

Welsh devolution and the politics of the pandemic: Evolving social media strategies

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## Introduction

This chapter examines the politics of the Covid pandemic in Wales, arguing that the negotiation of the pandemic by the Welsh Government was mobilised by independence campaigners via the nascent YesCymru movement, but that the policies enacted by Wales's devolved parliament simultaneously increased polarisation across the country. It assesses that reception by analysis of the evolving use of social media tactics, the primary method used to push both sides of the argument.

The pandemic was constitutionally unprecedented in the UK, in that a national crisis was managed differently in each devolved nation. Because it has control over health (a devolved matter) Wales had control over testing, lockdowns, mask mandates and restrictions. The Welsh Government's decision-making even resulted in what effectively became a temporary hard border with England, an event with no historical precedent. In general, Wales took a more restrictive approach to the pandemic, which was supposedly science and evidence-based, with longer and more stringent regulations.

As a result, the pandemic became framed in the wider media as a diametric contrast between a socially democratic Wales (and Scotland) and a neo-liberal England, and Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford subtly cultivated this distinction. The implication was that Drakeford's leadership was reassuring and appropriately cautious in a time of uncertainty, in contrast to that of Boris Johnson. Polling suggested trust in Drakeford's management of Covid sat at around 61% by Sept 2021, with Johnson on 34% (Yougov/ITV/Cardiff University, 2021). This transcended Welsh internal debate, with the liberal wing of the UK media also pursuing the theme (for example, Rhiannon Lucy Coslett in the Guardian, 27 October 2020:

‘Wales’s Covid competence is inspiring many of us to thoughts of independence’). This despite the fact that Drakeford is a unionist, opposed to independence but in favour of more devolved powers – and the uncomfortable reality that Wales’s Covid outcomes were little better, and in some cases were worse, than those of England (Scobie 2021).

The problem with much of the pontificating about Welsh Covid policy (and, in particular, its public reception) is that it was almost entirely anecdotal, suffering from a fairly obvious confirmation bias. People interpreted Drakeford’s approach to Covid via their own ideological prism. There was (and remains) an urgent need for empiricism, with a particular need to make a realistic appraisal of the range of public opinion that resulted from the Welsh handling of the pandemic. These are important issues, not least for the future of the UK, and need proper consideration.

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We adopt a methodological approach using NodeXL to conduct social network analysis, which allowed for detailed analysis of the debate as it emerged on social media and therefore gain some insight into public opinion. Our research suggests that, far from being uniformly welcomed and celebrated, the policies enacted by the Welsh Government during the pandemic increased polarisation in Wales, with Mark Drakeford’s leadership (and the institution of the Senedd itself), being simultaneously welcomed and vilified. Groups such as Yes Cymru fused what they saw as the success of Welsh Covid policies to their agenda for an independent Wales, modelling itself on the Scottish ‘Yes’ campaign and attempted to broaden the appeal of Welsh independence away from its linguistic heartlands. Post-COVID, its success has been notable – moving support for full independence from a minority concern centred in Welsh-speaking areas (estimates vary, but support for independence never rose above 15% before 2016 – although some sources suggest it rarely rose above 5%). YesCymru used various strategies to highlight perceived UK government incompetence in the management of COVID, fusing this to wider perceptions around the marginalization of Wales. It borrowed heavily from the Scottish experience to do this.

In direct contrast, groups such as ‘Abolish the Welsh Assembly’ (based upon the political party of the same name), rejected the leadership of Mark Drakeford and called for closer

ties to Westminster, attempting to mobilise opposition to what they saw as the authoritarian tendencies of Drakeford and the Welsh administration.

Further, we tentatively suggest that the evidence suggests this polarisation closely maps the contours of Balsom's 'Three Wales model' (1985), which some observers considered outmoded in the post-devolution world (e.g., Scully 2003). There has been a large uptick in support for Welsh independence post-Covid, as exploited by YesCymru, and to an extent that has increased (and diversified) away from traditional linguistic heartlands. However, this is only true to an extent: for the most part it maps onto traditional Plaid Cymru (the Welsh nationalist party) voting areas, with increasing numbers in what Balsom described as 'Welsh Wales' (the South Wales valleys, for example). In parallel, however, it also became increasingly clear over the course of the pandemic that there has been an uptick in opposition to the very concept of devolution, exploited by Abolish the Welsh Assembly.

