What does it mean to be ‘normal’? Plaid Cymru and the SNP in Government

Craig McAngus
School of Government and Public Policy
University of Strathclyde
McCance Building
16 Richmond Street
Glasgow
G1 1QX
craig.mcangus@strath.ac.uk

Paper prepared for the Annual Conference of the Political Studies Association, Cardiff, 25th-27th March 2013

Abstract

Autonomist parties have been described as having shifted from ‘niche to normal’. Governmental participation has further compounded this process and led to these parties facing the same ‘hard choices’ as other parties in government. However, the assumption that autonomist parties can now be described as ‘normal’ fails to address the residual ‘niche’ characteristics which will have an effect on the party’s governmental participation due to the existence of important ‘primary goals’. Taking a qualitative, comparative case study approach using semi-structured interview and documentary data, this paper will examine Plaid Cymru and the SNP in government. This paper argues that, although both parties can indeed be described as ‘normal’, the degree to which their ‘niche’ characteristics affect the interaction between policy, office and vote-seeking behaviour varies. Indeed, while the SNP were able to somewhat ‘detach’ their ‘primary goals’ from their government profile, Plaid Cymru’s ability to formulate an effective vote-seeking strategy was severely hampered by policy-seeking considerations. The paper concludes by suggesting that the ‘niche to normal’ framework requires two additional qualifications. Firstly, the idea that autonomist parties shift from ‘niche’ to ‘normal’ is too simplistic and that it is more helpful to examine how ‘niche’ characteristics interact with and affect ‘normal’ party status. Secondly, appreciating factors such as the ‘rules of the game’, the party system and the legislative strength that an autonomist party possesses, as well as an understanding of the party itself, are necessary for understanding what being ‘normal’ actually means.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Arno Van Der Zwet and Malcolm Harvey for their extremely helpful and useful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
Introduction

In 2007, British politics experienced a first: both Plaid Cymru¹ and the SNP became governing parties in Wales and Scotland respectively. Perhaps more importantly, both of these parties exist to achieve independence for their respective nations and, as a consequence, fundamentally oppose their nation’s current constitutional status within the United Kingdom (UK). Both parties have played a part in altering the constitutional status quo in the UK. The SNPs historic majority in the Scottish Parliament has resulted in the Edinburgh Agreement between the Scottish and UK Governments on the holding of a referendum on Scottish independence sometime in the latter half of 2014. In Wales, Plaid played a vital role in delivering a ‘Yes’ vote in a referendum on devolving primary law-making powers as well as playing a part in the setting up of the Holtham Commission which has recommended the devolution of fiscal powers to the National Assembly for Wales (NAW).

Both Plaid and the SNP can be classed as belonging to the ‘autonomist’² party family.³ A significant body of literature exists which examines parties belonging to this family in a comparative manner (De Winter and Türsan 1998; De Winter et al. 1996), their relationship with European integration (Lynch 1996; Elias 2009; De Winter and Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro: 2002) and more recently on the strategic challenges that new and regionalized political arenas (Carter and Pasquier, 2010) bring to this party type (Hepburn, 2009; Jeffrey 2009). With autonomist parties now entering government across Europe, a new avenue for empirical research has opened up which can build upon more theoretical work that has been recently published (Elias and Tronconi, 2011; Toubeau, 2011).

As will be discussed in more detail in the literature review, autonomist parties have been described as embarking on a successful journey from ‘niche to normal’ (Hepburn, 2009). Such a transition has, alongside valuable opportunities, brought specific challenges to autonomist parties (Jeffrey, 2009). The purpose of this paper is to examine the ‘niche to normal’ framework empirically using Plaid and the SNP as comparative cases (Yin, 2009) and focussing mainly, although not exclusively, on the period between 2007 and 2011. Assuming that Plaid and the SNP are now ‘normal’ political parties, this paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of what this actually means. Both of these parties hold, in common with other autonomist parties, a deep commitment to their primary goals (Harmel and Janda, 1994). This paper argues that this feature means that residual ‘niche’⁴ characteristics remain a fundamental aspect of both the SNP and Plaid’s profile which influences their ‘normal’⁴ profile. The paper will adopt Strøm and Müller’s (1999) framework which provides a heuristic guide for identifying the trade-offs that are hypothesised to occur between policy, office and vote-seeking behaviour. Because of the importance of primary goals to autonomist parties, then it would be expected that any trade-offs would likely not be at the expense of policy.

This paper is structured into three main sections, the first being theoretical and the following two being each case study. The first is divided into two parts and provides a review of the relevant literature, focussing on the ‘niche to normal’ framework and Strøm and Müller’s (1999) framework respectively. Each case is split into three parts, looking at the primary goals of each party, the role these primary goals played in government, and finally the policy/office/votes analysis. The paper takes a qualitative approach, using documentary and semi-structured interview data.
Overall, the paper aims to understand what ‘normality’ actually means for Plaid and the SNP.

