SNP) did not mean the realisation of independence but rather the move towards greater powers in Wales, falling short of stating the end goal of independence (McAgnus, 2013). Equally, for Plaid, fundamentalism was not understood as 'nothing short of independence, now' but simply meant the explicit desire for independence irrespective of the means to achieve this (Ibid). In the first term of the Assembly, the label of 'full national status in Europe' was adopted by Plaid, with the aim being to not emphasise constitutional arguments and instead adopt a pragmatic/gradualist approach, demonstrating Plaid's credentials as a credible party of government (Elias, 2009a:543). The lack of a constitutional focus is even admitted by senior party officials: 'I don't think the party has taken a particularly forthright view on constitutional issues if you look at what the party has campaigned on compared to the SNP we've campaigned for independence far less' (Dafydd Trystan, Interview, 2023). However, the party's poor election result in

2003 in combination with the election of Dafydd Iwan as President who was a lifelong Plaid activist, saw the party adopt a pro-independence argument in relation to constitutional matters from 2003 onwards (Ibid). However, independence has in almost every election, both Welsh and General, been expressed in terms of the long-term goal it represented for the party, rather than a referendum being held in the near-term (Royles, 2023). Indeed in interviews, it was apparent that many in the party believed 'Plaid leaders have at times in the past been nervous to talk about independence for fear of scaring people and that we would be labelled as 'obsessed with independence' (Plaid MS, Interview, 2023). Indeed, only in the 2021 election manifesto do we see Plaid commit to holding an independence referendum in its 2nd term in office and the creation of a 'Welsh state' by 2030 (Plaid Cymru, 2021).

One of the key reasons Plaid has struggled to achieve predominance in the constitutional debate is again due to Welsh Labour. Plaid's main rivals occupy a halfway-house autonomist position of supporting the further devolution of powers to Wales in key areas, such as criminal justice (Welsh Labour, 2021). This, in combination with the fact that Plaid has opted to pursue a strategy that does not place independence front and centre of their agenda, has meant that on the centre-periphery spectrum, both parties occupy broadly similar space. What was clear from interviews was the frustration among Plaid elites that those voters who are sympathetic or in support of independence in Wales, don't necessarily vote Plaid:

'One of our primary problems is that people are willing to consider independence but not Plaid Cymru. The fact that such a large share of Welsh Labour voters are sympathetic towards independence is evidence of this problem. The SNP is synonymous with independence in a way that Plaid Cymru just is not in Wales. The problem is as a country we are so far away from independence, that the debate is around which powers will be devolved to Wales next, not whether Wales should be independent. So what we find is that because Labour also support the devolution of criminal justice to Wales, it is not illegitimate for independence supporters to vote Labour'

(Dafydd Trystan, Interview, 2023).

THE INTEGRATION OF CENTRE-PERIPHERY ARGUMENTS – GETTING RID OF 'THE EFFING TORIES' & THE WEAPONISATION OF BREXIT

Before assessing the overall success of constitutional arguments presented by both the SNP and Plaid, it is first important to understand how either party has been able to link their arguments on the left-right and European integration spectrums to their constitutional arguments. The SNP have since 1999 adopted an argument which seeks to attract the social democratic majority in Scotland to the cause of independence. As Fusco argues (2014:44) 'the electoral desire for social democracy cannot

effectively be tapped in the UK because power in the current institutional framework can only be won by the left if it excludes radical and creative ideas from its policy agenda'. Therefore, the SNP leadership understood that 'sold' in this way, the majority of Scots would be attracted to the idea of independence as it would remove the structural constraint of a numerically dominant right-wing England who have repeatedly returned Blairite Labour or Conservative governments at general elections. As Chris Law MP stated, 'we don't want independence for independence's sake, and we don't want to become a sort of free port, with Scotland in a race to the bottom of zero corporation tax as you see in some places like Singapore' (Chris Law MP, Interview, 2022). This decision to present independence in its instrumental value to achieve social democracy in Scotland has characterised the party's centre-periphery arguments throughout devolution, to the extent that in the 2014 referendum David Cameron pleaded with Scots not to vote yes just to 'kick the effing Tories' (Watt et al, 2014).

However, after 2016 the party's arguments concerning independence have taken on a new European focus in light of the Brexit referendum result. One of the key arguments presented by the 'Better Together' campaign in the 2014 independence referendum was that if Scotland left the union, there was no guarantee, of then deputy-leader Nicola Sturgeon's proposal, for 'a transition from membership as a part of the UK, to membership as an independent country' (Flamini, 2013:60). In this sense the 'Better Together' campaign originally weaponised the issue of EU membership against the SNP, capitalising on EU officials statement that automatic transition would not be an option due to fears of a domino effect a 'Yes' vote would have on other regions with high support for independence in Europe such as Catalonia (Chikhoun, 2015). The 'No' vote in 2014 therefore considerably benefited from a majority of Scots who supported Scotland's place in Europe. However, the UK's decision to leave the EU in 2016, while 62% of Scots voted to remain, flipped this dynamic on its head. Suddenly, the SNP's pro-EU arguments could be used as leverage in convincing the public to support a second independence referendum. The decision of Scottish Labour and the Scottish Conservatives to not pursue the UK's re-entry into the EU, in combination with the SNP's continued support for re-entry, positioned the SNP to win over the Europhilic majority by suggesting that, independence could be viewed instrumentally in the opportunity it provided for Scotland to re-join the EU. Indeed, since 2016 the refusal of Westminster to grant the SNP a second referendum on the basis of the EU issue has galvanised support for independence further in how it has reinforced the SNP's projected negative perceptions of Westminster as undemocratic and not concerned with the interests of Scotland. As Michael Russell recalled in an exchange with Michael Gove, then Minister for Intergovernmental relations:

"Look, I recognise your mandate to deliver Brexit in England and you've got that mandate, but you have to recognise our mandate to a referendum because the two things are exactly the same. We fought the 2019 campaign on the basis of the referendum, we won 48 seats out of the fifty-nine. So, you have to recognise that. I acknowledge your majority of 80 at Westminster to deliver Brexit and the failure to accept that basic democratic point is now one of the big issues."

(Interview, 2022).

If we look to the elite level it would appear that the SNP's centre-periphery arguments have had little success in winning over any of the unionist parties to the cause of independence. In only one instance did another party express that they may support independence, when in 2016 the then Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale in an interview stated it was 'not inconceivable' to see Scottish Labour supporting independence if Scotland voted to remain in the EU and the rest of the UK voted to leave (Bush, 2016). However this shouldn't be overstated, as Dugdale quickly backtracked on this statement and when such a scenario did occur in the EU referendum, Scottish Labour afterwards have remained vehement opponents of independence. However, at the public level, the story is different.

