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## **Does Devolution make a difference?**

### **A comparison of party-group interaction in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly.**

Paper for presentation at the  
PSA Parliaments and Legislatures Specialist Group Annual Conference 2009,  
Constitution Unit, Department of Political Science, UCL, 29-30 Tavistock Square,  
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## Abstract

*Significant research has been dedicated to the question what roles members of parliament play within an assembly and how they shape them individually. (e.g. Searing 1994, Patzelt 1995, 1997, Müller et al 2001). Findings show that some differences in parliamentarians' roles and behaviour are tied to the party's status in parliament. However, most of the analyses in this field (exception: Müller et al 2001) do not consider how these characteristics are linked with the overall appearance of particular parliamentary party groups (PPGs) and their political strategies. Research conducted on the Bavarian Parliament (Steinack 2007 a, b) shows significant differences in PPGs' strategies that relate to the MPs' socio-demographic background and the party groups' history and discussion culture. Based on preliminary results of an ongoing research project, the paper outlines how structural differences between parliamentary party groups in the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales shape strategies and political styles of their representatives. Interviews with members and clerks of the assemblies illustrate the findings.*

## 1. Background

There has been considerable qualitative research on parliamentary behaviour in the past decades, most notably by Searing (1994) for the House of Commons and Patzelt (1997) for German MPs.<sup>1</sup> It became evident that depending on their background, their individual skills and their career plans, MPs may pursue different roles both in and outside of parliament. For example, work patterns of MPs focusing more on parliamentary work, or more on their constituencies differ significantly (Patzelt 1997). What unites most of these studies is that while they are looking at what typical roles MPs might play, they are ignoring one central benchmark that any members of parliament have: their party and their parliamentary party group. The systematic neglect of the question of what impact the *membership in a particular party group* might have on a MP's behaviour in parliament is surprising as it contrasts with some empirical findings on several legislature: Isaksson and Akademi's (1994) quantitative longitudinal analysis *Party Behaviour in the Finnish Parliament* demonstrates how a party's position in parliament affects its behaviour. Opposition parties acted foremost as vote-seekers. They showed strong activity in plenary sessions and in employing (unsuccessful) roll-call votes. In contrast, the members of the governing coalition focused on committee work where they acted unanimously to ensure that their own bills became law. Based on quantitative analysis of Belgian MP's behaviour, De Winter (1997:129) claims that the use of the various parliamentary tools, such as voting, debate and control, "is largely determined by party, and especially by its governmental status and ideological profile". The impact that partisanship and a party's position in parliament might have on the party group's behaviour is further underlined by research on the Austrian National Parliament. As Müller and his colleagues (2001) indicate, there are significant differences in the way members of opposition and governing parties, as well as of smaller and larger party groups, focus on one role or the other and these roles might change – along with the

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<sup>1</sup> I am excluding quantitative studies of legislative behaviours that look mostly at role-call voting in the European Parliament, such as for example the research conducted by Hix (2001, 2002). While these studies shed light on what effect MEPs' policy preferences have on their voting behaviour, they do not discuss the origin of these preferences and the way these might be tied to the individual MEP's socio-demographic background or the particular culture of their parliamentary party.

party groups' fate in parliament – over the course of several legislative periods.<sup>2</sup> Both Jenny and Müller's findings on Austrian MPs (2008) and Isaksson and Akademi's (1994:102) empirical results on Finnish MPs underline a particular active role of Green Party opposition MPs that could – amongst other reasons – have its cause in the party's unorthodox history in the grass roots movement. Their findings are backed by analyses of party group behaviour in British local government that suggests that the specific partisan world-view does influence a party group's votes (Leach & Copus 2004). First results of a study explaining party cohesion in the House of Lords from a social-psychological angle through the party group members' 'belongingness'<sup>3</sup> further underline the important impact party culture might have on its members' behaviour and choice of strategies.

The idea that there might be more to party-cohesion and strategic decision making in parliament than a strong whip is supported by a third strand of research that focuses on the socio-cultural aspects of legislative careers, their impact on the selection and election process and the representativeness of those finally elected. Research in political representation has been a well-established and geographically widespread strand of political science for several decades (Best & Cotta 2000b, Patzelt 1999). By looking at the interdependence of social and political change and changes in the composition of the legislative bodies it aims – amongst other issues – to analyse if the MPs' social bias will have an impact on their legislative behaviour and consequently to what extent "representation by identity" (Best & Cotta 2000a:519) could make a difference (Kavanagh 1992, Norris & Lovenduski 1995). Most of the studies focusing on the background and changes in the background of MPs are looking at the MPs as a group, detached from their individual parties. This is surprising, as it has long been acknowledged that the composition of party groups may differ significantly from the point of view of their members' gender, education, occupational background, religion etc. and many legislatures provide this data sorted by the MPs' partisanship (Norris & Lovenduski 1995, Ismayr 2000, Saalfeld 1995). However, findings as to what extent these variances – which after all are only proxy-variables for individual socialization – really do make a difference if it comes to drafting and implementing political ideas are inconclusive. This applies even to the very well researched question of how significant the impact of the representation of women MPs in parliament is on policymaking.<sup>4</sup> Though many studies analyse in detail the different strands of influences on MPs, both within and outside parliament (for example Wahlke et al 1962:14; Mezey 1979: 148, von Beyme 1997; Norton 2005: 159ff.; Saalfeld & Müller 1997),<sup>5</sup> none of these have actually developed

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<sup>2</sup> Amongst other results, their extensive qualitative and quantitative analysis of the behaviour of members of the Austrian National Parliament shows that while members of the governing parties focus on committee work, the first preference of the opposition MPs was the use of questions in plenary-sessions. In particular, the two smallest opposition parties, the Greens and the Liberal Forum, represented in parliament with nine MPs prioritized party-specific policy-areas over constituency work.

<sup>3</sup> See Russell (2008) who refers to Norton (2003) as main trigger for her research.

<sup>4</sup> Following Pitkin's book on *The Concept of Representation* (1972), there has been a widespread discussion whether female MPs would be automatically "acting for" women and if a "critical mass" of women in parliament would change the way politics is made. For an overview and discussion of the most recent findings, see Celis and Childs (2008).

<sup>5</sup> One major discussion in this context is the question whether inside players shape institutions – mostly linked with the rational choice school of thought - or whether in contrast the decisions of

patterns of the types of legislators that might result from their different backgrounds. Despite the research into legislative careers, our knowledge on how MPs' socio-cultural background and how the experiences they have had throughout their party career might be linked to the roles they play in parliament and to the decisions they take, is still rather limited and the findings are conflicting. While the analysis of party groups in the German Bundestag indicated that social homogeneity is not a useful indicator to predict party cohesion (Saalfeld 1995:218), other strands of research claim that the social background of legislators does influence their attitude and behaviour (Norris 1997: 6 with further references, Hazan & Rahat 2006).

My own empirical findings on opposition parties in the Bavarian State Parliament showed that in contrast to the theoretical models discussed above there are great variations as to how opposition party groups behave *within one* political system. Bavaria stands out amongst the 16 German federal states insofar as it has been governed by the same party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), since 1957; from 1962 to 2008 this regional conservative party has held the absolute majority of seats in the Bavarian State Parliament. Its long lasting success frequently triggered the question whether it was the state's particular culture (Falter 1982, Falter 1988, Gebhardt 1986, Mintzel 1987b, Mintzel 1987a), the CSU's setup and remit (Mintzel 1998) , or a combination of both (Sutherland 2001, Hepburn 2008) that manifested this hegemonic situation over nearly five decades. Against this background I analyzed what strategies the opposition parties during the legislature's 13<sup>th</sup> session (1994-1998) used in order to influence the CSU majority's decision making (Steinack 2007a, 2007b). During this session CSU members held 120 out of 204 seats; the Social Democrats held 70 seats and the Green Party as relative newcomer to the assembly occupied 14 seats.

A combined qualitative and quantitative analysis of the MPs behaviour in parliament showed distinctive differences between both the appearance and the strategies employed by the two opposition parties during this period. The Social Democrats, with over 40 years in opposition, focused on a strategy of *professional, subject-oriented cooperation within parliament*. The Greens chose *confrontational power policies* that had their main effect *outside parliament* and sought to involve the media to a great extent. The party groups' contrasting manners and corresponding party-specific strategies of opposition influence can be ascribed to different political cultures of SPD and Greens in the Bavarian State Parliament that result from specific historic and structural considerations.

There are several historic-programmatic reasons for the SPD's focus on a content-oriented strategy of cooperative discussion and the Green's preference for a strategy of influence by public confrontation. At the start of the 13th electoral term the Social Democrats were looking back on nearly 40 years of opposition in the Bavarian State Parliament and none of the party's MBSPs had ever been a member of a national or state government. Many of the SPD representatives had, however, been elected to leading positions in local governments prior to joining parliament and their experience on a local level that many problems could be solved only in cooperation with the CSU had left them more open for compromising and pragmatic decisions.

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legislators are impacted by their environment and developments out of their control (public mood, technological change etc.) (Hibbing 1999).

The strong focus on political realism and the resulting insight that not everything can be realised that might be programmatically desirable has been stressed in interviews with several SPD representatives.<sup>6</sup>

Another reason for the SPD MBSPs' choice of strategy is the fact that the party stands in strong competition with the CSU when trying to win votes from the political mainstream. In order to succeed both catch-all parties have to avoid extreme positions; they mustn't rely on idealist aims but must focus on solutions that are politically realistic. As a result, the political discussions of both CSU and SPD are inevitably more geared towards *Realpolitik* (real politics) than to political ideals.

In contrast to the SPD that has its roots in the labour movement of imperial Germany (1870s), the Bavarian Greens look back upon a rather short party history (Raschke 1993). The Green's origins in grassroots movements and the extra-parliamentary opposition of the late 1960s formed the first years of the party in parliament. The Green ideal to be an 'anti-party' which aims to keep a check on the political system as such has faded while the party established itself in parliament. However, at least until the Greens first became part of a coalition government on national level (in 1998), the party's electorate expected explicitly left-wing positions. This made it easy for the Bavarian Green party to distinguish themselves very clearly from the CSU in the fields of security and home affairs, as well as agricultural and environmental policy. It did not harm the party's profile that there were severe clashes within the party's more realistic and more fundamental wing; its voters tolerated, and even anticipated this behaviour as part of the party's specific culture.<sup>7</sup> Even though the Green MBSPs' appearance in parliament during the 13<sup>th</sup> electoral term was mostly similar to the one displayed by the CSU and SPD MBSPs, many Green representatives still thought extra-parliamentary protest to be the right measure to gain attention and reach political change.<sup>8</sup>

Adding to this are structural reasons that explain why the opposition party groups chose different strategies. One central reason why the social democrats focused on the content-oriented strategy of cooperative discussion is the party's bigger number of MBSPs. As at least six of them were present in any of the parliament's committees the party was able to develop experts for many of the topics discussed and to rely on those experts' knowledge in the decision making process. At the same time, the number of MBSPs involved in each of those decisions required complex and time-consuming coordination within the parliamentary party group and some of the interviewees stressed that balancing interests within the party group quite regularly lead to a watering down of their political intentions, which made it harder to increase the party's profile in the public.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, the Greens did not need complex coordination, as they could not send more than one MBSP into each of the specialist committees who then represented the party-group's opinion. This allowed the Green MBSPs to argue and act more to the point than their SPD colleagues did. The Green's specific culture of discussion supported their MBSPs' focus on a strategy of influence by public confrontation.

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<sup>6</sup> See interview 10-160201 CSU, line 263f.

<sup>7</sup> According to Raschke (1993: 203), having several competing wings was internally seen as healthy sign for the party's plurality, heterogeneity and inner party democracy.