#### Welsh devolution: a brief historical summary

Wales voted for a degree of self-government in a referendum held in September 1997, a manifesto pledge made by the newly incumbent Labour government in London. The margin was very narrow (50.3%), but led to the passing of the Government of Wales Act (1998) and the subsequent formation of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999. This became officially known as the Welsh Parliament (Senedd Cymru in the Welsh language) in 2020.

Its law-making powers (initially very limited) were expanded by a further referendum in 2011, and then further expanded by later Acts, ultimately leading to a 'reserved powers' style of devolution, similar to the Scottish Parliament. However, while support for Welsh devolution has generally grown since the 1997 vote, Welsh public opinion remains split along geographical, linguistic and cultural lines.

#### Welsh media context:

The Welsh context offers a particularly intriguing example of the relationship between evolving media technologies and a changing political dynamic, a useful potential testing ground for the effectiveness of networked communication in a deficient mainstream media

environment (Roberts, 2008). This is at least partly because Wales has historically been dependent on a press that derives very largely from London-based national newspapers and television news; and that mainstream British press was increasingly inclined to ignore devolved politics in both Wales and Scotland.

Covid changed that, at least temporarily, revealing the realities of what ‘reserved powers’ meant to the voting public, in many cases for the first time. With health a devolved matter, both Wales and Scotland differed markedly from the Westminster government on numerous occasions over the course of the pandemic.

It is important to note that while Scotland has its own English language media, which explores devolved politics and frames news from a distinctive Scottish perspective, Wales (with the exception of the BBC) does not. It does, however, have a long tradition of Welsh language media, from the national TV station S4C to the long-established tradition of the *papurau bro* (a distinctive, non-commercial kind of local newspaper)

This paradox gives rise to an unusually deficient media and related democratic deficit, and an associated tendency to rely on social media, which grew in significance over the pandemic.

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#### YesCymru:

Given the volume of pandemic-related coverage, the authors felt that the most meaningful approach to a detailed analysis of social media coverage would be to focus on the nascent YesCymru movement, which expanded its scope considerably over the course of the pandemic. Our research sought to trace its use of social media – in particular Twitter – to generate engagement and mobilise a wider network by exploiting the dynamic inherent in the platform. In parallel, we sought to analyse the dialogue relating to those opposed to devolution, and in particular to assess the ways in which critics of Drakeford’s Covid policies fused this to anti-devolution sentiment.

YesCymru formally launched in 2016. Modelled on the Scottish Yes campaign, to the extent of adopting near-identical iconography, it was given additional focus by the Brexit vote later

that year, and another spike in engagement followed the December 2019 UK general election.

Its trajectory illustrates the different socio-political context in Wales, which remains considerably more internally diverse in terms of its broader politics than Scotland (sectarianism notwithstanding). Denis Balsom's four decades old 'three Wales model' still has relevance for a country in which support for independence has historically been closely linked to the politics of the Welsh language (spoken by around 20% of the population, predominantly in what Balsom dubbed 'Y Bro Cymraeg', the rural West and North-West).

Indeed, the 2019 general election confirmed the continuing relevance of Balsom's model, with the electoral map still tracing its contours. The odds for full independence, in short, have traditionally been very poor – with support for independence historically running at less than 10%, indeed closer to 2% according to some readings.

