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Title: Family policy in the programs of political parties in Wales

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Citation style: Libor Grzegorz. (2017). Family policy in the programs of political parties in Wales. W: K. Juszczak-Frelkiewicz, G. Libor (red.), "Contemporary family - comparative perspective" (S. 115-127). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



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Family policy in the programs of political parties in Wales

Introduction

The parliamentary, presidential or local government elections are events stirring a lot of emotions in almost every country in which they are carried out. This should hardly be surprising, taking their conflict-triggering and competitive character into account. This very competitive character of elections mainly results from the existence of socio-political cleavages. Different opinions and views existing amongst the members of a given society not only explain the diversity of political parties, but also influence their functioning. The above claims may be approached in two ways. The first one assumes that the electoral decision is the result of the voters' response to the problems and issues presented in the pre-election and election discourse. Here the economic and social situation within which the elections occur is the main determinant. This in turn means that the key to electoral success lies in particular economic or social issues and their tackling. When economic problems give way to social ones, then we can get the impression that setting the main directions of policies by political parties is relatively less important. But still party policy makers try to manipulate media messages to increase the chances of electoral victory. The second approach stresses the importance of ideological self-identification for the left-wing and right-wing voters. This is because the voters are able to determine their voting preferences themselves on the basis of which it is possible to define the content of ideological concepts of "left" and "right" (Wojtasik, 2012).

The diversity of the political parties is therefore not a coincidence. It is the result of intentional actions undertaken within electoral engineering, although

giving all credit to planned engineering actions would certainly be an oversimplification. In essence, political parties are organisations of people who share not only a common goal which is to take over and maintain power, but also, and perhaps above all, organisations that bring together like minded people with similar beliefs; let me emphasize – similar, not the same, the example of which can be the party line or electoral programme. A. Sentsov, O. Aleksandrov, Yu. Bolsunovskaya and M. Kuimova rightly point out that:

Analysis of the programs of political parties is extremely relevant to a modern political science. Program of a party is an independent type of text functioning as a part of a political discourse. As the central document conditioning activities of the whole party and its members, the program has a fundamental nature of the text on the basis of which articles, press releases, leaflets, public presentation texts etc. are created. Voters usually perceive the goals and the objectives declared in the parties programs as a kind of obligations of the parties presenting themselves for the elections. In addition, it is almost impossible to determine an exact author of a party program. The collective addresser of the message is represented by numerous politicians and citizens who support the ideas of the party. In addition, the conceptual side of the programs of political parties is nowadays an important component of politics. It is associated with the activities of political parties, the incorporation of ideologies in the practice of political struggle, electoral competition and inter-party communication, and finally, with the development strategy of political system and the society at large (Sentsov, Aleksandrov, Bolsunovskaya, Kuimova, 2015).

In this article the analysis of election programs of Welsh political parties will be used to identify the major problems the contemporary Welsh society is facing. It can be assumed that the issues that appear in the election programs are treated by the members of a given society as the most important and essential ones for its functioning. In this way, it is possible to explore the changes taking place within different societies over the years, providing a significant contribution to the development of social change, and in this particular case, in the development of family policy.

Election context

The competition between the Welsh political parties grows particularly during election campaigns. They spend a lot of effort and time to prepare manifestos which are presented using various communication channels. That is why this is a perfect moment for tracking the electoral discourse and analysing it. The last elections to the National Assembly for Wales took place recently, on Thursday 5 May 2016. Of the 2.25 million eligible voters more than 1.02 million citizens

decided to go to the polls. The voter turnout was 45.4%, the increase of over 4% in comparison to the previous elections in 2011. The elections were won by the Labour Party which won 29 seats. The second was Plaid Cymru with 12 seats and the third one was the Conservative Party with 11 seats. UKIP gained 7 seats, while the Liberal Democrats only 1 (<http://www.senedd.assembly.wales/mgManageElectionResults.aspx?bcr=1>).

The origins of the Welsh Labour Party reach back to the late 19th century, when the Independent Labour Party was created although it did not initially enjoy great popularity. The situation began to change in 1900, along with the creation of the Labour Representation Committee, which combined socialist and trade union activists. In the same year, the first representative of the Labour Party, Keir Hardie, was elected to the British parliament. The increase in the support for the Labour Party in the next few years was not only the result of the slogans proclaimed by the party, but also of the strikes that exploded regularly, during which workers demanded working conditions to be improved and to obtain greater influence on the public affairs. For this reason the decision was made to increase the political representation of the industrial districts and the right to vote was granted to young men who were not householders, which translated into the electoral success of the Labour Party in 1922. An equally important factor was the decline in the support for the Liberal Party caused by its militaristic rhetoric and the fact that the candidacy of the Prime Minister Lloyd George was supported by the conservatives. The Liberal Party could still, however, count on the support of the Welsh, but mainly those living in the agricultural areas of Wales¹.

