

Wales – poll position

Public attitudes towards
Assembly elections



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The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. Our mission is to foster public confidence and participation by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process.

Wales – poll position

This report presents the findings of a research project undertaken by GfK NOP Social Research and the Institute of Welsh Politics at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

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Preface

Elections to the National Assembly for Wales (NAW) in 2007 will be different in a number of ways to elections held in 2003 and 1999. Firstly, the Assembly itself will acquire additional powers immediately after the elections in 2007. In a revision of its constitution, the Assembly will have more powers to make and amend legislation. Secondly, the Assembly will be able to promote to the public, at the 2007 elections, its powers and responsibilities, something it has previously been unable to do.

The Electoral Commission will be developing and co-ordinating public awareness and education campaigns in Wales. The Commission will also prepare and publish a report on the elections. To inform both of these exercises, the Commission has funded a research study better to understand public attitudes towards the NAW and the factors that might motivate people to vote in 2007.

The Commission is committed to a programme of research which investigates what motivates people to vote and what stops some people from voting. This research assists the Commission in developing, in discussion with other stakeholders, a clearly targeted programme of voter education. It is also used to inform the Commission's statutory reviews of the administration and conduct of elections.

This report presents the findings of a research project, undertaken by the Institute of Welsh Politics at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, and GfK NOP Social Research. The project involved a scoping study review of recent opinion research, a new survey and focus groups exploring public attitudes towards devolution, the Assembly and voting at Assembly elections. Overall responsibility for the report rests with the authors and it should be noted that the findings and conclusions are those of the authors and not of the Electoral Commission.

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This report covers a number of issues, including attitudes in Wales towards the Assembly and devolution, public understanding of the Assembly's role and responsibilities, factors affecting turnout, attitudes towards the Additional Member System, and the factors that might influence people to vote, or not to vote, at the 2007 Assembly elections.

The research demonstrates that, while many people are well disposed to the NAW, there remains a need to convey its powers, remit and responsibilities more effectively. The additional powers that the Assembly will acquire seem a better reflection of many people's aspirations for governance in Wales. Conveying what those powers will mean in practice, so that people know what they are voting for, will be a significant challenge.



Glyn Mathias
Electoral Commissioner
Chair of the *Wales – poll position*
research steering group
September 2006

Executive summary

The Electoral Commission appointed GfK NOP Social Research and the Institute of Welsh Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, to conduct a research study. The study aimed to improve understanding of public attitudes towards the National Assembly for Wales (NAW) and the factors that might motivate people to vote in 2007.

Turnout in NAW elections

A notable feature of the first two sets of elections to the NAW has been the relatively low level of voter participation. Turnout was 46% in 1999 and 38% in 2003. Our research for 2006 suggests that many people in Wales are well disposed towards the NAW, but that there are still challenges to be met in encouraging participation in the 2007 elections.

The most striking distinctions in electoral participation are those by age group. Younger people are least likely to vote in Assembly elections, with around 80% of registered voters aged 18–34 not voting in 2003. In the 2006 focus groups it was evident that younger voters were least engaged with politics and least interested in voting in Assembly elections. Indeed, many young people (half of our focus group of 18–24-year-olds in Ruthin) knew nothing of the NAW.

General attitudes towards politics and voting

Surveys conducted after the 1999 and 2003 Assembly elections reflected trends evident elsewhere in the UK, finding cynicism among the electorate. For instance, 67.5% of voters in 1999 agreed that 'parties are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions'.

Across the focus groups held in 2006, there was a feeling of a lack of interest in and disaffection with politics and voting. Key reasons given for this were:

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- a general lack of interest in politics and elections (particularly among those aged under 25)
- the widespread belief that politicians were dishonest and untrustworthy

These factors affect people's inclination to vote in Assembly elections as much as in any other elections in the UK.

Attitudes towards devolution

The 2006 survey indicates that a strong plurality of the public wish for devolution to be extended further. It also shows that 40% believe that 'Wales should remain part of the UK with its own elected Parliament which has law-making and taxation powers'. A minority (20%) believe that 'Wales should remain part of the UK without an elected Assembly'. However, research findings suggest that people's attitudes towards devolution seem to have little effect on their likelihood to vote.

Attitudes towards voting in Assembly elections

The academic literature on 'second-order elections'¹ indicates that, where people are less engaged by the electoral contest and believe there is less at stake, they are significantly less inclined to vote. There is direct evidence to

show that voters in Wales believe that Assembly elections are less important than general elections. In the 2006 quantitative survey, 16% felt that voting in Assembly elections made 'a great deal' of difference, compared with 25% for elections to the UK Parliament.

Awareness of and attitudes towards the NAW

Encouragingly, interest in the Assembly declared by survey respondents is fairly high. In our 2006 survey, 63% of respondents declared themselves to have either a great deal, quite a lot or some interest in the Assembly. Attitudes towards the NAW's impact were also positive, with 54% of respondents saying the Assembly has improved the way Wales is governed since 1999, and only 13% saying it has made it worse.

Throughout our primary research for 2006, however, it was clear that awareness of the remit, responsibilities and initiatives introduced by the Assembly did not extend throughout the whole population. When asked to name some of the responsibilities of the Assembly, over half said they could name something but a significant minority said they could not name any.

While a better informed minority was aware that certain initiatives in education and health (such as free school breakfasts and free eye tests for under-25s) had been passed by the Assembly, most were either unaware of these initiatives or did not connect them with the Assembly.

¹ Second-order elections are elections that are perceived by voters to have less importance than first-order elections for the major national elective offices, and thus are often used by voters to punish or reward the current nationally governing parties. Local and regional elections are usually considered second-order elections.

It was evident that this lack of awareness had affected people's propensity to vote in Assembly elections, and many felt that a clearer understanding of the Assembly's remit and responsibilities could help make the Assembly seem stronger and more relevant to them.

Awareness of and attitudes towards the voting system for Assembly elections

Among those in the 2006 focus groups who had voted in previous Assembly elections, there was awareness of the practicalities involved and how these differed from other elections. Many recalled receiving two different-coloured ballot papers – one containing candidates' names and one containing party names – and that they had submitted both ballots. Crucially, no one claimed to have found the system difficult to negotiate in practice, a view supported by the post-election survey for 2003.

As would be expected (few people generally have detailed knowledge of how electoral systems work), it was apparent from the 2006 research that understanding of the mechanics of the additional member system (AMS) was quite low. While the majority recognised that the voting system for Assembly elections was different from that used in general elections, few were able to describe how the system actually worked. Despite this low awareness of how AMS works, participants in the 2006 focus groups reflected findings of previous surveys in a strongly positive response to the use of some form of proportional representation to elect the Assembly.

Sources of awareness about the Assembly

It was quite clear throughout the focus groups that interest in and engagement with media coverage of the Assembly was quite limited. Many respondents had a low level of interest in politics and did not follow political coverage of any kind in the media, reflecting wider trends in the UK.

Crucially, under-25s remain most disengaged from media coverage of the NAW. Where younger people showed higher awareness of the Assembly than their peers, it was evident that this had been stimulated by discussions about the Assembly with well informed parents.

Encouragement to vote in the 2007 Assembly elections

There are challenges in encouraging people to participate in the forthcoming Assembly elections. These remain broadly similar to those identified by GfK NOP's research for the Electoral Commission prior to the 2003 NAW elections:

- Firstly, general feelings of political dissatisfaction and disengagement appear to be high, which has an impact on people's propensity to vote in NAW elections, as well as in general and local elections.
- Secondly, the Assembly is rarely seen as being powerful or relevant to people's lives. This can be attributed to low levels of awareness of the NAW's remit and

responsibilities, as well as the lack of recognition of the various initiatives that have been introduced through it since 1999.

In this context, our focus groups came up with ideas as to what they thought would encourage people to take part in the 2007 elections.

Suggestions included:

- better provision of basic information about the NAW, communicating its powers, remit and responsibilities more clearly
- effective advertising, reminding people of the Assembly elections in 2007 and ensuring that people are registered to vote

1 Introduction

The Electoral Commission contracted GfK NOP, working with the Institute of Welsh Politics at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, to undertake research to investigate public attitudes towards the National Assembly for Wales (NAW), examining understanding of its role and responsibilities and exploring the factors that might motivate people to vote in the 2007 elections. The project involved a scoping study of recent attitudinal surveys, followed by primary research, both qualitative and quantitative, among the Welsh electorate, and follows *Wales votes?*, a report published by the Electoral Commission in 2002, which also drew on research by GfK NOP and the Institute of Welsh Politics.

Project team and objectives

1.1 The research project team comprised:

- Michael Thompson, Associate Director, GfK NOP Social Research
- Gwenan Llwyd Evans, Research Consultant, GfK NOP Social Research/Walton Evans, Penarth, Vale of Glamorgan
- Tim Buchanan, Associate Director, GfK NOP Social Research
- Joy Mhonda, Senior Research Executive, GfK NOP Social Research
- Dr Roger Scully, Institute of Welsh Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth

1.2 The project team reported to a steering group comprising:

- Glyn Mathias, Electoral Commissioner
- Kay Jenkins, Head of the Electoral Commission's Wales Office
- Heulyn Gwyn, Principal Officer, the Electoral Commission's Wales Office
- Katy Knock, Senior Research Officer, the Electoral Commission
- William Reburn, Research Officer, the Electoral Commission

1.3 The objectives of this research were:

- to understand public attitudes towards the Assembly
- to establish and measure public understanding of the role and responsibilities of the Assembly

Table 1: Focus group make-up

Location	Quotas	Minority ethnic and other representation	Language used
South-east Cardiff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3–4 voted in 2003 • 3–4 intended to vote in 2007 Demographics: 25–44 C2DE	2 Black African/ Black Caribbean respondents attended	English
South-east Cardiff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3–4 voted in 2003 • 3–4 intended to vote in 2007 Demographics: 45–60 BC1	2 Welsh speakers* attended	English
South-west Llanelli	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not vote in 2003 • 3–4 intended to vote in 2007 Demographics: 18–21 C1C2	2 full-time students attended	English
South-west Llanelli	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3–4 voted in 2003 • 3–4 intended to vote in 2007 Demographics: 45–60 C1C2	–	English
North-east Ruthin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3–4 voted in 2003 • 3–4 intended to vote in 2007 Demographics: 25–44 BC1C2	2 Welsh speakers attended	English
North-east Ruthin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3–4 voted in 2003 • 3–4 intended to vote in 2007 Demographics: 18–24 C2DE	3 Welsh speakers attended	English
North-west Bangor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not vote in 2003 • 3–4 intended to vote in 2007 Demographics: 18–24 any SEG	All Welsh speakers	Welsh
North-west Bangor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3–4 voted in 2003 • 3–4 intended to vote in 2007 Demographics: 25–44 BC1	All Welsh speakers	Welsh

Notes: *For the purposes of this table, 'Welsh speakers' refers to people whose first language is Welsh.

The social class classifications used here represent the so-called middle class (ABC1) and the so-called working class (C2DE). People are assigned to a group on the basis of their occupation.

A total of 37 men and 33 women participated.