<sup>8</sup> During the electoral term Green MBSPs for example protested outside parliament against final storage of radioactive waste and blockaded a slaughterhouse where cattle, potentially infected with BSE, were meant to be culled.

<sup>9</sup> See interview 21-151001 SPD, line 315.

Shortly after the start of the 13<sup>th</sup> electoral term the party group members engaged in intensive internal party strife and discussed their clashing opinions on 'proper opposition politics' in the media extensively. The fact that in focus of their discussion was the question, how the Green representatives should handle access to the party group's press office, underlines the MBSPs' ambition to act in the public and to discuss things publicly<sup>10</sup>

Looking at these findings, it became evident that there might be a strong connection between individual party ideology, history, the party group members' socio-economic background, their informal rules of engagement etc with the strategies they use that so far has been overlooked and that might deserve further investigation.

## **2. Party Group Interaction in the British devolved Assemblies**

The research project that this paper refers to, is looking at party group interaction in the British devolved assemblies and contrasts these findings with research on the House of Commons and my already mentioned findings on the Bavarian State Parliament. By doing so, I aim to contribute to two questions:

- Are there distinctive patterns of party group interactions that might be observable in all of these assemblies?
- What impact do the institutional settings, the political culture, and the different party groups' historical and socio-demographic background have on the interaction of party groups?

### **2.1 Setting and Context**

Despite of the variations in size and their different histories, the British devolved assemblies and the Bavarian State Parliament share several common features, for example the mixed member proportional representation system – allowing voters to vote for both party and constituency seats, and a strong committee system. As pointed out, Bavaria is proud of its cultural heritage, with the conservative regional party CSU being one of the most prominent advocates of doing things in a particular Bavarian way. Alike the Bavarian CSU the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru (equally characterised by their rather socialist orientation and a significant focus on regional issues) have a powerful influence on devolved regional party politics in Britain and. Their success in the last sub-national elections and the most recent European elections show that they are likely to further repel Labour's long lasting majority in the future. The dominant role of all three regional parties in their country's politics allows taking into account to what extent region specific party cultures could influence territorial decision-making.

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<sup>10</sup> Having free access for all Green MBSPs to the party group's media office was one of the key issues which ignited a major internal and public discussion on the party group's opposition strategy in 1996. Compare Steinack 2007a, 81 ff. and 'Fraktionschef und Pressesprecher beziehen Prügel. Die Landtags-Grünen spucken Gift und Galle', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4.10.1996.

<b>Institutional Setting</b>	<b>Bavarian State Parliament<sup>11</sup></b>	<b>Scottish Parliament</b>	<b>National Assembly for Wales</b>	<b>Westminster</b>
<b>Structure</b>	Bicameral until 1999, now unicameral	Unicameral	Unicameral	Bicameral
<b>Electoral system</b>	"Improved" mixed system: 105 constituency seats elected through FPTP 99 AMS elected through 7 open regional lists. <sup>12</sup>	Mixed system: 73 constituency seats elected through FPTP 56 AMS elected through 8 regional lists (using d'Hondt)	Mixed system: 40 constituency seats elected through FPTP 20 AMS elected through 5 regional lists (using d'Hondt)	First past the post – constituencies seats
<b>Number of representatives</b>	1998: 204 members	129 MSPs	60 AMs	
<b>Legislative period examined</b>	1994-1998	2007-	2007-	1997-
<b>Governing party/ies</b>	long standing majority of regional conservative party CSU (120 seats)	Scottish National Party minority (47seats) with changing alliances	Coalition of Welsh Labour (26) and Plaid Cymru (15)	Labour
<b>Opposition party/ies</b>	SPD (70) Greens (14)	Labour (46) Conservatives (16) Liberal Democrats (16) Green Party (2) Independent (2)	Conservatives (12) Liberal Democrats (6) Independent (1)	Conservative Party Liberal Democrats Plaid Cymru & SNP Ulster Unionists
<b>Interviews</b>	21 conducted as part of previous research	9 conducted in March 2009	8 conducted in April 2009	6 conducted between March and June 2009

The British devolved assemblies were explicitly constructed as counter-drafts to the traditional Westminster model. The used system of mixed, proportional representation has produced chambers with several smaller opposition parties that do not replicate the Westminster model where the major opposition party enjoys a privileged position. The Consultative Steering Group (1998) for Scotland and the National Advisory Group for Wales had stressed the new institutions' participative approach to legislation and policy making as a key principle and distinguishing feature that should lead to a different style of politics. Taking the views of MPs at

<sup>11</sup> From 1998 onwards, the length of the election period extended from previously four to now five years; since 2003, the number of delegates in the Bavarian State Parliament has been reduced to a regular number of 180 even though parties may gain excess seats. This happens if the number of constituency seats a party obtains in a region (gained through the so-called "first vote") is larger than the number of seats to which it would be entitled based on its share of votes given to the party ("second vote"). The in 2008 newly elected 16th Bavarian State Parliament consists now of 187 delegates; the election result forced the governing CSU into a coalition (with the Liberal Democrats) for the first time since 1962.

<sup>12</sup> The open regional lists allow voters to mark out their preferred candidate on the list, thus adding an additional element of personalisation. The overall share of a party's seats is calculated by adding the number of all party votes for the regional list and the votes for the regional constituencies. Seats per party are distributed for each region, using Hare-Niemeyer's formula for proportional representation, and allowing extra seats (Überhangmandate) for parties where the number of constituency seats the party has won would exceed its actual overall share of votes (Hübner 1979). The system effectively favours mass parties that are more likely to win constituency seats – an issue that smaller parties have criticized severely in the past (Schultze & Ender 1991, Zeh 1992).



Westminster into the equation seemed to be a useful way to judge whether the intended different approach to political decision making on a territorial level has indeed left an impact on the party groups and party group interaction in these assemblies.

## **2.2 Main Research Questions**

1. How can Parliamentary Party Groups (PPGs) influence legislative decision making in parliament?
2. How do the structural differences and the institutional setting of the House of Commons and the British devolved assemblies influence the PPG's identities and their way to interact?
3. How does the different parties' socio-cultural background influence their identities and policies and their parliamentary behaviour?
  - How do parties perceive their own position in parliament?
  - How do party groups perceive each other?
  - Do party groups use different strategies when trying to seek majority support for their policy plans?
4. To what extent do PPGs in the devolved assemblies and in the Bavarian State Parliament show similarities (internal communication, choice of strategies, etc.) – and can these be linked to party size, party type?
5. What opportunities did the transition of a majority to a minority government (as currently observable in Scotland) and of a single-party to a coalition-government (as in Wales) open up for opposition parties?

## **3. Empirical findings on the devolved assemblies**

As this is an ongoing research project and as there is still a substantial amount of empirical data to be analysed, the following findings can address only some of the questions raised. The empirical data on AMs' and MSPs' gender, age, education and previous career enables me to compare the socio-demographic setting of party groups in both devolved assemblies. Adding to this are the transcriptions of nine interviews conducted at Holyrood in March 2009 and eight interviews conducted at the Senedd in April 2009.

The interviews conducted at the Bavarian State Parliament aimed to sample a rather wide-spread variety of opinions. I sought to interview a gender-balanced selection of both newcomers and old hold hands in all three party groups, taking in the views of committee workers and constituency focused representatives alike. As my research on the devolved assemblies also seeks to address the question how the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly have changed since 1999 I focused my sample on MSPs and AMs who had been in post throughout. To get a good impression of the interaction both inside one party and amongst the different party groups I deliberately addressed the different party groups' business managers and chief whips as well as representatives who could look back onto a previous career at Westminster. I avoided to interview party group leaders as they seem to be less likely to focus on the structural questions I am interested in. On top of seven MSPs and six AMs, I interviewed three clerks who are involved in committee work and plenary sessions and one party employee. Those selection criteria led to a rather gender-unbalanced sample of eight male interviewees and one female one for the Scottish

Parliament and six men and two women in the National Assembly for Wales. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymized before being processed with Maxqda – software developed to analyze qualitative data by coding passages of text.<sup>13</sup>

### **3.1 The party groups' socio-cultural background**

In the following I will focus on question 3 - *How does the different parties' socio-cultural background influence their identities and policies and their parliamentary behaviour?* This builds onto the assumption that there are differences in the socio-cultural background of party groups in Wales and Scotland that may impact on their political aims and behaviour. Socio-demographic data available on both assemblies<sup>14</sup> shows following tendencies:

#### **3.1.1 Gender**

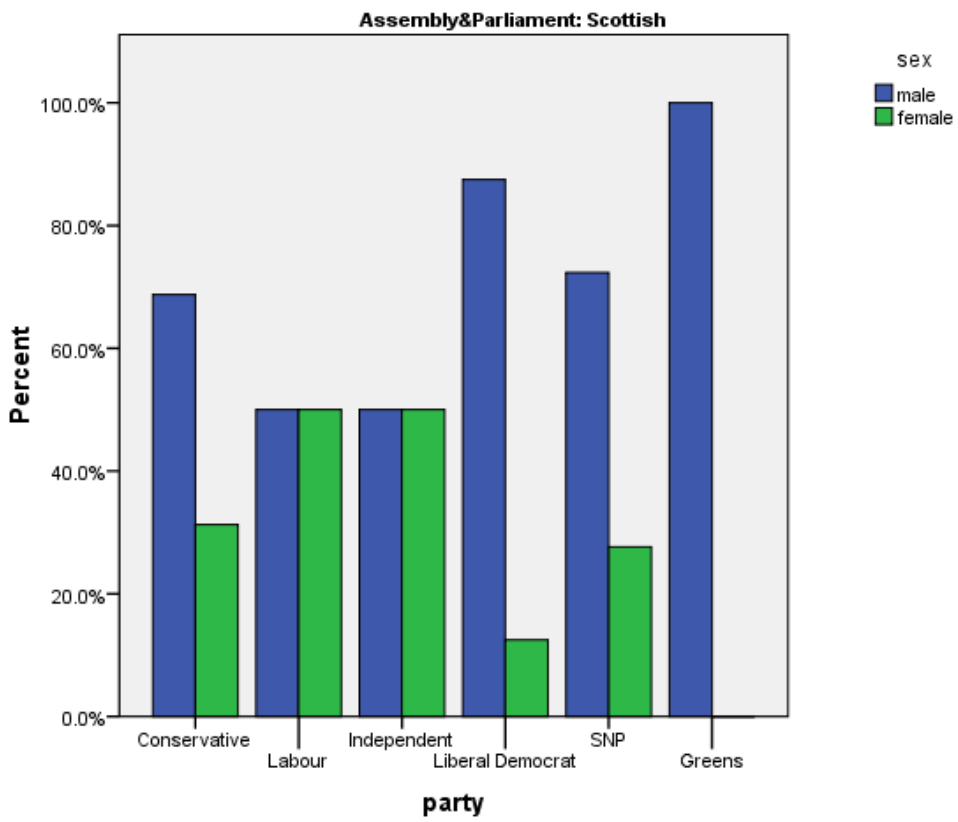
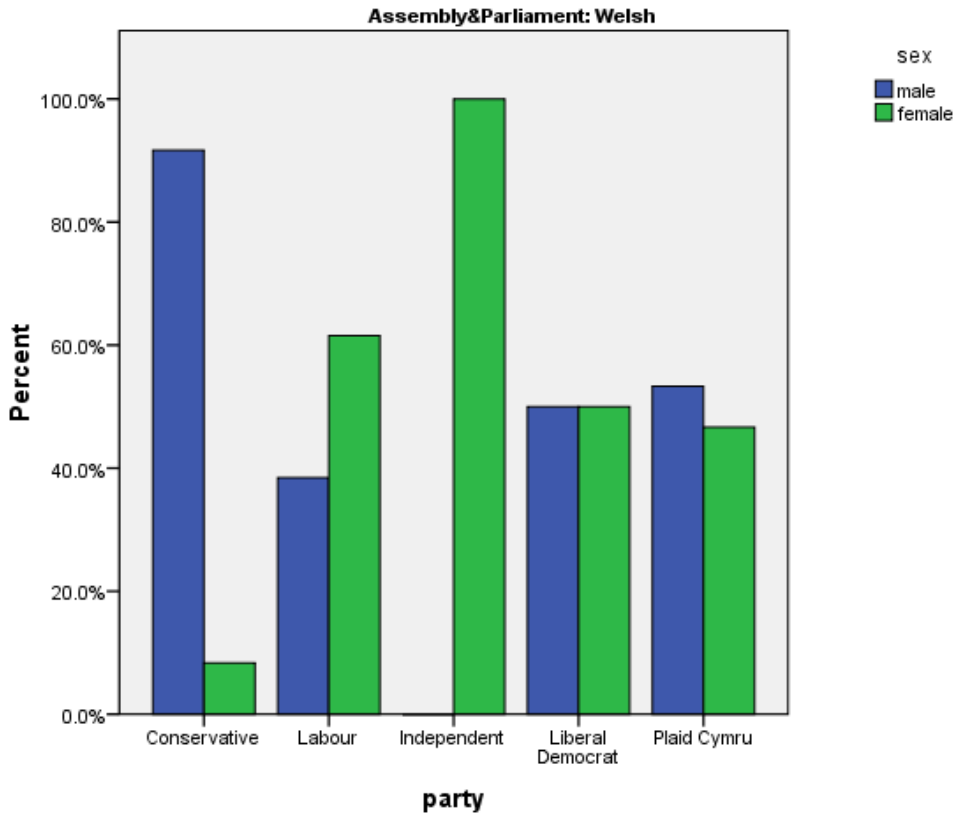
In international comparison both assemblies are rather gender balanced with the Welsh Assembly being more open to female representatives. Currently, 47% of AMs are women and the Assembly managed to maintain the exceptionally high share of female representatives throughout the first three sessions. Amongst its party groups, Labour (with 61% of female AMs) and Liberal Democrats (with 50% women – 3 out of six representatives) are most women-friendly whereas the Conservatives with only one woman out of 12 AMs clearly are a male bastion.