**Theoretical Framework**

*Niche to Normal*

Hepburn (2009: 485-486; see also Adams et al, 2006; Meguid, 2005; Wagner, 2012) argues that autonomist parties have undergone a change from ‘niche’ to ‘normal’ politics in the context of the creation and strengthening of regional electoral arenas across Europe. Such processes were occurring in Plaid and the SNP decades ago, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s (Evans, 2001; Lynch, 2002; Lynch, 2009; McAllister, 2001; Mitchell, 1996; Mitchell, 2009a; Mitchell et al, 2012; Wilson, 2009), but both parties could only practically exhibit ‘blackmail potential’ (Deschouwer, 2008: 3; Sartori, 1976: 108-109) given the electoral constraints at the UK level. However, with the creation of ‘new spaces for politics’ (Carter and Pasquier, 2010) in the form of the devolved institutions, Plaid and the SNP’s strategic considerations could realistically and seriously incorporate the possibility of holding governmental office; so-called ‘governing potential’ (Deschouwer, 2008: 3; Sartori, 1976: 108-109).

Plaid and the SNP have not only exhibited their ‘governing potential’, but both parties actually proceeded into government, at the devolved level, for the first time in 2007. On the one hand, governing for the first time is fraught with challenges and leaves parties open to electoral, ideological and organisational ‘vulnerabilities’ (Bolleyer, 2008; Buelens and Hino, 2008; Deschouwer, 2008). On the other hand, it does provide an opportunity to use governmental office to achieve a measure of policy ‘success’ (McConnell, 2010: 40-51), particularly with regards to ‘primary goals’ (Harmel and Janda, 1994). Moreover, holding governmental office is a clear indicator that both Plaid and the SNP have achieved ‘normality’. This status has two distinctive sources. Firstly, the fact that devolved elections are dominated by ‘valence’ voting (Johns et al, 2009; Johns et al, 2013; Scully and Wyn Jones, 2012) is proof that to be electorally successful in both the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament, it is crucial to appeal to voters on the basis of competency rather than positional grounds. To do this requires a comprehensive and wide-ranging policy platform that is acceptable to a wide-range of voters. Secondly, McDonnell and Newell (2011) argue that a crucial aspect in ending a party’s ‘outsider’ status is its coalition potential with a larger, and in this case state-wide, party. Štefuriuc (2009) provides evidence that coalitions at the sub-state level are dominated by policy considerations. Therefore, the main concern for larger coalition partners is policy compatibility and so the fact that Plaid were deemed acceptable by Labour to form part of the One Wales Government is testament for their ‘normality’.

Despite this change in relevance and subsequently entering into government, Plaid and the SNP continue to retain some ‘niche’ characteristics (Meguid, 2005; Wagner, 2012) as a result of belonging to the autonomist party family. Although doubts have been raised about the homogeneity of this particular ‘party family’ (Coakley, 1992; De Winter and Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro, 2002), there is enough resemblance across different political and social contexts to identify broadly similar ‘primary goals’ (Harmel and Janda, 1994) which will override other policy areas (Duncan, 2007: 71). Müller-Rommel (1998: 18) defines members of this party family as ‘parties that refer to geographically concentrated minorities which challenge the working order, even the democratic order, by demanding recognition of their cultural identity’. However,
this party type also exists to represent and promote discontent at the constitutional status quo, advocating anything from cultural autonomy to national independence (Rokkan and Irwin 1983: 141).

Meguid (2005: 347-348) outlines three features of niche parties: the rejection of traditional class-based politics, the promotion of issues that do not coincide with existing lines of political division, and the limiting of issue appeals. Whilst Plaid and the SNP may have exhibited such behaviour during the early stages of their development, it is clear that they no longer adhere to such definitions and are mainstream political actors. Nevertheless, Plaid and the SNP, both parties have constituted primary goals which, by their very nature, are expected to ‘override’ other considerations.’ (Duncan, 2007: 71) Jeffrey (2009: 646) states that autonomist parties run the risk of alienating members and core voters if they are not perceived to be striving to achieve the party’s primary goal. Both the SNP and Plaid’s primary goals in each of their constitutions are independence for Scotland and Wales respectively (Plaid Cymru, 2011a; SNP, 2009). If the public profile of both parties were to be reduced to these primary goals alone then they would undoubtedly be characterised as niche parties. Despite the indisputable normalisation of both Plaid and the SNP, the fact that their overriding constituted objective is independent statehood for Wales and Scotland means that they do still embody residual ‘niche’ characteristics.

Policy, Office and Votes
Elias and Tronconi (2011) argue that autonomist parties in government are susceptible to the same pressures as any other party type. Political parties want to win votes, influence policy and gain governmental office, in other words, be policy, office and vote-seeking simultaneously and, more importantly, successfully. Strøm and Müller (1999: 5-8) discuss each type of party behaviour in turn in terms of them being singular models. However, they criticize the single models on the basis that they are static; that they treat parties in too much of a unitary fashion; that behaviour is seen as unconstrained and ignoring the institutional environment; and that decisions are seen to be driven by politicians’ preferences rather than by office benefits or policy opportunities. We must therefore assume that all three objectives are desired, and that they constitute individual forms of behaviour that are closely related to one another. The question is, where are the trade-offs (Strøm and Müller, 1999: 11-12)? Figure 1 below shows Strøm and Müller’s framework in visual form;
This paper will adopt this framework as a heuristic guide in order to ‘describe different party objectives and the relationships between them’ and utilise ‘operationalizable terms that [can be applied] to concrete situations in which party leaders make their critical choices’ (Strøm and Müller, 1999: 11). If, as Elias and Tronconi (2011) maintain, autonomist parties in government are susceptible to the same pressures as any other party, then it is assumed that the so-called ‘hard choices’ (Strøm and Müller, 1999) of governmental office will also exist. Because of the existence of a clear, distinctive and overriding primary goal (Duncan, 2007; Harmel and Janda, 1994) it can be assumed that an autonomist party in government will place emphasis on policy-seeking behaviour over office and vote-seeking. The nature of the membership and core vote of an autonomist party would presumably require that this be the case (Jeffrey, 2009; Pedersen, 2010: 740). Therefore, how Plaid and the SNP have managed to reconcile their primary goals with holding governmental office, or in other words how niche characteristics are reconciled with a normal, mainstream status, will determine what it means to be ‘normal’ for both these parties.