- to explore the potential motivators to people turning out in the Assembly elections
- to explore and measure public attitudes towards electoral systems and processes, including voting and registration

Method and sample

Scoping study

1.4 The scoping study for this research aimed to explore turnout among key sub-groups of the electorate and issues of interest to be investigated further in the quantitative and qualitative stages of the project. The scoping study drew on the following quantitative sources:

- Welsh Referendum Study 1997
- Welsh Assembly Election Study 1999
- Wales Life and Times surveys 2001 and 2003
- British Election Studies 2001 and 2005
- Electoral Commission's post-2003 election survey

1.5 The following qualitative studies were also used:

- Electoral Commission post-2003 focus groups
- Electoral Commission 2002 focus groups

Qualitative focus groups

1.6 Focus groups were conducted in order to complement the scoping study and to investigate further some of the issues it identified. A total of eight focus groups were

carried out with the general public across Wales. Two groups were conducted in each of the following locations, in order that the opinions of people in south-east, south-west, north-east and north-west Wales were reflected:

- Cardiff
- Llanelli
- Ruthin
- Bangor

1.7 Each focus group lasted two hours with between seven and 10 respondents attending each. A total of 70 people participated in the qualitative stage. All focus groups were conducted between 8 May and 11 May 2006 by Michael Thompson (Associate Director) and Gwenan Llwyd Evans (Research Consultant) for GfK NOP Social Research. Table 1 opposite shows the exact make-up of each focus group.

1.8 Respondents were recruited on the basis of whether or not they were registered to vote. Of the 70 people who participated in the focus groups, 56 were registrants, while 14 were either non-registrants or did not know whether they were registered or not. At least one person who either was not registered or did not know whether they were registered attended each group.

Quantitative research

1.9 The project used quantitative public opinion research to explore and measure public attitudes towards the Assembly, politics and voting, understanding of the Assembly's role and responsibilities, and intention to vote in

the Assembly elections. Some 1,000 quantitative interviews were carried out with a demographically representative sample of residents aged 18 and over in Wales. A questionnaire equivalent to a 10-minute interview was developed by GfK NOP and the Electoral Commission. Interviews were conducted using computer-assisted telephone interviewing.

1.10 Quotas were set for age, gender and working status, and the data was weighted on age, gender, working status, social class and region, to adjust the sample to reflect the population of Wales. Fieldwork took place between 25 May and 7 June 2006.

1.11 Postcode sectors within Wales were identified and a random sample of telephone numbers was obtained for each postcode area. Respondents were asked to confirm their postcode prior to the interview to ensure that only residents living in Wales were interviewed.

2 Main findings

This chapter explores turnout at previous elections to the NAW, the Welsh public's attitudes towards politics and voting, devolution, the NAW and the voting system for NAW elections, and where Welsh people get information about the NAW from.

Turnout

2.1 Electoral turnout has been a subject of growing academic interest, with several studies exploring the topic broadly across many established democracies (Franklin 2004, Wattenberg 2002). This research indicates that there has been some, albeit relatively modest, trend across established democracies towards declining electoral participation. This trend appears to have begun in the 1980s, and increased slightly in subsequent years, and to be associated both with broad societal changes (notably a decline in the influence of organisations that would politically mobilise and educate citizens) and also with a specific decline in adherence to a 'duty to vote'.

2.2 But we should also be aware that the most detailed examination of electoral participation in the UK (Clarke et al 2004, Chapters 7 and 8) has concluded that low and declining election turnouts – such as that experienced in the 2001 UK Parliamentary general election – can mainly be attributed to election-specific factors, such as the lack of viable alternatives to the governing party, and widespread perceptions of an uncompetitive election. Such conclusions are also supported by much of the comparative literature (Franklin 2004).

Turnout in NAW elections

2.3 A notable feature of the first two sets of elections to the National Assembly for Wales (NAW) has been the relatively low level of voter participation. Turnouts of around 46% in 1999 and 38% in 2003 were recorded.

2.4 Effective action to remedy low levels of voter turnout will be possible only if it can be built on an accurate understanding of the reasons for electoral participation and non-participation. This report is concerned with building such an understanding. Firstly, it will document the scale of the problem of low participation in NAW elections, placing turnout rates in these contests in the broader context of recent election turnouts across the UK. Following on from this, it will explore the possible causes of low participation rates in the NAW elections and examine any developments in people's attitudes towards voting in NAW elections since 2003.

Documenting turnout rates

2.5 Table 2 shows the levels of electoral participation recorded in the 1999 and 2003 NAW elections. To aid in placing these turnout

rates in a broader context, the table also displays figures for turnouts in other major elections since 1999 – those for the Scottish Parliament, UK Parliamentary general elections, European Parliament elections and also local elections in Wales.

2.6 What the table shows, very clearly, is that turnout at NAW elections has been low, even by the rather modest standards set by participation rates in other recent elections in the UK. Participation rates for the two NAW elections have been markedly lower than those for the Scottish devolved elections held simultaneously, and also considerably lower than the turnout rates recorded in the last two UK Parliamentary general elections (even though, in historical terms, the turnouts in the 2001 and 2005 general elections were low). The level of participation in the 2003 NAW elections was also lower than that recorded in Wales in

Table 2: Turnout rates in recent elections, UK

Election	Turnout (%)
Scottish Parliament, 1999	59
National Assembly for Wales, 1999	46
Welsh local elections, 1999	50
European Parliament, Wales, 1999	28
European Parliament, UK, 1999	24
UK Parliamentary general election, 2001	59
Scottish Parliament, 2003	48
National Assembly for Wales, 2003	38
Welsh local elections, 2004	42
European Parliament, Wales, 2004	42
European Parliament, UK, 2004	38

Source: Institute of Welsh Politics.

the (simultaneously conducted) 2004 European Parliament elections and local elections. Therefore, there can be little doubt that electoral participation rates for NAW elections so far must be regarded as disappointing.

2.7 These low levels of electoral participation are particularly striking for several reasons:

- Historically, Wales has been the part of Britain most inclined to participate in elections, with turnouts typically being somewhat higher than in either England or Scotland.
- The AMS system used for NAW elections has, in cross-national comparative research, been found to be associated with slightly higher election turnouts than the single-member plurality system (commonly known as ‘first past the post’) used in UK Parliamentary general elections.
- Considerable efforts have been made in recent years to update the process of electoral registration, and to make it easier (through measures such as widening availability of postal votes) for people to participate in elections (Electoral Commission 2005).
- The Electoral Commission made significant efforts to raise awareness of the NAW and to encourage electoral participation prior to the 2003 election (Electoral Commission 2003).

2.8 As Table 3 shows, prior to the 2003 NAW elections, 51% of respondents said they were ‘certain to vote’, while in the quantitative survey carried out for this research only 41% stated that they were ‘certain to vote’ in the NAW

elections scheduled for 2007. (Clearly, people’s propensity to overstate their likely voting behaviour needs to be taken into account in interpreting these figures – in 2003, only 38% actually did vote.) Similarly, while in 2003 8% said they were ‘certain not to vote’, in 2006 this increased to 11%.

Type of election

2.9 There was clear evidence in the focus groups that people’s attitudes to voting depended on the type of election. In all groups, the consensus of opinion was that general elections were most important and the majority stated that they were more likely to vote in these than in other types of election. There were two main reasons for this:

- General elections involved voting for the UK government, which was perceived to have more power and a more pronounced effect on Wales than other elected institutions.
- There was a greater familiarity with UK political figures and issues, due to more extensive media coverage.

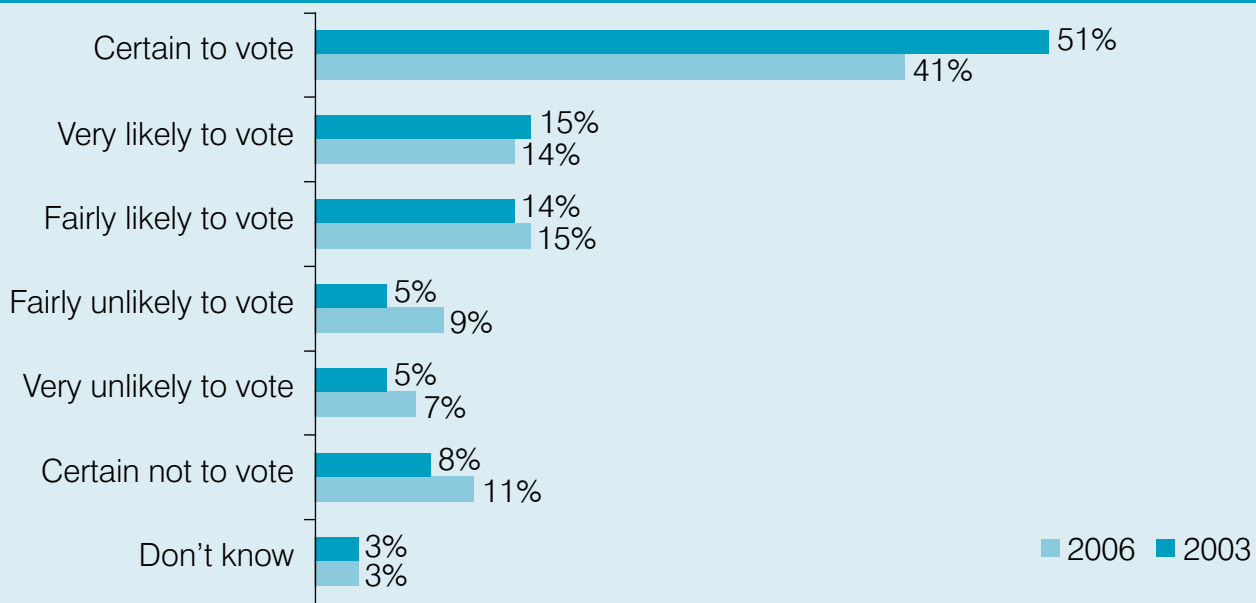
You do think more of the general election, don’t you? It’s the important one for London. It affects more things: taxes, the cost of petrol, all that.

Ruthin, 25–44

When there’s a general election, because the news comes from London, the Welsh parties don’t get the same attention, you don’t get the whole picture.

Bangor, 25–44

Table 3: Future voting intention for the NAW elections



Base: All (unweighted 1,000, 2006). All registered to vote or don't know (unweighted 1,450, 2003). Sources: 2006 GfK NOP/The Electoral Commission, 2003 GfK NOP/The Electoral Commission.

2.10 Voting in local elections was widely seen as next in importance to the general election. Primarily, this was because local elections were seen as having a significant impact on local areas and individuals. Furthermore, many of those who had voted in local elections claimed that they were less centred round political parties. This was often viewed positively, as it was seen to place greater emphasis on individual candidates and single issues.

particularly so outside Cardiff, where many felt it was rather distant, both geographically and in terms of its effect on their lives.

I always vote in the national election but I never vote for the Assembly. I wouldn't know who they are. I don't know what their policies are, I don't know what they stand for, so I don't bother to vote.

