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Cymru

Missing
Voices

Missing Voices
How do people across Wales feel about politics?

Jess Blair and
Mat Mathias
December 2017

1867 direct engagements on social media

Participants
Male: 331,
Female: 468,
Other: 1

Focus Group Location

Participants
Under 18: 54
18-24: 60
25-34: 109
35-44: 205
45-54: 167
55-64: 119
over 65: 79

128,652 reach on social media

20 focus groups across Wales

756 survey responses

Participants from all of Wales' 22 local authorities

Missing Voices

807 direct participants in the project

Contents

Introduction

Jess Blair,
Director ERS Cymru

The sad truth is that nearly 20 years after devolution the majority of people in Wales still don't vote in Welsh elections, be that local or Assembly elections. While turnout for General Elections is comparatively high in Wales, there is a huge gap in those that vote in local and UK wide elections.

While turnout isn't the only indicator of how healthy a democracy is, it's certainly a good place to start. Yet, this does only offer a small picture of how people really feel about politics.

That's why we launched 'Missing Voices', a project which has aimed to have a conversation with people across Wales about how they feel about politics and how it can be improved.

'Improvement' really is the watchword here. For the first time we in Wales have the power to change elections and the way the political system works as new powers are transferred to Wales following the Wales Act 2017. We can make our own democracy work better for the people in this country.

This report outlines the findings of an extensive piece of work that has traveled the length and breadth of Wales trying to find out what you really think about the way Wales works.

We've attempted to engage with people in a number of ways;

1. An online survey engaging with 756 people over two months
2. 20 focus groups across Wales targeting groups of people less likely to be engaged with politics

In total 807 people took part directly in this project and gave us extensive information, which we have been able to draw key themes out of.

Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods we have identified the following three key themes in how people feel about politics in Wales.

1. Confusion
2. Frustration
3. Hope

This report explores these themes and the evidence given to us on these issues by the people who've taken part in this project, without whom this project would not have been possible.

Jess Blair
Director
ERS Cymru

Methodology note

A more detailed methodology is available in Appendix 1.

This project used a combination of approaches to address the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions and interpretations of 'politics' among a cohort of Welsh respondents?
2. How do the participants in this study perceive 'politics' in terms of its relevance and prevalence in their day to day lives?
3. What are the key barriers to voter turnout among a significant proportion of the Welsh population?

The main research tools the project used were online surveying of the general public and targeted focus groups with people who represented different groups around Wales.