Scotland with 34% female MSPs still exceeds many other legislatures (e.g. the House of Commons with only 19% female MPs) in the share of seats women hold. However, compared to the first two sessions this is a decrease. Within Holyrood, Labour is the only party that is gender-balanced with exactly 50% male and female MSPs. In contrast, the Liberal Democrats (87% men) and SNP (72% men) continue to be male-dominated.

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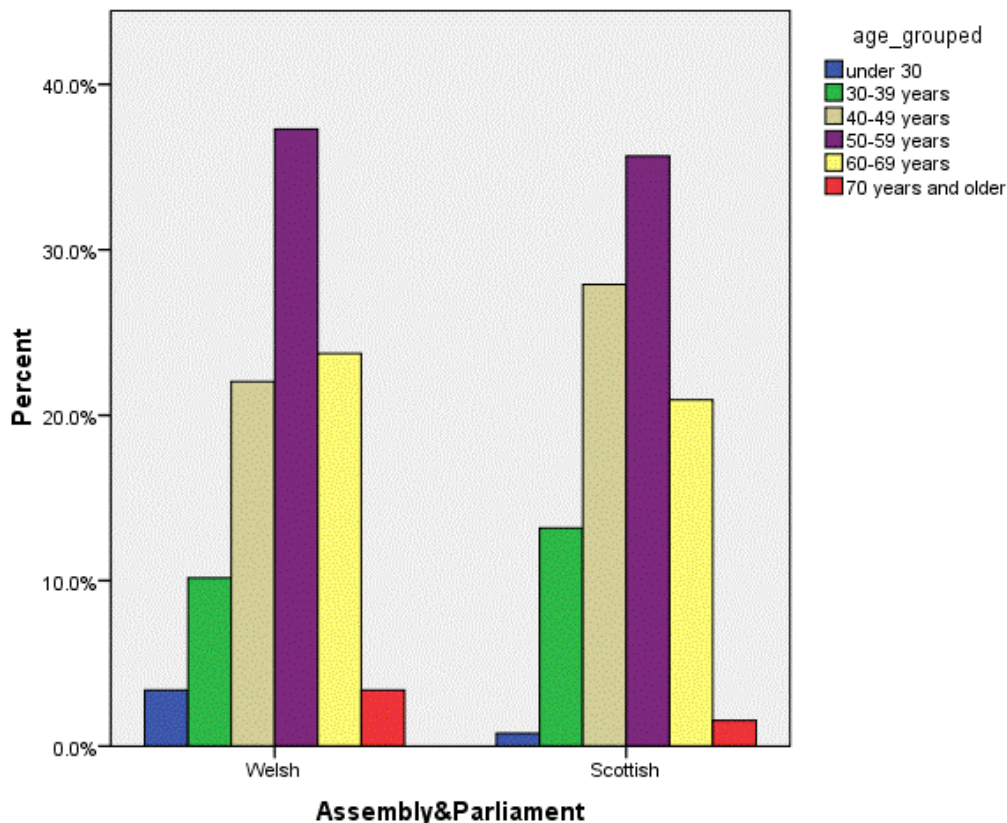
<sup>13</sup> For details see [www.maxqda.com](http://www.maxqda.com). For a thorough discussion on the impacts of computer aided coding on theory building see Kelle 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Own calculations, based on the data available through Dods Parliamentary Companion and the member profiles available on the websites of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.



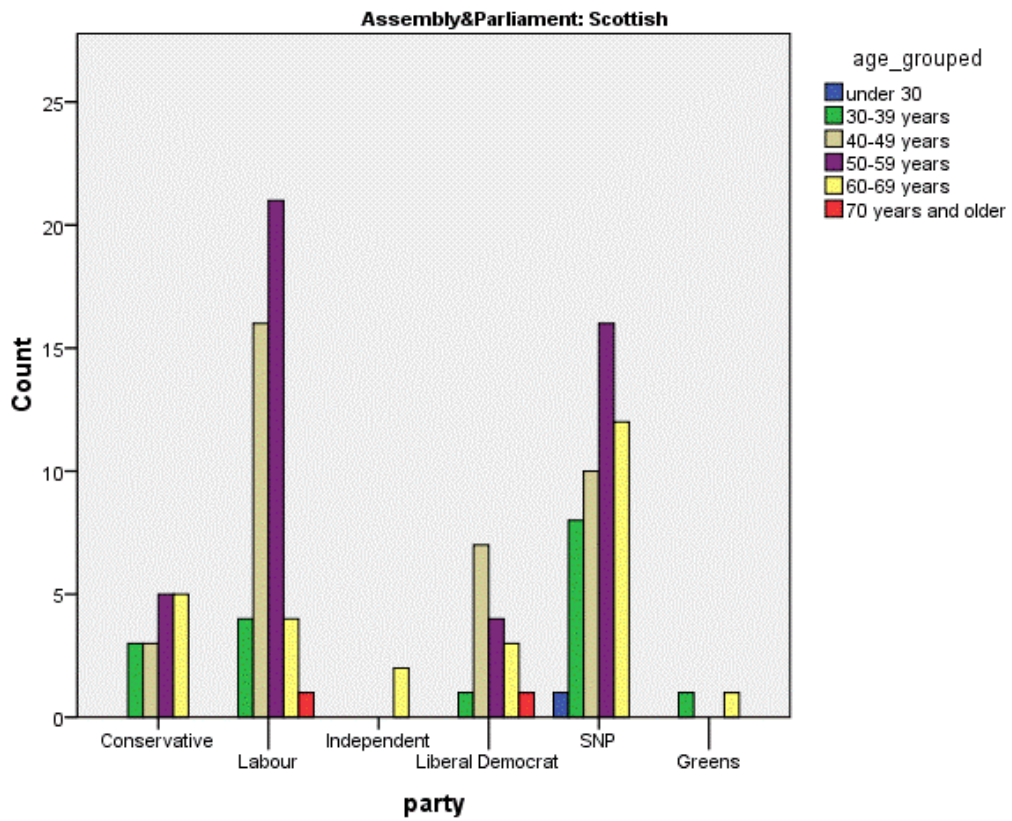
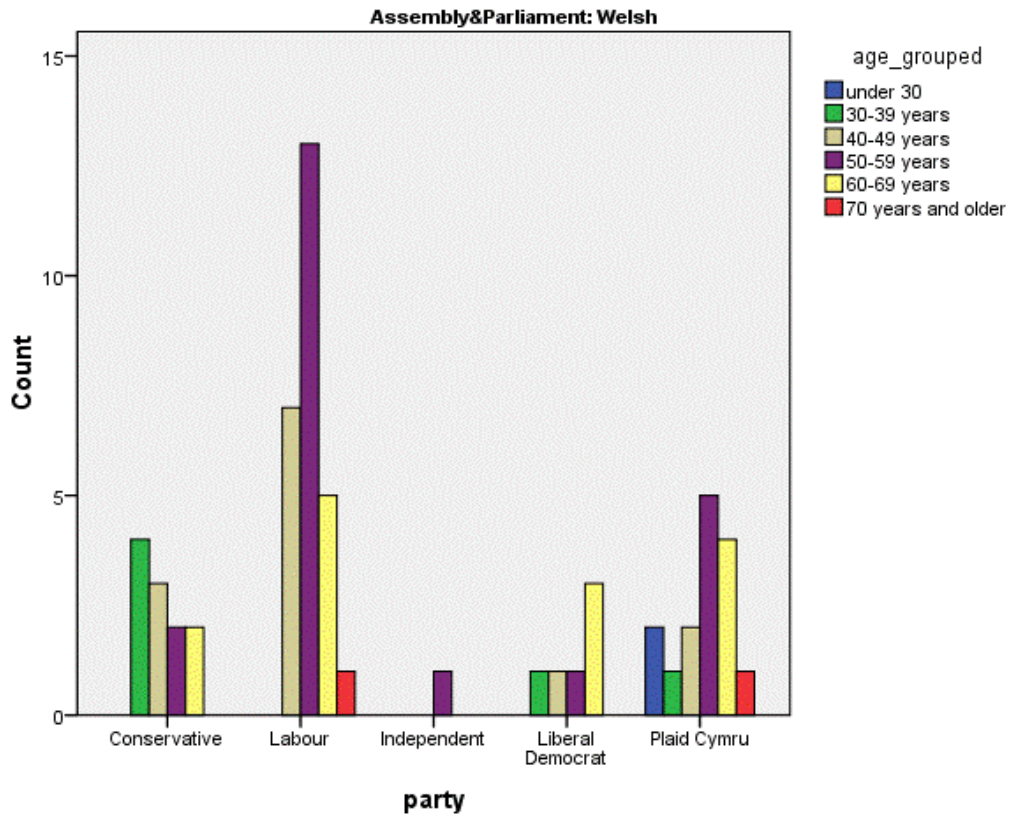
### 3.1.2 Age

The age structure shows that even on a regional level it takes time to develop a political career – 37% of AMs and 36% of MSPs are in their fifties, the peak age for representatives in both assemblies. A direct comparison of both legislatures further underlines similarities with the two other major age clusters being 40-49 years (22% of AMs, 28% of MSPs) and 60-69 years (24% AMs, 21% MSPs) while representatives under the age of 40 and above the age of 70 were in the minority.