The second party – Plaid Cymru – was founded in 1925 and its aim has from the beginning been:

To secure independence for Wales in Europe. To ensure economic prosperity, social justice and the health of the natural environment, based on decentralist socialism. To build a national community based on equal citizenship, respect for different traditions and cultures and the equal worth of all individuals, whatever their race, nationality, gender, colour, creed, sexuality, age, ability or social background. To create a bilingual society by promoting the revival of the Welsh language. To promote Wales's contribution to the global community and to attain membership of the United Nations.

Plaid Cymru won its first mandate to the British parliament in the 60s of the 20th century².

¹ The rise of the Labour Party, http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/themes/guide/ch19_rise_of_the_labour_party.shtml, http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/themes/guide/ch19_part2_rise_of_the_labour_party.shtml, 21.06.2016.

² Our history, <https://www.partyof.wales/our-history/>, 21.06.2016.

The origins of the Welsh Conservatives reach back to 1921. Throughout its history the party has not enjoyed much support thus giving way first to the Liberal Party and now to the Labour Party. Looking at the history of the Welsh Conservative Party, one can come to a conclusion that it has always played second fiddle.

The Liberal Party, now the Welsh Liberal Democrats, presents itself as the first party to “recognize Wales as a political nation in its own right” thanks to William Gladstone, the British prime minister. The Liberal Party adopted the Welsh Church Act of 1914 and “Home Rule” for Wales as well as made the creation of the University of Wales possible. The heyday of the Liberal Party can be attributed to the years 1905–1922 while its most famous characters were Lloyd George and Reginald McKenna. In 1966, the Welsh Liberals founded their own state party and in 1987 merged with the Social Democrat Party to create the Liberal Democrats³.

The last and youngest of the parties – the UK Independence Party (UKIP), was established not so long ago – in 1993 at the London School of Economics and was founded by members of the Anti-Federalist League. Its position, nevertheless, has significantly strengthened in the recent years mainly due to the anti-European and anti-federalist demands it proclaimed⁴.

The study indicates that the Welsh party system is characterized by a significant stability, the main determinant of which is the political socialization that the Welsh experienced over the last centuries as members of a larger community, in this case the British community. In this way they got used to the party system in which the competition takes place between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, and recently the Liberal Democrats. No wonder then that the same parties are fighting against each other to gain as many seats as possible in the National Assembly of Wales. This does not mean, however, that the Welsh party system is a copy of the British party system. In addition to the strong position of the Labour Party, there are local parties as well such as the Party of Wales which regularly has their representatives in the Assembly and in 2007 and 2016 it even entered into coalition with the Labour Party.

At this point, however, one important remark should be made. The Welsh party system is a part of a broader British party system which is reflected in the fact that the political parties which compete with each other are in most cases the branches of nationwide parties. In addition to that, the substantive content of the Welsh campaign is dictated by the competencies that the Welsh Government and the National Assembly of Wales possess. The National Assembly for Wales was established in 1999 by the Government of Wales Act 1998 and received the

³ Our history, http://www.welshlibdems.wales/our_history, 21.06.2016.

⁴ UKIP: The story of the UK Independence Party's rise, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-21614073>, 21.06.2016.

powers so far reserved for the Secretary of State for Wales. A few years later, in 2007, the Government of Wales Act 2006 led to the separation on the legislative National Assembly for Wales and the executive Welsh Government. Moreover the position of the National Assembly for Wales was strengthened and Assembly Measures were introduced.

In 2011 a referendum decision to go further was made and the legislative powers of the Assembly were improved for the second time. Today the list of the legislative competencies of the National Assembly for Wales includes 20 areas with the exceptions that were defined in Schedule 7 and in section 108 of the GoWA 2016. These legislative competencies are as follows:

1. Agriculture, fisheries, forestry and rural development
2. Ancient monuments and historic buildings
3. Culture
4. Economic development
5. Education and training
6. Environment
7. Fire and rescue services and promotion of fire safety
8. Food
9. Health and health services
10. Highways and transport
11. Housing
12. Local government
13. National Assembly for Wales
14. Public administration
15. Social welfare
16. Sport and recreation
17. Tourism
18. Town and country planning
19. Water and flood defence
20. Welsh language⁵.