Online participants were asked a range of quantitative questions, including how interested they were in politics on a scale from one to ten, how easy they found it to understand politics and which recent elections they had voted in.
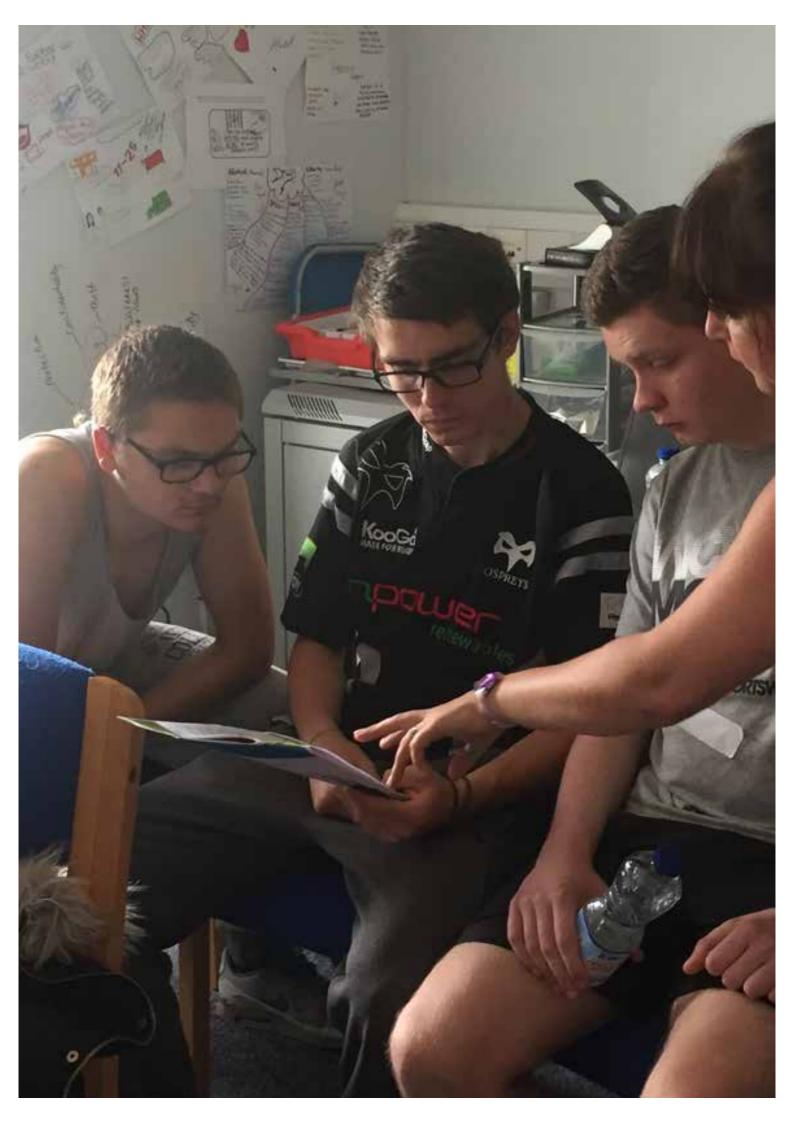
Online participants were also asked a qualitative question, "In ten words or less, what does politics mean to you?"
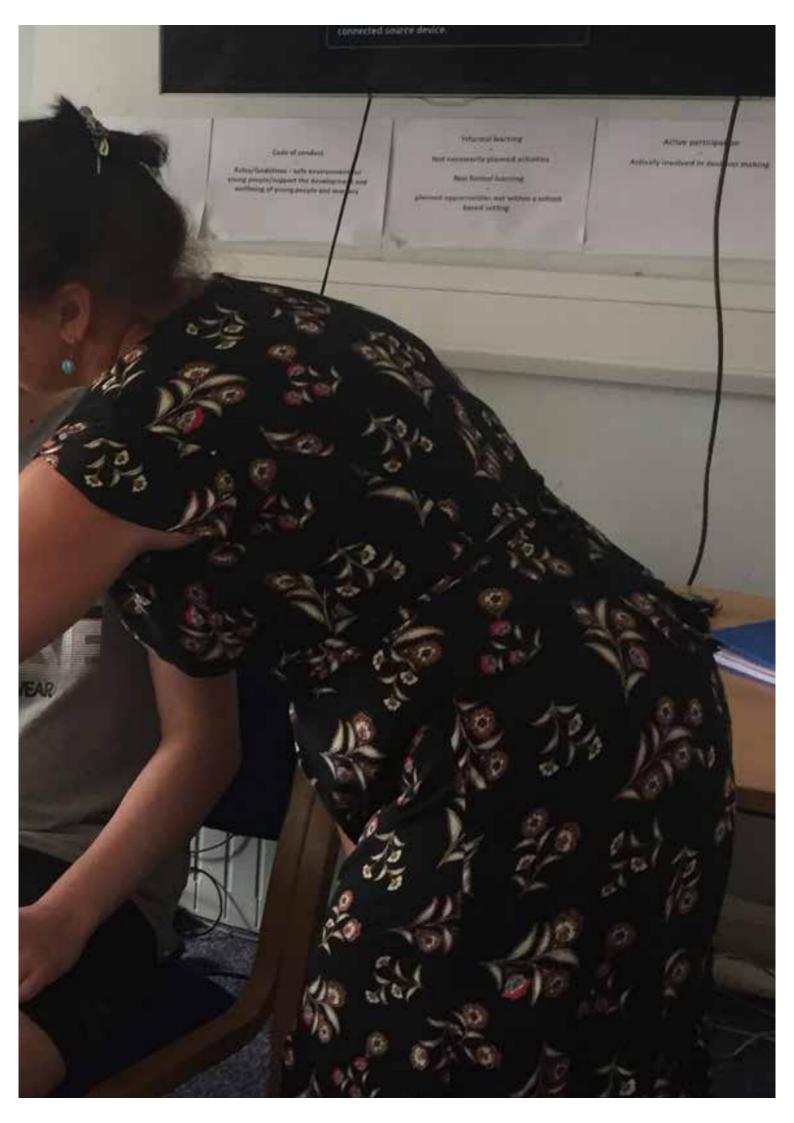