However, that dynamic is shifting, and Yes Cymru's growing use of Twitter and other social media platforms provides an opportunity to analyse the growth of a political movement in an unusual context. May 2019 saw the first ever formal march for Welsh independence, 'All under one banner Cymru' (also modelled on the Scottish attempt to bring diverse groups together for a common cause), when 3000 marchers demonstrated in Cardiff. In July 2019, organisers claimed 10,000 attended a second march, in the Welsh-speaking town of Caernarfon. A third march was held in Merthyr Tydfil, September 2019, and in January 2020 the organisation gained a considerable amount of media publicity for its successful social media push to get Yma o Hyd, a famous pro-independence song by folk singer Dafydd Iwan (dating back to the early 1980s) to the top of the iTunes charts.

The vandalism surrounding the iconic 'Cofiwch Tryweryn' monument lent the movement an additional dynamic. In this case a famous piece of political graffiti (referring to the flooding of a Welsh-speaking valley to provide drinking water for Liverpool) was covered over, and the ensuing visual imagery lent a further dynamism to the social media campaign.

Indeed, a debate on independence took place in the Welsh parliament on Wednesday 15 July, revolving around whether an independence referendum should be held, with the pandemic centre-stage. Plaid Cymru argued that the response to coronavirus in Wales had shown the country would be better off going it alone, and observed that it was the first time the question of independence has been the sole focus of a debate in the Senedd.

In late 2022 a poll found that a quarter of people in Wales supported independence – the largest proportion ever recorded in an opinion survey. Speaking ahead of the debate, the Plaid Cymru leader, Adam Price (since deposed), said:

*Wales has proven itself during the coronavirus crisis by acting independently to protect our citizens from the dysfunctionality and ineptitude of the Westminster government.*

*As we come out of this crisis, we cannot go back to the status quo. The status quo has failed Wales. Underinvestment and unfair funding forms the crux of this unequal union of broken promises – delivered by the Tories at Westminster and defended by Labour through their support for the stagnant status quo.*

*We are calling on the Welsh government to seek the constitutional right to allow the Senedd to legislate during the next term to hold a binding referendum on independence.*

First Minister Mark Drakeford said it was for the people of Wales to decide on their future. He said he would be making the case in the run-up to next year's Welsh parliament elections for Wales to remain within the UK. Indeed, Drakeford was vocal in arguing for a collaborative approach to Covid in the early days of the pandemic, suggesting that close communication between Westminster and the devolved administrations was the best way to tackle it, fusing his instinctive unionism with the challenges of the pandemic.

The rather haphazard nature of British devolution revealed itself early on, however, and the relationship between the Welsh government and Westminster began to crack despite the rhetoric of unity. A good example of this came with the numerous (intentional) leaks about the UK government's 'roadmap' out of lockdown, none of which were discussed with Sturgeon or Drakeford (Hayward, 2020).

Sturgeon responded by saying she would 'not be pressurised' into the early lifting of measures, adding that Scotland would take a different approach if necessary. Drakeford followed next day, saying he wanted a 'regular and reliable' pattern to measures, and the first significant divergence followed, with the devolved administrations coming to different conclusions based on the same science (Hayward, 2020). Johnson (and the wider media) failed to make it clear that many of the easing measures applied only to England, creating farcical situations particularly in Wales, where the border with England is often urban or suburban in nature, sometimes barely detectable. Police chiefs were then tasked with enforcing different temporary legislation on either side of a border which is frequently unmarked.

The Welsh government's caution was generally well received by the public, but it is worth noting that Drakeford's approval never rose above 62% and was masked by considerable differences relating to much older cultural and demographic factors.

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Balsom (1985) argued that Welsh voting patterns, as well as what might usefully be described as a broader historical pattern of 'identity politics' can best be encapsulated by dividing the country into three units: the 'Welsh Wales' of the South Wales valleys (traditionally Labour-voting, Welsh-identifying but largely English-speaking), the 'Fro Cymraeg' of the North-West and West (Welsh-speaking, with significant levels of support for Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party) and 'British Wales' (parts of Pembrokeshire and the North Wales coast, along with most areas adjacent to the English border, with significant levels of support for the Conservatives). Although rather dated and reductive, Balsom's simple summary retains considerable relevance and appears to align closely to attitudes to Welsh policy as it relates to COVID, and wider attitudes towards devolution and independence.

