The Government and Politics of Wales
Questions for discussion and case studies

Chapter 7 – Wales and Elections
Pages 139–61, Authors Alison Denton and Russell Deacon

Teacher’s guide – in conjunction with the text book

Timing: Students should read the relevant chapter before undertaking the exercise questions and case studies, and discuss their answers. There are answer note suggestions behind all questions. The questions can be undertaken in class or at home with questions/answers and activities being undertaken in the classroom. The material is teaching material and NOT specifically material for answering examination questions.

Tutor guide: Tutors should familiarise themselves with the text, questions and answers before undertaking the activities in the classroom. For any unfamiliar terms an extensive glossary of key terms is provided on pages 206–22 of the book. The questions and case studies do not cover all of the material in the chapters. If tutors wish to cover this, they will need to set additional stimulus questions. Tutors and students may also wish to add material not provided in either the suggested answers or the text to the answers. Welsh politics is constantly changing, so answers provided now may well alter as these changes take place.

The questions for discussion and the case studies are found at the end of each chapter. The suggested answers and some ideas for teaching these are provided on the following pages. Tutors should seek to draw these answers from the students and also discuss their merits.

Suggested answers

Chapter 7 Questions for discussion

These questions cover the WJEC AS Government and Politics Specification Element 2.2 Participation through elections and voting, specifically 2.2.2 Electoral systems in the UK, the subsections on ‘The use of referendums in Wales and the UK including examples and advantages and disadvantages’ and ‘The effect of voting systems on party systems in Wales and the UK’.

1. How has the electoral system for the National Assembly affected the interrelationships of the parties in Wales?

Answer points: Students should discover from reading that the central answer points can be found throughout the chapter. These include the central factor that the AMS electoral system is more proportional than those used in other Welsh elections, so it reduces the dominance of the Labour Party gains from those systems. With greater
representation it can mean that the other political parties have to be brought into the policy-making process more directly. This can be through either coalition or partnership government. It can also be through formal negotiations over getting legislation through or the Assembly’s budget passed. This change has improved the inter-relationships of the parties in Wales, which can be quite tribal in their nature. As a result, this has brought about wider consensus politics at the Welsh Assembly than occurs with Welsh representation at Westminster, where the politics remains more divided in its nature.

2. **What impacts on policy in Wales have been caused by the Additional Member electoral system for the National Assembly and the outcomes it produces?**

*Answer points:* This question requires the students to undertake some research of their own. They should examine some of the electoral manifestos of the last Assembly elections and seek to find areas where the parties have come together. In addition, students should examine some of the recent votes in the Assembly and look for examples of where compromise has been reached on a legislative or policy issue. They should also seek to find examples of where legislation has enjoyed majority party support, indicating a consensus has been reached.

3. **Are referenda a good way of deciding issues?**

*Answer points:* Students should note that for a long time referenda were not undertaken because it was believed that:

1. they were primarily a method used by dictators to harness populist opinion to carry forward mainly unlawful acts, as had been used by Fascist/Nazi and Communist dictatorships; this is linked into the so-called ‘tyranny’ of the majority;
2. the mandate of a political party’s manifesto and its winning of the majority of seats in Parliament was deemed to be sufficient to ensure that any policy was undertaken without the need for a referendum.

In addition to the above points, referenda can be seen merely as nationwide opinion polls on issues on any one day; the public may think differently later. Referenda are also sometimes used as a ‘stick to beat’ an unpopular government with, such as the 1979 Welsh devolution referendum which was used as a mechanism to ‘send a message!’ to an unpopular Labour government of the time.

Referenda are normally only set when the government setting them thinks they will be won. It is usually a minority of the voting public who endorse the winning side, as referenda never enjoy anywhere near 100 per cent turnout. The voters can get easily confused by the claims and counter claims during a referendum without knowing which, if any, side is telling ‘the truth’. The funding and support for one side in a referendum can be much poorer than the other, leading to one side of the argument failing to get across. The ‘No’ side in the 2011 referendum on primary powers (law-
making) in Wales, for instance, declined state funding support and did not have enough resources to cover the whole of Wales, and therefore many constituencies in Wales received only ‘Yes’ information or no information at all before the vote.