Plaid Cymru in Government

Plaid Cymru’s Primary Goal

According to the party’s constitution, Plaid’s primary goal is to ‘[s]ecure independence for Wales in Europe.’ (Plaid Cymru, 2011a: 3) More specifically, ‘Plaid Cymru exists because it is our belief that the people of Wales, in common with all nations, are sovereign. An elected Welsh government in an independent Wales would exercise its powers in the best interests of the people of Wales.’ (Plaid Cymru, 2012a: 7) Although this primary goal appears to be unequivocal, it took the backing of a motion at the party’s autumn 2011 conference in order to clarify and constitute it (Plaid Cymru, 2011c: 53; Plaid Cymru 2011d; see also BBC, 2011a). Plaid’s
previous constitution stated the top-listed aim of the party as ‘[t]o promote the constitutional advancement of Wales with a view to attaining Full National Status for Wales within the European Union.’ (Plaid Cymru, 2011b: 3) Back in 2001, Plaid’s annual conference ruled out seeking independence for Wales as a long-term target (BBC, 2001). It would thus appear that this is a party that has historically been far from unequivocal about its constitutional objectives.

Such claims are strengthened from interview evidence. For example, one AM stated that Plaid’s role was ‘[to set] Wales free’, while a party office and another AM mentioned ‘self-government’ rather than using the term ‘independence’. Some interviewees avoided the concept altogether, stating that Plaid exists to ‘effectively represent and recruit support amongst the people of Wales’ and to ‘continue pushing the boundaries of the devolved settlement.’ One AM was extremely vague on the issue and, despite mentioning Plaid’s ‘historical commitment’ to self-government, never mentioned independence. Another AM stated that their vision was of a party that ‘should believe in independence for Wales.’ Clearly, and in spite of a renewed pledge towards independence, Plaid is a party that is still ambiguous in terms of its constitutional objectives. Although the constitution does ‘unite most' in the wider party and is its 'foremost objective', it appears that there is some divergence in terms of what that actually means.

Plaid’s Primary Goals in Government – The Referendum Above Everything Else?

Using governmental status to gain powers for the NAW was a key priority for Plaid. The party’s 2007 manifesto outlined a clear pledge to hold a referendum in order to ‘establish a Proper Parliament for Wales’ (Plaid Cymru, 2007a: 36). Following negotiations with Labour in the summer of 2007 that led to the formation of the One Wales Government, a clear commitment to holding a referendum in order to achieve such an end was a key part of the agreement. Indeed, according to the One Wales Agreement, both Labour and Plaid agreed ‘in good faith to campaign for a successful outcome to such a referendum.’ (Labour and Plaid Cymru, 2007: 6) Both parties had, of course, cooperated successfully in the run-up to the 1997 referendum which established the NAW. In 1997, Plaid was officially a partner to a ‘determined Labour effort’ (McAllister, 2001: 138) and cooperated extensively behind the scenes (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2012: 17). Furthermore, the far more concerted effort from Labour in 1997, as opposed to 1979, meant that the debate about the ‘slippery slope’ towards Welsh independence was neutralised (Mitchell, 2009b: 155). Plaid were also mindful of realpolitik when dealing with Labour, quickly dropping their 1997 general election pledge to hold a multi-option referendum with the status quo, limited devolution and self-government in Europe as choices to prevent fuelling the slippery slope argument (McAllister, 2001: 138).

For Plaid in government, the only ‘red line’ was the referendum. This proved to be a useful aid in keeping the party motivated and mindful about ‘why they were doing what they were doing’. Despite Labour’s long-running ambivalence and equivocal attitude towards the advancement of devolution in Wales (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2012), the One Wales agreement provided Plaid with assurances that it would be held. According to a party officer, the referendum was the ‘reason for going into government knowing Labour could provide it.’ Another said that the referendum was a ‘step towards [Plaid’s] main goals’, with a party officer describing the coalition with Labour as ‘the only way to win a referendum’ and ‘in terms of the national project, there was no other way that was realistic.’
The One Wales Agreement was a comprehensive and detailed document which contains commitments to a wide range of policy areas. It was not only the referendum which promoted an ‘autonomist agenda: there were commitments to giving the Welsh language official status (Labour and Plaid Cymru, 2007: 34) and the setting up of an ‘independent Commission to review Assembly Funding and Finance’ (Labour and Plaid Cymru, 2007: 6). These commitments were very important for Plaid, particularly legislation on the Welsh language. Plaid’s constitution states as one of the party’s objectives ‘[t]o create a bilingual society by promoting the revival of the Welsh language.’ (Plaid Cymru, 2011a: 3). In this sense, this is classifiable as a primary goal. However, according to a party officer, the language was expressive of a ‘less deep red line’, alongside ‘roads and hospital closures’. In this regard, in order to bring Wales closer to independence, increasing the powers of the NAW via the referendum sat comfortably with the party’s primary goal and thus overrode other policy areas.