Plaid Cymru is the established Welsh nationalist party, launched in 1925. Its recent strategy has been to attempt to bridge the two linguistic cultures by, for example, appointing non-Welsh-speaking Leanne Wood (from the Rhondda Valley, archetypal 'Welsh Wales') as leader (since replaced by Adam Price). However, this (and arguably all subsequent attempts

at nation building) perhaps understandably ignored the lurking presence of 'British Wales', which remained firmly in the background as the process of building coherent, and strong, national narratives intensified after devolution in 1997.

The experience of the pandemic, however, appears to have confirmed some of these trends, although with one critical shift (which our research tentatively suggests might be happening). The uptick in support for Welsh independence partly generated by the Yes Cymru movement and lent momentum by COVID, has spread away from Balsom's 'Fro Cymraeg' into Balsom's 'Welsh Wales', the very areas that confounded nationalists by voting to leave the EU. At the same time, attitudes in Balsom's 'British Wales' have hardened in opposition to Drakeford's COVID policy and the very concept of Welsh devolution.

## **Methodology**

This work focuses upon the influence of digital media, specifically Twitter, in underpinning both the expanding appeal of Yes Cymru, and the wider discourse on Welsh independence. With Twitter being the platform of enquiry, NodeXL was used to conduct qualitative and quantitative network analysis. NodeXL is a powerful extension of the Microsoft Excel package that allows users to search key words and hashtags, learn about how these words bind together different networks, and visualize these which are called 'sociograms' (Smith et al. 2009). Whilst this focus is quantitative, allowing users to scrape large datasets, there is also a qualitative component which was undertaken in this work, allowing users to conduct thematic content analysis on key terms used within networks. This topic modelling allows the researcher to gain a greater understanding into the dynamics of networks.

Yes Cymru have explicitly used a Twitter-centric social media strategy for diffusing the Welsh independence message. This was particularly evident during the pandemic when on-the-ground protest was restricted. There has been a visible increase in engagement by and with Welsh independence discourses on Twitter amidst COVID, which raises questions surrounding how political talk on Twitter is framing the Welsh independence debates, how influential prevailing discourses are, and who are the conversational leaders within these



debates. As such, NodeXL, with its ability to import data from the Twitter API and determine network metrics both statistically and visually through sociograms was a useful method to complement Balsom's three Wales model. This research was conducted between the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February – 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 2021 and was based around '#IndyWales', which is the emblematic tweet of the Yes Cymru movement; '@abolishassembly', the Twitter handle of the single-issue political party that opposes Welsh devolution, and 'Abolish the Welsh Assembly', which is the full name of the single-issue party. Given that Abolish were less active than Yes Cymru on Twitter, this required these two terms to be used against Yes Cymru's one, which is already interesting and shows the different levels of Twitter activity by the opposing groups.

These terms were chosen as they all relate to the key research areas of this paper, that of Welsh independence, scepticism of central Westminster governance, but also the uptick in opposition for Welsh devolution and, indeed, independence. '#IndyWales' is the inclusive, emblematic tweet of Yes Cymru, which often features alongside '#annibyniaeth', the Welsh word for independence. '@abolishassembly' was chosen as the Abolish the Welsh Assembly's official Twitter account was often targeted by both supporters and opponents of the movement. As such, it was a visible tweet that had the potential to formulate rich analysis through NodeXL.

'Abolish the Welsh Assembly' is the full title of the political party, and one that was regularly used to bring both positive and negative attention to the movement. Conducting searches using this term was likely to highlight polarisation and highlight clusters of anti-devolution conversations.

The justification for conducting this network analysis is to determine the issues used by Yes Cymru to mobilise support for '#IndyWales' amidst COVID, and what the oppositional conversations of Abolish utilised to reject Drakeford's vision of Wales. How was the Welsh independence debate framed? Who were the important figures in the period of study that spearheaded the debate on both sides? How did both sides utilise the digitally-fortified COVID communication environment? Network analysis allowed for an insight into these questions.