In election campaigns political parties inevitably focus on these 20 areas of activity of the National Assembly of Wales and the Welsh Government. Otherwise, declarations made to the voters would be just empty promises and the image of a party would be undermined. A cursory examination of the above list of areas of competencies of the National Assembly of Wales reveals a lack of reference to the area of family policy. The thematically closest area of competence seems to be the number 15 which is social welfare if family policy is understood in the way suggested by A. Kurzynowski, according to whom family policy is a “totality of legal norms, actions and measures launched by the state in order

⁵ Devolution settlement: Wales, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/devolution-settlement-wales>, 21.06.2016.

to create the appropriate conditions for family creation, its proper development and meeting all important social functions that it has to realise. The objectives of family policy can be defined as the creation of general conditions for its development and satisfaction of living and cultural needs of the family, the creation of optimal conditions for the education and upbringing of the young generation, and the equality of their start in life and career – equal opportunities in life.”⁶ Such a definition could also mean that the actions taken within family policy could also be found in other areas for instance health services, education or housing. Moreover it is easy to imagine that the activities undertaken in the framework of economic development affect even the families’ quality of life because of the increase in real wages, amongst other factors.

Analysis of election programs

As follows from the above, the analysis of the electoral programs of the Welsh political parties in terms of family policy should be limited only to some and not all of the aforementioned areas. On the one hand this certainly does facilitate the election programs studies, on the other hand, however, it seems impossible to use quantitative techniques e.g. calculating the frequency of occurrence of certain words and phrases in manifestos. Still the issues crucial for individual parties can be determined.

The manifesto of **the Labour Party** was entitled “Plan for prosperity” and a lot of attention was devoted to the issues directly and indirectly related to family policy. The party will try to support parents in sharing responsibilities between work and home, will try to increase the funding of schools as well and improve health facilities, paying more attention, for example, to the quality of care for the elderly. A characteristic feature of the Labour Party is its relying on generalization which should be explained by the fact that its authorities were aware of their little chances for creating majority government and therefore decided to increase its potential chances for coalition in this way. Despite many important electoral promises related to the NHS (National Health Services), the Labour Party insists that every citizen of Wales should take care of their own health as it is their obligation and not the obligation of the state. In addition to greater funding of the healthcare system, what is important from the point of view of the functioning of Welsh families is the promise of a review of existing solutions in the field of health and their eventual correction for instance by reintroducing the Public

⁶ A. Durasiewicz, *Instrumenty polityki rodzinnej*, Biuletyn Informacyjny PTPS, Nr 1/2009, p. 57.

Health Bill. The Labour Party's manifesto also stresses the need to create attractive working conditions for family doctors which should result in an increase of their number. The Community Learning Centres would play an important role in supporting parents by "providing extended services from 8 am to 6 pm with childcare, parenting support, family learning and community access to facilities built around the school day." From the point of view of families' budgets there is still little known about the future of tuition fees, but the Labour Party has promised that the income tax will not increase while the National Assembly for Wales receives additional, this time fiscal, powers. Finally around 20 thousand affordable homes are promised to be built in the course of four years.

The manifesto of **Plaid Cymru**, consisting of 192 pages, pays particularly large attention to the need to improve the health situation of the inhabitants of Wales, including the Welsh families. For this purpose the party wants to increase the number of doctors and nurses in health centres and reorganise them by way of their integration. Its main goal is to "reduce preventable deaths by 25% by 2026." Additionally, it declares willingness to change the system of financing student fees beneficial for those of them who will decide to work in Wales after graduation. This would make it much easier for many Welsh families to finance their children's education. Equally important seems to be a provision for the introduction of "15 hours of free childcare a week by 2017/18, and by 2021 full-time early education of 30 hours a week." The party also promises the income tax will not be increased and council tax system will be replaced with a domestic property tax which is friendlier to people living in less expensive properties, which includes families.

The manifesto of **the Conservative Party**, described as "the most ambitious blueprint for change ever delivered in Wales," assumes an increase in spending on healthcare system over the course of five years and a reduction of income tax. It aims to secure the situation of people living in nursing homes as well. Interestingly, the conservatives intend to liquidate a grant enabling the Welsh students financing their fees and propose that the funds thus obtained be used to lower rents. A key element of the Conservative Party's manifesto, however, is the announcement of not changing NHS, only strengthening its financial capacities. This should prevent the liquidation of hospitals and the reorganization of the existing structure of the healthcare system in Wales. This, from the perspective of the everyday functioning of the Welsh families, would mean the same access to healthcare as before but at higher standard. It should be noted that the Conservative Party among other electoral promises will try to ensure "at least 75% of ambulances respond to immediately life-threatening calls within eight minutes" as well as guarantee access to a doctor also during the weekends. Moreover, they declare putting more emphasis on teacher education through the creation of a higher education institution specializing in their preparation. An issue of particular interest for the families might be the party's proposal to

introduce 30 hours of free childcare that would allow parents to combine professional duties with family responsibilities more easily. At the same time, however, it plans to introduce a payment for breakfast in schools. Just as Plaid Cymru, it announced to cut the tax rates as well. It is worth mentioning that the party declared the willingness to allow “tenants to buy their council home using full discount” too.