Policy and Office at the expense of Votes?

Governmental office was, for Plaid elites, a way to bring a degree of political maturity to the wider party. Indeed, one AM stated that it was government was important for Plaid to in order to convince the wider party that ‘being in government is a good thing’ for those elements in the party that still remained sceptical of governmental status. Despite the majority of the party being behind the decision (Plaid Cymru, 2007b), there were elements that remained unsure and thus ‘needed to understand government’. This respondent also stated that these elements had to realise that government is a ‘good thing’, especially because the party had not been in this position before. Furthermore, being in government provided an opportunity to ‘cast a different light’ on the party by showing that Plaid could deliver ‘on a whole host of policy areas’ not directly related to its primary goals. Another AM mentioned the same types of benefits; the most important thing about being in government was just ‘being there’ in the first place. However, Plaid sought office on the whole to achieve functional ends (Strøm and Müller, 1999: 6). Following negotiations with Labour in the summer of 2007 that led to the formation of the One Wales government, it was clear that a successful outcome in a referendum on primary law-making powers was the top priority for Plaid.

On entering government, Plaid strategists were keen to make sure that Ieuan Wyn Jones as Deputy First Minister was a ‘real deputy’ and that he was well placed to keep a ‘close eye’ on Labour. This, according to an AM, was ‘absolutely crucial’ so that two broad aims could be achieved; firstly, that the Plaid end of the government was coherent and thus in line with both the One Wales Agreement and the party’s aims, and secondly, that the leadership could oversee portfolios across government and make sure there was ‘not anything happening that Plaid did not want.’ One potential consequence of coalition government is that the smaller party overstretches itself either by focussing so intensely on its bigger partner that it weakens its position heading into an election, or attempts to stretch itself too thinly over too many ministerial departments (Bolleyer, 2007; Müller and Meyer, 2010). Indeed, the latter phenomenon has been identified with regards to the Liberal Democrats at Westminster (see The Constitution Unit, 2011: 2). In Plaid’s case, the former appears to have occurred. There was deep suspicion of Labour as a coalition partner despite the assurances that the One Wales document gave. One AM stated that it did not matter what you wrote down with Labour, they would try and ‘wriggle out of the referendum’. For example, it was thought that they might try and fix the
All Wales Convention process, which could have forced the delaying of the referendum.\(^\text{29}\)

Plaid’s scepticism of Labour’s commitment to the timing of the referendum was justified when Labour looked like breaking the One Wales agreement which stated that the referendum would be held before the end of the assembly term. However, tensions calmed after Rhodri Morgan reaffirmed his support and were further subdued by the election of his successor, Carwyn Jones, who was less afraid of upsetting Labour MPs, some of whom were the main protagonists in the whole affair (Osmond, 2012; Wyn Jones & Scully, 2012: 84-88).

Despite the coalition’s problems, on March 3\(^{rd}\) 2011 the Welsh electorate voted on whether the NAW should be granted full law-making powers in the twenty areas designated to it in the Government of Wales Act 2006.\(^\text{30}\) The result was a very convincing endorsement of the proposal with 63.5% voting ‘yes’. Moreover, the result was significant in the sense that, unlike the painfully narrow result in 1997,\(^\text{31}\) every local authority area apart from one (Monmouthshire) returned a majority supporting law-making powers (Wyn Jones & Scully, 2012: 110). Some areas of Wales experienced large increases in those voting ‘yes’ between 1997 and 2011, with Flintshire (24%) and Denbighshire (21%) having the highest increases.

Although the prize of getting the referendum was a very important development for Plaid as an autonomist party, it was also a major constraint on the ability of the party to construct an effective vote-seeking strategy for the 2011 Welsh election. Plaid put a lot of effort into the referendum, firstly in ensuring it actually happened, and secondly in the day-to-day campaigning and organising that was needed to win it (Evans, 2011). One Plaid AM maintains that it was Plaid Cymru that did most of the work on the ground to achieve a yes vote in the referendum.\(^\text{32}\) Such a claim is reiterated by Wyn Jones and Scully (2012: 93). Yet, the party failed to achieve an electoral dividend from the referendum, losing 5 of 17 AM’s in the election.

Plaid viewed the referendum as more important than the assembly elections which was reflected in a decision made in 2010 by senior figures in the party to make the referendum the top priority for 2011\(^\text{33}\) (Plaid Cymru, 2011e; Plaid Cymru, 2011f). On this, an AM claimed that, because Plaid treated the referendum as ‘the prize’, the party paid the price for pushing it and were ‘tired’ after the campaign. The resources were then not there to carry out the following Welsh election campaign.\(^\text{34}\) On the referendum, it became clear within Plaid that the only way to achieve a ‘yes’ vote was to allow Labour to take the lead in the campaign when it came to television and other forms of the media.\(^\text{35}\) One AM said that one reason the referendum was successful was because the Labour First Minister, Carwyn Jones, fronted the campaign.\(^\text{36}\) His public backing of the proposal meant it was perfectly acceptable for the Labour electorate to vote ‘yes’; the fact that there was not a Labour ‘no’ campaign was crucial.\(^\text{37}\) According to another AM, Plaid had no ‘exit strategy’ in place in advance of the election campaign. By the time that a strategy had been developed it was too late and Plaid ended up turning on their coalition partners which meant they, self-admittedly, ‘looked ridiculous’ as they were basically criticising themselves as a part of the One Wales Government.\(^\text{38}\) Furthermore, the same AM criticised Plaid’s leadership, especially Ieuan Wyn Jones, for getting ‘sucked in’ to government at the expense of the party machine as a whole.\(^\text{39}\) In other words, Wyn Jones allegedly became more concerned with being DFM than being Plaid’s leader. However, it has also been suggested by a party officer that the party was not structured in such a way that allowed Wyn Jones to focus on the ‘red line’ of the
referendum without ‘leaving the party behind’.\textsuperscript{40} Such evidence points to the supposed vulnerabilities felt by first time governors, particularly ‘organisational vulnerability’ (Bolleyer, 2008; Deschouwer, 2008).