Looking at the party groups showed some significant differences and similarities:

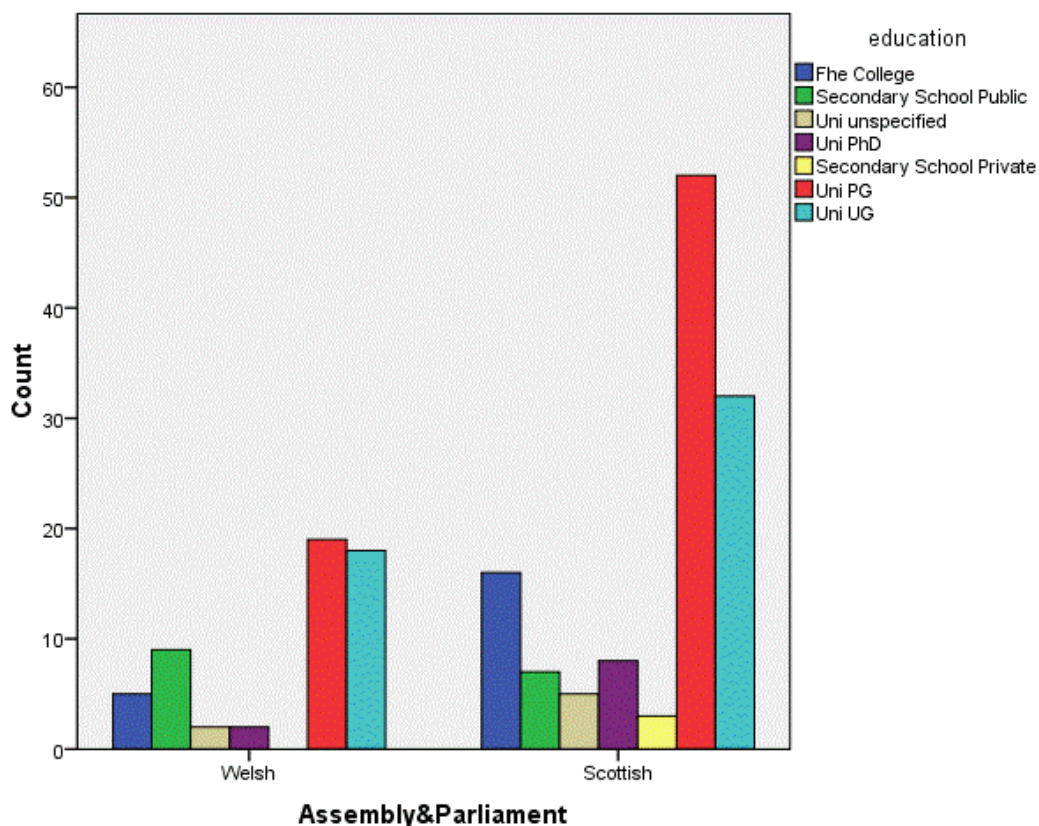
- Most similar regarding the age of its representatives is the Labour Party. In both assemblies most of the elected candidates were of middle age – in Wales 94% of Labour AMs were between the age of 40 and 69, in Scotland 90% of Labour MSPs belonged to this age group with a peak of 50-59 year olds in both assemblies.
- With 75% of its AMs being under the age of sixty, the male-dominated Conservative Party group in the Welsh assembly was significantly younger than its counterpart in Edinburgh where the age structure seems almost reverse: 31% of conservative MSPs were sixty or older (the largest group of over sixties in both assemblies).
- In contrast, the Liberal Democrats in Scotland had younger representatives with 44% of MPS being between 40-49 years old while in Wales 3 out of the six party's AMs were older than 60.
- The regional parties SNP and Plaid Cymru are rather broad churches as their representatives seem to be least focused within a specific age group.



- The country specific parties Plaid Cymru and SNP showed rather big diversity regarding the age of their representatives, with Plaid Cymru being in particular distinctive: 70% of its female AMs (5 out of 7) were under the age of 50, while all eight male AMs were 50 or over. For the SNP the gendered age distribution was fairly even, though SNP seems to allow a particular good career path for women beyond their 40s – (21% of all female SNP MSPs).

### 3.1.3 Education

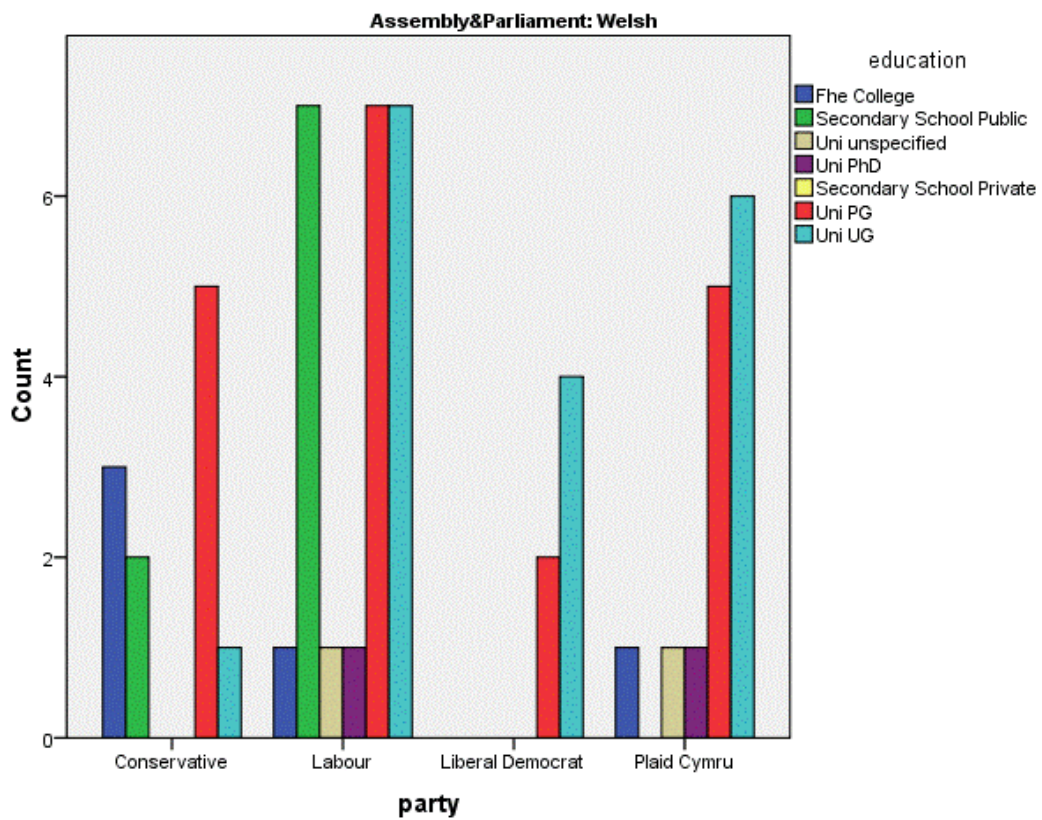
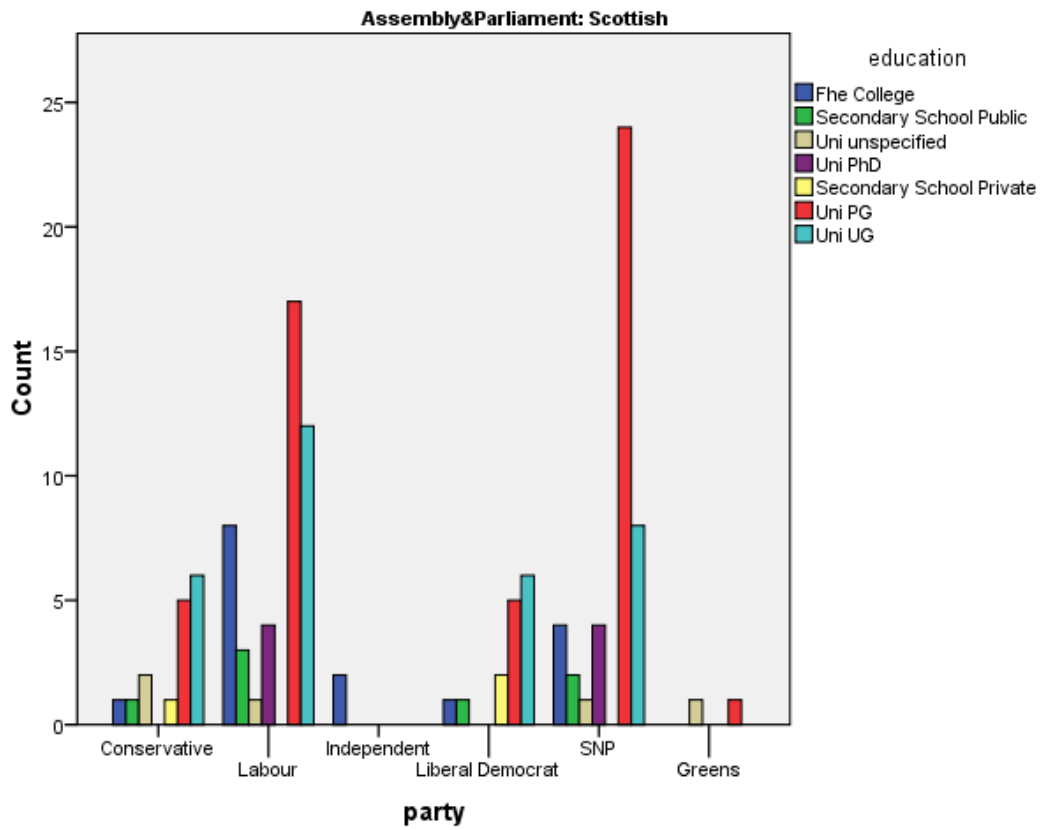
Members of both assemblies follow the tendency to be very well educated and at least 68% of AMs and 75% of MSPs have a university degree. These findings stand in line with more general research on legislative careers (Best & Cotta 2000b) that also highlights significant differences between the socio-demographic background of the electorate, all party-members as such, and the people who finally are elected into parliament.



However, while in Scotland more women tend to have a university degree and more of them have a postgraduate qualification (64% of the women but only 41% of men had a postgraduate degree), this relation did not replicate in Wales. Looking at the party groups within Holyrood, the level of professionals with a university degree was more or less even and the larger party groups all hav MSPs in their rank with a FHE college degree or Secondary School as the formally highest qualification.