## Results and discussion

Firstly, the results of '#IndyWales' will be presented. For the purpose of readability, the findings of the empirical research will be presented with the data available upon request from the authors.

Through NodeXL, researchers can cluster Twitter users into groups based on conversational aspects. In the first search of '#IndyWales' between 22<sup>nd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of January 2021 Yes Cymru was the key broker of a conversational catalyst based around #dissolvethunion and #indyref2: clear goals of Yes Cymru and emblematic tweets of the movement. These ideas influenced other conversations based around this topic, and fed into debates that support the '#IndyWales' agenda, but manipulates this message to push the case for #IndyRef2 in Scotland, alongside '#Time4Unity' and #UnitedIreland', evidencing different conversations stemming from the original #IndyWales hashtag. This means that multiple conversations can stem from the original use of the hashtag, where sub-networks can use the original hashtag to stimulate unique, yet interdependent conversations.

Beyond analysing hashtags, the in-degree and betweenness centrality of different Twitter users was conducted. The importance of in-degree and betweenness centrality are that users with high in-degree centrality are those who are at the centre of the community and have high engagement and visibility (Golbeck, 2015). Those who have high betweenness centrality are important conduits of information, facilitating the flow of information across and between networks (Perez and Germon, 2016). A user who has both a high in-degree centrality and a high betweenness centrality can be determined as a central figure in the network, having high visibility and engagement, but also acting as an informational gatekeeper. Without these users, particularly those with high betweenness centrality, information would not diffuse across networks, which, given the retweet function of Twitter, is a cardinal measure of incidental exposure which network-facilitated movements greatly rely upon (Eady et al. 2019).

Table 3: In-degree and betweenness centrality measures across the '#IndyWales' timeframe.

	#INDYWALEES 2 FEB	#INDYWALEES 9 FEB	#INDYWALEES 16 FEB	#INDYWALEES 23 FEB	#INDYWALEES 2 MARCH
<b>IN- DEGREE</b>	Yes Cymru	Yes Cymru	Yes Cymru	Yes Cymru	Yes Cymru
	Irish Unionist	Yes Cymru supporter	Welsh Independence supporter	BBC News	Plaid Cymru politician
	Welsh Independence supporter	Irish Unionist	Welsh Independence supporter	Plaid Cymru candidate, pro Yes Cymru	Plaid Cymru
	Plaid Cymru	Welsh Independence supporter	A movement for radical Welsh Independence	Plaid Cymru	Alt-data polling organisation
	Yes Cymru supporter	Conservative MP	Plaid Cymru	Welsh Independence supporter	Welsh Greens Leader

	#INDYWALEES 2 FEB	#INDYWALEES 9 FEB	#INDYWALEES 16 FEB	#INDYWALEES 23 FEB	#INDYWALEES 2 MARCH
<b>BTWN</b>	Yes Cymru	Yes Cymru	Yes Cymru	Retweet bot	Yes Cymru
	Retweet bot	Retweet bot	Retweet bot	Yes Cymru	Retweet bot
	Irish Unionist	Irish Unionist	Welsh Independence supporter	Yes Cymru supporter	Yes Cymru supporter
	Welsh Independence supporter	Yes Cymru supporter	Welsh Independence supporter	BBC News	Alt-data polling organisation
	Welsh Independence supporter	Yes Cymru supporter	Irish Unionist	Plaid Cymru candidate, pro Yes Cymru	Scottish Independence campaigner

This table suggests several factors come into play when recognizing those with the highest in-degree, and betweenness centralities. Firstly, Yes Cymru is unanimously the node with the highest in-degree, and therefore the node most likely to spark conversation surrounding

'#IndyWales.' That said, alt-data polling organisations and members of the Welsh Green party are also (less obvious) conversational hubs. Here, users that are not ordinarily part of the Welsh independence debate highlights the permeation of the Welsh independence debate across numerous spheres. This highlights the growth of Welsh independence as a fringe issue to one that is influencing wider political movements.