Figure 31: Support for the various constitutional options in Scotland (%)
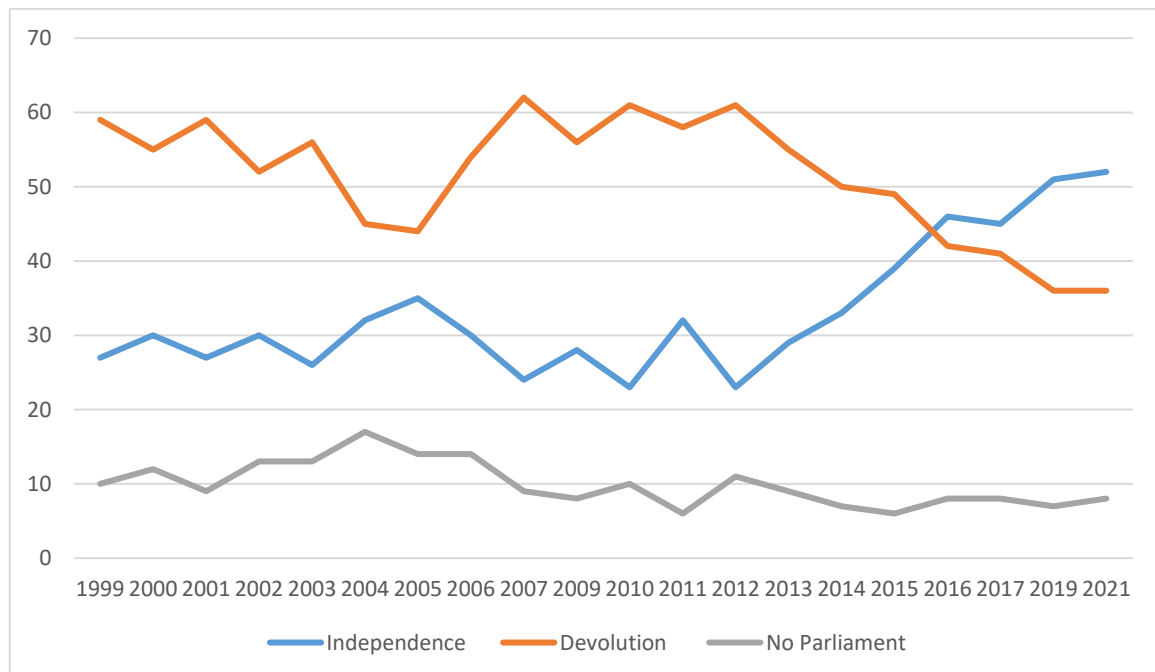
Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 1999-2021

In Figure 31 we can see that for much of the devolution period, the party's gradualist centre-periphery ideology and the presentation of independence as the instrumental means to social democracy, have had little effect on the overall support for independence. However, what is clear is that after the Brexit referendum in 2016, the linking of the party's arguments concerning European integration to constitutional arguments has been effective. It is no coincidence that only after Brexit does 'Independence' become the most common answer to Scottish voters' constitutional preferences. This would suggest that by 2016, the SNP had been able to capitalise on the structural opportunity of the UK pursuing Brexit while Scotland voted against it, to synthesise not only their left-right position to their centre-periphery arguments but successfully incorporate their European integration position to advance their constitutional aims. It would not be unfair to argue that after 2016, the three main ideological positions the SNP had taken and their success in synthesising these arguments resulted in a left-wing, pro-EU, pro-independence agenda synonymous with Scottish interests. In this sense, the SNP have been able to win hegemony in the constitutional argument by instrumentally using pro-EU and left-wing positions.

Unlike the SNP, Plaid struggled to create links between their position on the left-right/European integration continuums and their centre-periphery arguments. As already stated there was an agentic failure by the leadership of Plaid during devolution to adopt ideological positions that resonated with a majority of voters in Wales. Social democracy was adopted as the party's left-right ideology despite the Welsh electorate existing as a much more ideologically heterogeneous cohort; and while for the first 15 years of devolution, Plaid positioned itself successfully to capitalise on a largely sceptical but still pro-EU majority in Wales, the party failed to adapt its position to reflect the emergence of a consistent Eurosceptic majority from 2015 onwards. This ideological incongruence with Welsh voters precluded the presentation of independence as an instrumental mechanism to achieve the goals of a social democratic Wales. Equally, the decision of the party not to revise its stance on the EU after 2016 and to adopt a preference-shaping strategy of trying to win back voters over the European issue, would appear to have failed in the short-term as voters remained in favour of existing outside the EU, which state-wide parties and, in broader terms, the union enable. In this sense, Plaid have struggled to present themselves as the defenders of Welsh interests and present independence as a means to achieving other ideological goals instrumentally. As can be seen in Figure 32, although many of those within Plaid still believe in the constitutional goal of independence, the level of support for independence amongst the Welsh electorate has consistently been very low, never surpassing 14%.

Figure 32: Support for the various constitutional options in Wales (%)
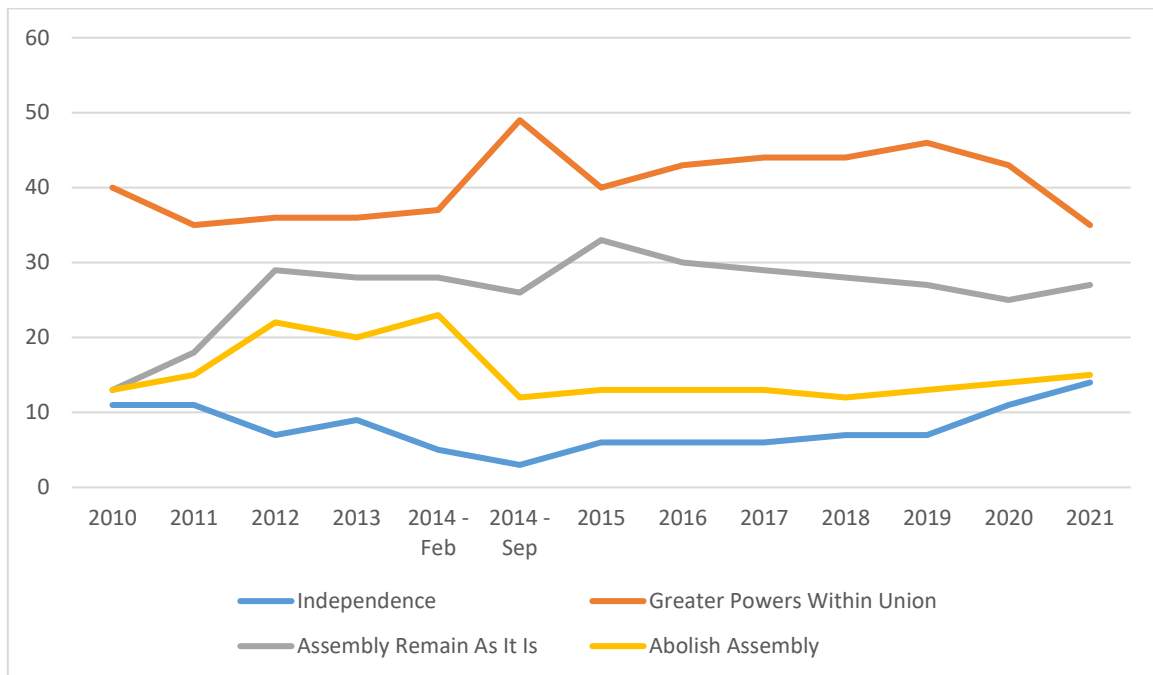
Source: ICM 2010-2021

