

No more 'Welsh effect'? Why the EU may be becoming a scapegoat in Wales

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*It used to be that case that Wales was distinguished by the strength of the Labour vote and the presence of the Welsh nationalist vote. Today, however, the conditions are perfect for Wales to be completely absorbed into the British mainstream, explains **Daniel Evans**. And this means that chances are high that Wales will vote for a departure from the EU.*



A recent YouGov [poll](#) on the EU and Brexit has highlighted regional differences in opinions within the UK. More respondents in England wanted a Brexit, and thought the EU was a 'bad thing'. The Scots were generally in favour of staying in the EU, and had a far more positive view of the EU than the English. The Welsh were somewhere in the middle: slightly in favour of staying in and slightly more positive about the EU than negative (as [shown](#) by Roger Scully).

Wales as a pro-EU bastion of social democracy and cosmopolitanism

Every nation has particular underlying myths. In Wales, it is the notion that it has innate social-democratic tendencies. Its social democratic ways are implicitly contrasted with the right-wing England. [Attitudes towards Europe](#) have always been bound up in this crude binary, with England's perceived Euroscepticism seen as evidence of conservatism and chauvinism, with Wales' traditionally more sympathetic views on the EU an extension of its social democratic tendencies.

The notion that Wales has always been an enclave of social democracy contains a grain of truth. During the 1970s and 1980s, political scientists identified the '[Welsh effect](#)' similar to the '[neighbourhood effect](#)' whereby once demographics and class were controlled for, Welsh political affiliation and voting patterns remained stubbornly different from England. Wales was distinguished by the strength of the Labour vote and the presence of the Welsh nationalist vote.

The reasons for this Welsh distinctiveness were the presence of local political and cultural apparatuses which were absent elsewhere in the UK. In the Southern valleys, these developed around heavy industry and the Labour movement that ensured the dominance of a distinct local political culture (Labourism). In the Welsh speaking rural areas to the North and West, the local dominance of Plaid Cymru, coupled with a localised prominence Welsh language, ensured a similarly distinct way of thinking which ostensibly remained outside the mainstream of UK public opinion.

These unique local political and cultural dynamics were ultimately believed to *inoculate* Wales, preventing it from being completely absorbed by the dominant Anglo-American culture and ultimately contributing to Wales' political distinctiveness from the rest of the UK. Hence Wales' proximity to England in this EU opinion [poll](#), coupled with the rise of UKIP and the Tories across Wales, renders reassessing the country's political allegiances.

There are some issues which are unique to Wales which can help to explain Wales' '[in-between-ness](#)' with regard to the EU. Some of these issues aid convergence to the mainstream of UK public opinion, whilst some will contribute to Wales remaining *slightly* different to England (at least in the short term).

One partyism and Labour's influence

Wales' complete political and cultural domination by the Labour party cannot be underestimated. Despite a few wobbles, Labour remain the [hegemonic power](#) in Wales and people (still) listen to what they say. Labour's political dominance in Wales is buttressed by significant fortifications or 'trenches' (as [Gramsci](#) puts it). The party has

significant support within the nexus of the (small) Welsh media, civil society and academia. What this means is that Labour MPs, AMs, journalists and intellectuals get more column inches and airtime than anyone else in Wales and therefore enjoy an unprecedented platform for their views. Welsh MPs don't get criticised or questioned when they speak on TV, but are simply allowed to parrot the party line, which is pro-EU. As long as Labour remain stridently pro-EU, this will have influence on how Wales as a whole thinks about the topic.

Poverty, FDI, jobs and EU objective one funding

Wales remains the **poorest region** of the **UK** and this is unlikely to change anytime soon. The poverty and the 'desperation' associated with being a **'lumpen region'** can influence attitudes to the EU in Wales in a way that it would not in a more affluent nation. Labour in Wales remain pro-EU also because it gains short term political capital from attracting foreign direct investment – and therefore (**poorly paid and temporary**) jobs to Wales. The EU represents a **significant source** of this investment.