Ruthin, 25–44

2.11 In keeping with the turnout figures for 1999 and 2003, NAW elections were seen as being less important than general or local elections. Across the qualitative research sample, there was a lack of enthusiasm for the NAW and a strong sense of disaffection with it. This was

2.12 It is also notable from the figures reported in Table 2 that, while there has been much discussion of declining electoral participation in recent years, both the European election in 2004 and the 2005 general election saw some increase in turnout rates. And it should further

Table 4: Participation and socio-demographic characteristics, 1999 and 2003

	% non-voters, 1999	% non-voters, 2003
Gender		
Male	42	51
Female	43	50
Age		
18–24	69	74
25–34	59	75
35–44	48	54
45–54	34	49
55–64	33	38
65+	29	28
Social class*		
Salariat	34	53
Routine non-manual	40	49
Petty bourgeoisie	42	39
Foremen/technicians	41	51
Working class	52	56
Welsh speaking		
Yes, fluent	31	38
Yes, not fluent	40	46
No	45	54
Place of birth		
Wales	42	49
Outside Wales	44	56
Identity		
Welsh/more Welsh	40	49
Equal Welsh and British	41	51
British/more British	48	50
Electoral region		
North Wales	44	48
Mid and West Wales	39	48
South Wales West	37	51
South Wales Central	42	52
South Wales East	50	54

Note: *The standard scheme for classifying respondents' social class (the A, B, C1, C2, D and E scheme) used in most commercial surveys is primarily income-related. However, much academic work in the last two decades or so uses an alternative scheme, the Goldthorpe-Heath classification, whereby respondents are classified into five categories (Salariat, Routine non-manual, Petty bourgeoisie, Foremen/technicians, and Working class) based on economic interests rather than on income or wealth levels. For a more detailed explanation of the differences between the two classification schemes, see Heath et al (1985, pp.13–16).

Sources: 1999 and 2003 post-election surveys.

Table 5: Participation and socio-demographic characteristics, 1999 and 2003

	% non-voters, 1999	% non-voters, 2003
Education level		
Degree	28	45
HE degree*	40	48
A level	48	54
Other UK	48	58
No qualifications	43	47
Housing tenure		
Owns	40	46
Rents (local authority)	48	62
Rents (other)	56	69
TV viewing		
BBC1 Wales	37	49
BBC1 other	44	56
Party identification		
Conservative	41	47
Labour	47	50
Liberal Democrat	28	49
Plaid Cymru	25	25
No party identification	72	80

Note: *HE degree includes anyone who has undertaken some higher education below degree level, such as completing a diploma or part of a degree course.

Sources: 1999 and 2003 post-election surveys.

be noted that the 2003 devolved elections occurred at a time when – due to the UK's involvement in the Iraq war – levels of political interest and activism among the general public appeared to be particularly high, and one might have expected this to have helped raise electoral participation.

Who votes in NAW elections and who doesn't?

2.13 An invaluable starting point for examining electoral participation is to document who votes and who does not. This is important both because it allows us to identify any social groups that are being disproportionately excluded from the electoral process and also because it may point to reasons for low or declining participation.

2.14 Data from the major post-election surveys conducted by the Institute of Welsh Politics in 1999 and 2003 allow us to analyse electoral participation according to a variety of social characteristics. Table 4 shows the percentage of respondents under various social categories who reported themselves as not having voted in 1999 and 2003.²

2 As with all such academic surveys, reported levels of non-participation in our surveys were lower than those actually recorded. There are three main reasons for this: first, that official election turnout levels are always somewhat understated, due to redundancy in the official register; second, that a small number of respondents are reluctant to admit to not voting; and third, that those individuals more willing to participate in such a survey are also more likely to have voted in the first place.

2.15 The first thing to observe about the findings shown in Table 5 is the striking similarity in the patterns shown for 1999 and 2003. While electoral participation in NAW elections declined among just about all groups across the two elections, patterns of participation among social groups were (with the exception of national identity) essentially the same in the two years: a notable finding, and perhaps somewhat surprising given the changing map of public attitudes to devolution during this time period.

Gender

2.16 There are some social categories for which we see essentially no differences at all in turnout. One is gender, where men and women are equally likely to have participated in the two devolved elections. This was also evident across the focus groups, in which there was little distinction in the inclinations to vote in NAW elections between men and women.

National identity

2.17 Another category for which we see essentially no differences in turnout, by 2003, is national identity, with those considering themselves to be primarily or exclusively 'British' being no more or less likely to vote than those seeing themselves as more or exclusively 'Welsh'.³ Here we do see a modest change since 1999, when British identifiers had been less likely to vote.

³ This finding relates to a survey question asking respondents to place themselves on a five-point scale, the options being: 'Welsh', 'More Welsh than British', 'Equally British and Welsh', 'More British than Welsh' and 'British, not Welsh'.

Age

2.18 The most striking distinctions in electoral participation are those by age group. The pattern observed is a fairly standard one, with younger age cohorts being the least likely to vote, and electoral participation increasing steadily with age. However, while the patterns observed are as might be expected, the extent of the differences are very stark: once we correct the data reported in Table 4 for over-reporting of turnout, we are left with the conclusion that around four out of five registered voters among the large cohort of voters aged between 18 and 34 did not use their vote in the 2003 devolved elections.

2.19 The quantitative research for 2006 shows this trend continuing, with those aged 45 and over more certain to vote than those aged between 18 and 34 (49% versus 27%). Clearly, any effort to raise electoral participation in the devolved elections must focus heavily on these younger voters.

2.20 This finding was strongly borne out by the focus groups, and is discussed later in the report. Younger voters (particularly those under 25) were least engaged with politics and showed least interest in voting in Assembly elections. Indeed, a sizeable number within this age group had never heard of the NAW.

I have just never been interested and I don't watch much TV, so I know nothing about it really, so I am never going to be interested to go and vote.

Ruthin, 18–24

Social class

2.21 Differences between social classes are less pronounced, with turnout remaining fairly similar between 1999 and 2003, although there was a marked rise in non-voting by the salariat from 1999 to 2003. This is a rather encouraging finding: working class voters do not appear to be disproportionately disinclined to participate.

Language differences

2.22 However, greater differences appear when we consider language differences. There is a consistent discrepancy across the two elections, with non-Welsh speakers less involved in the elections. Given widely expressed desires that the NAW should represent all citizens in Wales, it is of some concern that an important cultural marker like language should appear to be related to voting turnout.

Place of birth

2.23 Place of birth appears only modestly related to voting participation, although those born in Wales are somewhat more likely to vote. Similarly, distinctions by region are also fairly small, and particularly in 2003. While turnout is somewhat higher in more traditionally 'Welsh' areas (those identified as such by authors such as Balsom [1984]⁴), differences are small. However, the focus groups show that understanding of the NAW – its role, remit and

responsibilities – is higher in Cardiff, with people in the capital having a sense of attachment to and affinity with it that is not apparent elsewhere.

Housing type

2.24 Greater distinctions in electoral turnout appear in relation to housing type, with owner-occupiers more inclined to vote. This is not an unusual finding – in the UK, at least, those renting tend to have more shallow social roots, and thus score lower on many measures of social involvement, of which electoral participation is only one – but it is somewhat worrying that the differences in rates of participation by housing type increased between 1999 and 2003.

Consumption of television

2.25 Another social distinction that Table 5 illustrates relates to the consumption of television. Previous work (e.g. Wyn Jones and Trystan 1999) has talked of an 'information deficit' in Welsh politics, deriving from a long-standing practice of many people in Wales – according to some estimates, up to 30% of the entire population – to tune their television aerials to English-based transmitters. With very little coverage of the devolution referendum on, for example, Granada or BBC1 West, turnout was appreciably lower among voters who did not watch Wales-based broadcasters on a regular basis. These patterns were maintained in both 1999 and 2003, with those who viewed BBC1 Wales more likely to vote than those watching other BBC1 regional broadcasts.

4 Balsom's 'Three Wales Model' divided up the country into British Wales (mainly areas in East Wales, although also Pembrokeshire), Welsh Wales (largely South Wales around the valleys), and Y Fro Gymraeg (areas in the North and West with high levels of Welsh speakers).

2.26 However, the focus groups do show that this barrier may have been overcome by technological developments. Wales has one of the highest take-up rates for digital television in the UK and access to stations covering Welsh politics appears to be wider than it may have been in the past. Nevertheless, despite enhanced access, it would not seem that people are necessarily more likely to follow Welsh politics on television than they were previously (see paragraphs 2.125–2.127 for more detail).

Party identification

2.27 The final variable considered in Table 5 is party identification – whether or not survey respondents indicated that they had a long-standing sense of identifying with a particular party, or with none. The most striking distinction here is between those with no party identity and those who do identify with a party; perhaps unsurprisingly, those least motivated to participate are those without a stable party attachment.

2.28 This is supported by the focus group findings. While only a minority of younger focus group respondents perceived voting as a duty, many of those who did located their sense of obligation in affiliation to a particular party.

My father was a Labour man and he never let me get away with not voting. You always turned out for every election and I still do.

Ruthin, 25–40

Reasons for not voting in NAW elections

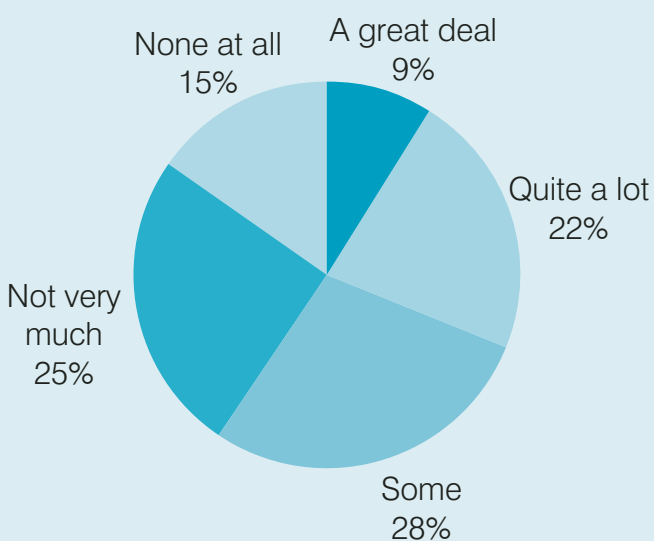
2.29 GfK NOP's previous report (Electoral Commission 2002), investigating attitudes towards participation in NAW elections, drew on both qualitative focus group evidence and quantitative analysis of survey data to assess why voter turnout had been lower in the first devolved elections in Wales than in other elections. This report concluded that, while there was much evidence that low turnout could be linked to general attitudes to politics (lack of interest among some, and alienation and/or cynicism among others), and also to perceptions that the devolved Assembly lacked power (and hence its elections were less important than other polls), there was very little evidence to indicate that low turnout was prompted by a widespread and active antipathy to the devolved institution. However, it may well be that, with the passage of time, attitudes (and their related behaviours) have changed. The research in this report will therefore investigate five key issues concerning participation in NAW elections:

- general attitudes to politics and voting
- attitudes towards devolution
- attitudes towards voting in Assembly elections
- awareness of and attitudes towards the Assembly
- awareness of and attitudes towards the voting system for Assembly elections

General attitudes towards politics and voting

2.30 The people of Wales are subject to broader currents in the public mood towards politics that can be observed across the UK and even internationally. Among the more obvious general trends are a decline in public inclination to participate in elections and public and vocal cynicism towards politicians and many of the traditional mechanisms of democratic politics. In the quantitative research for 2006 shown in Table 6, 25% of respondents stated that they had not very much interest in politics, while 15% said they had no interest at all. In comparison, just under a third of respondents said that they had a great deal or quite a lot of interest in politics (9% and 22% respectively).