Unfortunately, polling exploring the constitutional preferences of the Welsh electorate only began in 2010, meaning that it is difficult to assess how Plaid's arguments for a 'long-term goal' of independence played with the public between 2003-2010. However, what is observable in comparing Figures 31 & 32 is the disparity in the level of support for independence in either country. In this context, many scholars (Bradbury & Andrews, 2009; Elias 2009a) have argued, that 'Welshness' as an identity has manifested around progressive constitutional reform rather than the way Scottishness has become synonymous with Independence in Scotland. Plaid unsurprisingly sought to win in this argument by presenting a distinctly Welsh national identity, which was hoped would foster a Welsh appetite for independence. While Labour adopted a dual identity, stating that Welsh and British identities were not mutually exclusive and emphasizing the need for Wales to remain within the union but, where necessary, to be granted greater powers (Bradbury & Andrews, 2009:240). Welsh Labour's strategy here sought to dampen both the nationalist appeal of Plaid. As Osmond (2000) has highlighted, Welsh Labour 'have taken on the nationalist threat by re-packaging their own political programmes so as to give them more of a Welsh face'. The party rebranded itself as early as 2000 as the "true party of Wales", which was a 'move clearly aimed at challenging Plaid Cymru's political appeal' (Ibid). The success of this strategy can be observed at the elite level when in the wake of the

disastrous 2011 election, Plaid launched a review of the party concluding 'Labour present themselves as the Welsh party whilst Plaid Cymru is perceived as the Welsh-speaking party' (Plaid Cymru, 2012).

As can be seen in Figure 32, the most common constitutional preference for Wales is to remain within the union but with greater powers for the Senedd. In adopting this dual identity that promotes greater autonomy for Wales but within the union, Welsh Labour have been able to win the support of the largest sub-section of the electorate who, unconvinced of Plaid's proposed independence, have opted for the autonomist position of Labour. The ability of Welsh Labour to harness the support of those in favour of constitutional reform at the expense of Plaid has frustrated many within Plaid:

'[The Welsh] Labour Party have very successfully tried to portray themselves as another version of us. Which in reality is not true at all. Labour is a Unionist Party but it has tried to park their tanks on our lawn in the eyes of many people in Wales, people who consider themselves Welsh and that's been challenging for us' (Plaid MS, Interview, 2022).

At the public level then Plaid has failed, unlike the SNP, in being unable to garner a perception of the party as the sole defenders of Welsh interests. Welsh Labour have been able to equally define themselves as promoters of a civic Welshness, which is not incongruent with the Britishness still felt in Wales (see Figure 3). However, there is a valid argument presented by many of the Plaid elites that the party has influenced the Labour Party to adopt a more consciously pro-Welsh, pro-autonomist position than it otherwise would have, especially since the election of FM Mark Drakeford. As John Osmond, the party's policy director outlined:

"I mean Labour have altered quite dramatically, Mark Drakeford coming out and saying in his policy document 'Reforming our Union: Shared Governance in the UK' that sovereignty lies with the people of Wales… bloody hell, I mean for unionist Labour to now adopt that position, that is a fundamentally radical shift. I think Adam [Price] spotted that a while ago, and sought to manoeuvre events so Plaid capitalised" (Interview, 2022).

Therefore, while strictly in electoral terms the party may have failed to achieve PAH, at the elite level there is an argument that Plaid has succeeded in its role to ideologically influence the centre-periphery ideology of the government, rather than govern themselves. As Dafydd Trystan elucidated:

'In electoral terms, the fact Welsh Labour is constitutionally ambiguous is a huge hindrance to Plaid but the fact we as a party are able to pressure Welsh Labour into the greater devolution of powers to Wales is a success. So it comes back to the central question of: what is Plaid's purpose? Is it to win elections, or achieve independence in Wales? After the 2021 election, it seems as though the party is of the view that building Wales is the priority, not building Plaid' (Interview, 2023).

In this sense, the party has managed to achieve some success in the political argument regarding the constitutional argument. While not being able to link their left-right and European ideological positions, to win votes through themselves being the political vehicle to move Wales closer to independence, Plaid have been able to influence Welsh Labour into a more radical constitutional position than it otherwise would have. The ramifications of this finding for the SNRP and Statecraft literature shall be discussed below.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has analysed the success of the SNP and Plaid in relation to their ability to achieve political hegemony in their arguments relating to the left-right spectrum; European integration and most importantly their centre-periphery/constitutional arguments. The chapter has developed Statecraft's understanding of PAH which originally depicted the concept as only encompassing one left-right issue that parties would jostle for hegemony over. At the sub-national level, European integration (particularly from 2012 onwards) and more obviously the centre-periphery axis are the two other significant ideological continuums that SNRPs have to position and compete with state-wide parties on. While the pre-existing literature (Massetti, 2010; Elias 2009a; Royles, 2023) has explored the development of these three ideologies in the SNP and Plaid throughout devolution, they do not consider how electoral and more broadly structural constraints specific to Wales and Scotland, may have influenced the positioning of SNRPs on these three continuums and their success within them. Equally, they don't explicitly acknowledge the somewhat unique position SNRPs are in to more freely alter their European and left-right arguments relative to their state-wide competitors.

The use of Statecraft here therefore is useful in explaining SNRP electoral competition in its assertion that political leaderships may 'use and abuse' ideology in an instrumental fashion to achieve the more important goals of polity management and winning elections (Bulpitt, 1986). Building on this assumption the chapter has explored how sub-national parties' ability to win PAH is dependent on their ability to successfully instrumentally utilise positions along the left-right, European and centre-periphery spectrums to support their primary political argument/spectrum. In the case of the SNP and Plaid, their level of success in achieving PAH has been dependent on their ability to successfully utilise a European and left-right position to make all sub-national politics refract through the constitutional lens. In the case of unionist parties, they (typically) instrumentally utilise their centre-periphery and European positions to reinforce their primary left-right arguments.

The SNP leadership sought to instrumentally utilise left-right and European arguments in order to bolster their case for independence. From 1999 until 2014, the party's main way of linking these

arguments was presenting independence as an instrumental mechanism to achieve social democracy in Scotland. While support for independence rose, this strategy ultimately fell short of the mark when 55% voted against independence in 2014. However, from 2016 onwards, the SNP's constitutional strategy has been to focus on and exploit European arguments to bolster the case for independence. Again, the SNP have been afforded an opportunity in the fact that a key claim of the 'Better Together' campaign was that leaving the UK would mean leaving the EU, attracting many Scottish Europhiles to vote 'No' in 2014. This has allowed the SNP to attract a new demographic of Europhile Scots who may now vote for independence as an instrumental means to re-join the EU. The linking of these arguments by the leadership appears to have won the SNP argument hegemony, with independence being the most common constitutional preference of Scots since 2016 (SSAS - Figure 31).