**Structural Funds 2007- 2013:
Convergence and Regional Competitiveness Objectives**



- Objective**
- Convergence Regions
 - Phasing-out Regions
 - Phasing-in Regions
 - Competitiveness and Employment Regions

Based on Eurostat GDP/head data available in April 2005, and on Financial Perspective agreement December 2005



Many parts of Wales have, since 2000, qualified for [EU objective one funding](#)– regeneration money which is earmarked for the poorest regions of the EU. Whilst the Labour government has generally wasted this money (£6 billion) on [white elephants](#), some of it has built community centres and funded other valuable assets and initiatives in Wales. These buildings have placards on the outside bearing the EU symbol – ‘paid for by EU objective one funding’. These initiatives make the EU tangible in areas where it would otherwise remain an abstraction. Crucially, they also stand as symbols of EU ‘benevolence’, which are particularly pertinent given the British state’s continued neglect of Wales.

So whilst in England, the EU is portrayed as annoying bureaucrats, in Wales the EU is instead often portrayed as a benevolent investor bringing much needed jobs and facilities. The association between the EU and jobs/money exerts significant influence over Welsh attitudes towards the EU.

UKIP on the march

Whilst Wales’ deprivation can lead to viewing the EU as saviour, it can, conversely, also lead to the EU being [scapegoated](#). Democracy in Wales is in trouble. First, the legacy of one-partyism has destroyed the point in voting on a Welsh level: in most regions of South Wales at least, whoever you vote for in Wales, Labour win. Second, moving to the UK level, the electoral maths of the British system means that whoever one votes for in Wales ultimately cannot impact the UK elections.

The lack of a Welsh national media means that people don’t understand the (highly complex) role of the Assembly. Consequently, [voting turnout](#) in Assembly elections is very low and Wales’ traditionally high turnout in general elections has been [in decline](#) since the welfare state ended, dipping under the UK average for the first time in 2005.

This mix of deprivation and political alienation is a fertile breeding ground for [radicalisation](#) and helps explain the rise of UKIP in former solidly Labour areas: people in Wales are not *naturally* social democrats, nor are they *naturally* radical – desperation leaves them susceptible to those who can appear to be ‘straight talking’ and offering a clearly defined enemy: the EU and immigrants.

In-migration and Wales’ changing demographics

It is estimated that over the last 10 years over a million English people have [moved](#) into Wales. As of now 20.8% of Welsh population is English-born. To put this demographic shift in context, this is the highest percentage of foreign born population in the EU apart from Luxembourg. As well as being destructive to the [Welsh language](#) in-migration can impact attitudes towards the EU in two ways. First, the constant in-migration of people from England into former Welsh speaking communities and the simultaneous out-migration of young Welsh speakers has a cumulative impact: it erodes the local political and cultural apparatuses which previously incubated/fostered the alternative political and linguistic culture which ultimately produced distinct political opinions. Second, whilst migrants from England are a diverse group, in terms of voting statistics they generally tend to be more conservative and have emerged as more likely to vote UKIP. This is unsurprising given that many in-migrants are products of ‘[white flight](#)’.



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Conclusion

Ultimately, the conditions are perfect for Wales to be completely absorbed into the British mainstream. The local political and cultural dynamics which used to inoculate Wales from the dominant narratives emanating from England are locked into an inexorable spiral of decline. Unlike Scotland, Wales has [no national media](#) and no distinct civil society. Unlike Scotland, Wales has no [‘public sphere’](#): there are no ‘national conversations’ about *anything*, let alone the EU.

It is highly probable that in future, there will be no Welsh distinctiveness, no ‘Welsh effect’. Wales will vote like England. The current close political alignment with England over the EU is merely one manifestation of this convergence. The influence of the Labour Party and the lingering perception that the EU means jobs can delay this convergence but they cannot prevent Wales’ acculturation in the long run.

This blog represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

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