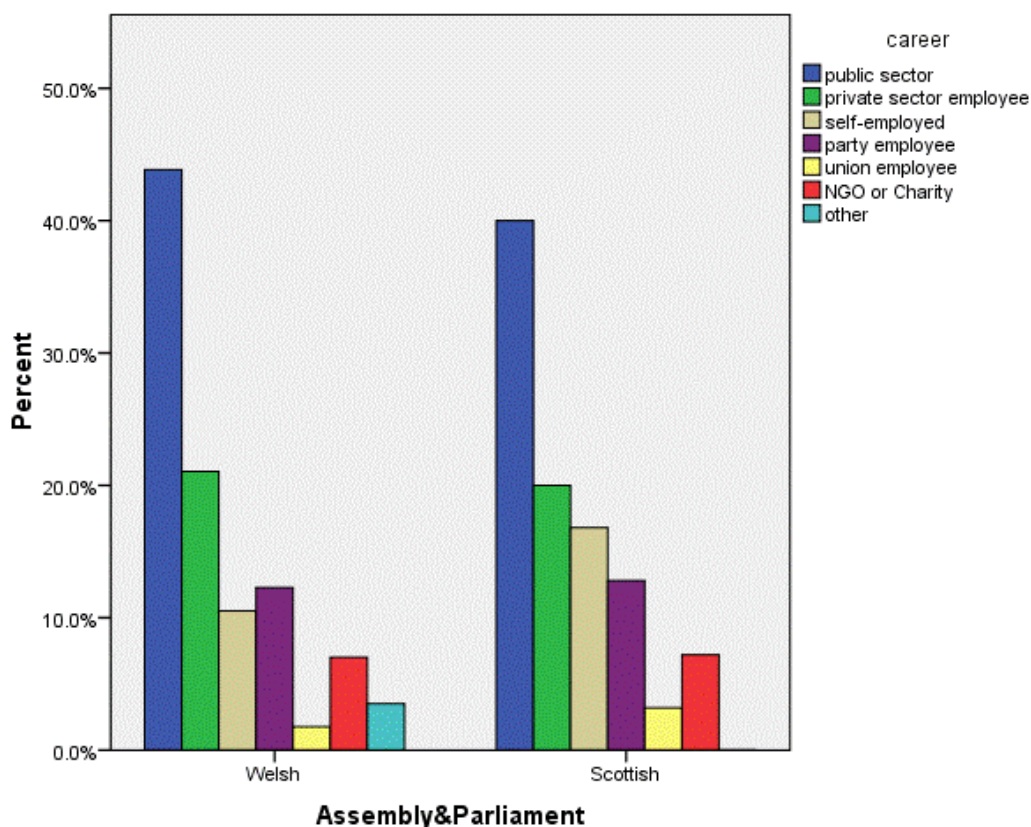
In contrast to Scotland, the level of education varied significantly amongst the different party groups in the Welsh Assembly: The Liberal Democrats are the most homogenous group – all six of them are university educated. Most heterogeneous is the Labour Group where education seems to be highly gendered: 28% of women –

seven out of the 15 female Labour AMs - had entered the Welsh Assembly with Secondary School as their formally highest level of education.



### 3.1.4 Previous Career outside Parliament

In accordance with the age structure, most representatives in Wales and Scotland have left already well-established jobs in order to take up a career in politics, many of them as solicitors or employees of the public service. Overall figures for both assemblies were rather similar: around 40% of representatives previously were employed in the public sector and a further 20% worked for a private company. 12% of AMs and MSPs were previously employed by their party – many of them as assistants to an AM or MSP – and further 7% had worked for a charity or NGO. 10% of the AMs and 16% of MSPs were self-employed - several of them as farmers.<sup>15</sup>



The direct comparison of party groups showed that there are some party-specific features:

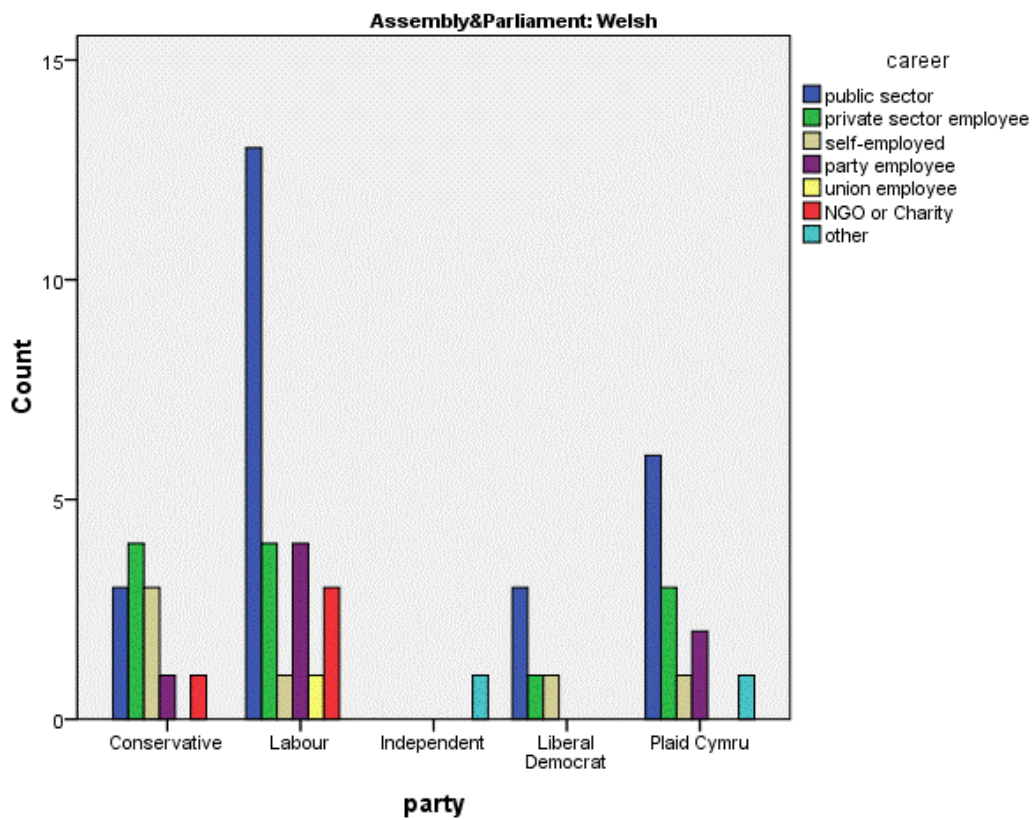
- In both legislatures, most of the conservative representatives had left a previous career either in the private sector or in being self-employed. While their number of previous party employees was beyond average in the Welsh Assembly, none of the Conservative MSPs at all had previously worked for a party. The occupational background of many Conservative representatives – solicitors, consultants, some farmers, highlights that this might be types of politicians that are quite used to sorting business efficiently with a hands-on approach.
- The Labour party had a clear dominance of former career paths in the public sector or as party employees (a stunning 17% in the Scottish Parliament). Additionally, it was the only party group with former union employees (4% in

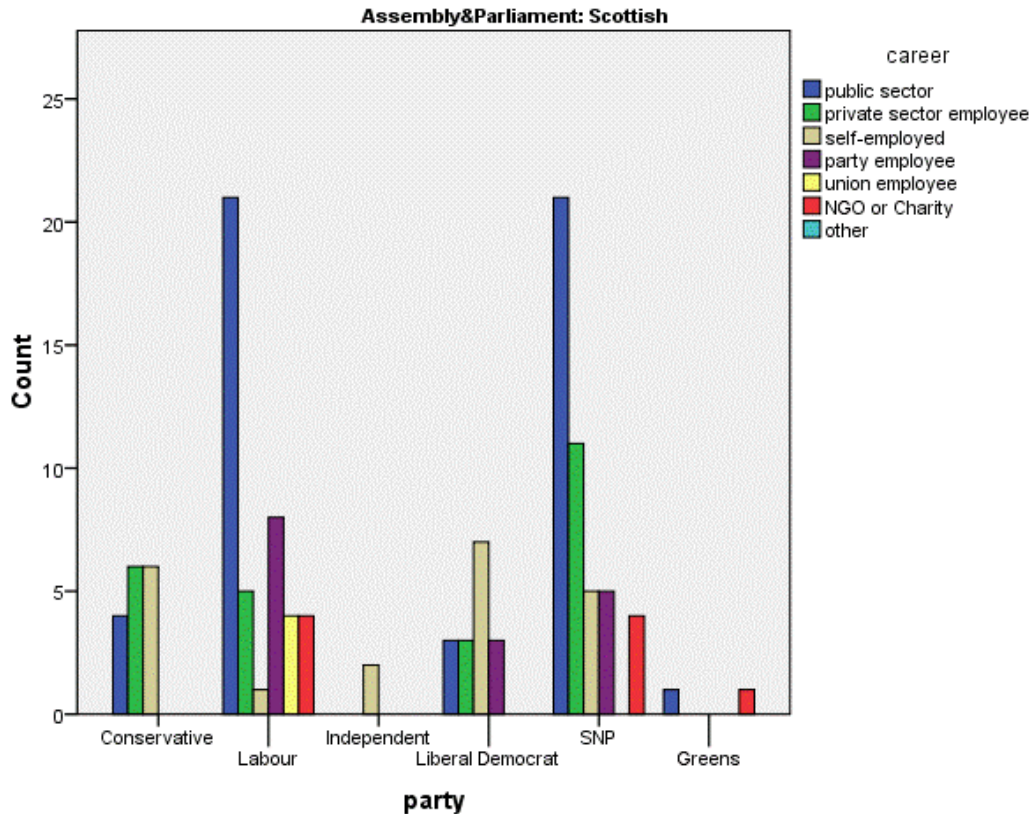
<sup>15</sup> In Scotland four out of the sixteen Conservative Party Group members were farmers before taking up their seat, the Liberal Party Group had two farmers amongst them. In Wales, four out of six previously self-employed AMs were farmers – one each in PC and LD, one in the Conservative Party.



Cardiff, 9 % in Edinburgh) amongst its ranks. Transferring these findings into the approach of their representatives to politics one might assume that they would be more used to following set and sometimes rather cumbersome procedures that are prevalent in the public service.

- The career background of both SNP and Plaid Cymru representatives pretty much followed the average figures for both assemblies – as observed for the age structure these parties again seem to be more accessible to candidates – and consequently representatives – from all different walks of life.
- The Liberal Democrats showed the most significant differences between both assemblies: While three out of six of their AMs had previously worked in the public sector, this picture reversed itself in Scotland: There, 44% of LibDem MSPs had previously been self-employed; a further 19% had been party employees.





Looking at the assemblies as a whole, the socio-demographic background of members of the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales see to be very similar. However, as the more detailed analysis has shown, there are significant differences in the age structure, the gender balance or the educational and professional background of the party groups within these assemblies:

- Apart from the fact that Labour still seems to be more connected to its working class roots in Wales (the large number of AMs with a secondary school degree as formally highest level of education is a strong indicator for this) Labour shows the smallest variances in the inter-parliamentary comparison of its party groups. This homogeneity could be an indicator for a party that does not allow a great deal for regional variances but more or less follows an overarching national theme.
- In contrast, the Conservative and the Liberal Democrat party groups in the two devolved assemblies showed quite significant differences that could be an indicator for a more regional approach to party politics.

### 3.2 The party groups in the perception of MSPs and AMs

One main issue I aimed to address in the interviews was the question if there are any differences in the behaviour of members of different party groups and if so, what might cause them. I asked the interviewees whether they could observe any attitudes, typical features or behaviour patterns that might be symptomatic for a specific party. Apart from the SNP and Plaid Cymru delegates whose parties, by their very nature have a strong country-specific focus, I addressed the issue how the interviewees' own party positioned itself in comparison to its counterpart in

Westminster. Though most of them stressed the importance of being quite distinct to Westminster, many of them failed to come up with a specific label in how exactly their own party group stood out. Structurally, there aren't big differences in how the different party groups in Holyrood and in the Senedd are set up – as one MSP stated:

“Most parties internally are organised in much the same fashion in terms of they have cabinets [or] shadow cabinets; they have group meetings on a weekly basis, they have spokesmen, the opposition parties put together central research teams and pool allowances in order to (...) create a team of researchers to support their work; everyone has press and media officers to suit. So organisationally, I would say it's pretty similar.” (MSP7\_Con, 23).

Another interviewee – asked if there are any distinctive partisan features – explained:

“I think it's probably a disappointing thing about the Parliament because the culture of the Parliament was to be different, but everybody is still acting as traditional political Parties, so I don't think you would necessarily see a big difference. I don't think so.” (MSP9\_Lab, 26).

This view was echoed by an AM who outlined: *“I think we all operate in a ... fairly similar way (...) I mean, it's perhaps a little bit a factor of size (...) but I think in terms of the general strategy and tactics of how you would attack these things, I wouldn't have thought there was a vast difference to be honest, no”* (AM7\_Con, 16)

### 3.2.1 Labour

The strong similarities to their counterpart in Westminster are especially true for the Labour party groups. Despite claiming *“We're a separate party and we have our own views”*<sup>16</sup> their interviewees had to admit that – apart from gradual differences with respect to some policies (for example with regard to tuition fees) *“It's not obvious on any of our current policies ... that we're different from London”*<sup>17</sup>.