In the case of Plaid, there has been a failure by agents to accurately perceive the structural context they operate. Rather than opting for a preference-accommodating strategy that would have seen them move to the centre to try pragmatically make Plaid more palatable to an ideologically diverse electorate, they pursued a preference-shaping strategy of attempting to realign the Welsh electorate leftwards. The continued success of the Conservatives and UKIP as devolution has progressed would suggest this strategy of Plaid's has failed. Plaid initially succeeded in adopting a preference accommodation strategy on their European arguments as during this time (see Figure 30), a Europhile majority in Wales existed. However, Plaid were seemingly unaware of the shift in attitudes towards Euroscepticism in the run-up to the 2016 referendum and they failed to represent the new Eurosceptic majority. Even after 2016 when Welsh Labour's adoption of a softer, single-market Brexit has enabled them to stay in tune with Welsh voters' Euroscepticism, Plaid stayed committed to a long-term goal of re-joining the EU.

The inability of Plaid to change their ideology in a Downsian fashion, to mirror the preferences of the electorate severely limited their ability to use left-right and European arguments to further their constitutional arguments. The fact a majority of Welsh voters wished to leave the EU means that the SNP's line which Plaid have ostensibly co-opted, that independence can be viewed as a route to re-joining the EU, does not have the same traction in Wales. Equally, in the same vein, the structural constraint of a more ideologically heterogeneous electorate has resulted in Plaid not being able to take advantage of the SNP's strategy of linking independence with the creation of a social democratic Wales. Plaid have been second best to a Welsh Labour Party more conscious of the structural context they operate. The WLP by pursuing a preference accommodating strategy of an autonomist centre-periphery position and a now revised 'soft Brexit' position on Europe, have mirrored the majority of Welsh ideological preferences after Brexit.

It would therefore seem the key difference between Plaid and the SNP was an accurate understanding of the electoral context they operated within and also how important ideology in its own right was to each party. Statecraft gives us an importantly neglected perspective of sub-national politics here. SNRP scholars need to give attention to how actors perceive structures, rather than trying to paint an objective picture of political actors' relationship with their structural context (Bulpitt, 1995). In this sense, there is a possibility actors may subjectively misperceive the structural context they operate within, which is a key concept to understanding Plaid's inability to win PAH. Alternatively, the SNP were the benefactors of a more favourable structural context of a social democratic, pro-European Scottish majority but understood the importance of the instrumental value of these ideologies to further their constitutional goals.

Plaid appear to have in certain instances misunderstood the electoral context they operated in but in others such as their stance on Europe after Brexit have valued ideological goals over the winning of elections in emphasising the Brexit mistake. While such ideological positions do not aid Plaid's goal of achieving Governing Competence, Bulpitt himself stated 'what a party does in terms of these various dimensions may not be coherent. There is no reason why the political argument dimension should 'fit' its operations under the Governing Competence category' (Bulpitt, 1986:22). This would therefore challenge the centrality of winning elections in Statecraft's depiction of politicians, as for Bulpitt politicians were concerned above all else with winning elections. A slight revision here then is that, rather than stating all politicians will by default be primarily concerned with Governing Competence and winning elections, political parties can exist for a political purpose of ideological influence but consequently will never succeed in electoral terms (e.g. Plaid & UKIP). Therefore, the SNP unlike Plaid, have been cognisant of the structural context they have operated in and accordingly sought to occupy ideological positions in relation to the left-right end European integration spectrums in a preference accommodating fashion to best exploit these structural advantages to further their constitutional goals.

CHAPTER 8: THESIS CONCLUSIONS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the concluding chapter is threefold and correspondingly it is structured into three sections. Firstly, the chapter illustrates the value of 'Sub-national statecraft' in our understanding of SNRP performance and, more generally, sub-national politics. Adopting a somewhat novel theoretical perspective of Statecraft, the thesis has sought to highlight how devolved politics may operate differently from Westminster politics but the underlying assumptions that inform elite decision-making at this level are fundamentally similar to the national level; primarily being the pursuit of an image of Governing Competence. Equally, in this section, the chapter discusses the empirical contribution of the thesis. Having established 'Sub-national Statecraft' as a theoretical framework to assess the SNP and Plaid's leaderships against, the thesis concludes that the SNP has as hypothesised outperformed Plaid in the three Statecraft 'functions', albeit to varying levels depending on the function in question. The chapter synthesises the analytical findings from the substantive/empirical chapters of the thesis and summarises the arguments concerning Bulpitt's claim that Governing Competence was the most significant of Statecraft's functions. Specifically, superior strategic decision-making by agents alongside a more favourable (and accurate understanding of the) structural context being operated within, allowed the SNP to dominate elections in the devolution period in a fashion unattainable for Plaid.

In the second section, the chapter demonstrates the important contribution the thesis has made to the existing Statecraft literature. The revisions to Statecraft presented were necessary for two reasons: 1. the need to respond to outstanding criticisms in the literature regarding the theoretical, methodological and ontological shortcomings of the theory; 2. the expressed purpose and empirical aim of this thesis is to understand the differing performances of parties operating at the sub-national level and consequently for any application of Statecraft at the devolved level the theory and particularly its operationalisations needed to be amended to reflect the important structural differences of this level of UK politics. The result is the creation of a new theoretical framework in 'Sub-national Statecraft' which is both theoretically more developed relative to Bulpitt's and Buller's iterations of the theory and moreover, one that is definitively congruent with devolved politics. In the final section of the concluding chapter, there shall be some consideration of how future avenues of research can contribute not only to the existing SNRP literature but also a suggestion of how 'Sub-national Statecraft' could be further tested in a different context.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE SNRP LITERATURE: UNDERSTANDING THE SNP AND PLAID CYMRU'S OPPOSITE TRAJECTORIES

The primary empirical aim of this thesis has been to contribute to our understanding of the SNP's meteoric political rise during devolution, relative to Plaid's electoral stagnation. In more general terms, the thesis has highlighted and demonstrated the dynamics of sub-national electoral competition (rather than deterministic laws). The findings of this thesis are presented below in relation to the three functions of Sub-national Statecraft:

1. Governing Competence - This thesis has sought to build on pre-existing works (McAgnus 2013; 2015; 2016; Hepburn 2009; 2011) which highlights the significance of being in government as a mechanism for SNRPs to demonstrate competence on policy areas with no explicit connection to constitutional arguments. A neglected aspect of the literature had been how SNRPs, when in office, can exploit the MLG structure of political systems to not only positively demonstrate competence in policy areas, in the form of issue ownership but also how blame avoidance has been an essential cornerstone for the SNP's and Welsh Labour's prevailing image of competence in Scotland and Wales. This has been achieved by the SNP and Welsh Labour through the pursuit of a 'structural insulating framework'. Plaid have largely been denied the structural opportunity to use such a strategy in only occupying office as a junior coalition partner with a Labour party who also held office at Westminster, precluding blame avoidance onto a higher level when Welsh political outcomes were negative from 2007-2010. After 2010, Plaid were precluded from the use of such a strategy to garner an image of competence when the WLG were able to effectively use such a strategy to present themselves as 'the party of Wales', using the powers of the Senedd to try offset the economic and political damage being inflicted in Wales by the Conservative Westminster government. However, unlike Plaid, the SNP was afforded the chance to operate as a minority government primarily because of the collapse of Scottish Labour. In this sense, the fate of Labour in either country is inextricably intertwined with the electoral fortunes of the SNRP in each country. As Johns & Mitchell have argued: 'Scottish Labour lost in 2007 & 2011 because it was seen as less competent, less in touch and less ready to fight for Scotland's interests than the SNP' (Johns & Mitchell, 2016:155).