Table 6: Interest in politics



Base: All (unweighted 1,000).

Source: 2006 GfK NOP/The Electoral Commission.

2.31 These attitudes do not necessarily indicate that general public interest in politics per se is in decline: much of the public now is not interested in politics, but that was also the case 20, 30 or 40 years ago, and some detailed studies argue strongly that examination of trends over time do not indicate a decline in general public interest (Clarke et al 2004). However, it does appear incontrovertible that there has been a decline in public deference to politicians and in the tendency to regard electoral participation as a duty for citizens, and that such attitudes are at least somewhat related to declining electoral turnouts.

2.32 Surveys conducted after the 1999 and 2003 Assembly elections reflected trends evident elsewhere in the UK, finding cynicism among the electorate. For instance, the 1999 survey found 67.5% of voters agreeing with the proposition that 'Parties are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions', with 20.2% disagreeing. By 2003 77% agreed with this proposition, and only 11.2% disagreed. Thus, it is unsurprising that the investigation of Wyn Jones and Scully (2004) and that reported by the Electoral Commission (2003) concluded that general political attitudes have contributed considerably towards low turnouts at NAW elections.

2.33 Throughout the qualitative focus groups in 2006, there was strong evidence of a general feeling of disinterest and disaffection with politics and voting at all levels: UK, national and local. Three key reasons were given for this:

- general lack of interest in politics and elections

- widespread perceptions that politicians are dishonest
- lack of knowledge about different political parties, their aims, beliefs and values

2.34 With regard to the first of these, many admitted that they were simply not interested in politics and, as a result, claimed they had no inclination to vote. This current of opinion was strongest in, but was not limited to, younger respondents (18–24). A consequence of this attitude was the apathy frequently apparent in people’s voting behaviour. Many stated that, when it came to election day, they simply could not be bothered to vote or did not have time to get to their polling station.

Because I work long days, the last thing I want to do is go off to the polling station and start voting. You just want to go home by that time. I know you can do a postal vote but that is just a hassle.

Ruthin, 24–44

Perceptions of parties and politicians

2.35 The view that politicians were dishonest and untrustworthy came across very strongly in the 2006 focus groups. While MPs in general were strongly criticised in this regard, a number of examples of the perceived dishonesty of Welsh politicians were also cited. These included widely known news stories as well as local incidents.

When there’s an election they promise the earth, then as soon as they’re in they forget.

Bangor, 25–44

Everybody has a vote, people died to give us the vote – it’s important, but the sleaze and corruption now is unbelievable.

Cardiff, 45–60

You have got them on TV saying they are going to do this or that, and then when they win they don’t do anything that they said they were going to do. So you don’t know whether to believe them or not because they go against what they have said. It don’t make me want to vote or anything. What is the point of voting if they are not going to do what they said?

Llanelli, 18–21

Lack of knowledge

2.36 It was evident that many were also put off voting by their lack of knowledge of the different political parties and their inability to distinguish their aims, beliefs and values. This was particularly strong among younger voters (18–24), who had virtually no awareness of the traditional differences between the Labour and Conservative parties and often seemed unaware of the main aims of Plaid Cymru.

Leave it for the old dads. They know what they’re on about, don’t they? If I voted, I wouldn’t even know who I voted for. I would just close my eyes and pick one and it won’t make any difference. The old dads, they have been alive for ages, so they know who are the best people to have.

The main reason I wouldn't vote is because I would want to know information about each party. Who stands for what and what are they going to do for us?

Llanelli, 18–21

2.37 Most older voters (particularly those over the age of 40) had a better understanding of the traditional differences between political parties. However, there was a strong feeling among this group that as the major parties became increasingly similar, their core values were harder to define. Many claimed that the lack of definition and clarity between parties resulting from this had put them off voting. The perception of an increasingly homogenised political landscape led some to claim that voting for any one party made little difference to the way in which they were represented (whether at UK, national or local level).

You used to know what Labour was and what the Tories were – it's not like that anymore.

Bangor, 25–44

At the last general election, I didn't really want to vote, but at the last minute I did go out and vote because I always have since I was 18, but if there had been a box saying 'I don't want to vote for any of these', I'd have ticked that.

Cardiff, 45–60

Voting as a civic duty

2.38 In the focus groups in 2006, only a small minority of respondents felt obliged to vote, perceiving it as a social duty. In most cases,

these respondents were over 40 and claimed to vote in all elections. Many of these people located their sense of obligation in family/ community tradition or in affiliation to a particular party.

It was tradition in our home. My father never let me get away with not voting.

Cardiff, 45–60

I think, because I'm a woman, I think about all the people who went to all that trouble to get the vote. It's the least I can do to turn out.

Bangor, 25–44

Attitudes towards devolution

2.39 Given the very marginal endorsement to the very idea of devolution given by the September 1997 referendum,⁵ it may be inferred that many of those opposed to the idea of devolution might have chosen to express their opposition by refusing to participate in the election of the new institution. In the 1999 post-election survey, an open-ended question probing respondents' reasons for not voting found some evidence in favour of this hypothesis, such as the following responses from a Labour identifier:

I didn't agree with the Assembly and so I refused to vote.

And similar sentiments from a Conservative identifier who also did not vote:

Enough government in London. We do not need another.

⁵ In 1997, 50.1% of Welsh people turned out to vote in the devolution referendum. Of these, 50.3% voted in favour of an assembly, while 49.7% voted against.

2.40 However, while it will always be possible to find some voices for such opinions, it is far less clear that antipathy to devolution serves as a satisfactory explanation for the low turnouts experienced in NAW elections. In the 1999 post-election survey, only 8% of those who failed to vote offered hostility towards the Assembly as an explanation of their non-participation; and by 2003, only 3.6% of non-voters were offering a similar justification. And the 1999 post-election survey found that those who had voted 'No' in the 1997 referendum were no more likely to fail to vote in 1999 than those who had voted 'Yes'.

2.41 Across the 2006 focus groups, the referendum was often a dim and distant event in people's political memories. Many struggled either to remember exactly what devolution meant or to connect devolution as a concept with the NAW.

2.42 For most, devolution was a difficult and rather abstract concept and only those who were more politically engaged/knowledgeable were able to explain it adequately. Understanding of devolution was lowest among those under the age of 25, who had virtually no

awareness of the debate that had preceded the formation of the National Assembly in 1999.

2.43 However, despite these difficulties in understanding, most focus group respondents accepted the NAW as a permanent feature of the political landscape, while only one or two respondents were, in principle, still opposed to devolution.

I'm all for devolution, so I'll go and vote because if everybody stops voting it'll all fall apart. At least we've got that little bit of power and we can always get more.

Cardiff, 25–44

I didn't agree with it when it was set up and I don't agree with it now, and I don't vote for something I don't believe in.

Cardiff, 45–60

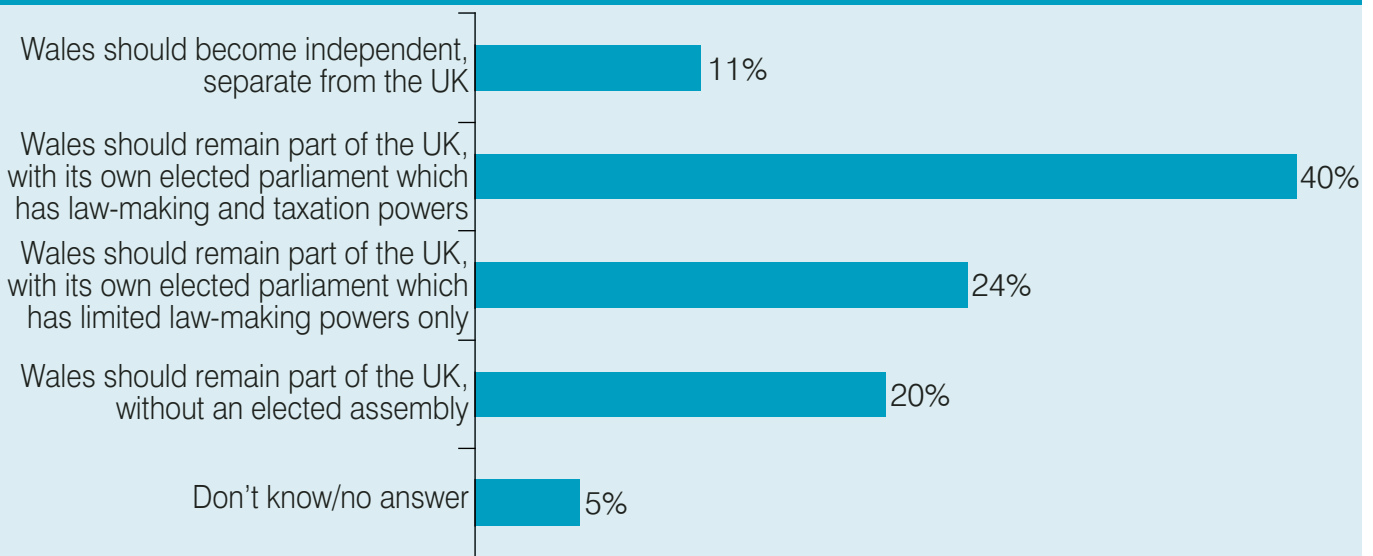
2.44 The results in Table 7 (from a basic question regarding constitutional preference that has been asked consistently in post-election and post-referendum surveys since 1997) indicate that opposition to devolution in Wales has halved in the period since the referendum,

Table 7: Constitutional preferences (%) in Wales, 1997–2003

Constitutional preference	1997	1999	2001	2003
Independence	14.1	9.6	12.3	13.9
Parliament	19.6	29.9	38.8	37.8
Assembly	26.8	35.3	25.5	27.1
No elected body	39.5	25.3	24.0	21.2
Number of respondents	641	1,173	1,044	935

Sources: 1997 post-referendum survey; 1999, 2001 and 2003 post-election surveys.

Table 8: Views about devolution in Wales



Base: All (unweighted 1,000).

Source: 2006 GfK NOP/The Electoral Commission.

while a strong plurality of the public actually wish for devolution to be extended further.

2.45 GfK NOP's 2006 survey shows this trend continuing (Table 8), with 40% believing that 'Wales should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has law-making and taxation powers'. A minority (20%) believe that 'Wales should remain part of the UK, without an elected assembly'. However, research findings suggest that people's attitudes towards devolution seem to have little effect on their likelihood to vote.

2.46 Furthermore, 58% of respondents to the 2006 quantitative survey stated that they would be more likely to vote in Assembly elections if

'the NAW was given much greater powers to change things that shape people's daily lives'.

2.47 It would be rather odd to attribute low (and falling) electoral participation to hostility to devolution at precisely the time when that hostility is diminishing.⁶ It is thus unsurprising that the most detailed examination of turnout at the two NAW elections concluded that antipathy to devolution was not a substantial factor in explaining electoral participation (Wyn Jones and Scully 2004).