Referenda have become more frequent now because on their more positive side, they are a form of direct democracy allowing voters to express opinions not shared by their own elected representatives. They allow the electorate to consider one or two issues in much more detail than in a general election. This means that expertise can be brought in to explain the question in more detail. Although they are not constitutionally binding, they tend to entrench a decision so that ‘what is passed by referendum can only be undone by one’; here a good example is Brexit and Wales leaving the EU. There was a referendum to join the EU in 1975 and one to leave again in 2016. They can be used to prevent dangerous divisions occurring within a governing party, such as with the Conservative government and the Brexit referendum, although these divisions may resurface later on. Referenda can also help answer tricky questions, whereby a more vocal minority may be actively preventing the views of a more silent majority being put forward.

Case study: the effects of the AMS system on party systems in Wales

This case study covers the WJEC AS Government and Politics Specification Element 2.2.2 Electoral systems in the UK.

The case study in Box 7.2 pays particular attention to those elements concerned with the Additional Member System (AMS) and its impact on party systems. Read the case study and then answer the following questions (as well as the case study, students should also examine the chart on page 152 of the book for answer points):

1. What sort of electoral system is AMS?

Tutors should note that AMS is a hybrid system between majoritarian First Past The Post (FPTP) and proportional representation (PR). It was the system agreed for elections to the Welsh Assembly and has only been modified slightly since the Assembly’s inception. Tutors may also find it useful to ask the students to examine the other systems used in Wales for elections and compare and contrast these with AMS over factors such as use, proportionality, ease of undertaking, etc.

2. In what ways could it be said to be good for democracy in Wales?

The students should be aware of the fact that the AMS system, although not fully proportional, is still far more proportional than FPTP. The latter system gives an electoral advantage to the Labour Party in particular and to a lesser extent the Conservatives. AMS therefore weakens the power of the dominant political party – Labour – and ensures that political power must be shared more evenly. The majority of Welsh governments now have been Labour-led but with opposition parties or an Independent presence in the government. Ensuring the election results reflect more
closely the votes cast could therefore be said to be good for democracy. The fact that the system, however, has enabled Labour to remain the lead party in Welsh government since the Assembly’s inception, despite never having gained a majority of the votes, could also be said to be bad for democracy in that it has not allowed for a change of government.

3. What arguments can be used against AMS?

Tutors should note that the arguments against AMS include wasted votes for those on the FPTP element, its still not being truly proportional, it encourage tactical voting, and it promotes male dominance and political party control over which candidates are elected, especially as there is a closed regional list, which does not allow voters to rank which candidates they would like to see elected. It can also encourage extreme or fringe parties to compete and even gain office because the PR element makes it easier to win than the FPTP one.

4. How has it altered the fortunes of specific parties in Wales?

The answer should indicate that all of the political parties have benefited to a degree from the AMS system, although the Labour Party has done so least, due to its dominance on the FPTP system. UKIP has been the party to benefit the most: all seven of its AMs elected in 2016 were from the proportional regional list. Due to the dominance of centre-eft parties in Wales, it has also allowed a centre-left political agenda to be followed over a longer period than in any other part of the UK.

The extra finance and resources provided to the political parties in Wales has also enabled them to build up a significant professional political infrastructure of researchers, elected members and related support staff. This resourcing is far beyond that which each political party had in the pre-devolution period. The current exception to this is the Welsh Liberal Democrats whose political fortunes in Wales are worse than in 1999 when the Assembly was established.

Summary – Reflective learning questions

These should be used either at the end or between the questions for discussion and the case studies to reflect on what has been learned. The students should be given sufficient time to discuss their answers.

1. Write a letter to one of next year’s students explaining what you have learned about.
2. What connections can you make between today’s learning and what we have studied previously?

--End--