Regarding betweenness, Yes Cymru is unsurprisingly the prime-broker of '#IndyWales.' Yet a retweet bot, unaffiliated with Yes Cymru, also plays a key role in diffusing information. This retweet bot account supports the pro-Scottish and pro-Welsh independence agenda, and, despite having less than 1,000 followers, acts as an influential bridge in distributing information across networks. As such, this bot is important in underpinning the informational flow between '#IndyWales', and #IndyRef2.'

To add further meaning to what these important figures were talking about, a content analysis of top hashtags, top words, and top word-pairs uncovered from the IndyWales hashtag across the 1-month period was conducted. As expected, '#IndyWales' represents 62.43% of the 50,158 hashtags unearthed through analysis. '#Annibyniaeth' (Welsh for 'independence') follows on 16.02%, with other pro-independence hashtags (#indyref2, #scottishindependence, #time4unity) present, but much less prominent in the search (4.93%, 0.73% and 1.45% respectively).

The analysis of words shows the more 'social-movement-style' of recruitment that Yes Cymru are using along with their shareable slogans. For example, many of the words encountered ('followers', 'help', 'join', 'people') evidences the presence of an attempt at group-identity building and the discursive strategy of attempting to recruit followers to join the collective Yes Cymru identity, not simply to be a clicktivist 'lurker', but rather to join an organization.

Examining word-pairs further clarifies this, with 'join, yescymru', 'support, #indywales', and '#indywales, help' suggesting Yes Cymru is attempting to become the focal point for the movement. However, despite these recruitment requests, the most common word-pairs were '#IndyWales, annabyniaeth' that composed 19.31% of the 24,614 word-pairs

uncovered, and 'independent, wales' composing 9.66%. Clearly, despite the recruitment of participants to support IndyWales being important, the core message apparent within this network was the clearly articulate the independence message. With other word-pairs such as '#indyref2, #indywales', 'irish, unity' and 'scottish, independence' also regularly appearing alongside '#IndyWales', this highlights the intertwined nature of pro-independence movements across the UK.

Through further analysis of the user network of Yes Cymru, many of the trends surrounding '#IndyWales' are supported. Exploring the user-network of Yes Cymru, #IndyWales and #Annibyniaeth continue to remain the emblematic tweets of the movement (compiling 53.69% and 26.69% of their 1,004 hashtags used), with words such as Westminster (6.27%), Welsh (8.99%) and Independence (11.1%) highlighting what the movement regularly discredits to push the agenda for an independent Wales. Word-pairs such as 'joined, yescymru' (11.66%) and 'join, yescymru' (8.64%) again highlight the attempt to unify the nation and go beyond language barriers (by using both Welsh and English) to unite followers, recruit them, and effectively market the Welsh independence project. Finally, the word-pairs of 'Wales' and 'Scotland' (5.35%) again highlight the interdependence and mutually synonymous agenda of Welsh, and Scottish independence. Indeed, both movements appear to regularly interact and support each other, effectively creating a dual-supportive framework where pro-Welsh independence is supported by pro-Scottish independence, due to the common political target to stake claims for independence: Westminster.

Whilst 'COVID' is not explicitly mentioned in this analysis, much of Yes Cymru's '#IndyWales' claims, supported with hashtags such as '#WelshIndependence' and '#Indycurious' are accompanied by iconography and visually eye-catching posters, such as 'anti-Westminster, never anti-England', with a picture of Boris Johnson. With iconography supporting these hashtags, this means that this can easily diffuse across Twitter and be digested, due to the presence of cognitive simplification which can foster interpersonal talk (Robertson, 2021).

## **'Abolish the Welsh Assembly'**

Table 6: in-degree and betweenness centrality of Abolish the Welsh Assembly.