Using Strøm and Müller’s (1999) framework as a heuristic guide, it is clear that Plaid traded vote-seeking capability for primary goal policy-seeking capacity. In 2007, there had been the possibility of a so-called ‘rainbow coalition’ between Plaid, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats which never came to fruition. Importantly, this coalition would have resulted in Ieuan Wyn Jones being First Minister. Due to modern politics being more and more focussed on individual candidates (Barisonne, 2009), not taking up probably the most publically recognisable office in Welsh politics meant a shift away from the ability of Plaid to embark on as effective a vote-seeking strategy as it might otherwise have been able to do. The rainbow option would have provided Plaid with distinctive intrinsic benefits in the form of holding the office of First Minister (FM) because the office is a relatively powerful one (Lynch, 2006). Of course, this coalition would not have had the legislative clout to trigger a referendum on law-making powers because this required a two-thirds majority in the Welsh Assembly.

In contrast, the coalition with Labour did offer the advantage of having the legislative clout to deliver the referendum (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2012). As stated above, this was the most important reason for going into government. The One Wales Government reignited the so-called ‘symbiotic relationship’ (McAllister, 2001: 215) between the two parties, with Plaid providing the ‘ideas and synergy’\textsuperscript{41} and Labour providing the electoral and political strength to deliver a successful referendum outcome. Indeed, former Plaid AM Nerys Evans stated in the media that Plaid was ‘rather flattered that Labour has been persuaded by our arguments’ (Western Mail, 2010b). Interpreted through the lens of Strøm and Müller’s (1999) framework, this highlights the importance of policy-seeking behaviour for Plaid. The apparatus of governmental office was used in a functional manner to monitor the behaviour of Labour and ensure that the referendum was delivered. Such behaviour came at the cost of vote-seeking capacity. Although accepted as a ‘normal’ coalition partner by Labour, Plaid was unable, and indeed unwilling, to shed a niche characteristic for the possible opportunity of a better electoral outcome at the 2011 Welsh election.

The SNP in Government

The SNP’s Primary Goal

The primary goal of the SNP is to achieve ‘independence for Scotland’ (SNP, 2009a: 1). Although the SNP’s primary goal was somewhat ambiguous in its early years, the 1950s saw the beginning of a process of real consolidation with regards to the party’s objectives (Finlay, 2009: 27). According to interview evidence, the current SNP is extremely united around the common goal of independence. Of the 17 interviewees used for this paper, 16 stated Scottish independence as the top priority of the SNP. Only one of these respondents mentioned other objectives before using the term ‘independence’, stating that ‘social justice’ and ‘equal opportunities’ were the most important objectives for the SNP, although these could only be achieved through the functions of an independent Scottish state.\textsuperscript{42}