The SNP's success owes much to utilising this strategy of insulating itself from criticism by blaming Westminster for negative policy outcomes. The challenge the SNP leadership was faced with once entering power, as Jim and Margaret Cuthbert have illustrated, was that there

was a need to prove their competency with the devolved powers at their disposal at Holyrood, while simultaneously highlighting the flaws and constraints of the system of devolution, as to promote independence (Cuthbert & Cuthbert, 2009:105). The SNP were able to navigate this difficult structural context, by adopting the argument that until they gained the full powers of existing as an independent nation, they could not be blamed for negative policy outcomes. The SNP leadership here appears to have drawn inspiration from James Mitchell's argument of 'Devolution without Self Government' that, as long as Holyrood is financially reliant on Whitehall, Scottish interests can never be fully realised (Mitchell, 2011:35). Therefore, paradoxical as it may seem, while the SNP campaign to leave the union, the higher institution of Westminster actually provides them with their most important source of Governing Competency, in how the SNP's leadership have deferred blame upwards for negative policy outcomes. The structural context SNRPs face, and specifically which strategies the leaderships adopt to use MLG to boost their governing credentials, was a caveat in the existing literature this thesis has addressed.

2. Party Management – The thesis has sought to build on the pre-existing literature of McAgnus (2013; 2015; 2016) and Johns & Mitchell (2016) in understanding both the extent of unity in both parties and also how SNRP leaderships attempt to manage and importantly prevent intra-party disputes. An empirical finding of the thesis is that at Westminster, where extensive voting records of either party since 1997 could be compared, the SNP enjoyed a greater degree of cohesion than Plaid. At the devolved level, the comparison of the parties was more difficult due to the limited collection of voting records in the Senedd particularly prior to 2016. Interviews were therefore the primary empirical means to explore divisions and the parties' means of controlling such disputes. Both parties underwent similar experiences (albeit the SNP's much later in the devolution era) at the sub-national level whereby divisive issues (e.g. SNP - Plan A vs Plan B; Plaid – Nuclear) were reinforced by personal disputes (SNP – Salmond; Plaid – McEvoy) leading to defections from the parties and indeed forming of new SNRPs (Alba & Propel). However, the SNP appear to not have necessarily excelled in their Party Management here but rather been fortunate in it. From interviews, it was clear Alba acted as something of a short-term way of dissipating existing divisions over Plan A vs Plan B and GRA, as those against the party's position defected to Salmond's party. In Plaid, while Propel did take the anti-nuclear figurehead in McEvoy out of the party it is clear from Senedd voting records that the party remains divided on this issue.

A central idea of the thesis is how organisational reform and importantly the timing of such reforms were key in either parties' leadership ability to control/discipline the party. The SNP pursued professionalising reforms in anticipation of government in 2004, allowing the party leadership to have centralised control of the party's agenda by 2007 (McAgnus, 2013). The key point to note here is that the SNP, in adopting such reforms in 2004, were not as susceptible to divisions such as radical activist standing orders (e.g. NATO) at conference, upon entering government. However, Plaid in failing to adopt reform until after their poor election in 2011, found themselves often debating the same issues at conference brought forward by activist regional branches (e.g. Welsh Language & Nuclear), rather than being a unified coalition partner between 2007-2011. The timing of the SNP's reforms made it a more vote-seeking and professional political party in anticipation of government, whereas Plaid failed to take advantage of the mechanism of government by only realising the need to fully professionalise after their time in office (McAgnus, 2016). Finally, the relative nature of party unity has also been illustrated in this thesis. The SNP had a considerably easier task appearing unified relative to a Scottish Labour tearing itself inside out for most of the devolution period, over the lack of policy autonomy it had from UK Labour. Plaid were not afforded such a divided opponent, as while initially suffering a period of conflict upon the election of Morgan as leader, Welsh Labour would achieve a level of policy autonomy from the state-wide party, enabling party relations to not implode as they did in Scotland in 2014 with Lamont's resignation. In this instance, the SNRP literature has addressed a caveat in Statecraft, that being the use of organisational reform as a key tool of Party Management.

3. Political Argument Hegemony – building upon the pre-existing works of Massetti (2010; 2011) the thesis has hoped to contribute to the SNRP literature by highlighting the instrumental nature of left-right and European ideological placement of SNRPs in supporting their more salient goals of constitutional reform and electoral performance. In particular, a key finding is the relationship between the quasi-structural/electoral context each party faced and the ideological positions they consequently adopted. In the case of the SNP, they operated in an electoral context where there was a clear social democratic and Europhilic majority. Consequently, the party has sought to adopt a preference accommodation strategy for such ideologies. Prior to 2014, the party sought to create a cogent link between their left-right position and their constitutional goals by presenting independence as a chance to achieve social democracy by removing the realistic chance of Conservative electoral victory (Fusco, 2014). The Brexit vote in 2016, where a majority of Scots voted to remain in the EU, in

conjunction with the 'Better Together' campaign in 2014 which claimed an independent Scotland would not be granted automatic EU membership, represented a huge structural opportunity for the SNP to weaponise their European arguments to further their constitutional goals. The SNP's strategy from 2016 now incorporates the European arguments of the party more pertinently; independence as a plausible means by which Scotland could re-join the EU, attracting Europhile votes in Scotland as the only party (other than the Greens) advocating re-joining the EU.

However, in the case of Plaid, the more heterogeneous left-right preferences in Wales and the development of a Eurosceptic majority from 2012 onwards presented a much more challenging electoral context than in Scotland. In this sense, the adoption of a strategy to 'out-left Labour' was an ill-advised strategy, as it precluded a large share of the electorate from giving the time of day for Plaid to pitch independence as an instrumental way to achieve a social democratic Wales. Equally, it would appear that Plaid were unaware of the development of a Eurosceptic majority in the years leading up to the Brexit vote and after 2016 despite a majority 'Leave' vote in Wales, stuck to its guns on the goal of re-joining the EU. Whether these ideological positions were a consequence of a complete misreading of the electoral context or because, as some interview evidence suggests they were attempting a preference-shaping strategy, Plaid fundamentally struggled to weaponise either left-right arguments or European arguments to further their constitutional goals or electoral performance. Therefore, the SNP unlike Plaid, have been cognisant of the structural context they have operated in and accordingly sought to occupy ideological positions in relation to the left-right and European integration spectrums in an instrumental, preference-accommodating fashion to best exploit these structural advantages to link such arguments to their constitutional goals. Plaid alternatively have failed in Statecraft terms by valuing a social democratic and Europhilic ideology, over 'using and abusing' a centrist and more consciously Eurosceptic ideology in order to better advance their constitutional arguments and electoral performance (Bulpitt, 1986). PAH has contributed to the existing SNRP literature by highlighting the importance of an accurate reading of the electoral context SNRPs work within and when a degree of homogeneity exists on one of the left-right or European spectrums, the importance for SNRPs to incorporate these arguments to further their constitutional and electoral goals.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE STATECRAFT LITERATURE