⁶ A further point to note is that turnout rates do not differ greatly among those opposed to devolution compared with other citizens. The 2003 post-election survey found reported non-voting among those indicating opposition to devolution to be at 54%, compared with 49% for those favouring one of the other constitutional options (assembly, parliament or independence).

2.48 On the contrary, where it was understood, the idea of devolution frequently provoked negative comparisons between the NAW and the Scottish Parliament within the focus groups. The majority were unhappy that the powers of the NAW were relatively weak and that it did not have the perceived independence of the Scottish Parliament.

I don't understand why we're different from Scotland, why we have to ask London for everything.

We're a toothless dragon at the moment, aren't we?

Bangor, 25–44

2.49 Accordingly, many believed that, ideally, the Assembly should possess increased powers,⁷ in order to make it more relevant and responsive to the Welsh people.

I do feel quite proud that we have got our own parliament. But at the same time, I feel a bit frustrated that it concentrates on south Wales and it is a bit of a talking shop. It votes on things but it can't make laws. It doesn't have tax-raising powers. We can't do anything fundamentally different from the UK, even if everyone in Wales voted for one party and that party was totally, radically different to the UK in its policies.

Ruthin, 25–44

I think they should give the Welsh Assembly more power to do more in Wales.

I think it is good that we have got our own Assembly and things, because, at the end of the day, if we were just part of England then I don't think we would have much of a say. So I think it is good that we can have our own say and everything.

Llanelli, 18–21

2.50 Nevertheless, it should be noted that some focus group respondents did object to any increase in the NAW's powers for the following reasons:

- disillusion with its achievements to date
- concern about the potential increase in government bureaucracy and cost to the Welsh taxpayer
- opposition to devolution in principle

They're not seen to be giving us value for money, all these junkets they go on.

Cardiff, 45–60

It is a waste of money, because think how much they are paying out in Cardiff in wages and you could just keep it all in one [i.e. have all government based in London] and not have so many people for a start.

Llanelli, 18–21

⁷ Focus group participants were not probed on the provisions of the Government of Wales Bill which was being debated in Parliament when this research was undertaken.

2.51 When questioned as to the advantages and disadvantages of devolution since 2003, focus group respondents tended to focus on the following issues:

- education
- health
- public transport
- political accountability

2.52 With regard to education, the general view was that things had improved since 1999. There was common awareness of various changes that had been made in Wales, including the introduction of learning support grants for students and the measures to prevent top-up fees, the abolition of SATs in schools and the introduction of free school meals for primary school children. All of these measures were very positively received. However, they were rarely connected spontaneously with the Assembly or the Welsh Assembly Government and when this was revealed, many respondents were surprised.

In university, people from Wales get extra loans. I don't know much about it, but if stuff like that is going on then, yes, it is good.

Llanelli, 18–21

2.53 No improvement was perceived in the health service. On the contrary, most felt that the provision of healthcare had declined since 1999. In particular, complaints were made (especially in Ruthin and Bangor) about hospitals closing down and the increasing centralisation of healthcare, with more and

more specialist departments being moved to large urban hospitals. There was also concern about the possibility of differences emerging in the standard of service between Welsh and English hospitals.

If they cock it up, we could end up with a completely different NHS system to England. Might be better, might be worse.

Cardiff, 45–60

2.54 As far as public transport was concerned, no one felt things had changed much, for better or worse, since devolution. There were frequent complaints, especially from those living in rural locations (outside Llanelli, Bangor and Ruthin), that bus services were still too infrequent and out of the way.

The bus routes from Ruthin are non-existent. If you go to Wrexham, and I go twice a week, you can see no benefits at all.

Ruthin, 25–44

2.55 Political accountability was only mentioned by those respondents who were more politically knowledgeable. They thought that accountability in Wales had improved since devolution, given that locally elected representatives (rather than the Westminster-based Welsh Office) now made decisions about Wales and that these decisions were open to greater debate and public scrutiny than previously.

Attitudes towards voting

2.56 The academic literature on ‘second-order elections’ (SOEs) (e.g. van der Eijk and Franklin 1996) has pointed to a persistent tendency, across virtually all countries, for election turnouts to be lower in elections other than ‘first-order’ contests for the major national elective offices. A highly plausible explanation for low turnouts at NAW elections, therefore, is that these polls fall victim to the same phenomenon that has long been witnessed in local council and European Parliament elections: where people are less engaged by the electoral contest, and believe there is less at stake, they are significantly less inclined to turn out to vote. Moreover, the SOE literature also suggests a plausible reason for the fall in turnout experienced between 1999 and 2003: this looks very similar to the trends seen in most countries regarding turnout levels in European Parliament elections, where there is usually a ‘novelty’ effect in the first election after a state

has joined the EU, with participation rates dropping thereafter (Franklin 2001).

Attitudes to voting in NAW elections

2.57 There is direct evidence that voters in Wales believe that NAW elections are less important than UK Parliamentary general elections. Both the 1999 and 2003 post-election surveys contained comparable questions regarding whether respondents believed that it ‘makes a difference who wins’ in these respective electoral contests. Results from these questions are displayed in Table 9. While the differences between the two levels are not enormous, they do nonetheless show a distinct difference, with general elections rated the more important in both 1999 and 2003.

2.58 These perceptions would seem to be increasing. In the quantitative research for 2006 as shown in Table 10, 16% of respondents felt that voting for the NAW made no difference (compared with 15% for Westminster and 14%

Table 9: ‘Make a difference who wins?’ 1999 and 2003

Response	NAW elections		UK Parliamentary general elections	
	1999	2003	1999	2003
A great deal	24.6	16.6	28.8	23.5
Quite a lot	23.2	26.3	28.0	29.0
Some	19.7	19.5	15.9	15.4
Not very much	22.7	26.2	20.2	22.9
None at all	9.9	11.5	7.1	9.2
Number of respondents	1,200	956	1,240	973

Sources: 1999 and 2003 post-election surveys.

for local councils). Furthermore, 16% felt that voting in NAW elections made ‘a great deal’ of difference, compared with 25% for UK Parliamentary general elections.

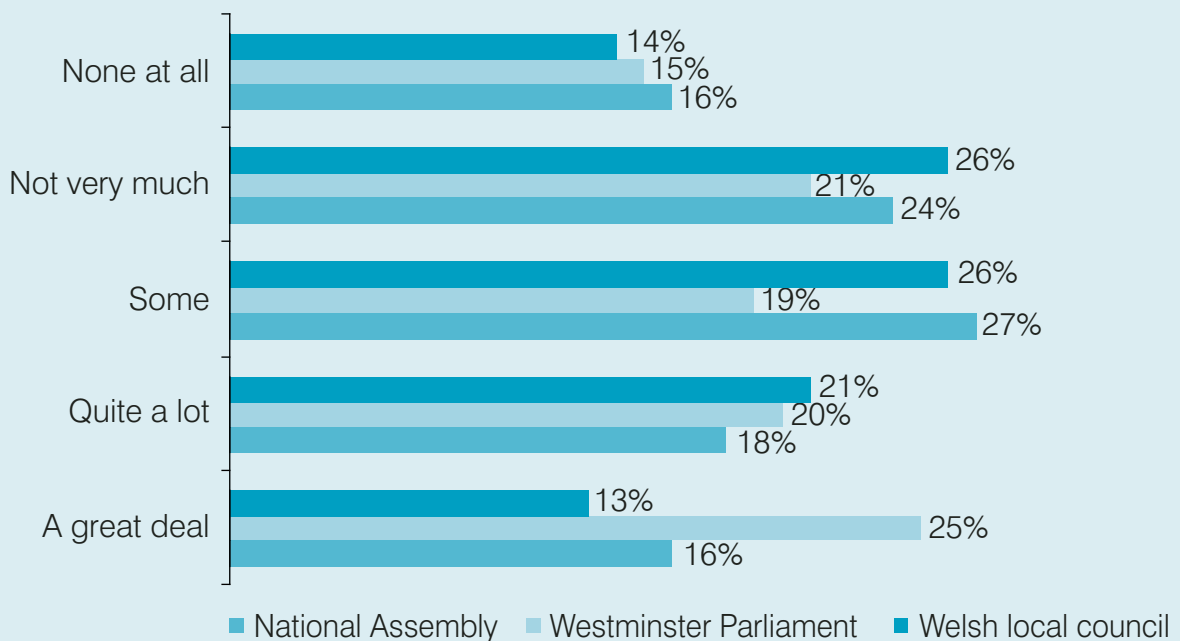
2.59 There were some notable demographic differences in attitudes towards NAW elections in this context. Those aged over 65, and those in managerial or professional roles, were particularly likely to indicate that it makes a great deal of difference who wins in the NAW elections. As would be expected, those who voted for the Assembly in 2003 and had more interest in the Assembly also thought that the

outcome of the NAW elections would make a great deal of difference.

2.60 Certainly, within the focus groups, voting in Assembly elections was overwhelmingly seen as less important than voting in general or local elections. Consistent reasons were provided for this view:

- lack of power and responsibility
 - It was widely felt that the Assembly was relatively powerless and did not have responsibility for making important decisions affecting Wales.

Table 10: How much of a difference it makes who wins in the Assembly, Westminster Parliament and local council elections



Base: All (unweighted 1,000).

Source: 2006 GfK NOP/The Electoral Commission.

- lack of achievement
 - It was commonly felt that the Assembly had failed to achieve anything of note since its creation in 1999. Few were able to identify spontaneously any of its key initiatives, outside of building projects in Cardiff.
- excessive focus on Cardiff
 - Outside of the Welsh capital, there was strong resentment of what was seen as the Cardiff-focused perspective of the NAW. There was very little recall of any activities undertaken by the Assembly outside of Cardiff and many assumed that any financial investment flowing from it was probably limited to Cardiff-based projects (such as the Senedd (debating chamber) or the Children’s Hospital for Wales).

I used to think the Welsh Assembly election was quite important because that was for the people to govern Wales. But not anymore.

Cardiff, 25–44

It’s all about Cardiff!

There are two cities in Wales, Cardiff and Bangor. Why don’t some of these things happen in Bangor? It’s just as important as Cardiff.

Bangor, 25–44

2.61 Across the focus groups, it was evident that only those who had previously voted in UK Parliamentary general elections (and usually also in local elections) had voted in Assembly elections, indicating that turnout was limited to those most engaged with politics and voting. As indicated by the perceptions of the Assembly described above, there is no evidence that this pattern of voting is changing, and those who have not previously voted in Assembly elections do not currently seem minded to do so in 2007.

2.62 This is particularly the case among younger voters (18–24), who showed least interest in voting for the Assembly in the future. While this group is less engaged with politics and voting generally, it is also least aware of the Assembly, its role, responsibilities and initiatives. Across the focus groups with those aged 18–24, a sizeable minority had never heard of the NAW (in Ruthin, for instance, this accounted for four respondents out of a focus group of eight people).

Yes, I have heard of the Assembly, but I never take any notice of any of it to be honest. I have never really thought about it. I am only young, aren’t I? Probably when I am older I will take notice of it, but I’m only 21.