The Liberal Democrats’ manifesto is known as one “that will deliver a Wales that works for you.” Similarly to the other parties it also puts the health issues first making a promise to increase the number of nurses in the healthcare centres. Their exact number is not, however, given. It is only known that such an increase should include mental health wards and community care teams as well. The party also plans to increase the availability and quality of medical services provided. An important promise is also the announcement that the party intends to build 20,000 affordable homes by increasing the amount of available funds from 35 to 75 million pounds per year. Moreover, the party announced the reduction of class sizes in schools to a maximum of 25 pupils as well as increased funding for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The amount of money given under the Early Years Pupil Premium will probably grow too. Like in the case of the other parties, the Liberal Democrats also announced that the tuition fee support grants for students will be suppressed, redirecting funds thus obtained to support Welsh universities. This does not mean, however, that the Liberal Democrats would leave students without any support, the new form of which is to be a student living support grant. An interesting proposition for parents is a proposition to introduce “ten hours a week of free childcare to all working parents from the end of paid parental leave until their child is two and ten hours [...] for all children aged two to three.” The Liberal Democrats also announced that this will not cause the increase in the income tax, to the contrary, in the long-term it should decrease. An important place in the Liberal Democrats’ manifesto was given to central Wales where the party is the most popular.

The manifesto of **UKIP (UK Independence Party)** consists only of 48 pages and bears the ambitious title “Raising the Dragon.” From the point of view of the family policy an interesting promise is to change the management of the Welsh health board, reserving more decision-making rights directly to the patients themselves and thus to the Welsh families. Like the previous parties UKIP also proposes to suspend the tuition fee grant for students and to introduce loans for Welsh students choosing to study in England. This, however, applies only to selected disciplines. From the parents’ perspective a crucial proposal seems to be the idea to restore grammar schools and present sex education teaching materials to parents before they are used. One other point of their program particularly worth mentioning is as follows: “although we are fully aware of the need to build more homes, UKIP will not allow new housing to strip our nation

of prime agricultural land.” This means that UKIP are not likely to decide on building 20 thousand new homes as other parties promised⁷.

The comparison of the manifestos of Welsh political parties clearly shows that the main problems raised by them from the perspective of the functioning of the Welsh families include mostly healthcare issues, primarily those involving the reform of the NHS and the increase of the number of medical personnel, that is, GPs and nurses. In most programs the Welsh political parties also declared to strengthen the financial capacity of the NHS. The changes announced by the Welsh political parties are significant for the Welsh families as they affect their health condition and thus their quality of life. The access to a doctor, especially in the afternoon or at weekends is particularly important for parents with children who are often forced to seek help at the least expected moment. Publicly available data seem to confirm the need for changes in the way the Welsh NHS functions. Although the situation of Wales in this respect is not much worse than of England or Northern Ireland, it is much worse than that of Scotland (Table 1).

Table 1. UK comparisons of general practitioners workforce by year (2014)

GPs	Wales	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Female GPs (% of all GP's)	48.6	49.9	53.3	47.3
GPs aged 55+ (% of all GP's)	23.0	21.9	19.6	24
GPs per 10,000 population	6,5	6,6	8,1	6,6
Total GPs	2,006	35,819	4,311	1,211

Source: <https://stats.wales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/General-Medical-Services/UKComparisonsOfGPWorkforce-by-Year>, 21.06.2016.

A lot of space in the election programs has also been devoted to the issue of education. The cost of children's education is a serious burden for many families. The proposal to liquidate the grant which allows students to finance their studies would face many of them with a serious challenge. Although the funds saved in are to be used for example to lower the rents, the costs of studies are still one of the highest costs the Welsh families have to bear. Generally, the level of fees depends on many factors, varying between courses and universities. “For home/EU students the maximum fee was £9,000 in 2016. Fee Grant will pay the balance of the tuition fee up to a maximum grant of £5,100 if a tuition fee is £9,000.” Of course, a system of student loans already exists but it is going to be expanded if one is to put trust in the electoral promises given by most of the Welsh political parties. A student loan gives the students the possibility of

⁷ D. Deans, Wales Election 2016: Manifestos at a glance, <http://www.bbc.com/news/election-2016-wales-36129136>, 21.06.2016.

obtaining a loan of up to £3,900, repayable after being graduated, provided that the income is higher than £21,000 per year. The costs of renting are even more varied as they depend not only on the type of tenancy but also on the standard of rented accommodation⁸.

