



DEBATE

TURN-OUT IN THE MAY 2003 NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTION

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Declining turn-out is a common experience across the western democracies and Wales is no exception. However, the 38 per cent turn-out in the National Assembly election in 2003, compared with 46 per cent in 1999, was especially low. A number of factors specific to the Welsh situation can be identified. In addition the fall in turn-out varied a great deal across the 40 Welsh constituencies, from a high 15.3 per cent fall in Caernarfon to a small increase in Wrexham, of 0.19 per cent. The major lesson for the political parties is that local campaigning makes a difference.

Explanations for the low and decreasing turn-out in elections over the last decade are well-rehearsed. The decline is said to be a universal. That is to say, it is not specific to any one institution or country, but generally experienced across western democracies - a global phenomenon in fact. In turn this is attributed to a variety of factors, such as:

- Widespread cynicism about politics and politicians, leading to such views as 'voting makes no difference'.
- A growing convergence of policies across the parties: Labour and Conservatives in Britain have followed the Democrats and Republicans in the USA in sharing much common ground.
- Generally rising affluence, leading populations to be more or less satisfied with the status quo.

In the case of the National Assembly elections in 2003 a number of other factors specific to Wales contributed to the decline in turn-out. These include, in a suggested order of importance:

1. The fact that local elections were not held on the same day as the election, as occurred in 1999, significantly reduced the amount of campaigning and inevitably decreased awareness of the poll amongst the electorate.
2. The press and media: the lack of a national Welsh Press, the dominance of the London press which gives Wales little attention, and the high proportion of homes – up to 40 per cent – which tune their televisions to signals emanating from across the border. Moreover, satellite penetration is very high in Wales – at 66 per cent it is 10 per cent higher than any other region in the UK.
3. Impact of the Iraq war which drowned out attention to the Assembly election until the last 10 days of the campaign the campaign

4. A widespread view that the Assembly is relatively powerless – closer to local than Westminster government - and therefore is not worth bothering with.
5. A view amongst a proportion of those who either did not vote in the referendum of 1997, or who voted against the Assembly, that the devolution process is something with which they do not wish to engage.
6. Disillusionment amongst some of those who did vote, and especially perhaps those who voted Yes in the referendum. There is some polling evidence to suggest that in 1999 people's expectations of what the Assembly might achieve were high – no doubt unrealistically high – and that as a result they have been disappointed by the experience so far.

While all these elements combined to be the main causes of the decline in turn-out in the May 2003 election compared with 1999, there is evidence that the political parties, and the character of their campaigns in each of the 40 constituencies, also contributed significantly to the reduction.

THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN

If we first look at the national picture, a quick glance at the statistics summarised in Tables 1 and 2 reveals that overall it was Plaid Cymru that lost the campaign as much, if not more than, Labour that won it.

Table 1: Constituency Vote: 1999 and 2003 Assembly elections compared

	2003			1999		
	Votes	% Vote	Seats	Votes	% vote	seats
Labour	340,535	40.0	30	384,671	37.6	27
Plaid Cymru	180,185	21.2	5	290,572	28.4	9
Conservative	169,842	19.9	1	162,133	15.8	1
Lib Dem	120,250	14.1	3	137,857	13.5	3
John Marek Independence Party	6,539		1			

Table 2: Regional List Vote: 1999 and 2003 Assembly elections compared

	2003			1999		
	Votes	%Vote	Seats	Votes	%Vote	Seats
Labour	310,658	36.6	0	361,657	35.5	1
Plaid Cymru	167,653	19.7	7	312,048	30.6	8
Conservative	162,705	19.2	10	168,206	16.5	8
Lib Dem	108,013	12.7	3	128,008	12.5	3

The striking message from these statistics is the extent to which Plaid Cymru failed to mobilise its supporters on the regional list vote. While the Labour Party more or less held its own in the regional vote – in numbers it fell by 11 per cent – Plaid’s regional vote collapsed by nearly half, 47 per cent.

Labour put most of its effort into the three southern seats it lost to Plaid in 1999: Islwyn, Rhondda and Llanelli. It gained all three, yet it only increased its vote by 1,808 in Islwyn and 2,897 in the Rhondda compared with 1999; while in Llanelli its vote actually fell by 1,369. Overall, Labour’s vote fell in 31 of the 40 seats, due in large measure to the decrease in turn-out, though in Cardiff there were added complications due to local politics. In three marginal seats - Conwy, Llanelli, and Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire - it won by a handful of votes in each case. All these statistics point to the conclusion that Labour more or less held the same position in 2003 as it had in 1999, while Plaid fell back significantly.