Llanelli, 18–21

Awareness of and attitudes towards the NAW

Overview

Attitudes

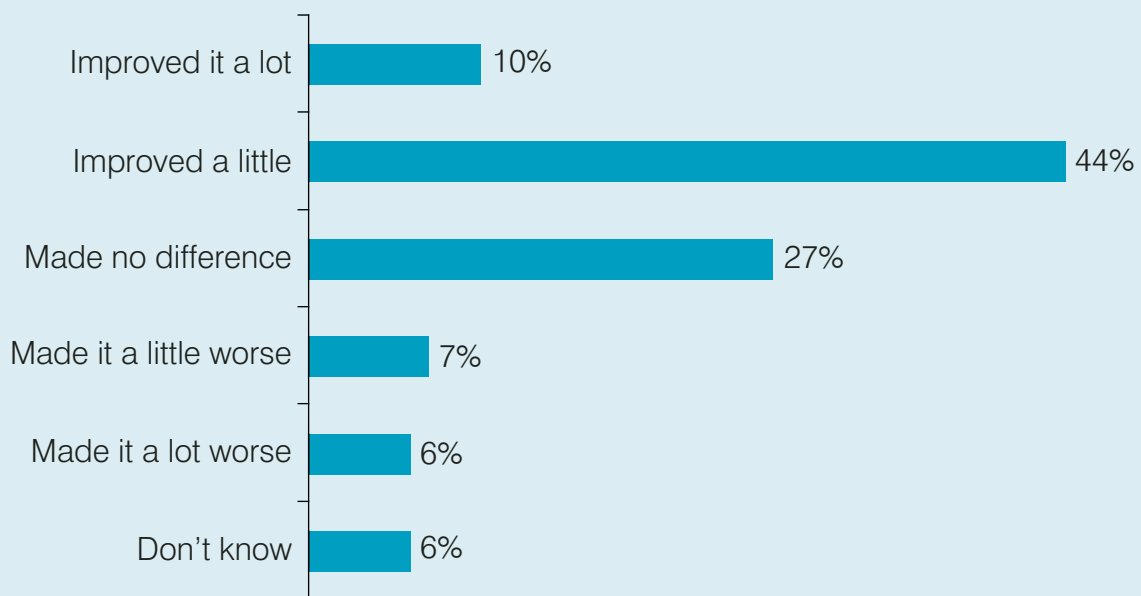
2.63 Encouragingly, interest in the Assembly declared by survey respondents is fairly high. In our 2006 survey, 63% of respondents declared themselves to have either a great deal, quite a lot, or some interest in the Assembly, while a total of 37% said they had either not very much or no interest in the Assembly.

2.64 Addressing the theme of devolution, participants in the quantitative research were

asked what impact the NAW has had on the way Wales has been governed since 1999. The results are shown in Table 11. Positively, over half (54%) thought it had improved, with 10% saying a lot and 44% a little. There was, however, a significant minority who thought there had been no difference since the introduction of the Assembly in 1999 (27%).

2.65 It should be noted that those who voted for the Assembly at the last elections and those with an interest in the NAW were more likely to state that they thought improvements had been made. There were marked differences between those saying things have improved (either a lot or a little). In 2003, overall, 45% thought things

Table 11: Impact NAW has had on the way Wales has been governed since 1999



Base: All except those who know nothing about what the Assembly does (unweighted 940).
Source: 2006 GfK NOP/The Electoral Commission.

had improved. In 2006, there is a significant rise, with 54% reporting improvement. However, it is worth noting that in 2003 this question was asked to all participants, but in 2006 those who reported knowing nothing about the Assembly were excluded.

2.66 By contrast, in the focus groups it was evident that people's spontaneous attitudes to the Assembly were rather negative. In all focus groups, the presiding attitudes were that:

- the NAW was subservient to Westminster and that ministers had to go to Westminster 'cap in hand' for approval of their initiatives
- it had achieved little since its inception and had not spent taxpayers' money effectively on the things that were important to Welsh people

2.67 There was also a strong feeling outside Cardiff that the Assembly was too focused on the capital and did not attend to the concerns of people in the regions frequently enough.

It conjures up an image of Cardiff and the Cardiff Bay area. For us it is a lot easier to get to Manchester than Cardiff. The unofficial capital of Wales is Liverpool! I don't think they are doing enough to make their mark up here.

I am actually quite pro the Assembly, but the southern bias is quite evident. There are more AMs [Assembly Members] from that area because it is a bigger population and the political interest for them is in those areas.

Ruthin, 25–44

Awareness

2.68 Across the focus groups, there was fairly low awareness of the Assembly's composition, remit and record.⁸ Spontaneously, most could say little about it beyond the following:

- The Assembly is based in Cardiff.
- A new building has been constructed to house it and this has been very expensive.
- Rhodri Morgan is First Minister.

The first thing I thought was Cardiff. There is a lot of people in north Wales feel that we are getting the thin end of the wedge. There definitely seems to be a south Wales bias. Most of them are from south Wales.

To be honest, I don't know much about the National Assembly. I have not seen it and I have not read that much about it. I don't really know.

Ruthin, 25–44

2.69 Awareness of the Assembly was very low among younger people (those aged 18–24), a proportion of whom had never heard of the NAW.

⁸ Again, it should be noted that focus group participants were not probed on the provisions of the Government of Wales Bill which was being debated in Parliament when this research was undertaken.

How do they expect us to have an interest in it if we haven't heard anything about it? People expect as soon as we hit 18 we understand everything!

A lot of it's passing us by at the moment. It doesn't seem relevant. When you're older you're probably more interested when it's things that actually affect your life.

Bangor, 18–24

2.70 However, it should be noted that there were a few people within this age group whose awareness of the Assembly (and of politics and voting generally) was quite high. It was often the case that their parents were politically engaged and that politics was a frequent topic of conversation at home. There were also indications of higher awareness among younger people who had been working and paying taxes for longer.

The Welsh can do anything apart from law changes. The Welsh Assembly can change things like free prescriptions and stuff like that, for under-25s.

Llanelli, 18–21

2.71 Higher levels of awareness were detectable among a small minority of politically knowledgeable respondents. Characteristically, these people were:

- aged over 30
- university educated
- working in politically active or politically dependent industries, such as agriculture

- generally interested in politics and current affairs
- more likely to vote in elections
- following political coverage in the media

2.72 Spontaneously, these respondents were able to say:

- who some of their Assembly Members (AMs) are
- what the Assembly's key responsibilities are (e.g. developing and funding NHS services in Wales, education and training in Wales)
- what initiatives the Assembly had been responsible for in education, health and agriculture

2.73 It should be noted that general levels of awareness of the Assembly were higher in Cardiff than in other areas of the country. In Cardiff, respondents often felt closer to and more engaged with the Assembly than in other areas and were often more supportive of it as a result.

2.74 The general lack of awareness of the responsibilities of the Welsh Assembly and the perception that it was relatively powerless had an effect on people's attitudes to voting in Assembly elections. Many felt that if they knew more about the Assembly's remit and achievements, they might be more inclined to vote in its elections in the future.

I think if the Welsh Assembly had all the power it needed, more people would vote because at the end of the day, they are Welsh and they know where we are coming from more.

Llanelli, 18–21

That is one of the things with the National Assembly – their money is given to them from central government and I think if it had tax-raising powers like the Scottish Parliament, we would feel a bit more interested in it.

Ruthin, 25–44

2.75 The following sections will deal in more detail with people’s awareness of and attitudes to the Assembly’s composition, record and remit, and comment on the effect of this on their propensity to vote.

Composition: Assembly Members and their role

2.76 The majority of focus group participants were aware that they were represented by more than one AM. In all focus groups, the name of at least one AM for that constituency/region was spontaneously recalled. However, most individual respondents were not aware of who their AMs were.

My idea of politics is that they are red, blue or yellow. I couldn’t tell you who’s in the local constituency anyway!

I wouldn’t know who either of them were.

Cardiff, 25–45

2.77 AMs were not seen as having a strong local presence and were often criticised (especially in the regions) for spending too much time in Cardiff and not forging closer links in the constituencies or regions they represented. Furthermore, there was a definite lack of awareness about what local AMs actually stood for and which issues they were most active on, making it hard for people to position them politically.

They’re always down in Cardiff – they’re not here, are they?

Bangor, 25–44

2.78 Only a minority were aware that they were represented by as many as five AMs, or that there were two types of AM – those elected to represent a constituency and those elected to represent a region of Wales. This level of awareness was limited to more politically savvy respondents.

2.79 Awareness of AMs was prompted by a number of factors, including:

- coverage in the local press (this was often not related to their political activities)
- the presence of their offices on the high street
- personal knowledge (via business or personal relations)
- local campaigns

2.80 As can be seen from this list, sources of awareness about an AM often revealed little about a member's political position and activities. As a result, even where AMs were known, they were not seen as providing a firm link between the activities of the NAW and people in the localities.

2.81 There was little awareness of what AMs did in the Assembly. While some had seen debates taking place on the S4C television channel and realised that members voted on (secondary) legislation brought before the chamber, there was very limited awareness of their role beyond this.

2.82 Most were aware that Labour had the most seats in the Assembly. A majority of respondents did recognise that a wide spread of political parties were represented within the Assembly, including Labour, Plaid Cymru, Liberal Democrat and Conservative. Detailed knowledge of the exact political composition of the Assembly was much higher in Cardiff, where some knew that Labour were currently just one short of an overall majority.

2.83 Nevertheless, recognition of the spread of parties represented at regional level was often quite limited. For instance, most respondents in Ruthin and Llanelli did not realise that they were represented by parties other than Labour and Plaid Cymru.

2.84 Awareness of how to contact an AM was very limited, and most felt that if they had a problem that required political intervention, they would be more likely to contact their council or Member of Parliament.

It wouldn't come into my head, oh National Assembly. I'd go to the council instead.

Cardiff, 25–44

2.85 However, two respondents did say they had contacted their AM. Their experiences are described below:

- The respondent was trying to get a business grant from the NAW. He was refused and contacted his AM to get help with his application. The AM had not responded to him.
- A mother of twins with a medical condition was struggling to get them appropriate treatment at her local hospital. She had contacted her AM, who had offered to help her. She was in the process of pursuing this issue in conjunction with a voluntary support group at the time of the focus group.

Remit: the Assembly's role and responsibilities

2.86 There was some awareness of the remit and responsibilities of the NAW but this did not extend throughout the population. When asked to name some of the responsibilities of the NAW in the 2006 quantitative research, a majority said they could name at least one but 49% said they could not name any. Similarly, in the 2006 focus groups, while many believed that the Assembly had quite a limited remit, most did not feel able to say what this covered. Spontaneously, only the more politically knowledgeable respondents (as identified in paragraphs 2.70–2.73) felt able to comment on the Assembly's responsibilities.

2.87 Once again, awareness was noticeably higher in Cardiff than elsewhere.

You hear snippets on the news, about wildlife protection, the Welsh language obviously, and you hear the words ‘Welsh Assembly’, so you kind of know. But when you ask me what it’s responsible for, I wouldn’t be able to tell you.