Alongside its empirical contribution, the thesis has also sought to contribute more broadly to explanations of SNRP political performance by developing a theoretical framework in 'Sub-national Statecraft' through which to analyse SNRP leaderships and their decision-making. The theoretical starting point to why Statecraft was deemed to be a useful export to the sub-national level of politics, was primarily due to the continued relevance of the theory in focusing on competency as the key determinant in political performance and also the key assumptions of 'structures enhancing agency' and 'instrumental value of ideology' which were relevant and unexplored aspects of devolved electoral competition. However, while the Statecraft approach at first glance appeared to be a welcome novel approach to understanding this level of political competition, there were fundamental shortcomings here both in relation to outstanding theoretical, ontological and methodological issues and also problems with the theory's practical application to a lower level of electoral competition. The suggestions to resolve these issues presented in Chapter 2, in the revised 'Sub-national Statecraft', were largely achieved by relating the theory and particularly Statecraft's functions to the wider literature on voting behaviour (Tilley & Hobolt, 2011), competency (Sejits & Clercy, 2020), party organisation (McAgnus, 2013; 2016; Katz & Mair, 1993) and ideological positioning (Massetti, 2010; 2011). The hope is that this thesis has presented an alternative theoretical framework through which scholars can understand not only future Scottish and Welsh elections but can also be applied to explain SNRP performance in other political systems.

Another central aim of the thesis was to better understand the relative saliency of Statecraft's four functions in determining political performance and importantly establish the relationship between them. The most obvious conclusion from this is the somewhat gratuitous nature of 'a winning electoral strategy' function of Statecraft. As Bulpitt (1986), implicitly suggested himself the function of a 'Winning Electoral Strategy' was largely how effective the adoption of a manifesto was in being able to unite *elites* within the party leading up to an election (Party Management); if the policies of the manifesto were *perceived by the public* as plausible solutions to the economy and the valence issue (Governing Competence); if the party has adopted a manifesto within an ideological space (on the three spectrums discussed in Chapter 7) that is compatible with the majority at the *public-level*. Therefore, the conclusion of this research is that a WES is a microanalysis or support mechanism of the other three functions, in the crucial period leading up to an election, rather than a distinctive function in its own right. Put simply, it is an exploration of public and elite responses to the adoption of a party's manifesto. Future studies would therefore benefit, from integrating WES into their analysis of parties' ability to achieve the other three more salient functions.

In applying Statecraft to the devolved contexts of Scotland and Wales, the thesis has found evidence of Bulpitt's assertion that 'the Governing Competence category… may be regarded quite rightly as of more significance than any of the others' (Bulpitt, 1986:22). This is primarily for two reasons. One, the heightened significance of Governing Competence itself within the MLG context of devolution and two, because of how the other two functions relate to the more central task of any party: garnering an image of Governing Competence. In the case studies of Scotland and Wales, the saliency of Governing Competence has been deliberately provoked by the SNP and, to some extent, Welsh Labour in how they've sought to make devolved politics a comparison between devolved parliaments vs an 'English' Westminster. The SNP since 2007 seem to have been cognisant of the vertical dynamic of competency when voters made performance judgements regarding the Scottish government and deliberately sought to create a narrative around which, they would further accentuate this existing dynamic by blaming Westminster for negative Scottish policy outcomes. In this sense, sub-national competition differs from the national level in that the perceived competency of devolved governments seems to be determined relative to Westminster, rather than their opposition at Holyrood/Cardiff Bay. The data presented in Chapter 4 would suggest that the SNP have exploited this pre-existing dynamic to a greater extent (as seen in extracts from debates at Holyrood), in how the Scottish government was still trusted by voters to work in Scotland's interests Westminster pre-2007 but since the advent of the SNP government 2007 have heightened this perception and increased those distrustful of Westminster, and created a majority of Scots who blame Westminster for negative Scottish policy outcomes/economic downturn.

The saliency of this relative understanding of competency is probably best illustrated in the fact the only change of the primary party of government in both Wales and Scotland during the whole devolution period has occurred when Labour held both UK and Scottish office, being unable to use the structural insulating framework against their UK counterparts to deflect blame for negative policy outcomes. In Wales, Labour did perform poorly in 2007, needing Plaid as a junior partner to form a coalition government, but the important consideration here is that Welsh Labour had distanced itself from their UK counterparts from the outset of devolution. This was enough for them to avoid the fate of Scottish Labour in 2007 and by 2010 Welsh Labour were afforded a huge structural opportunity in the election of a Conservative Westminster government that would allow them to pursue the structural insulating framework (albeit in a softer fashion), similar to the SNP. In this sense, Plaid have not been afforded the opportunity to use the structural insulating framework as a way to frame their own competency relative to Westminster due to the aforementioned reason of being in a coalition with Labour who also held power at Westminster and also because after 2010 Welsh Labour monopolised such a strategy against the Conservatives at Westminster. In this sense, Governing

Competency and particularly the ability of sub-national elite actors to be aware of the structural context they operate within, as to successfully use the structural insulating framework, seems to be central to political performance.

The saliency of Governing Competence is secondly shown in how the other two functions support the primary function of Statecraft. In the case of Party Management, one of the primary contributions of the thesis to the existing Statecraft literature has been the presentation of organisational reform as a key tool of how party leaderships retain control of the party agenda and professionalise the party as to be more unified (McAgnus, 2016). However, the primary benefit of professionalising reforms that either party undertook at different times and to different extents during devolution, are the benefits a unified party has in terms of its office-seeking. It was clear from interviews with SNP elites that a key motivation to pursue organisational reforms to the SOAC and the adoption of OMOV, was to reduce the potential for intra-party conflict over the adoption of specific policies by putting the leadership in greater control of the party's agenda (or at least moderating it with the inclusion of less active policy-pure members). In line with May's (1973) law, a key worry for both parties' leaderships prior to reform was the activist members of the party bringing forward policies that were more 'extreme' than wider electoral preferences in Scotland and Wales. In this sense, a key aspect of Party Management was not only the benefits of a unified party but also that the leadership could ensure the party focused its narratives upon the key valence issues and adopt ideological positions within key political arguments, that resonated with the majority of Scottish voters.

Equally, the ability of a party to achieve PAH and particularly the ideological positioning aspect of achieving hegemony appears to be fundamentally linked to Governing Competence. The SNP case demonstrates this, as the party in adopting a pro-EU and social democratic ideology was seeking to pragmatically make itself ideologically compatible with the majority of Scottish voters, many of whom were historically Labour voters. However, in the case of Plaid, there was an inability to adopt a European and left-right ideology in tune with the 'swing and rhythms' of the Welsh electorate due to erroneous assumptions concerning the electoral context it was working within. If we follow the logic of the SEM of voting behaviour, the decision of Plaid to 'out-left' Labour precluded the support of a much larger centrist and right-wing subsection of the Welsh electorate on an ideological basis before any assessments of competency were made. The inability of Plaid to use ideology instrumentally therefore curbed their ability to create a broad appeal on the basis of competency. In Scotland, the similar ideological profiles of both Labour and the SNP who were both successfully pursuing an ideological strategy of preference accommodation resulted in voters having to make a competency assessment of either party to determine their vote. As Johns & Mitchell have argued, 'If the SNP and Labour are occupying similar [left-right] ideological territory but the former has an in-built advantage

when it comes to being seen to fight for Scottish interests, the SNP may eventually supplant Labour and render it irrelevant' (Johns & Mitchell, 2016:155). After all, if ideological factors were the most salient in determining votes Scottish Labour would surely not have lost its standing as the largest party in Scotland, as at that time it was placed in ideological waters on all three spectrums to capture the median Scottish voter between 1999 and 2007.