Focus groups by their very nature varied much more in terms of their content but we put in place set questions so that we could create some comparisons between them. Focus group participants were also asked to fill in the survey but this was always at the beginning of the sessions to avoid influencing the findings of the survey.
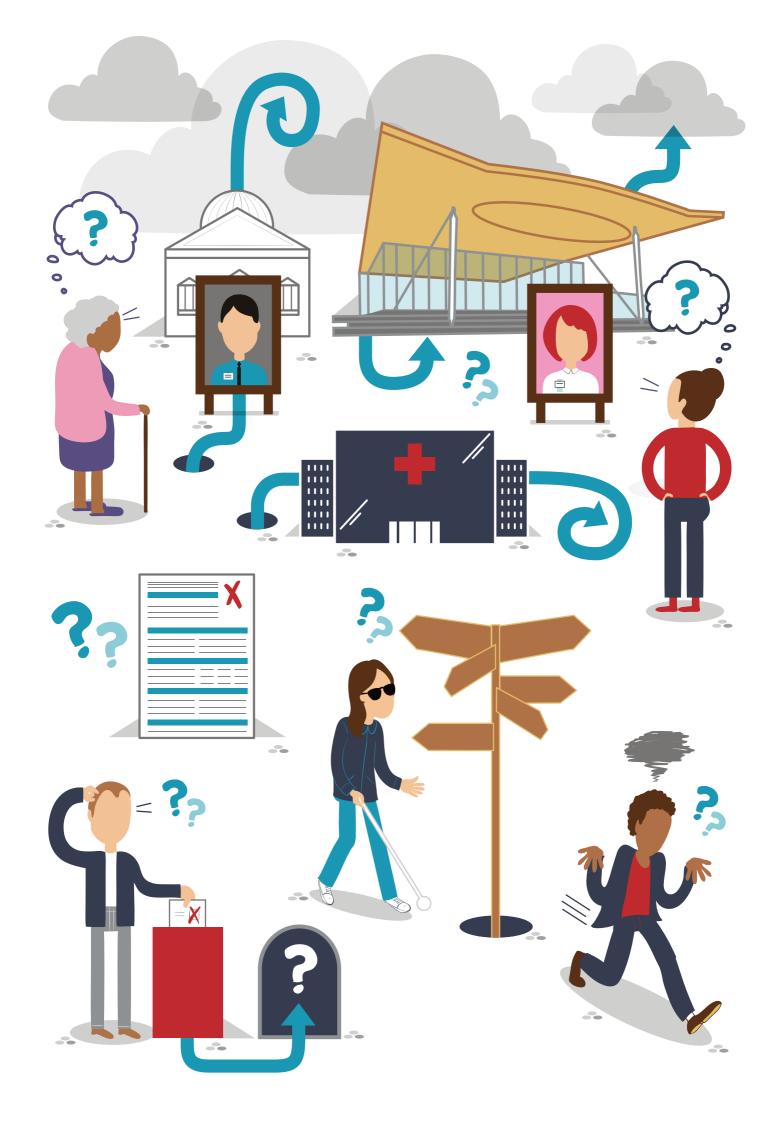
Summary of survey responses