Cardiff, 25–44

2.88 Within the 2006 quantitative survey, of those who could name some of the NAW responsibilities, roughly a third specified education, training and lifelong learning, and funding NHS services in Wales. Smaller numbers of respondents mentioned funding for local authorities in Wales (14%) and transport (13%) and nearly one in ten said housing policy, the environment and conserving wildlife and natural habitats, agriculture and rural development. There were some striking gender differences in those who identified education and funding in either the NHS or local authorities in Wales. Men were more likely to mention these than women. Perhaps surprisingly, younger respondents (18–24) were less likely than those aged 25 and over to comment upon education (12% versus 35%) while those in professional or managerial roles mentioned this more than those in other roles (58% versus 35%).

2.89 These findings were mirrored in the focus groups. Among the more knowledgeable minority, awareness of the Assembly’s responsibility for education was highest. This was usually due to recognition of its

involvement in initiatives such as free school breakfasts and learning grants. Among this group, awareness of the Assembly’s involvement in health was also quite high.

I was fairly cynical during the referendum because I didn’t see what additional powers they were going to have, but then, as a young person under 25, I always get free prescriptions and all these other things, so it did have an effect.

We don’t have the SATs. The primary school and infant school system is quite a lot different to England.

Ruthin, 25–44

2.90 In addition, there was some limited awareness of the NAW’s involvement in transport and its responsibility for distributing funding from the European Union (EU).

The national government has to match funds from European money 50/50. Previously, the Conservative government and new Labour had refused to match funds. The Cardiff Assembly put that money up.

Ruthin, 25–44

2.91 Across the groups, there was fairly high awareness that the Assembly could not make primary legislation in any of the policy areas mentioned above. However, there was some confusion about exactly what the Assembly actually could do, what powers it had and how effective and binding its decisions were. Perhaps as a result, many believed that the

Assembly had to get its decisions ratified by Westminster before it could enforce them.

I assumed the Welsh Assembly was just a collator of information and sent it all up to London.

Cardiff, 25–44

2.92 It should be noted that, when prompted with a list of the NAW’s responsibilities, there were indications that some respondents had a slightly better knowledge than they had evinced spontaneously. For instance, once they had been shown that the Assembly had responsibility for dealing with funding from the European Union, a few were able to recall that they had seen the Assembly’s name or logo in connection with specific EU-funded projects in their local area.

2.93 Once prompted, most people felt the NAW’s remit and responsibilities were both extensive and appropriate to it as the legislative body for Wales. There were virtually no objections to the Assembly having a role in any of the policy areas shown. The only item that raised any concerns was housing policy, which many saw as the role of the local authority and did not think appropriate for the NAW.

I would rather go with the transport in Wales, because you can spend money on our roads then rather than English people saying, ‘We will do our roads first, then we will do the Welsh roads after’.

Llanelli, 18–21

I think all these things seem appropriate to the Assembly really. The only thing that stands out is housing. I thought that was more the local council’s territory.

Ruthin, 25–44

2.94 Across the groups, there was a strong belief that the NAW should have greater power within the policy areas it currently deals with. Many felt the Assembly was currently rather ‘toothless’ and wanted to see its powers increased, feeling that it should be able to make its own laws.

We can’t create our own laws. It gets a block grant from Westminster every year and decides how it’s spent.

Cardiff, 25–44

2.95 However, some were sceptical of the view that the Assembly should have increased powers, most notably the groups identified below:

- those who felt that the Assembly was inefficient, bureaucratic and costly (this view was expressed by one or two in all groups outside Cardiff)
- those who felt the Assembly was not currently representing all of Wales (this view was quite pronounced in Bangor)
- those who had opposed devolution

2.96 In addition, under-25s were often indifferent to the issue of the Assembly’s powers.

2.97 There was evidence within the focus groups that people's lack of awareness of the NAW's remit and responsibilities could affect their propensity to vote. Those who had little awareness of the Assembly's responsibilities were often surprised by what it covered and were more able to see its potential relevance to their everyday lives once this was described to them.

2.98 Furthermore, there were indications that the pervasive belief that all major decisions affecting Wales were still made in Westminster and that the NAW needed Westminster to ratify its decisions had put people off voting. Many felt a clearer understanding of the Assembly's remit and the division of power between the Assembly and Westminster could help to make the Assembly seem stronger and more relevant to them.

Record: the Assembly's initiatives

2.99 The first thing that came to many people's minds when discussing the Assembly's initiatives was the construction of the Assembly Senedd. Most (especially outside of Cardiff) viewed this negatively, feeling it had been too expensive. There was a strong sense of resentment in the regions about it being located in the capital.

I don't know why they needed a new building. That place where they were talking before seemed absolutely fine to me.

Cardiff, 25–44

2.100 In this context, the Millennium Centre and the Children's Hospital for Wales were also frequently mentioned spontaneously, although, outside Cardiff, similar criticisms were made of these initiatives. While the benefits of both were commented on, there was a strong feeling in the regions that the NAW was too Cardiff-focused in its initiatives and activities.

If children from north Wales are still having to go [to hospital in] Liverpool, I don't understand why it's called Ysbyty Plant Cymru, it should be Ysbyty Plant De Cymru!

Bangor, 25–44

Maybe if one of the candidates said they were going to make sure regeneration happened in Bangor rather than everything going to Cardiff, we'd be more interested. Bangor's always second on the list.

Bangor, 18–24

2.101 Beyond these building projects, those who were more knowledgeable about the Assembly often recalled its education initiatives. The following were frequently mentioned:

- assembly learning grants
- prevention of top-up fees
- free school breakfasts
- free milk
- removal of SATs

Uni people get grants in Wales, but they don't in England.

Llanelli, 18–21

2.102 While these initiatives were often viewed positively, particularly by those who were affected by them – either directly (e.g. students) or indirectly (e.g. parents) – only a small minority of those who were aware of them spontaneously associated these initiatives with the Assembly. Even those who had benefited from these schemes often did not associate them with the NAW.

Half of us didn't realise we were getting free prescriptions differently to people in England. You don't realise.

Llanelli, 18–21

2.103 Awareness of the Tir Gofal and Tir Mynydd initiatives was limited to those involved in farming, or with relatives involved in farming. Among these people, there was high awareness that both were administered by the NAW. Their view of these initiatives tended to be fairly positive, as most felt that subsidies for Welsh farmers were administered better in Wales than they were in England.

2.104 Awareness of age-based policies such as free bus passes for the over-65s, free swimming for over-65s and free prescriptions and eye-tests for under-25s was usually limited to those who had taken advantage of them. These were rarely connected with the Assembly and many were surprised that such schemes were specific to Wales.

2.105 Many were impressed with the range of Assembly initiatives once they had been made aware of them. However, even then it was widely felt that the NAW was only 'tinkering at the edges' of Welsh public services through

these schemes, rather than addressing the critical issues. For instance, while the advantages of a national Children's Hospital were obvious to most, there was a belief that developing local health services for children was more important. Also, the recent controversy in Cardiff regarding the local authority's proposals to reorganise educational provision and close a number of schools was confused in respondents' minds with Assembly education initiatives.

It's the same old thing. We're going to give you free school milk but we're going to take your school off you!

Cardiff, 25–44

They don't seem to know what they're doing. On the one hand they're lowering prescription charges and with the other they're saying they haven't got enough money to give medicines to people. You can't run a country with bad bookkeeping like that!

Cardiff, 45–60

Awareness of and attitudes towards the voting system for NAW elections

Awareness of and attitudes towards AMS

2.106 The electoral system used for NAW elections has recently assumed public prominence as a possible cause of low election turnouts. There are various factors that may be causing AMS to impact negatively on turnout, including the unfamiliarity of the system to UK voters and the complexity of the manner in which seats are allocated.

2.107 When asked about how much they felt they knew about the voting system for elections to the Assembly, over half said they knew not very much or nothing at all (36% and 19% respectively). Nearly a fifth said they knew a great deal or quite a lot (3% and 16% respectively), while nearly a quarter said they had some knowledge. A higher proportion of women stated they did not know very much (40% compared with 33% of men). There were again clear age differences, with a higher number of older respondents (55 and over) claiming that they knew quite a lot (23% compared with 10% of younger people). There were also differences apparent in the views of professional or managerial workers when compared with those employed in other roles (26% versus 15%).

2.108 As expected (people's understanding of the mechanics of electoral systems in general is low), awareness of how AMS worked was very low. In the focus groups, the majority recognised that the voting system for NAW elections was different from that used in general elections. While a minority, however, were aware that a form of proportional representation (PR) was used, few were able to describe accurately the way in which the voting system actually worked. Despite this low awareness of how AMS worked, participants in the 2006 focus groups reflected findings of previous surveys in a strongly positive response to the use of some form of PR to elect the Assembly.

2.109 Across the groups, only five people used the term AMS to describe the voting system. Four of these lived in Cardiff and one

in Ruthin. Again, awareness was significantly lower among younger respondents: the vast majority did not know that the NAW was elected via a system different to that used in general elections.

2.110 There are various ways in which the impact of AMS can be investigated. One is to look at responses to the open-ended question, which, in the 1999 and 2003 post-election surveys, asked non-voters to identify reasons why they had not voted.⁹ In 1999 only 0.3% of non-voters mentioned the electoral system at all; in 2003 only two respondents in the entire sample referred to it.

2.111 A number of more detailed questions were included in both the 1999 and 2003 surveys which probed voters' reactions to the use of the electoral system. As reported by the Electoral Commission (2002), voter reactions in 1999 appeared positive towards the principles of the system, and did not indicate that voters had stayed away from the polls because they disapproved of the new system or found it difficult to understand. However, it is possible that more experience and knowledge might have raised concerns in voters' minds. What, then, does the evidence from the 2003 post-election survey indicate?

2.112 Table 12 reports general attitudes towards PR in 2003. (To give some broader perspective, we include voter attitudes on the use of PR for the UK Parliament and local government as well as the NAW.) These figures

⁹ It should be noted that multiple responses were allowed; if voters wished to list several reasons for not voting, all of these were recorded.

Table 12: Should candidates be elected via PR? (%)

Response	Westminster	NAW	Local government
Strongly agree	20.2	19.1	18.6
Agree	33.6	39.4	38.4
Neither agree nor disagree	31.0	27.8	28.1
Disagree	10.7	9.7	10.8
Strongly disagree	4.5	4.0	4.0
Number of respondents	780	781	783

Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: 2003 post-election survey.

indicate that the balance of opinion is heavily in favour of the use of PR for NAW elections.

2.113 These attitudes towards AMS were supported by the 2006 focus group findings. Once a rudimentary description of the system was provided, AMS was generally considered to be fair, offering a broader spread of party representation in Wales than first past the post was likely to.

If I know my Assembly Member's going to be a party I don't support, my vote can still go for something. It's not proportional representation but it's a way of evening out the votes.

Cardiff, 45–60

I like the system. I like the idea that you have got a particular AM for your area so if you have a problem you could go to that AM. But it is also fair that other parties who get votes in north Wales do get representation.

Ruthin, 25–44

2.114 Similarly, when asked whether the voting system used for NAW elections is fairer than that used for Westminster, the balance of opinion is favourable towards AMS – 40.7% agreeing with the suggestion that it is fairer, compared with only 16.9% who disagreed (although a plurality of respondents, 42.3%, were unsure).