In particular, the Scottish Labour Party Group was seen - and saw itself – mostly through the focus of the previously lost election. The shock about not being in power anymore, the difficulties in coming to terms with this loss, and the party's strong connection to its Westminster headquarter were the main features listed by the interviewees.

Referring to the previous two sessions a member of the Labour Party highlighted:

“I think that's the problem for us because (...) we are perceived as being, by some people, as being too close to Labour in London (...) We have had examples in the past, you know, in the last Parliament when we were the Government in Scotland we kind of abolished university tuition fees and instituted free personal care (...). So we did have different policies then but, to be honest, it was partly because we were in coalition with Liberal Democrats (...). But now,... I mean my own view probably is, I'm not saying we should be different from London just for the sake of it, but I think it can create problems for us that we are perceived as having the same line as London.” (MSP9\_Lab, 79)

His statement stands in line with another feature one of the Liberal Democrat MSPs thought to be significant for Labour:

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<sup>16</sup> AM4\_Lab, 45.

<sup>17</sup> MSP9\_Lab, 79.

“The Scottish Labour Party are very heavily top-down [in their] approach to politics. Their backbenchers just – it’s the Shadow Cabinet, it’s the group of people at the top that make the decisions.”(MSP8\_Lib, 37)

It might be this double handicap of not having developing an independent Scottish profile and not allowing more room for the participation of backbenchers in the development of the party group’s policies that make it so hard for Labour in Scotland right now when trying to compete with the SNP. In the meantime, it seems as the parties focus wasn’t on itself but on the SNP instead. Remarks like “*We no longer know what Labour are for, we only know what Labour are against and Labour are against SNP*”(MSP1\_SNP,22) or “*Labour’s agenda is to out-do SNP*” (MSP4\_SNP, 14) were quite typical for the way at least SNP interviewees classified their colleagues from the Labour camp.

### 3.2.2 The Liberal Democrats

While Labour had been voted out of power in Scotland, the Liberal Democrats had deliberately decided at the start of the parliament’s third session not to coalesce with another party again but to work on regaining an independent profile instead. Being asked about how they would view themselves in comparison to the other parties in Holyrood they stipulated that the most distinctive issue was their philosophy. One liberal MSP claimed that his party group was

“Completely different! That’s what makes us Liberal Democrats – we had an hour-and-a-half group meeting on Tuesday night in there and I operated as a Whip. I do not tell my members how to vote. The Conservative group are told by their Whip, ‘actually, this is what we’re doing – any questions?’ ‘Yes Sir!’ – that sort of thing. And the Labour Party are told how to vote. We operate completely differently. (...) We get together and everybody has an opportunity to speak. We decide amongst ourselves how we take forward our votes or what we’re going to do (...) and sometimes our spokesperson’s view is overturned by the group” (MSP8\_Lib, 21).

He added further: “*In the Labour Party, they (...) look upon the group, they look upon sections of society, they don’t look at individuals and the Liberals do*” (MSP8\_Lib, 23). His remark on not being as strongly whipped as the other party groups was underlined by comments of a Conservative colleague who pointed out that even during the Labour-Liberal coalition from 1999 to 2007

“The Liberals were allowed synchronised abstention. Basically, the Labour people were always whipped and had to tow the party-line but any Liberal who didn’t like what was being said because it might make their position locally uncomfortable in their local area – as long as it was only 1 or 2 of them – they were allowed to dissent or absent themselves or whatever so they weren’t whipped” (MSP7\_Con, 10).

A distinct (though not further defined) liberal philosophy and the simultaneous existence of different views at a time were also mentioned with respect to the six-member strong Liberal Party Group in the Senedd. At the beginning of the third session, the group had been internally split about the question whether to enter a coalition with Plaid Cymru and the Conservatives or choose opposition instead, a fact that one interviewee labelled as “*very little intellectual coherence*”<sup>18</sup>. Plaid Cymru’s perception of the Liberal Democrat party group’s unsteadiness might also be owned

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<sup>18</sup> AM5\_PC, 32.

to change of its party leader after mid-term: In October 2008 the long term party leader (and previous deputy first minister) Mike German had announced that he would step down from his post. The following leadership contest was won by Kirsty Williams who had previously been an outspoken advocate against a potential rainbow coalition between Plaid, Liberal Democrats and Conservatives that was discussed at the beginning of the session. However, her attempts to sharpen the Liberal Democrat's profile in the assembly were met by irritation of one Plaid Cymru interviewee who commented: *"under their new leadership, they seem to have decided to take a much more oppositional and less co-operative approach. If I'm honest, I think they'll be sorry"* (AM2\_PC, 7-9).

### 3.2.3 The Conservatives

Similar to the Liberal Democrats the Conservatives, who in both assemblies enjoy their third consecutive session in opposition, pointed to their ideological values as one significant factor that distinguished them from the other parliamentary parties. Their claim for Scotland to be the *"the only party from a right-of-centre perspective"* (MSP7\_Con, 37) was underlined by the other interviewees who stressed that, the predominance of "Law and Order" and respect of seniority within the party were features that were equally visible from outside.<sup>19</sup> One of their MSPs pointed out: *"We have a quite strong whipping system. We wouldn't tolerate dissenting votes from the party-line, other than the very small number of issues that are regarded as 'conscience issues'"* (MSP7\_Con, 25). He continued to explain, *"there are discussions – I'm not simply saying people's opinions are suppressed – there are collective discussions within the group, but we don't encourage dissent"* (MSP7\_Con, 27). While they spoke with one voice within the Scottish Parliament, the group seemed to find it easier to develop a Scottish identity than Labour: Looking at how the party fared in comparison to its pendant in Westminster one interview partner pointed out that his Scottish branch in general was not on a strong reign if it comes to the area of devolved politics, that it had been quite influential in shaping conservative policies as a whole over a period of time, and that overall his party was not afraid of allowing differences between Holyrood and Westminster (MSP7\_Con, 45).

One Conservative AM equally pointed out that his party group would *"do some things differently"* to Westminster as *"you can't have devolution and then act as if the devolved Chamber is a branch office"* (AM7\_Con, 60), though his answers stand somehow in contradiction to the opinion of a party group colleague as to whether the Welsh branch was *"Cameronesque before Cameron"* (AM7\_Con, 60), and in a spear-head function for developing Conservative policies in general, or in contrast putting a strong focus on doing things in a different, particular Welsh way (AM3\_Con, 52-54).

### 3.2.4 The nationalist parties

While the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and in particular the Labour party groups struggled in finding and promoting a regional identity, this was far less of a problem for SNP and Plaid Cymru. The parties' embeddedness in regional structures and history, their firm focus on the particular assembly and their campaign for an independent Scotland or Wales all contributed to generating a distinct profile. Quite interestingly, none of the interviewees reflected on SNP's party's ideology, structure

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<sup>19</sup> MSP8\_SLD, 23

or management. Instead, in both assemblies the devolved parties' gain of power in 2007 was seen as an achievement that further proved the need for regional representation.

### **3.3 Party group interaction in the devolved assemblies**

How do these different ideologies and party group structures impact on the interaction of party groups? In exploring this further, I focussed on following aspects:

- The experience of coalition government (Scotland: Labour/Lib Dem, 1999-2007, Wales: Labour/Lib Dem 2000-2003, Labour/Plaid Cymru since 2007)
- The experience of minority government in Scotland (SNP since 2007) and minority government / hung parliament in Wales (Labour, 1999-2000, 2003-2007)
- The opposition parties' general strategies to influence the governing party's/parties' decision making
- The different settings of party interaction – in particular the committees, the plenary chamber and semiformal or informal settings

In contrast to the Scottish Parliament where two consecutive coalition governments of Labour and Liberal Democrats had been replaced by a SNP minority government (holding 47 out of 129 seats) with the start of the third term in May 2007, coalition arrangements in the Welsh Assembly have been more troublesome. Following the elections to the assembly's first session, Labour had initially started off with a minority government under Alun Michael. After 10 months, this was replaced by a joint Labour/Liberal Democrat Government under Rhodri Morgan that lasted until the end of the session. After Labour had won half of the seats in the 2003 elections, Morgan reverted to a Labour-only government that lasted for the whole term but that – with 30 out of the assembly's 60 seats - was dependent on the presiding officer's abstention from voting to gain a working majority. Labour's frail majority slipped away in 2005 when one of its group left the party group and continued as an independent AM. Having lost substantially in the 2007 elections, Morgan initially formed a Labour minority government, based on the party's 26 seats. After seven weeks this was replaced by the current coalition government of Labour and Plaid Cymru that's based on a convenient majority of 41 out of 60 seats.

#### **3.3.1 Party group interaction under coalition government**

While the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly were deliberately set up as legislatures that should follow a more consensual approach – a fact that's reflected in the important role all-party committees play in initiating and discussing legislation, this does not transfer into consensual governing as such. Typical for the situation may be following comment by an assembly member:

“There is still an awful lot of consensus politics, a consensus approach with co-operation across political lines. I mean, you could still very often look at a National Assembly Committee and not be able to say, ‘She's Labour. He's Plaid Cymru. She's a Liberal Democrat...’ because there might be quite a sort of strong debate going on but it would be a debate about the issues more than a debate about, you know, along party lines. That sort of changes slightly when you come to legislatures committees and where you're actually discussing specific amendments and where government backbenchers then have to follow the government line.” ( AM2\_PC, 2).

In line with her observation, the interviews showed that both in Scotland and Wales party interaction under a coalition government was perceived as similar to the one in Westminster. Having two parties with a solid majority sharing power gave the political process a great extent of stability:

### ***Creating Stability***

One opposition AM almost sounded relieved when he stressed: „*there is no sort of high-drama in the Assembly Chamber the way there used to be (...), knife-edge votes and making sure everybody was there and how was X going to vote and so on (...)* we have stability now“ (AM7\_Con,8). On the other hand, a member of the current Welsh government underlined that „*The government's in the driving seat; that's what the government is there to do (...) it is the government that will ultimately prevail*“ (AM4\_Lab, 53). His remarks echo the observations of a member of the opposition in the Scottish Parliament that, looking back to the first two sessions remembered: „*you had a Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition that (...) called all the shots, they made all the decisions (...), they were largely settled in a sense behind-the scenes*“ (MSP7\_Con, 10).

### ***Limiting opposition influence and creating a partisan climate***

While the stable coalition arrangements in both assemblies provided for smooth governing, they limited opposition influence severely and thus contributed to the creation of a rather partisan climate.

Looking at the Labour/Liberal Democrat Coalition's power in the first two sessions of the Scottish Parliament a conservative MSP simply complained: „*Opposition in the first eight years was frustrating*“ (MSP7\_Con, 12), while a SNP colleague recalled that the opposition then did not have any influence on legislation at all as „*Labour and the Liberal Democrats wouldn't accept anything from anybody*“ (MSP1\_SNP, 4). Similar comments were made by AMs looking at the current 2/3 majority of Labour and Plaid Cymru in the Senedd. Their remarks that „*It's the two largest parties together (...) so there is little prospect of us, as the Opposition (...) defeating them*“ (AM7\_Con, 6) and that „*there are occasions (...) when the Government rejects the opposition's viewpoint for the sake of it, because it's been put by the opposition not because the viewpoint is invalid; and that happens a lot*“ (AM8\_Lib, 36) reveal that even if opposition parties sought to contribute to the decision making process in parliament in a constructive manner, their efforts are unlikely to prevail. In consequence, this might then trigger opposition parties to act more confrontational, as was observed by a Plaid Cymru AM who stressed: „*When you have a substantial over-all majority, and a very clear political programme, it isn't as necessary to engage with the opposition positively. I think it's also a temptation for the opposition to become very negative*“ (AM2\_PC, 2).

