



Wales: Culture and identity

Political representation

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Here Anwen Elias, the author of chapter 8, discusses the 'circuit of knowledge' and its usefulness to Social Scientists. She begins by looking at how political representations are key to understanding connections in Wales.

ANWEN ELIAS

Well key to this chapter is the very fundamental connection between voters and the people we elect to represent us and the chapter looks at the quality of that connection in one particular context which is Wales and it looks at it firstly from the historical perspective and looks at the problems with that connection and how those problems lead to a new process of devolution which saw the creation of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999. And how devolution was presented to the people of Wales as a process which would lead to better connection between politicians and citizens of Wales. So that's one of the central connections that is the theme of this chapter.

Connections manifest themselves in other ways in the chapter. For example there is the very mechanical way of operationalizations, the connection between voters and politicians and that is through the use of different electoral systems and how different electoral systems can lead to different kinds of connections if you like. And then following from that there is the idea of inclusivity in Welsh politics and how the idea of being inclusive in politics means bringing in new groups of people to the political process; trying to establish connections with people who maybe before devolution had been excluded from a particular process and so on.

There are quite a few studies that have looked at the idea of inclusivity in Welsh politics and I think they are very interesting in terms of what they tell us about the nature of political representation in Wales.

So if we look at for example the case of black and ethnic minority groups in Wales a lot of research has been done to look at to what extent has devolution brought these kinds of people into politics in Wales. And the kind of research that has been done with these groups is going to talk to them and doing very in depth qualitative research, giving these people a voice if you like and allowing them to speak from their own experiences of what it's been like in trying to get their interests, getting their voices heard, in the political process in Wales. And in the chapter there are examples of the opportunities that these groups have had to connect to politicians and to the political institutions in Wales but also the problems they've had in doing that.

And I like this kind of research because it gives voice to the people directly. We hear about these experiences through the interviews that researchers have done with them through the focus groups that have been done with them and that kind of evidence is very important in allowing us to make judgements about what political representation is like in Wales post devolution; what that connection is like between this groups – black and ethnic minority groups and the politicians that are supposed to represent them but maybe they don't do so in as good a way as perhaps we would have wanted them to.

The idea of the circuit of knowledge is very important in trying to understand what we as social scientists try to do when we are understanding or wanting to explain the world around us and it's a way of being more systematic, being more organised in the way we go about trying to explain and understand different phenomena in the social world. And there are different components to the circuit of knowledge and these are employed in this chapter to try

and be more organised and systematic in the way that we can go about making judgements about the quality of political representation in Wales.

So the chapter starts off with a basic question that it tries to answer and that is how has devolution impacted on the nature of political representation in Wales. I go on to try and test some claims that have been made about political representation in Wales. So for example one of the claims that was made about devolution was that it would improve the quality of political representation in Wales. It would make political representation more inclusive. So what the chapter does is to try and test these claims and it does so by using a very important concept and that is the concept of legitimacy. The chapter uses this concept as a sort of criteria for measuring political representation in Wales, the quality of political representation in Wales. Now in order to do this the chapter gathers evidence and evidence is very important for us as social scientists because that's the way in which we can make arguments that are grounded in important information about this thing that we are looking at, political representation in this case.

The kind of evidence that this chapter uses is some of it is qualitative so there are interviews with different groups from society. There's also quantitative evidence. So evidence from polls, public opinion polls about what people think about political representation in Wales. And on the basis of this evidence the chapter can then make judgements about political representation as it has changed or not post devolution in Wales. And it's on the basis of this evidence that we can then go back and answer the original question which was to what extent has devolution changed political representation in Wales. I don't want to give the answer away because you can read the chapter and you will find out the answer for yourselves but the answer in turn gives rise to new questions and that then leads to the circuit of knowledge beginning again and going through the different steps whereby we find answers to these new questions that we ask.