	<b>ABOLISH THE WELSH ASSEMBLY 2 FEB</b>	<b>ABOLISH THE WELSH ASSEMBLY 9 FEB</b>	<b>ABOLISH THE WELSH ASSEMBLY 16 FEB</b>	<b>ABOLISH THE WELSH ASSEMBLY 23 FEB</b>	<b>ABOLISH THE WELSH ASSEMBLY 2 MARCH</b>
<b>IN-DEGREE</b>	Pro-UK, anti-SNP, anti-Plaid Cymru	Pro-UK, anti-SNP, anti-Plaid Cymru	Mark Reckless	Abolish the Welsh Assembly	Abolish the Welsh Assembly recruiter
	Abolish the Welsh Assembly press officer	Abolish the Welsh Assembly recruiter	Abolish the Welsh Assembly	Gareth Bennett	Pro-UK, anti-SNP, anti-Plaid Cymru
	Abolish the Welsh Assembly recruiter	Guido Fawkes reporter	Gareth Bennett	Boris Johnson	Anti-lockdown political commentary
	Pro-Brexit, anti-lockdown	Sunday express political correspondent	Pro Welsh Independence	Mark Drakeford	N/A
	Sunday express political correspondent	Pro Yes Cymru: anti-Westminster never anti-England	Pro Yes Cymru: anti-Westminster never anti-England	Anti-lockdown	Mark Reckless

	<b>ABOLISH THE WELSH ASSEMBLY 2 FEB</b>	<b>ABOLISH THE WELSH ASSEMBLY 9 FEB</b>	<b>ABOLISH THE WELSH ASSEMBLY 16 FEB</b>	<b>ABOLISH THE WELSH ASSEMBLY 23 FEB</b>	<b>ABOLISH THE WELSH ASSEMBLY 2 MARCH</b>
<b>BTWN</b>	Pro-UK, anti-SNP, anti-Plaid Cymru	Abolish the Welsh Assembly recruiter	Mark Reckless	Abolish the Welsh Assembly	Abolish the Welsh Assembly recruiter
	Abolish the Welsh Assembly press officer	Pro-UK, anti-SNP, anti-Plaid Cymru	Abolish the Welsh Assembly recruiter	Anti-Drakeford, anti-devolution	Anti-lockdown political commentary
	Pro-Brexit, anti-lockdown	Pro Abolish the Welsh Assembly	Abolish the Welsh Assembly	Anti-Drakeford, anti-devolution	Pro Welsh independent media
	Mark Reckless	Guido Fawkes reporter	Gareth Bennett	Mark Drakeford	Wales online

	Sunday express political correspondent	Mark Reckless	Sunday express political correspondent	Boris Johnson	N/A
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The in-degree of 'Abolish the Welsh Assembly' demonstrates an immediate focus upon the anti-devolution figures that are regularly targeted in the conversation, which comprises both 'elite', well-known figures such as Gareth Bennett and Mark Reckless, and 'non-elite', 'regular' Twitter users. Arguments against Mark Drakeford weave into anti-lockdown sentiment. However, several accounts that supported the agenda of Yes Cymru were regularly targeted also. Regarding betweenness, the informational conduits largely compose anti-Drakeford commentators from the right, such as Guido Fawkes reporters, pro-Brexit figures and anti-lockdown campaigners. What can be understood through observing this is a different set of focal users and information brokers than '#IndyWales.' Notably, the presence of Abolish Assembly and the Abolish the Welsh Assembly Senedd members, former Conservative and UKIP MP Mark Reckless, and Gareth Bennett, alongside anti-devolution-specific Twitter accounts not run by the party. Yet, pro-Yes Cymru accounts continue to play a high in-degree role in '@abolishassembly', with Yes Cymru frequently tagged by those criticizing the '@abolishassembly' account. Here, Yes Cymru supporters effectively comment on posts by '@abolishassembly' and tag Yes Cymru to highlight a more unified, less divisive, and, ultimately, more coherent agenda explicitly pushing for Welsh independence. Looking at betweenness centrality, it is again a mix of pro-Abolish Assembly accounts (e.g. Mark Reckless, Gareth Bennett, Abolish Assembly), but also the presence of Yes Cymru supporters, and political commentators. With this array of anti-Abolish Assembly accounts being important conduits of information, this highlights the polarized network, where '@abolishassembly' information is being posted by the account, then critiqued and framed by oppositional groups. Clearly, there is a hostility between '@abolishassembly' and Yes Cymru supporters, with both jostling for different visions of a redefined Wales. These tags are largely used to engage in debate, however, oppositional movements often tag each other when being contentious in order to generate interest, visibility, and debate surrounding the cause.