There was a good deal of comment during the campaign that it lacked the feel of a general election with national themes running across the country. Rather, the impression was one of a series of localised contests, typified by John Marek’s falling out with the Labour Party in Wrexham, as a result of which he deprived his former party of an overall majority in the Assembly.

Plaid Cymru’s underlying failure was that as a nationalist party it did not manage to capture any clear or distinctive national themes. For its part Welsh Labour, under Rhodri Morgan’s leadership, spoke very clearly to its core supporters with a rhetoric built around free prescription charges, free breakfasts for all primary schoolchildren, continuing free bus travel for people over 60, no top up fees at Welsh Universities, and scrapping home care charges for disabled people.

The Liberal Democrats more or less held on to their 1999 position, though Jenny Randerson polled exceptionally in Cardiff Central. On the other hand the Welsh Conservatives improved their position significantly. They actually increased their constituency vote against the trend of a falling turn-out, and in relative terms they also improved their regional list performance. Arguably, however, what this achieved was to bring their strength back to what it has traditionally been in Welsh politics.

THE LOCAL CAMPAIGNS

When we come to look at the results on a constituency basis, as shown in Table 3, we can see how local circumstances and campaigns materially affected the turn-out. The decline in percentage turn-out ranged from a 15 per cent fall in Caernarfon, to a small increase of 0.19 per cent in Wrexham where John Marek succeeded in galvanising a remarkable personal vote. At least four separate trends can be identified from Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3
Constituencies where decline in turn-out in the 2003 Assembly election compared with 1999 was greater than the Welsh average (marginal seats in bold)

Constituency	Party	% Majority	% Turn-out	% Decline in Turn-Out
Caernarfon	PC	27.80	45.02	15.3
Delyn	Labour	9.62	31.02	13.2
Meirionnydd	PC	38.35	45.03	12.3
Preseli Pembrokeshire	Labour	5.81 <i>2.93% swing Lab to Con</i>	41.37	12.27
Merthyr	Labour	44.29	33.03	11.88
Cardiff Central	Lib Dem	34.74	32.97	11.78
Carmarthen East & Dinefwr	PC	17.24	49.47	11.42
Blaenau Gwent	Labour	59.36	37.36	10.86
Conwy	Labour	0.38 <i>(0.38% swing PC to Lab)</i>	38.44	10.67
Aberavon	Labour	41.66	37.35	9.43
Ynys Mon	PC	8.94	50.43	9.13
Carmarthen West & Pembrokeshire South	Labour	2.20 <i>(1.55% swing Lab to PC)</i>	41.58	9.0
Neath	Labour	22.29	39.09	8.86
Ceredigion	Plaid Cymru	17.82	48.96	8.71
Cardiff North	Labour	1.95 <i>2.68% swing Lab to Con</i>	42.98	8.35
Llanelli	Labour	0.09 <i>1.26% swing PC to Lab</i>	40.34	8.29
Gower	Labour	24.00	39.16	8.17
Cynon Valley	Labour	42.70	37.48	8.02
WALES			38.2	8

Table 4
Constituencies where decline in turn-out in the 2003 Assembly election compared with 1999 was less than the Welsh average (marginal seats in bold)

WALES			38.2	8
Vale of Glamorgan	Labour	9.53	40.39	7.92
Ogmore	Labour	38.82	33.80	7.74
Newport West	Labour	17.51	34.99	7.36
Islwyn	Labour	35.73 <i>19.13% swing PC to Lab</i>	40.04	7.25
Torfaen	Labour	35.61	31.92	7.27
Vale of Clwyd	Labour	15.48	36.27	7.16
Alyn and Deeside	Labour	23.25	37.35	7.15
Brecon and Radnor	Lib Dem	19.77	49.95	7.15
Pontypridd	Labour	28.36	38.60	7.11
Cardiff South and Penarth	Labour	20.45	30.71	6.96
Swansea West	Labour	13.2	33.04	6.92
Montgomery	Lib Dem	11.79	42.74	6.66
Monmouth	Con	30.62 <i>11.03% swing Lab to Con</i>	44.51	6.62
Clwyd West	Labour	1.97 <i>(0.52% swing Lab to Con)</i>	40.62	6.15
Bridgend	Labour	10.93	35.42	6.14
Cardiff West	Labour	33.02	34.21	6.01
Caerphilly	Labour	19.59	37.25	5.95
Swansea East	Labour	22.96	30.41	5.66
Clwyd South	Labour	15.49	34.91	5.6
Newport East	Labour	20.27	30.21	5.24
Rhondda	Labour	34.58 <i>21.40% swing PC to Lab</i>	45.58	4.64
Wrexham	Marek	5.6	34.38	+0.19