### ***Limiting the governing parties' scope***

While opposing a coalition government might not have felt much differently to Westminster for many members of the opposition party groups, negotiating different parties' views and agendas within a working government made the situation more complicated for the coalition partners. Though none of the interviewees that belong or belonged to a governing party admitted this openly, living in coalition was not always easy, as others observed. For the Scottish Parliament a Conservative MP

pointed out that ruling Scotland in the years before 2007 was made more difficult for Scottish Labour as they governed in coalition with the Liberal Democrats who were considered to be „unable to define a principle“ and „always problematical“ (MSP2\_Con, 6). One of his party colleagues added:

“The Labour people were always whipped and had to tow the party-line but any Liberal who didn’t like what was being said because it might make their position locally uncomfortable in their local area – as long as it was only 1 or 2 of them – they were allowed to dissent or absent themselves or whatever so they weren’t whipped.” (MSP7\_Con, 10)

For the Welsh Assembly both Plaid Cymru and Labour interviewees stressed the stability of the current coalition.<sup>20</sup> One Plaid Cymru interviewee particularly pointed out that, despite of the fact that entering a coalition always needed some compromising, the “One Wales” agreement had not caused her party to give up any of its integral standpoints.<sup>21</sup> Several interviewees mentioned, however, that the idea of entering a coalition, per se, initially had been quite alien to many politicians, as following quote illustrates:

“It’s been a hard road in understanding, understanding coalitions because all of the UK parties, in fact all of us come with a tradition in the first past the post elections, you come with the tradition of being, you know, the party gets a majority and it’s been a very unusual circumstance when you have a coalition so for parties it’s been a learning process” (AM6\_Lib, 2)<sup>22</sup>

While the Labour Party already had undergone two coalition periods with the Liberal Democrats, and experienced in governing Wales, Plaid Cymru took longer to adjust after entering the “One Wales” coalition in 2007. As one party member observed:

“A number of people felt and thought well we can’t do this [entering into a coalition with Labour] for pragmatic reasons because Plaid Cymru ... will lose its status as the main opposition and therefore we will suffer immediately. Now there, there is no reason for believing that that has happened. In fact, I would probably say the opposite. If anything, I think, we are doing better in term of getting our message across the media than we did before”. (AM5\_PC, 28)

Remarks of a non-partisan interviewee show, that some Plaid Cymru members’ initial distaste for entering a coalition still has an impact on daily politics as “*you can occasionally see signs from some Plaid Cymru members who are not used to being members of government struggling to act like loyal back benchers in the government because they are having to compromise on what they want, in an ideal world, in order to be in government, and some of them struggle to do that.*” (AM1\_clerk, 30-31).

### 3.3.2 Party interaction under a minority government

With the SNP’s electoral success in May 2007 and the party groups’ decision to govern Scotland on its own, members of both assemblies now have gained some experience with minority governments. However, the way the Scottish minority

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<sup>20</sup> AM4\_Lab,3; AM5\_PC,2.

<sup>21</sup> AM5\_PC, 28.

<sup>22</sup> This is echoed by the comment of a Labour colleague: “I think it took time for an understanding of coalition politics to engrain itself in the minds of the Welsh political parties because historically we weren’t, we weren’t use to it but, I think now, that you know people understand what coalition is all about and can work within a coalition, which is essential, given the electoral system that we have” (AM4\_Lab, 3).



government (SNP, 2007-) is experienced and how the and minority government / hung parliament in Wales (Labour, 1999-2000, 2003-2007) was perceived, differs significantly, both in the governing parties' and the opposition parties' perception:

### ***Demanding more engagement of opposition parties***

SNP's current minority government was seen by all parties (but Labour) as "fundamentally different" (MSP7\_Con, 13) and „near ideal construct", allowing every party group considerable influence on policy development. Most opposition interviewees clearly saw their role as a challenge, „*in that you cannot just go into that chamber now and point out the party line and go on a frolic on your own (...) you have got to really have thought things through*" (MSP2\_Con, 2). In particular Conservative MSPs enjoyed the new constellation as "*a much more dynamic situation, much more creative situation*" and stressed that "*from a Conservative point-of-view, we have very much moved into a central and a key position in terms of the decisions that are actually made.*" (MSP7\_Con, 13). The only caveat made was by a Labour interviewee who lamented that in the new minority situation opposition parties were far less influential than expected as "*Governments, whether the minority or majority, can do a very great deal without reference to parliament*" (MSP9\_Lab, 2).

For the Welsh Assembly, opposition AMs equally testified that „*the last [government] had to listen to all shades of opinion (...) I rather think that lead to quite good government in relative terms*" (AM7\_Con, 2). They stressed that with Labour's marginal majority, „*it was very much a process of negotiation between the parties on individual issues. So, in a sense, you're having to build a consensus ... which does make it interesting and does give you opportunities to influence even when you're just a small group of six*" (AM8\_Lib, 4). However, in contrast to the Scottish interviewees they seemed to see their opposition role more as a re-active one, with the benefit of being consulted, but not actively trying to shape policies; something that might be owed to the fact that until the Government of Wales Act 2006 came into force in May 2007, the Assembly did not have any competences in primary legislation and thus simply did not allow for much genuine policy-shaping.

### ***Challenging for SNP- Unsatisfying for Labour***

The different perception of opposition parties in the two chambers is mirrored in the way the SNP and Labour experience/d their situation: Again, the more positive framing came from the Scottish Parliament. The SNP's interviewees were clearly thrilled to finally be in power, even if this meant the constant search for coalition partners on single policy issues. They viewed their situation very realistically and pointed out:

„ when you come in as a minority government (...) you have to reach out to the other political parties to try and get some common ground in areas of policy that you agree. I think we did that quite successfully initially (..) but I think we then possibly got to the point where we started behaving as though we were a government who had power to do what we wanted to do and then ...we had a bit of a reality check" (MP4\_SNP, 2)

On the contrary, the experience of running a minority government seemed to have been far less enjoyable for Welsh Labour, whose interviewee conceded:

„the one thing to my mind that doesn't work is a minority government. (...) You never know from one week to the next whether you're going to win or whether

your are going to get your budget through. It just creates instability and that's no good for the public" (AM4\_Lab, 3)

His rather negative perception was underlined by the opinion of a conservative AM, voicing that „*In the first Assembly... there was a minority administration with Labour which teetered and it was difficult for it to operate (...) in the second Assembly, Labour did a bit better and although they didn't have an outright majority (...) they limped on*“ (AM7\_Con, 2).

### 3.3.3 Different Qualities of Opposition

In their competition to gain influence over the minority government, the party groups revealed different qualities of opposition that can be observed in both assemblies:

#### ***Conservatives – cooperative and reliable***

In particular the Conservatives fared well which is surprising as the (in comparison to the other parties) central setup of the party with London as clear centre of gravity, does not seem to allow the party-groups in the devolved assemblies much room for developing their own positions. In the current minority government at Holyrood they praised themselves – and were praised by the SNP – for contributing significantly to policymaking in Scotland. Based on their initial statement that the party would not coalesce with any other party but would be willing to support any policy that would comply with the party's political ideas and aims the Conservatives were quite successful in fulfilling parts of their manifesto.

“The Conservative Party has generally acted very constructively with the Scottish Government and in a way that they have been able to shape and influence the SNP government's budget bill. They have managed to get quite a lot out of it – other parties, Labour and the Liberal Democrats who did not take part in these discussions lost the ability to influence what might be in it” (MSP1\_SNP, 24).

Two main reasons were given as to why the Conservatives found it so much easier to work the minority government to their advantage: Experience in being a opposition party, and the lack of shock both Labour and the Liberal Party had to overcome when they lost power in Scotland in 2007.

“The Conservatives are good and experienced at opposition and the other two parties [Labour and Liberal Democrats] that spent eight years in government are not very good at it. (...) You had two parties who were, for eight years, ... effectively mollycoddled by the civil service (...) I see it a lot in terms of things like drafting of motions and amendments and so on for debates where I would regard their levels of craftsmanship (...) as poor in comparison with ours.” (MSP7\_Con, 35)

“The Conservative Party are much more capable in understanding how to influence a minority government than the Labour Party are. I think they're much more willing to sit down and discuss thing that the governments here might say, 'look, we're interested in taking this forward we need to get support from the chamber on this' and the Conservative Party would say, 'well, if you're wanting that, then we would like you to look into providing money for x, y and z' and this has happened and there has been agreement on these types of things. The Liberal Democrats are starting to move in that direction a bit.” (MSP4\_SNP, 14)

The SNP interviewees' positive reflection on the Conservatives reliability and willingness to cooperate was echoed by their nationalist colleagues in the Welsh Assembly. One Plaid Cymru AM, asked about the general differences between

Westminster and the Senedd, pointed out: „*even our Conservatives are nicer than most of the Conservatives in London*” (AM\_PC2, 54) while one of her party colleagues conceded that in Wales the Conservatives were “*Clearly the main opposition party*” (AM5\_PC, 32). A Liberal Democrat’s comment that the Conservatives – in contrast to his own party group, were inflexible and just taking on their own policy agenda,<sup>23</sup> gives some clue that actually just sticking to that set agenda might have made them trustworthy and reliably partners in the eyes of members of the governing party/ies.

### ***Liberal Democrats – more oppositional, less trustworthy***

The Liberal Democrats in both assemblies prided themselves in being different, allowing room for discussion and consensual decisions. However, their political philosophy might make it harder to take them into account as political partners, as one Scottish Conservative MSP pointed out:

“The Liberals are always problematical (...). They cannot make a decision, they bend in the wind; they will make up their mind on the basis of the last person they’ve spoken to. They cannot sort of say ‘right, that’s what we’re doing, we’ll stick to it’. (...) I think it goes off Liberalism. I think they at all times, want to be all things to all men – and you can’t do that” (MSP2\_Con, 6-8)

In particular their aim to demonstrate clashes between coalition partners in Wales<sup>24</sup> led to irritation by Plaid Cymru colleagues who perceived the small Liberal Democrat party group as „very oppositional” (AM2\_PC, 10) and brushed it away as “an irrelevance in Wales” with „very little intellectual coherence as far as their policies and identities are concerned” (AM5\_PC, 32).

### ***Scottish Labour – failing to convince***

While Conservatives and Liberal Democrats fared quite well in the SNP interviewee’s perception, the impression their Labour colleagues left in opposition was less convincing. One SNP MSP explained:

“The Labour party are still quite arrogant about what they think, ‘Well, we’ve always run Scotland so we should still run Scotland’ and haven’t really adapted to the idea of trying to get, having to give ground and work with others” (MSP4\_SNP, 6)

Several interviewees mentioned that the shock of not being in power anymore still had a heavy impact on Labour’s behaviour in parliament.<sup>25</sup> Though the party had entered its first session in opposition with the aim to pursue it’s own legislative programme by using private member bills, a non-partisan observer remarked, “*we’re half way through the session and we haven’t had anything like an alternative legislative programme from the Labour Party*” (MSP6\_clerk,16-17). Apart from the frequently mentioned fact of coming to terms with their new opposition status, the interviewees gave two other reasons for Labour’s less convincing performance in Opposition:

“Labour’s agenda is to out-do the SNP and, as a result, they’re less inclined to do things which might help support the SNP government getting things through that they would like to get through, even though it means that some of the things that

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<sup>23</sup> AM6\_Lib, 20.