More commonly, as previously mentioned, ‘independence’ in of itself was the top priority for the majority of interviewees. For example, one MSP stated that
'everything else is secondary', while another MSP stated that without this aim he would not be a member of the SNP and 'if [...] [independence] was dropped [he] would leave'. The same respondent stated that independence was ‘all or nothing’; with a further MSP stating that it was the reason he had joined the SNP. Overall, interview evidence clearly shows that Scottish independence is a defining and commonly held belief and objective within the parliamentary group and party officers of the SNP. According to one MSP, 'everyone has their personal reasons' for supporting independence, but it is the ‘overriding policy objective’. This sentiment is also prevalent within the wider membership (Mitchell et al, 2012). The SNP's Primary Goal in Government – Delivering a Referendum Unlike Plaid, the SNP were not part of a formal legislative majority in the Scottish Parliament, existing instead as a single-party minority government. There were coalition talks with the Liberal Democrats which collapsed because ‘the Liberal Democrats were unwilling to agree to a coalition [...] until plans for a referendum on independence were abandoned.’ (House of Commons Library, 2007: 2) The SNP’s 2007 election manifesto pledged the ‘[p]ublication of a White Paper detailing the concept of Scottish independence’ so that the Scottish electorate could have the ‘opportunity to decide on independence in a referendum, with a likely date of 2010.’ (SNP, 2007) In late August 2007, the Scottish Government released a report on the first 100 days of the parliamentary term, stating that they had ‘published a White Paper on Independence and further responsibilities for the Scottish Parliament’, as well as ‘a draft Bill for a referendum’ and had begun ‘a national conversation about the future of Scotland’s Parliament and Government.’ (Scottish Government, 2007) This document, entitled ‘Choosing Scotland’s Future – A National Conversation’, outlined three choices for the future constitutional status of Scotland vis-a-vis the UK: the current devolution settlement as laid out in the Scotland Act 1998, ‘redesigned’ devolution involving the transfer of competencies from the UK, and independence (Scottish Government, 2007a: viii). Without the majority needed to pass a bill which would trigger a referendum on independence, the SNP aimed to use governmental office to promote its primary goal by relaying the impression of governmental competence which would boost support for the SNP and independence; and use governmental office as a ‘direct institutional platform’ to hold a referendum on Scottish independence (Harvey and Lynch, 2010: 1), although it turned out to be unsuccessful in achieving this second aim. Despite the obvious constraints surrounding the passing of legislation, a few interviewees stated that they were very happy with the fact that the SNP ended up as a minority government. A minister claimed that, despite the fact ‘many people [had] hoped to join a coalition’, they were ‘quite relieved when we went it alone’. Another MSP stated that coalition with the Liberal Democrats ‘at the time, being honest, didn’t fill me with dread’. However, they went on to say that minority government ‘has benefitted [the SNP] in the long run’ because the SNP has been able to ‘present [its] own programme and initiatives’ and be ‘masters of our own destiny, albeit in minority’. Office and Votes at the expense of Policy? Governmental status, for the SNP, is perceived to be a mechanism for enhancing the credibility of the party and of independence more generally (Harvey, 2010). For example, one cabinet minister stated that the SNP’s first period in office has given the party ‘hugely enhanced credibility’ which will ultimately ‘make people sympathetic
to independence’. This point is reiterated by an MSP: ‘if the party is seen as credible, then independence is credible.’ Such claims are supported by a government minister who argued that ‘people build up faith in [the SNP]’ when the party is seen as a competent government. The ‘purpose of power’, according to a different MSP, is to ‘establish our credentials and build confidence’. Another MSP stated that the SNP had previously been shackled by the perception that it was a ‘single-issue party’: by ‘taking government and [running] a minority government’ the party can be seen as credible and ‘thus independence is credible’. The SNP’s disappointing performance at the 2003 Scottish election was a ‘wake-up call’ for the SNP, according to a cabinet minister, and brought home a realisation that the party ‘had to be a united force to stand any chance of constitutional advancement.’ Such sentiments were expressed publically in 2003 by the party leader at the time, John Swinney. In a statement made after the 2003 Scottish elections where he said that the SNP’s ‘[…] future rests not in attracting votes to protest against the government - but in attracting votes to become the government.’ (SNP, 2003)

According to a government minister, governmental status provides the ‘capacity to have the debate’ on independence and the ‘strength of government gives you a chance to do this.’ An MSP echoed similar sentiments, stating that governmental status has given the SNP ‘the opportunity to define what independence is’. Having the opportunity to prepare for the potential debate on independence, with publication of material about the referendum and independence itself, is an important function of governmental office (see Harvey, 2010: 4-5). Furthermore, the fact that the SNP’s opponents responded with their own territorial reform proposals (Commission on Scottish Devolution, 2009) is testament to the SNP’s agenda setting abilities (Elias and Tronconi, 2011; Toubeau, 2011).

The SNP announced in 2009 that its manifesto promise to hold a referendum in 2010 would go ahead (SNP, 2009b). However, it was decided not to table the referendum bill (Scottish Government, 2010) due to a lack of support from opposition parties in the Scottish Parliament. The SNP leadership predictably blamed the opposition parties, with deputy leader Nicola Sturgeon absolving the party of responsibility at the SNP’s 2010 autumn conference by trying to connect with ‘those who share our anger that Scotland has been denied the democratic right to choose [its] own future’ (Sturgeon, 2010). Interview evidence suggests that, on the whole, the decision to drop the referendum bill was perceived as the correct one. One MSP claimed that it was important not to table it because seeing it defeated would have played on elements of ‘self-doubt’ that still exist within the SNP. In his opinion, it ‘would have hurt many members to see it shot down’ and by ‘[keeping] it in the locker’ it allows the ‘Holy Grail’ to remain ‘untarnished’. The party leadership clearly took a gamble, with one MSP alluding to the fact that ‘[had] we lost [the election] and [not] put the referendum bill through then that would have been bad, I think.’ Another MSP admitted that he was disappointed by the shelving of the bill in 2010, but that the election result in 2011 provided huge credibility to the First Minister’s strategy. Although the opportunity to pass the bill presented itself in 2008 when Wendy Alexander, then leader of Scottish Labour, called on the Scottish Government to ‘bring on’ a referendum (BBC, 2008), a party officer stated that this was not ‘the right time because we don’t do things in a random way.’ Indeed, the same respondent stated that ‘attempts of other parties to jump in are destructive attempts.’
As previously mentioned, the SNP have achieved electoral success by being a party of competence, not as a party that advocates independence. When asked about what part independence played in their local campaigns leading up to the 2011 Scottish election, MSP’s gave a mixed response. On the one hand, some MSP’s were keen to highlight the fact that independence is always an issue on the doorstep. One MSP claimed that ‘every conversation [during] canvassing’ involved independence, however this could quite simply be for the collection of data for the SNP’s ‘Activate’ software, something that a cabinet minister was keen to stress is important for the SNP. However, another MSP reiterated similar sentiments, claiming that independence does not take a secondary role to getting someone to vote SNP and that he would talk about independence ‘24/7’ given the chance. A different MSP insisted that ‘you have to have independence there’ in the overall message because ‘you won’t get your activists or your core vote without it.’