1. Plaid Cymru's Failure

Plaid Cymru's failure to mobilise its support to the extent it achieved in 1999 is underlined by the relatively large percentage falls in turn-out it experienced in its stronghold seats:

- Caernarfon – 15.3%
- Meirionnydd – 12.3%
- Carmarthen East – 11.4%
- Ynys Mon – 9.1%
- Ceredigion – 8.7%

Arguably, the extent of Plaid Cymru's failure to mobilise its vote can be exaggerated. This is simply because it did so exceptionally well in 1999, In the first elections to the

Assembly Plaid Cymru benefited from being seen to be closely associated with the success of the devolution project. It had in place a high profile leadership for whom the Assembly was a lifetime's political project. In addition Plaid benefited from Labour's unusual combination of difficulties. All these factors could not be repeated in 2003. Moreover, in 2003 Plaid Cymru probably lost out to a greater range of other parties that stood on the regional list (especially the Wales Green Party). In combination these polled 11.8 per cent of the vote.

Despite all this, however, the relative decline of Plaid's vote and the turn-out in its stronghold seats remains a striking element in the 2003 results.

2. Marginal Constituencies

The evidence points clearly to turn-out being enhanced in seats where there is perceived to be a close contest or where there is some unique feature. The latter, of course, was illustrated in Wrexham where John Marek's intervention uniquely increased the turn-out.

Where there was a felt to be a real contest, the fall in turn-out was generally arrested. The outstanding case was the Rhondda. Here Labour's determination to mobilise its vote resulted in a 21 per cent swing from Plaid Cymru and the relatively low drop in turn-out of just 4.6 per cent. Other marginal seats which saw relatively low falls in turn-out were:

- Clwyd West – 6.1%
- Monmouth - 6.6%
- Islwyn - 7.2%

This leaves four other marginals where the drop in turn-out was relatively high – that is to say, they were above the Welsh average. One of them, Cardiff North (8.3%), only became a marginal as a result of the outcome of the election. Before the poll it had not been identified as such. The relatively high falls in the other three can be attributed again to Plaid Cymru's failure to mobilise to its full potential.:

- Llanelli – 8.2%
- Carmarthen West- 9%
- Preseli Pembs – 12.2%

In Llanelli Helen Mary Jones did slightly increase her percentage share of the poll (by 0.5 per cent) but her actual vote dropped by some 2,000, from the 11,973 votes she polled in 1999, to 9,895 in 2003. A similar trend occurred in Carmarthen West where, though Plaid increased its share of the poll by 3.7 per cent the votes actually cast for the party fell by 530. In Preseli Plaid Cymru dropped into third position behind the Conservatives.

3. Labour Strongholds

There are clear indications that in Labour strongholds in the Valleys, where there is very little chance of another party mounting an effective challenge, there is less motivation to vote. This is indicated by the relatively high fall in turn-out in these constituencies:

- Merthyr – 11.8%
- Blaenau Gwent – 10.8%
- Aberavon – 9.4%
- Neath - 8.8%
- Gower – 8.1%
- Cynon Valley – 8%

4. Border Constituencies

There is also evidence to suggest that where turn-out was relatively low in 1999, especially in the border north-eastern and south-eastern constituencies the decline is approaching an irreducible minimum. It is noteworthy, for instance that apart from Delyn, the fall in turn-out in these seats was consistently below the all-Wales average:

North East:

- Clwyd South – 5.6 %
- Alyn and Deeside – 7.1%
- Vale of Clwyd – 7.1%

South East:

- Newport East – 5.2 per cent
- Monmouth – 6.6 per cent
- Newport West – 7.36

CONCLUSION

The conclusion to be drawn from this analysis is that, while many factors contributing to falling turn-out are beyond the scope of the political parties to influence, there is still a great deal of variation in turn-out across the constituencies that can be attributed to their actions or, more importantly, in-actions. In particular three lessons can be drawn:

1. Where contests are closely fought voter interest is higher and turn-out is correspondingly increased.
 2. Parties can do more to raise the profile of local campaigns, as shown by John Marek's campaign in Wrexham. Such campaigns tend to involve the local press, which was certainly the case in Wrexham in 2003.
 3. Parties need to strive to achieve a greater national profile for their campaigns, with messages that can convince the electorate that voting for the Assembly can make a real difference. In the 2003 campaign Labour managed to achieve this to a greater extent than its main opposition Plaid Cymru, and reaped benefits as a result.
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