<sup>24</sup> AM6\_Lib

<sup>25</sup> MSP5\_green, 38-40; MSP6\_clerk, 12-16; MSP1\_SNP8.

they would like to see the minority government doing don't happen because the SNP government are not prepared to do it because they wouldn't support the government as well. (...) Whereas the smaller political parties in here, particularly the Conservatives, don't have that 'we are the government' mindset therefore they are prepared to give and take a bit more." (MSP4\_SNP, 14)

"They have also been, I don't think it's too harsh to say, kind of out-manoeuvred because especially of the principle stance the Conservative Party has taken. The SNP Government has been able to build majorities on things much easier than it thought it might. The Labour Party is a Party which would be most inclined to oppose for opposition sake but when the other Parties have worked with the Government to secure particular policies, the Labour Party's position has not been as strong as it would have liked; so it struggled with all of these kind of issues and it hasn't really got round to pursuing its own agenda." (MSP6\_clerk, 16)

### **3.4 Party group interaction in- and outside parliament**

For most interviewees in both legislatures committee meetings were the most important place for actively scrutinizing the government and developing new policies.

#### **3.4.1. The influence of committees on parliamentary decision making**

Holyrood as well as the Senedd have highly developed committee cultures. The Scottish Parliament currently has seven Mandatory and seven Subject Committees that have between five and 15 members each and are set up to allow MSPs to scrutinize the work of the government and to examine proposed legislation with the help of external witnesses. In the National Assembly for Wales the government's actions are scrutinized in 13 Current Committees while planned legislation is assessed in five special Legislation Committees. The committee size ranges from a maximum of ten to a minimum of four members and the rather intimate setting provides an excellent platform for exchanging views and developing cooperative approaches relatively unbiased by partisan agendas, as several representatives highlighted:

"The Committees are important (...) because that's the kind of ... its almost the invisible side of the Parliament where the Parliament probably does act at its best so Parties do work together far more co-operatively in a Committee situation." (MSP9\_Lab, 28)

"Committees themselves are not whipped – or they shouldn't be whipped – in actuality they are whipped but there's a lot more scope within the committees for the committee members to come together than has been possible in the past" (MSP1\_SNP, 16)

In particular members of the opposition parties valued committee work highly as it allowed them a certain amount of influence on the government's policies, both through scrutinizing ministers directly and through winning over government backbenchers for opposition drafts:

"There are two routes, either through the committees where (...) the number of people you need to get on side is that much smaller and there's certainly plenty of cases where cross-party committees have produced reports, either with majority support pulling in one or two members from the government parties, or unanimous support. That, you know, are affecting government policy definitely, so quite a few of those in a constructive way with subject-based committees raising issues, making a series of recommendations in the usual way to

government and generating a lot of pressure on the government to accept those, so that's definitely one route and so from your social perspective I suppose the whipping of members in committees does not seem all that strong to me. By and large they seem to be given space to go as they want." (AM1\_clerk, 22)

"Committees are very valuable in the sense that the scrutiny that they carry out can be in depth and at length and, in that sense, Ministers are very much tested on their agenda. And secondly, the policy reviews that they carry out again are in depth and at length and often come up with conclusions on a cross-party basis which Ministers are happy to adapt. So I think committees are a very important part of this whole process" (AM8\_Lib, 16)

"On committee they [the members of the government] have to listen and on committee the votes are going to be closer just because the numbers are fewer so it only takes a couple of Labour potential rebels to say, "Well hang on, they've got a point here." to mean that opinion will be affected at the committee stage. And there are certainly examples of that happening so, yeah, I wouldn't say that we're without influence now, but we're not likely to defeat them on major issues." (AM7\_Con, 68).

"Another tactic would be to try and incorporate part of a committee's report so the committee would tend to be all party and if we can get elements, more elements incorporated in the committees report, it then, because that committee report is usually agreed all party/across party, its more difficult for the government to reject it, so there are two ways. There's one which is the more political way and about trying to force them to do it, but the more successful way is usually through committee reports." (AM3\_Con, 6)

However, many interviewees conceded that as the binding decisions are taken in the plenary, this does limit the committees' impact significantly.

"We thought that a lot of stuff would be played out in Committees but that hasn't really happened to the extent that we thought it would either, and I mean anecdotally I would say that the reason for that is the party Members seem to be concentrating on what goes on in the Chamber but also what goes on in the constituencies (...) so I think the Committees have been less of a feature than we thought they would be" (MSP6\_clerk, 30-31)

"I think if agreements are reached in the committees then that's fine but in terms of the actual chamber and actual business I think regardless of what went on in the committees, the government and the parties would have their view. And I think not for the first time committee members have had a view but we'd overturn it (...) so ultimately, decisions are made in the parliament not in the committee." (MSP1\_SNP, 18)

### **3.4.2. The Impact of the Media and Pressure Groups**

Getting the public involved in parliamentary decision making was one of the main targets when setting up the devolved assemblies. The aim to be visible to the electorate and to get the people involved manifests itself in the architecture of the assemblies, an extensive petition system, the public committee meetings, and the extensive visitor programmes the legislatures run for the public.

The Scottish Parliament has over the period of the last ten years made great efforts in order to involve the public in the parliamentary decision-making process and several MSPs acknowledged that both with regard to the Public Petitions Committee and with respect to involving NGOs this has been quite successful.<sup>26</sup> With

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<sup>26</sup> MSP8\_Lib, 58-62; MSP4\_SNP, 46.

regard to the wider public's interest into the legislature there are limits, however, as a Labour MSP pointed out:

"All the kind of the rhetoric about the Scottish Parliament is that it's going to be more open, inclusive and more influenced. To be fair I think that to some extent that's happened and it's certainly happened within the formal processes so you can't introduce a bill without having a big consultation about it, and then you have to ask people for their views on it and people can put in written evidence, and then various people who have given written evidence get called to give oral evidence, and all that happens in the Scottish Parliament before it ever gets debated in the Chamber, so that is better than the traditional way at Westminster (...) but you know to be realistic the vast majority of people are not involved in that, but I do think legislation in the Parliament's certainly a big opportunity for those who are involved in that policy area" (MSP9\_Lab, 68).

While the Scottish Parliament seems to be quite well embedded in a network of NGOs and QUANGOs that take an interest in Scottish politics, this applies to a far lesser extent to Wales. Several members of the Welsh Assembly pointed out that the civic society that takes an active interest in Welsh politics is still a relatively small one. In the past this has led to two occasions where none of the 60 assembly members had brought forward their name for the regular ballots for Members Measures and Members Legislative Competence Orders.<sup>27</sup> The main reason behind this apparent disinterest of assembly members to actively shape legislation is – as one opposition AM argued: *"It's an awful lot of work. It takes a lot of time. (...) Don't forget, in Westminster, when they put their names into the ballot, they'll get hundreds of lobby groups asking will you please introduce my bill. Here you have to write the bill practically when you put your name in the ballot and it's probably not the right way round to do it."* (AM3\_Con, 36-42). Adding to this is the very complex and hardly transparent way legislation is dealt with in the assembly that – in opinion of a Plaid Cymru AM would lead the public to *"stick their heads in buckets of sand and quietly weep because it's all so complicated"* (AM2\_PC, 44). There is still no Welsh national newspaper and the readership of the "Western Mail", the only print-media dealing with developments in the Assembly on a regular basis, is very much restricted to people shaping the policies within the assembly. Regarding television the situation appears to be slightly better, *"BBC does now give pretty serious coverage and so there are serious political programmes on the BBC in Wales. BBC journalists, based just here, so they do a pretty good job, but it's still small beer, and even though the BBC Wales covers it, lots of people in Wales have their TV aerials turned to England, you know, they don't see BBC Wales at all"* (AM3\_clerk, 50-57). This limited interest of the public in *"what happens here in the Chamber, in the 'Cardiff Bay Bubble'"* (AM8\_Lib, 24) was an issue raised by several interviewees<sup>28</sup> who highlighted that even though there have been some developments towards a civic society in Wales, this had its limit, as one AM stressed: *"The assembly government go out to consult, but let's not forget we're the small nation. The civic society is quite small, so those people that would respond tend to be limited. It tends to fall to the same sort of bodies all the time"* (AM3\_Con, 33-34).

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<sup>27</sup> On 11 June 2008 and 28 January 2009.

<sup>28</sup> For example, AM1\_clerk, 50; AM8\_Lib, 42.

## 4. Preliminary conclusions

The nature of this still ongoing research at the moment don't allow me to draw definite conclusions yet whether there are any valid relations between the socio-demographic, historic and cultural background of different party groups and their behaviour in parliament. This would require both a more detailed analysis of the specific parties' histories in their particular region and further interviews that help to overcome the problem of working on a comparatively small basis of qualitative data. What became evident, though, is that there are significant differences in the different party groups setting – both within one assembly and in the inter-parliamentary comparison of the legislatures in Scotland and Wales.

Furthermore, the interviews show that the party groups vary in their success when trying to influence the majority's decision-making. While in the current Scottish Parliament the Conservatives benefited from working alongside a minority government (to a lesser extent the Liberal Democrats, too); being in opposition seems to be much harder from a Labour perspective. Faced with a 2/3 majority of Labour and Plaid Cymru delegates the opposition parties in the Welsh Assembly naturally enjoy less influence. Still it seemed that it was again the Conservatives who were seen as more reliable and trustworthy partners when negotiating policy issues, whereas the Liberal Democrats enjoyed the reputation of being more oppositional.

### 4.1 The impact of party-specific factors

One key to explaining the different party groups' successes when trying to influence the majority's decision making might be a different concept of power that has its roots in particular party-cultures, the parties' different experience with power and the MSPs' /AMs' socialisation:

- **Labour (Scotland):** focused on re-gaining power; no willingness to compromise. This could be linked to the very homogenous appearance of the party, its top-down structure, and its strong ties to London. In particular the latter might have an impact as sticking to Westminster policies while focusing on Scotland creates a split that sometimes might be hard to bear. Moreover, the fact that Labour's delegates overall are rooted in firm structures (as party- or union-employees or members of the public service) could contribute to a rather in-flexible approach to the need to compromise.
- **Conservatives:** no chance to gain power in devolved assemblies and thus no danger for ruling party – they are willing and allowed to take a share/contribute. At the same time, it can be assumed that the Conservative's long-standing experience as the official Opposition in Westminster has generated a valuable source of expertise in how best to influence governmental draft bills. Having rather strong ties to Westminster would in this case work as an advantage for the party groups in Wales and Scotland as does the benefit of not actually having to deliver specific policies in London. At the same time the occupational background of many Conservative representatives as self-employed or private sector employees; solicitors, consultants, and farmers, highlights that this might be types of politicians that are used to sorting business quickly and efficiently with a hands-on approach.

- **Liberal Democrats:** unpredictable as to if they seek power or not. Their focus in both assemblies on criticising the government shows similarity to the behaviour of the Green party in Bavaria. This could be a consequence of the party's background in grass-root movements (as in Bavaria) and the party's relatively young history. It's plausible, that both factors contribute to a lesser degree of party-specific socialisation and a greater openness of its delegates to openly discuss different policy approaches. In a way it seems ironical that despite the federal set-up of the party they seem unable to focus on particular Welsh/Scottish electorate and despite having shared power in both assemblies did not manage to improve their share of seats or use the governing experience to their advantage.

## 4.2 The impact of regional factors

Taking into consideration that the devolved assemblies were deliberately set up as counter drafts to Westminster with the aim to involve the public in the decision making process to a great extent, it is surprising, that none of the opposition parties sought to make greater use of this by actively seeking to involve the media or the wider public – a strategy quite successfully pursued by the Green opposition party group in the Bavarian State Parliament. Taking the interviewee's points into account, the main reasons for this seem to be the underdeveloped media landscape in the devolved regions, in particular in Wales, the very recently invented and particularly complicated process of (acquiring) primary legislation in Wales, and the continued focus of pressure groups on Westminster as the main arena of partisan policy making.

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