Another primary finding of using the Statecraft approach at the sub-national level has been how Bulpitt's assertion of the relative nature of Statecraft's functions is not only relevant but also more salient and complex in the context of multileveled electoral competition. As already established in the discussion of both Scottish and Welsh cases, a key aspect of the differing performances of the SNP and Plaid was the ability of Scottish and Welsh Labour to achieve the three functions of Sub-national Statecraft. For instance, where Scottish Labour failed to keep an image of party unity the SNP benefited, this would be evidence of the classical horizontal depiction of Bulpitt's idea of relativity. However, there exists a notable dynamic in devolved contexts whereby which the governing party against all three functions are more commonly compared to the Westminster governing party. The greatest evidence of this is the fact both the SNP and Welsh Labour have sought to pursue the structural insulating framework and ideologically position themselves relative to their Westminster Conservative opponents. Therefore, a key finding is that Statecraft's functions are both relative in horizontal and vertical terms and that governing parties have often achieved these functions when exploiting the vertical nature of this relativity.

One key methodological contribution of the thesis is the use of interviews to try to help the epistemological criticism levelled at Statecraft that it does not lay out a precise empirical foundation on which we as researchers can try to gain knowledge of the 'governing strategies' or 'codes' (Bulpitt, 2983:57). As Buller described, elite interviews could be conducted to try to remedy this problem but the caveat exists that politicians are unlikely to want to speak candidly about elite governing and office seeking strategies, instead providing 'a partial viewpoint being more interested in self-justification or grinding particular political axes' (Buller 1999:704). The interviews conducted in this research have found only some support for this notion. In the case of the SNP interviewees, elites were quite willing to speak frankly of their office-seeking strategies, for instance when discussing the need to curb the influence of 'policy purist' activists in the party prior to Swinney's organisational reforms of 2004 and how such professionalising reforms were key to the party's success in the 2007 election. However, in the case of Plaid, elites were often hesitant to divulge their office-seeking strategies such as when pressed on their continuation of a Europhilic ideology after the 2016 EU referendum.

Therefore, it would seem as though the key determinant of whether elite interviews are useful to researchers, as a way of ascertaining knowledge of the governing codes and strategies of political

leaderships is that it depends on whether such strategies enabled to the party to electorally succeed or not. In the case of the SNP, elites were surprisingly very forthcoming about their need to prioritise competency over ideological goals, centralise power within the party and use ideological positions in an instrumental fashion *precisely because these efforts had* led to their unprecedented electoral success. However, in the case of Plaid in instances such as their inability to win PAH (see Chapter 7), it was difficult to ascertain definitively whether they had misread, or tried to preference-shape, the Welsh electorate's preferences, as their strategy *had ultimately not lead* to electoral success. In other words, if a party has achieved some form of electoral success from their governing strategies, elites in interviews will be more than willing to speak openly about such strategies. However, a methodological issue that needs to be addressed by future researchers is how we in epistemological terms go about learning of the failed governing strategies of parties who do not achieve political success. One suggestion here is the methodology of participant observation for the study of contemporary office-seeking/governing strategies.

This research has presented a detailed discussion of how sub-national elites have used the powers and structure of devolution to further their own electoral fortunes. However, one aspect of Statecraft in the sub-national context which warrants greater discussion is the motivations as to why devolution and the further granting of powers to Scotland and Wales have been pursued by Westminster elites. As discussed previously, Statecraft would see the devolution of powers to the regional level as just one aspect of a broader agenda first pursued by New Labour to 'hive off' issues of 'low politics' to the periphery so it could enhance its 'governing autonomy' over the electorally salient issues of 'high politics' (Bulpitt, 1983). Drawing parallels with Burnham's (2001) work on depoliticisation, a key motivation for devolution for Westminster elites was that, if negative policy outcomes occurred in the devolved competency policy areas of Holyrood or Cardiff Bay, Westminster would not be responsible or judged upon these at general elections. Equally, if devolution succeeded in bringing about positive policy outcomes in those devolved policy areas which were often politically contentious (as seen in the case of the NHS examples in Chapters 4 & 5), Westminster could take credit as the pioneers of a decentralised system of government which produced positive policy outcomes. However, if this indeed was at least part of the rationale for devolution, the practice of devolution has drastically differed. As Buller (1999:702) argues actors subjectively construct the structural environment around them and our job as analysts is to understand how they perceive them, not to analyse structures as objective entities. In this sense, Westminster elites seem to have severely misperceived the structures they were ushering in with devolution and the opportunity they created for both disunity within Labour and the Conservatives, but more pertinently the fact SNRPs could pragmatically use the new level to further the case for secession. Therefore, future research would benefit from the use of

Statecraft as an analytical framework through which to understand the key motivations of the New Labour leadership in pursuing devolution as a governing strategy.

FUTURE AVENUES OF RESEARCH

This final section outlines two avenues of future research, one being related to available empirical data and the other being which context 'Sub-national Statecraft' could be utilised in next to best develop the Statecraft and SNRP literature. Finally, the chapter will present a brief discussion of either parties' prospects going forward from 2021.

One of the primary empirical issues with conducting any comparative case study approach between the SNP and Plaid and in broader terms Scottish and Welsh politics is the asymmetry in available secondary survey data on public attitudes. In the case of Scotland, this research was considerably aided by the extensive surveys conducted by SSAS and the Scottish Election study which have consistently since the start of devolution provided insights into the constitutional preferences, satisfaction levels with the economy and the NHS, blame/credit attributions and personal competency scores (to name a few) of Scottish voters. However, in the case of Wales there exists no equivalent to the SSAS meaning that on many occasions in this thesis, the data set comparisons have been less than perfect, such as the inability to directly compare Scottish and Welsh left-right attitudes in the form of Likert scale data, as no equivalent has ever been conducted in Wales. The Welsh Election Study allows for some exploration of certain public attitudes such as personal competency scores but is only conducted in election years, unlike the SSAS which is conducted every year and covers a wider range of political public attitudes. Equally, the British Social Attitudes Survey can be used presently but often 'Welsh only' responses are not included due to the small sample sizes of such surveys. Future research on Welsh politics would therefore benefit considerably from the formation of a Welsh Social Attitudes Survey, as presently it is difficult to empirically measure trends in Welsh politics without a large degree of inference.