On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that at least some SNP candidates seeking election did attempt to detach the independence issue from their campaign. One MSP stated that he ‘never avoided discussing [independence]’, however he went on to state that ‘you can elect as many SNP representatives as you want, independence won’t come’ and thus ‘it’s not at the forefront’. A different MSP mentioned that independence, although not hidden, was not the most important issue as the election ‘was about who governs Scotland’. Asked whether the referendum separates independence from the rest of the SNP’s policy platform, the same MSP answered ‘yes, 100%.’ Similarly, a different MSP agreed with the notion that the referendum acts as a ‘fail-safe’ for voters. He stated that previously the SNP’s stance was ‘vote for us and get independence’, whereas now the message has become ‘[the SNP] will govern Scotland best and [will] come back to [the voters] with the referendum.’ Indeed, a government minister claimed that voters ‘mostly focus on local issues’ but that they would engage with a voter on the issue of independence if they wished to do so. Overall, the SNP campaigned to win votes: ‘SNP are doing things to be popular very deliberately’ stated one MSP.

The SNP’s first period in office from 2007 to 2011 resulted in no legislative output that could be said to be primary goal related (Cairney, 2011: 40). Indeed, the 2007-2011 period recorded the lowest legislative output from the Scottish parliament at 53 Acts passed (Scottish Parliament, 2011: 8), compared to 62 in 1999-2003 (Scottish Parliament, 2008a: 7) and 66 in 2003-2007 (Scottish Parliament, 2008b: 8). Much of the Scottish Government’s agenda was pursued without needing to resort to legislation (Cairney, 2011: 50). However, despite the brief possibility of Labour providing the legislative numbers to deliver a referendum, parliamentary arithmetic meant that the decision to shelve the referendum bill was a relatively easy one to make. Rather than take a random and unforeseen opportunity to hold a referendum, the party was committed to following its own strategy in government. However, this bill was an extremely important symbolic aspect of what the SNP stands for. Interview evidence suggests that pragmatism was the main consideration at the
time, but there is also evidence to suggest that there was some disappointment at not seeing a crucial cornerstone of the SNP’s primary goal at least being brought before parliament. Given the importance and centrality of primary goals to autonomist parties, it would not have been a surprise had the SNP decided to table such a bill despite knowing it would not have passed. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the SNP refrained from displaying the policy-seeking behaviour (Strøm and Müller, 1999) which may have been expected.

The notion that the goal of the SNP as a party of government was to be seen as ‘credible’ is also indicative of the shift away from a party that is overtly policy-seeking to one that is more vote-seeking (Strøm and Müller, 1999). The SNP were quite willing and able, on the whole, to detach Scottish independence from their election campaign in 2011 and campaigned on a platform that was deliberately designed to be populist. This strategy paid dividends electorally as the SNP achieved a majority in the Scottish Parliament and it is now possible for the party to pursue its autonomist policy agenda within the limits of devolution. However, the electoral success that the SNP had in 2011 could not be predicted far in advance and so it is reasonable to suggest that votes were sought in order to attain governmental office as an end in itself, or as a platform for the continuation of the so-called ‘gradualist’ strategy (Mitchell, 1996; Lynch, 2002) to achieve independence. The SNP was focussed on winning votes as a priority, and in doing so made sure that its goal of using the Scottish Parliament to hold a referendum on independence did not impinge on or undermine its vote-seeking capacity. In other words, the party was careful to play down its niche characteristics in order to appear ‘normal’ and mainstream. Furthermore, the party has used governmental status as a mechanism to establish its ‘normality’ in the eyes of the electorate, and has also been able to use the apparatus of state at its disposal as an effective agenda setting tool. Overall, as interpreted through Strøm and Müller’s (1999) framework, the SNP traded off policy-seeking behaviour in return for office and vote-seeking capacity.

**Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to explore the ‘niche to normal’ framework (Hepburn, 2009) using Plaid and the SNP as comparative case studies. As the theory section outlined, the aim was to provide empirical context to this process and to highlight what being ‘normal’ actually means for the parties in question. The theory section also argued that, despite obvious normality, Plaid and the SNP do retain residual ‘niche’ characteristics due to their primary goals. The empirical evidence provides credence to this argument: both Plaid and the SNP have clearly definable primary goals which, according to Meguid’s (2005) criteria, can be considered as sustaining these niche characteristics.

If governmental participation is to be considered as one possible indicator of normality, then how these niche characteristics affect both parties is crucial in understanding what ‘normal’ means in each case. To assume that this ‘normal’ state would be the same for each party would disregard the fact that parties are ‘the product of a specific historical experience which is not replicated elsewhere.’ (Ware, 1987: 1) As the discussion above has shown, both Plaid and the SNP underwent different experiences. For Plaid, their primary goal (as constituted at the time) of promoting the ‘constitutional advancement of Wales’ towards eventual independence (Plaid Cymru, 2011b: 3) largely defined their period in office. Intra-coalition relations
with Labour, the setting of priorities heading into an election year and the focussing of time and resources were primarily concentrated on the delivery and success of the 2011 referendum on law-making powers. This policy-seeking behaviour therefore came at the expense of vote-seeking capacity (Strøm and Müller, 1999).