Expanding, content analysis on top hashtags, words, and word-pairs was conducted. This search across the five-week period retrieved much less data than '#IndyWales', conveying a

much more fringe and rejected issue than ‘#IndyWales.’ #IndyWales is still a hashtag associated with the movement, but to a much lesser extent than that peddled by Yes Cymru supporters (26 uses of the hashtag by Abolish compared to 540 by Yes Cymru). The hashtag ‘#IndyWales’ here is seemingly only utilized by ‘@abolishassembly’ to generate debate and engagement with Yes Cymru supporters in attempt to discredit their argument. Beyond this, however, it can be noted that the supporters of ‘@abolishassembly’ in a similar vein to many populist movements globally, operate through a more notable echo chamber, as opposed to the broadcasting network of Yes Cymru that attempts to inclusively unify support amongst many different groups. With the most common hashtags by Abolish being ‘#WeAreAbolish’ (83 tweets, 16.7%), ‘#SaveWales’ (79 tweets, 15.9%) and ‘#AbolishAssembly’ (78 tweets, 15.69%), there are clearly different goals here beyond independence, with blame largely thrown at the Welsh Senedd, not Westminster as Yes Cymru predominantly target.

The top words clarify this, with not one mention of the term ‘Westminster’, but many mentions of the terms ‘devolution’ (377 mentions), ‘election’ (494 mentions), alongside ‘pandemic’ (90 mentions), which explicitly links Abolish the Welsh Assembly’s critique of the Senedd with Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford’s handling of the pandemic. This is further clarified with the word pairs such as ‘election, pandemic’ (39 mentions), ‘devolution, failed’ (137 mentions), ‘devolved, powers’ (136 mentions), ‘useless, institution’ (82 mentions), and ‘failed, people’ (134 mentions) Here, the ‘@abolishassembly’ message focuses on discrediting Westminster by highlighting an explicit anti-devolution agenda, with COVID weaponized as a discursive mechanism in an attempt to discredit Mark Drakeford, and the Senedd as an institution.

By contrast, YesCymru’s rhetoric aims at inclusivity, at broadening the appeal of Welsh independence away from its traditional linguistic heartlands (Balsom’s ‘Bro Cymraeg’). Increasingly, it does this by borrowing and fusing debate with wider UK dissatisfaction with the Johnson regime post-COVID and post-Brexit. Tentatively, our findings suggest that positions have hardened, and Welsh politics has become increasingly polarized as a result. Further, it appears to map quite closely to the old geographical boundaries of Balsom’s ‘Three Wales Model’, with much of the opposition to Drakeford and Welsh policies deriving



from what Balsom dubbed 'British Wales' (essentially areas adjacent to the English border, along with the North Wales coast and parts of Pembrokeshire). The rhetoric of Yes Cymru for an '#IndyWales' regularly alludes to the powers that Wales would have if a fully independent country.

Increasingly, it does this by fusing the debate with wider UK dissatisfaction with the Conservative regime post-COVID and post-Brexit. This was then mobilised as a means of drawing attention to the perceived competence and 'Welsh-specific' policies enacted by Drakeford, which involved harsher lockdowns and stricter interpretations of the science. The rhetoric of Abolish appears more divisive. Here, whilst Westminster is blamed for devolution (a policy associated with Blair's Labour Party in the late 90s) so too is the Senedd itself. Whilst Welsh independence through Yes Cymru is progressively framed through the potential benefits of independence related to lifestyle politics and postmaterialist concerns, the rhetoric of Abolish attempts to exploit populist, anti-establishment tendencies, evidenced by the presence of former UKIP MP Mark Reckless, pro-Brexit supporters, and anti-lockdown supporters.

ENDS

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