One of the aforementioned criticisms in Chapter 2 of Statecraft is the UK-centric nature of the theory. A shortcoming that could be levelled at this research is that the choice of the SNP and Plaid does nothing to remedy this criticism and leaves open the question of whether Statecraft is useful in other political contexts outside of the UK. The utilisation of the revised 'Sub-national Statecraft' will help illuminate electoral dynamics in distinctly pluralistic political systems, unlike Bulpitt's iteration of the theory which historically struggled to be exported outside of Westminster's highly centralised system of politics. Equally, the exporting of 'Sub-national Statecraft' outside of UK politics would help demonstrate if the theory holds universal explanatory value in SNRP electoral fortunes. Quebec

therefore serves to be an interesting comparison in this respect for several reasons. Firstly, in a federal political system in Canada, the nationalist parties of Quebec operate in a structurally/institutionally different context to that of the SNP and PC. While there have been arguments that the UK increasingly resembles a federal state in the wake of the devolution measures that have decentralised executive decision-making, there still exists a stark structural difference in the national/sub-national context of Quebec's nationalist parties compared to the UK's (Hough & Jeffery, 2006). Within this, there exist further structural differences as, at the provincial level elections in Canada, first past the post is used compared to the semi-proportional Additional Member Voting system in Scotland & Wales. Additionally, in the case of Bloc Quebecois at the federal level, the party compete for seats in a bicameral system where both chambers are elected, unlike the UK where only the Commons is elected. Thirdly, there exists no supranational level of electoral competition for Quebec's SNRPs. However, in Wales and Scotland, the European platform allowed the SNP & PC to put policies/agendas before the public before adopting them at other levels and therefore was an important electoral springboard for further success at the regional and national levels (Hepburn, 2008). The starkly different structural context of Quebec is therefore a useful case study to ascertain whether structural context plays any meaningful role in determining SNRP electoral fortunes. However, from a Statecraft perspective, the more interesting object of analysis is not the structural context in of itself, but the differing (or similar) agentic responses of SNRP elites to the differing structural constraints they operate within (Bulpitt, 1986:23).

However, the Quebec case would also be interesting not just because of the differing structure but also on an agentic basis due to differing decisions made by SNRP elites in relation to their organisation and the differing saliency of the left-right arguments of Quebec SNRPS. Firstly, unlike in the UK where the main parties compete at multiple levels of government, in Canada parties tend to compete in elections exclusively at one. For instance, Bloc Quebecois (federal) and Parti Quebecois (provincial) despite being almost identical in ideological terms, remain formally separate organisations competing at separate levels. It should be noted that there do exist informal links between Canadian provincial parties and their (broadly speaking) ideologically similar federal counterpart parties, but these usually pertain to sharing certain resources rather than deliberate ideological consistency between parties. This would be a particularly interesting dynamic to explore in relation to the unionist parties in the UK who (as discussed in this thesis) have often faced problems at the devolved level when ideological differences between Welsh/Scottish branches and Westminster, combined with a lack of policy autonomy, has led to political tensions and disunity. In the case of Canada, the Quebec Liberal Party, unlike the unionist parties of Labour and the Conservatives is not a state-wide party, only competing

for seats at the provincial level. This makes the QLP distinctly more regionalist in its ideology and more autonomous compared to Scottish/Welsh Labour and Scottish/Welsh Conservatives.

Another distinct difference in Quebec SNRP elite responses is their rejection of a left-right (and arguably even centre-periphery) broad church approach and consequently a multitude of SNRPs compete within the same electoral system. In Scotland and Wales, for the majority of devolution, there has existed one electorally significant party who represents the nationalist cause. However, in Quebec, three different SNRPs all occupy different positions on the left-right and centre-periphery cleavages at the regional level. This is useful to comparatively analyse, as it will elucidate whether the decision to adopt a particular position along the left-right spectrum and the centre-periphery spectrum has a significant effect on the electoral fortunes of SNRPS, or whether a catch-all SNRP which attempts to fulfil an ideological broad church position is more conducive to electoral success.

Overall, the comparison of the PQ (1976-2003) and SNP (1999-2021), which utilises 'Sub-national Statecraft' would be the logical next step for research. Both parties, at different periods in time, have enjoyed a period of steady growth in the electoral polls and prolonged periods of time in office at the regional level. The comparison would allow an examination of how both the mechanism of government and differing structures impact SNRP electoral fortunes. The 'value' of this second comparison would be that it allows scholars to analyse how SNRPs' leaderships chose to navigate their structural context and identify if there is a universal formula to SNRP's success or, whether PQ's and the SNP's similar electoral success has required specific differing governing strategies dependent upon the structural/electoral context they operate within. Therefore, this synchronic and diachronic comparison will elucidate whether there are universal governing strategies SNRP leaderships can adopt that will result in electoral success, irrespective of structural context, or whether differing structures require SNRP leaderships to adapt to their context and adopt different strategies in relation to their structural constraints.

Looking ahead to the future research of Plaid and the SNP after 2021, there have been some interesting developments after the period of analysis for this thesis. Firstly, both parties now have new leaders from those at the helm during the 2021 elections. In Scotland, the political tectonic plates appear to be significantly shifting against the SNP and Humza Yousaf. The resignation of Nicola Sturgeon and indeed her subsequent arrest after allegations of financial misconduct by the SNP have caused considerable damage to the SNP's image of Governing Competence. To compound this, the defection of MP Lisa Cameron to the Conservatives and MSP Ash Regan's defection as a former

minister under Sturgeon, to Alba (giving them their first seat in Holyrood) have undoubtedly presented the most challenging context of Party Management for an SNP leader since 1999. While Alba allowed the SNP to purge members with divergent ideological views in the run-up to 2021 (importantly without losing any seats to Salmond's party), it appears in the run-up to 2026 that an emboldened Alba and a resurgent Scottish Labour could significantly alter Scottish electoral dynamics. In this sense, Jeffery's (2009) original claim that a 'truer' regionalist party will arise when an SNRP is perceived to be part of the 'mainstream' may have finally borne fruit in Scotland. In relation to Sub-national Statecraft, it will be interesting to see if, in light of such divisions and defections, Party Management becomes the most salient of the functions in determining electoral outcomes in the 6th term of Holyrood. The resignation of Lisa Cameron on the grounds of the party's overly progressive policies and Ash Regan's on the basis of the SNP's drifting focus from independence will undoubtedly call into question the current ideological positioning of the SNP and importantly their ability to achieve PAH concerning independence, if such elite-level divisions are symptomatic of public-level shifts in attitudes.

In the case of Plaid, the resignation of Adam Price came after an internal report found that he, as leader, had not adopted a zero-tolerance approach to sexism in the party. While his resignation was not due to ideological splits and did not lead to defections of any kind as we have seen in the SNP, the election of Plaid's new leader in Rhun ap Iorwerth may signal a key change in the ideological positioning of Plaid. Iorwerth has previously expressed how the party has become too fixated on social democracy as an end goal and stressed the need for the party to appeal to Conservative and Labour voters alike. In Sub-national Statecraft terms then, it appears as though Plaid's new leader is not falling into the trap of his predecessors and is willing to instrumentally use left-right positioning as a way to try to achieve PAH in the constitutional debate. In both Scotland and Wales, it will be interesting to see if these recent developments have an impact on their electoral fortunes in 2026 and, maybe more significantly, the level of support for independence in either country.

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