2.115 Not only do voters appear to support PR in principle; as Tables 13 and 14 suggest, few of them appear to find the current voting system difficult to use in practice.

Table 13: Is it difficult to fill in ballot papers for a NAW election?

Response	%
Very difficult	3.3
Fairly difficult	13.0
Not very difficult	35.7
Not at all difficult	47.9
Number of respondents	665

Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: 2003 post-election survey.

Table 14: Is it difficult to understand the allocation of seats in the NAW?

Response	%
Very difficult	12.2
Fairly difficult	37.1
Not very difficult	36.1
Not at all difficult	14.6
Number of respondents	662

Source: 2003 post-election survey.

2.116 This is certainly supported by the focus groups. Among those who had voted in previous NAW elections, there was an awareness of the practicalities involved and how these differed from other elections. Once prompted, many remembered receiving two different coloured ballot papers – one containing candidates' names and the other containing party names – and that they had

submitted both ballot papers. Crucially, no one claimed to have found the system difficult to understand in practice.

You choose your main one that you vote for but there's also a back up list of people that come second in south-east Wales, south-west Wales, north Wales. There's about 38 members and the rest are made up from the back up in these regional lists.

Cardiff, 25–44

You voted for the local person and then for the party.

Cardiff, 45–60

2.117 Therefore, while many people find AMS extremely complex and struggle to understand it fully, this does not seem to cause much consternation among them, and there was little evidence in any of the focus groups that people's general lack of understanding of the voting system for NAW elections had affected their propensity to vote. Whether or not they had voted in NAW elections previously, most focus group respondents did not feel that voting for the Assembly would be difficult or off-putting, and the electoral system was never mentioned as a reason for not turning out to Assembly elections.

2.118 However, the current voting system does not win unambiguous support from the Welsh people. The 2003 post-election survey also asked whether voters would prefer to be able to vote for individual candidates rather than a party list on second vote: this idea

wins widespread support, with 57.1% of respondents in favour and only 13.8% against. Furthermore, when asked if they would prefer to be represented by one individual for their area or by several representatives for different parties within a wide area, the notion of a single constituency representative is still very popular: 63.6% opt for a single representative, with only 21.9% favouring multiple representatives.

2.119 Summing up all of this evidence, it would appear that the conclusion developed in 1999 very much still held good for 2003: although not winning wholly unambiguous public support, on balance public attitudes to AMS were positive.

Awareness of and attitudes towards dual candidacy

2.120 What of dual candidacy?¹⁰ Very few survey respondents mentioned electoral system factors as a reason for not voting, and public reactions to the system are generally positive. Moreover a comparison of voters in North Wales (where, in the most publicised example of dual candidacy's effects, three defeated candidates from the same constituency, Clwyd West, were all nonetheless elected from the North Wales list) with those from the rest of Wales in the 2003 survey shows no difference in overall levels of approval of the voting system. All these factors would appear to suggest that dual candidacy had little effect in deterring people from voting.

¹⁰ Currently, candidates in Assembly elections are able to stand both in a constituency and, at the same time, on a regional basis on a party list. The UK Government introduced a ban on dual candidacy in the Government of Wales Bill.

2.121 Within the focus groups, the issue of dual candidacy was only raised among 45–60-year-olds in Cardiff and among 25–44-year-olds in Ruthin. However, even where it came up unprompted, dual candidacy was a marginal issue and no one exhibited strong views about it. Those who were moved to comment could usually see both sides of the debate and showed little propensity to favour one argument over the other.

Someone could get zero votes and still get elected, which doesn't make sense at all.

But that has been a definite problem, is that you have got people who are basically councillors with no experience of running a government and so if you lost a lot of people because they couldn't stand on those lists, you would lose people with experience.

Ruthin, 25–44

Sources of awareness about the NAW

2.122 The final sections of this report will use data from the focus groups to examine the sources of information used by Welsh voters to find out about the Assembly and to identify ways in which an increased turnout could be encouraged for the Assembly elections in 2007.

2.123 Across the 2006 focus groups, it was evident that there was a limited interest in and engagement with media coverage of the Assembly. Many had a low level of interest in politics and were not following coverage of politics in the media at all, while those who did

tended to show a preference for coverage of events at Westminster over coverage of the NAW, as they felt Westminster was more relevant to, and had a greater impact on, their daily lives. The only focus group in which respondents showed a strong interest in following the NAW in the media was the 45–60-year-olds in Cardiff.

2.124 Most respondents did not think the Assembly was doing a good job of promoting and publicising itself.

It should have a higher profile and publicise more what it is doing for Wales, not just round Cardiff but the rest of Wales as well.

Cardiff, 25–44

We get a breakdown of our Council Tax every year. Why can't we get a breakdown of what the Assembly's spent our money on? We're kept in the dark like mushrooms.

Bangor, 25–44

You never see any posters anywhere for like free school breakfasts and free bus passes, free swimming. You never see anything like that. I haven't.

Ruthin, 25–44

2.125 Those who accessed information about the NAW in the media used the following sources:

- television news
 - BBC1 Wales (news programmes)
 - BBC2 Wales ('am/pm', 'Dragon's Eye')

- Welsh national and local newspapers
- radio
 - Radio Cymru
 - Radio Wales
 - Local stations (Red Dragon, Rural Radio, Marcher Coast)

There's a programme called Dragon's Eye which does an awful lot about it. So if you are interested you can pick it up. I do because I'm sad!

Ruthin, 25–44

2.126 Those using these sources often felt that, on the whole, coverage of the Assembly was fairly limited in the Welsh media.

We only get the big news, what the media want to give us, not the detail of what the Assembly actually do.

Bangor, 25–44

2.127 Those with an interest in Assembly politics did follow it in the television news, although only a few more enthusiastic respondents watched programmes such as 'Dragon's Eye' or 'am/pm'. S4C's coverage of the Assembly was rarely mentioned.

If you go to Wrexham, people turn their TV aerials to Granada, to the north west, because they are more likely to get news about their region from there than they are from Cardiff.

Ruthin, 25–44

2.128 Coverage of the NAW in the Welsh national newspapers and local papers was strongly criticised for being sporadic and of poor quality. For instance, it was frequently commented that when local AMs did feature in a newspaper, it was usually for something unrelated to their political activities, such as hosting a local event.

If you pick up a local rag or free press or whatever it is, the coverage of local politics is non-existent. They don't cover what goes on in cabinet. I am relatively interested in politics but I have no idea who the cabinet members are.

Ruthin, 25–44

2.129 While radio coverage of the NAW was seen as more substantial than that offered by the newspapers, radio was less frequently used as a source of information on the Assembly than newspapers or television.

2.130 In addition, a few focus group respondents had received leaflets about the Assembly through their doors. Most admitted they had not read these, while those who had found the information contained rather limited. No one had encountered any other local sources of information on the NAW, such as stands at *Eisteddfodau*, other festivals or local road shows.

2.131 Under-25s were most disengaged from these sources of information. Where younger respondents had picked up information about the Assembly, this tended to be through word of mouth, either at home or in the workplace. Where awareness was highest among younger respondents, it was apparent that their parents were very interested in politics and that the Assembly was frequently discussed at home. Evidently, the power of word of mouth communications among younger people should not be underestimated.

Yeah, word of mouth. We have friends and at work, we have a few discussions at work and we talk about it and maybe two people know about it but by the end of the coffee break everyone does!

Ruthin, 18–24

3 Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter draws together conclusions as to how people could be encouraged to participate in the 2007 NAW elections.

Encouragement to participate in the 2007 NAW elections

3.1 There are challenges in encouraging people to participate in the forthcoming Assembly elections. Clearly, general feelings of political disaffection and disengagement play a part here, and it is evident that these have had an impact on people's propensity to vote in all elections. Many people (especially those under 25) feel disengaged from political parties, have little understanding of what they stand for and do not see voting as a social duty.

People don't have time or the effort, they just think it is for old people. People think it don't affect you and you think your votes won't even count. And people don't really understand what is going on and what the parties have to offer.

Llanelli, 18–21

3.2 However, some of the barriers to be faced in increasing turnout in 2007 are specific to people's attitudes towards the Assembly. Levels of awareness of the Assembly, its remit and responsibilities are very low. It is evident that this has had a negative impact on people's perceptions of the Assembly's power and relevance to their daily lives, and could discourage people from voting in 2007.

3.3 Levels of engagement with and enthusiasm for the NAW are certainly no higher than they were four years ago, and it is particularly clear that young people have little awareness or understanding of the Assembly and show a very limited interest in voting next year.

3.4 When discussing initiatives to encourage people to vote, participants suggested two basic strategies that could be implemented for the 2007 NAW elections:

- better provision of basic information about the Assembly
- effective advertising

3.5 With regard to the first of these, the information many thought would be most compelling and would have the greatest impact on their propensity to vote related to the powers and responsibilities of the Assembly. It was widely felt that if these were communicated more effectively, the Assembly would seem more authoritative, important and relevant to people's lives.

3.6 As discussed earlier, many did not know the full range of the NAW's responsibilities and were impressed by their scope. Most felt that its responsibilities in health and education were particularly compelling and relevant. However, in communicating these, attention should also be given to stating clearly the powers the Assembly has in these areas and in demonstrating the kind of decisions it has the authority to make.

3.7 Across the groups it was often felt that information about the Assembly could be improved by showing its effect on people's lives. It was widely believed that the Assembly could be brought down to 'street level' through case studies showing the effect of Assembly initiatives (such as learning grants or free swimming) on the day-to-day lives of Welsh people.

You could show how it affects people. Like, people have said first time buyers can't afford houses. You have got to show stuff like that just to relate to them.

Llanelli, 18–21

I think if it doesn't really affect your life you just carry on and don't take any notice of it. You have a lack of interest unless you can see how it affects you.

Ruthin, 25–44

3.8 Effective advertising was seen as key to achieving high turnout in the 2007 elections. Many expected that an advertising campaign would precede the election, and the Electoral Commission's 'Tom and Mike' advertisements, aired before the UK Parliamentary general election in 2005, were widely remembered. These were perceived as having an appropriate tone, being both humorous and down to earth. In this context, the Scrum 4 advertisements aired by BBC Wales before last year's coverage of the Six Nations rugby tournament were also cited. These were seen as humorous, attention grabbing and strikingly Welsh, and many felt that the format could be adapted to advertising the NAW elections.

They should do, like on the adverts, they should do slogans coming up and stuff and not like all the political talk with posh words and everything. Making it short and snappy to catch your attention.

Llanelli, 18–21

3.9 Celebrity endorsement of the 2007 elections was also seen as being potentially effective in enhancing turnout.

3.10 Outside of raising the Assembly's profile for 2007, many younger respondents stated that teaching in schools of the role of the NAW and citizens' responsibilities to vote in elections in general could be vastly improved. Most of those who had only recently left secondary education did not recall being told about the Assembly at school and felt that a more thorough programme of education would be essential to improving young people's awareness of and engagement with it for the future.

It should be taught as part of the curriculum, in layman's terms and integrated as part of schools' social studies.

Cardiff, 25–44

They could involve more in education so everybody has got to do it and I know it would be boring in school, but at least everybody would know what was going on then and break it down so it shows that it does affect you.

Llanelli, 18–21



Appendix

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