Undoubtedly, from the point of view of the Welsh families, one of the key electoral promises proclaimed by the majority of the Welsh parties is to provide free childcare. This will help many parents to reconcile professional and family life. The aim of such actions is not only to encourage the Welsh to have more children (Table 2), but also to increase the number of economically active persons, especially women (Table 3).

Table 2. Total fertility rate by year

Year	Total fertility rate
1971	2,4
1972	2,22
1973	2,05
2008	1,91
2009	1,87
2010	1,92
2011	1,9
2012	1,88
2013	1,8
2014	1,78

Source: <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Births-Deaths-and-Conceptions/Births/totalfertilityrateandgeneralfertilityrate-by-year>, 21.06.2016.

Table 3. Economic inactivity rates (excluding students) by year

Gender	2006	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Males	17,2	17,3	17,2	15,8	15,4	15,8	15,7
Females	30,4	29,9	29	28,4	26,6	26,2	26,2

Source: <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Business-Economy-and-Labour-Market/People-and-Work/Economic-Inactivity/economicinactivityratesexcludingstudents-by-welshlocalarea-year>, 21.06.2016.

All parties have also referred to the proposal to strengthen the fiscal powers of the National Assembly of Wales, as well as announced either maintaining the

⁸ Going to University in Wales, <http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/university-tuition-fees/going-to-university-in-wales/>, 21.06.2016.

present rate of income tax, or its reduction primarily for the poorest inhabitants of Wales, and thus also the poorest families. Lowering the taxes is one of the easiest and relatively the fastest ways to improve the material situation of the poorest inhabitants of Wales. The money remaining in the households' budgets can be spent on meeting the needs that otherwise would not be satisfied. In Wales progressive tax system exists. In the case of taxable income of £17,000 or less, there is no tax on savings income (Table 4)⁹.

Table 4. Tax year 2015/2016

Taxable income	Rate of tax
0 – £31,785	20 per cent (basic rate)
£31,786 – £150,000	40 per cent (higher rate)
Over £150,000	45 per cent (additional rate)

Source: https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/tax/income-tax-how-much-should-you-pay/income-tax-rates/#the_starting_rate_for_savings, 21.06.2016.

Among the priorities of some political parties there were also those to build new houses, the buying or renting of which would be affordable while the housing was of high standard as well. The number of new homes to be built indicated most frequently by the parties was 20 thousand. This can be especially important for the families struggling with housing difficulties. This is despite the lower prices of real estate in Wales than in England (Table 5). It should be remembered, however, that the average gross weekly earnings in Wales (546 pounds) are much lower than the average for the UK (630 pounds)¹⁰.

Table 5. Average price of house by region

Region	Price	Annual change [%]
Northern Ireland	£117,524	5.9
Scotland	£138,445	3.3
Wales	£139,385	1.7
England	£224,731	9.1

Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-house-price-index-april-2016/uk-house-price-index-april-2016#headline-statistics>, 21.06.2016.

⁹ Income tax rates, https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/tax/income-tax-how-much-should-you-pay/income-tax-rates/#the_starting_rate_for_saving, 21.06.2016.

¹⁰ Average gross weekly earnings by UK country – English region and year (£), <https://stats.wales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Business-Economy-and-Labour-Market/People-and-Work/Earnings/averageweeklyearnings-by-ukcountryenglishregion-year>, 21.06.2016.

Each of the political parties defining their electoral priorities referred to the 20 aforementioned areas in which the National Assembly for Wales has legislative powers. This merely confirms the assertion about the impact of the devolution on the Welsh party system and the way it functions.

Conclusions

What is the future of the Welsh family policy? What is the image of the family policy that emerges from the manifestos of the Welsh political parties? Without doubt, the electoral victory of the Labour Party means a continuation of a previously conducted family policy. One of the factors that can lead to its redefinition is the fact that it has received less support than in 2011, which for the politicians of this party should be considered a kind of a warning given to them by the voters. Such a warning should be treated seriously by the party authorities if they want to maintain their primacy in the next elections. Another factor is the support of Plaid Cymru which enabled the establishment of the Labour Party minority government. This support wasn't however unconditional. Certainly Plaid Cymru will try to take advantage by fulfilling its own election promises. It is a chance for the party to get more votes in the next elections. All the electoral promises discussed above result from a particular situation in which Wales has found itself, as a consequence of the expectations expressed by its inhabitants as well as the responsibilities held by the National Assembly for Wales.

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