For the SNP, governmental participation meant the ability to, at least, embark on successful agenda setting (Elias and Tronconi, 2011; Toubeau, 2011). The actual passing of ‘primary goal’ policy proved to be more difficult, and the SNP took the decision to shelve their much coveted referendum on Scottish independence. However, the party was successfully able to ‘detach’ its primary goal from its overall electoral profile somewhat, a strategy that meant that the SNP could promote itself as a party of competency rather than one of primary goals (Johns et al, 2013). As interpreted through the lens of Strøm and Müller’s (1999) framework, the SNP were explicitly willing to trade off policy-seeking behaviour in order to maximise their vote-winning credentials.

This paper has shown that normality for Plaid was more affected by its niche characteristics than it was for the SNP. However, this is not to say that the SNP is indeed more ‘normal’ than Plaid. For Plaid, a primary goal policy-seeking strategy was a rational one considering the assurances in the One Wales Agreement which led to a successful outcome in the referendum. For the SNP, separating their primary goal from their profile as a party of government meant that the opportunity to hold governmental office, and thus advance the cause of Scottish independence gradually, was equally rational. Furthermore, the SNP’s second term in government is, like Plaid’s first, proving to be far more primary goal dominated because they possess the legislative strength to pursue those goals. With regards to Hepburn’s (2009) ‘niche to normal’ framework, two qualifications can thus be made. Firstly, the phrasing niche to normal is slightly misleading. Because autonomist parties cannot simply shed their niche characteristics as they normalise, the question becomes; to what extent have niche characteristics affected and influenced normal party status? As the above empirical discussion shows, they affected Plaid to a greater degree than the SNP. The second qualification follows on from this: normality is not a fixed position or an end point, but rather a status that is particularised by factors such as legislative strength, potential coalition arrangements (if any), the ‘rules of the game’ (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009: xxiii) which the institutional setting present, and the nature of the primary goal itself. The normality that an autonomist party enjoys will be shaped by how these factors interact and amass which, in turn, will affect the likelihood, length of time required and potential opportunities to successfully achieve, or at least to take steps towards, primary goals.
Bibliography


De Winter, Lieven., Margarita Gómez-Reino and Peter Lynch (eds.) (1996) *Autonomist Parties In Europe: Identity Politics And the Revival of the Territorial Cleavage* (Barcelona: ICPS)


http://www.plaidcymru.org/uploads/Articles_and_reports/Plaid_-_education_keynote_8-7-11.pdf


Plaid Cymru (2007a) Make a Difference: National Assembly Election Manifesto 2007 (Plaid Cymru)

Plaid Cymru (2011a) Cyfansoddiaid/Constitution (Plaid Cymru, 19 September 2011)

Plaid Cymru (2011b) Cyfansoddiaid/Constitution (Plaid Cymru, 31st May 2011)

Plaid Cymru (2011c) Motions Passed at the 2011 Plaid Cymru Annual Conference (Plaid Cymru, 19th September 2011)


Plaid Cymru (2011f) Gweithlen January-February 2011 (Information pamphlet circulated amongst members)

Plaid Cymru (2012a) Moving Forward: Renewing Plaid for Wales (Plaid Cymru)


http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/Factsheets/Scottish_Parliament_Legislation_Session_3_NEW_VERSION.pdf


http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/ass07/man/scot/snp.pdf

SNP (2009b) *SNP outlines plan for independence referendum* (accessed 10th January 2013)  


Sturgeon, Nicola (2010) *Nicola Sturgeon’s address to SNP Conference 16th October 2010* (accessed 10th January 2013)  


18


---

1 Plaid Cymru will from this point be referred to simply as ‘Plaid’
2 There are a number of different labels and names that have been used for this party family, but this paper will stick to autonomist for ease.
3 It’s important to note that the notion of an autonomist ‘party family’ is not an unchallenged one. For example, De Winter and Gomez-Reino Cachafeiro (2002) argue that the ideological cohesiveness of this party family has traditionally been low. They also go on to claim that electoral success for these parties has, if anything, brought about more heterogeneity to the party family, evidence of which is found in the hindrance of cooperative action in the European Free Alliance.
4 The term ‘normal’, in the context of this essay, is interchangeable with ‘mainstream’.
5 The interview data used in this paper was collected between June 2011 and January 2012.
6 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member A
7 Plaid Cymru Party Officer A, Plaid Cymru Assembly Member B
8 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member C
9 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member D
10 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member E
11 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member F
12 Plaid Cymru Party Officer B
13 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member G
14 Plaid Cymru Party Officer C, Plaid Cymru Party Officer D
15 Plaid Cymru Party Officer D
16 Plaid Cymru Party Officer C
17 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member B
18 Plaid Cymru Party Officer C
19 Plaid Cymru Party Officer C
20 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member E
21 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member E
22 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member E
23 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member E
24 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member C
25 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member B
26 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member E
27 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member E
28 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member A
29 Plaid Cymru Assembly Member A
30 A list of the 20 devolved areas can be found here: http://www.assemblywales.org/abthome/role-of-assembly-how-it-works/governance-of-wales.htm (accessed 10th January 2013)
A ‘Yes’ to devolution was achieved in 1997 with an extremely narrow 50.3% of the vote, just under 7,000 votes. On the contrary, the 2011 referendum was a different affair altogether, with 63.5% voting ‘Yes’.