	Average Agreement Scale 1-10
Confidence in going to a polling station	7.4
"When people like me get involved in politics they can really change the way things are run"	5.8
"I am interested in politics"	6.9
"Politics is relevant to people like me"	7.4
"I find it easy to understand political issues being talked about in the news"	6.2
"I find out what is happening in the UK and the world by following social media"	6.3
"I regularly watch news programmes and/or read newspapers"	5.9

Statement	Average Agreement Scale 1-10	
	Non-Voters (Voting Age)	Voters in every election
Confidence in going to a polling station	6.3	9.4
"When people like me get involved in politics they can really change the way things are run"	4.7	6.7
"I am interested in politics"	5.8	8.2
"Politics is relevant to people like me"	6.1	8.4
"I find it easy to understand political issues being talked about in the news"	5.8	7.6
"I find out what is happening in the UK and the world by following social media"	5.8	6.6
"I regularly watch news programmes and/or read newspapers"	5.2	7.6

1   **Confusion**

Let's face it, when it comes to politics and elections we should be experts. In only the past eighteen months we in Wales have been asked to vote in four different elections and a referendum.

While 'Missing Voices' initially set out to find out the views of those who aren't voting, what became evident is that those that are voting had a story to tell too. In particular a number of voters have a huge amount of confusion around what it is they're voting for. With others a perceived lack of knowledge acted as a barrier for them to vote at all.

Repeated phrases that cropped up in our survey included 'confused', 'I don't know' or 'I don't understand'. The average survey response to 'I find it easy to understand political issues being talked about in the news was 6.2 out of 10.

"I'm not really interested in politics- I don't understand politics very well, mostly because I don't attempt to understand"

"Although I enjoy reading the news and trying to understand politics, I will admit I find it all confusing, wish there was an easy guide!"

"I always feel confused with national and local politics"

"unfulfilled promises, misguided truth, self serving, confusion, uncertainty"

"I'm unsure & confused, therefore uninterested sadly"

"I'm not as passionate as I should be and I believe that is down to my lack of knowledge"

While we didn't explicitly ask participants in our focus groups about who they thought did what at each level of governance, a clear narrative emerged that there is a huge amount of confusion around politics.

In many of the focus groups we ran across Wales there was discussion about not understanding which institutions had what responsibilities and at a more fundamental level, what politicians, at all levels actually did.

"In general (we don't know) the basics, it's all so complicated"

"I don't know enough about the Welsh Assembly"

With regards to responsibilities there were participants in focus groups who were unsure about who ran the health service which reflects the BBC/ICM polling of March 2016 that stated nearly 30% of respondents thought, incorrectly, that it was the UK Government at Westminster that was responsible for running the NHS in Wales.

To begin all our focus groups, pictures of different politicians at all levels including regional Assembly Members and local constituency AMs and MPs were shown. The reason was to get people thinking about politics and politicians with the amount shown dependent on time and so varied from group to group. All respondents recognised Donald Trump and Theresa May while only three people failed to identify Jeremy Corbyn.

While the recognition rate for local politicians was not always as high, the ones who did identify were more likely to be positive. Both constituency AM and MP had over 70% recognition rate (71.4% and 73.5 respectively) while only 34% recognised a picture of one of their regional AMs. The discussion always moved onto what the roles of these politicians were.

As a member of the NAS said in Swansea:

"What I found working for the charity over the past few years and what we have experienced with (our own AM) is people sometimes don't realise that they can actually use AMs and MPs... Not just globally or [on issues like] bins you can actually approach them and say 'my family is struggling with this can you help me'"

Another element of confusion that emerged in both the focus groups and online survey was not around politics in general, but the process of voting, both on the day and in terms of registration. This took the form of people being unsure if they were registered to vote and a lack of transparency around which address they were registered at. In some cases people we spoke to had problems with registration and voting due to disability.

One respondent to our online survey answered 'What does politics mean to you?' with the following:

"Everything. But very hard to vote in confidence, let alone register, if you can't see properly!"

There are problems for people who, like above, are blind or visually impaired not having the right support to vote or that their vote is not private. Other focus groups raised issues around the stress and sensory pressures that may occur when having to go to a polling station for those with autism or a mental health issue.

Political education

At the same time as the running of Missing Voices, the Welsh Government was conducting a consultation on electoral reform in Wales with one of the big questions being lowering the voting age to 16. The Electoral Reform Society has long supported this believing the way young people come into contact with politics in their formative years is crucially important for the future of representative democracy.

We asked our focus groups about the issue, including in nine of them a straight 'yes' or 'no' answer. It produced a lot of discussion.

These comments are from Swansea:

"At 16 you can leave school and get a job, pay income tax and national insurance – you should have a say"

"We aren't saying they (under 18s) aren't politically minded. They are just not at an age when they should vote"

"They (under 18s) are the most interested and energetic"

60% of respondents said the voting age should be lowered, 40% against the proposal. The discussions were not as clear cut.

"Yes and a no – if they understand it yes. If they (Government) nail the teaching then possibly"

"I'm saying absolutely not unless you have an independent people coming in (to schools) and speaking to them and in an unbiased way"

"There has to be proper politics education before that comes in"

Political education was a big bone of contention for many when considering the lowering of the voting age with concerns that current provision was not sufficient.
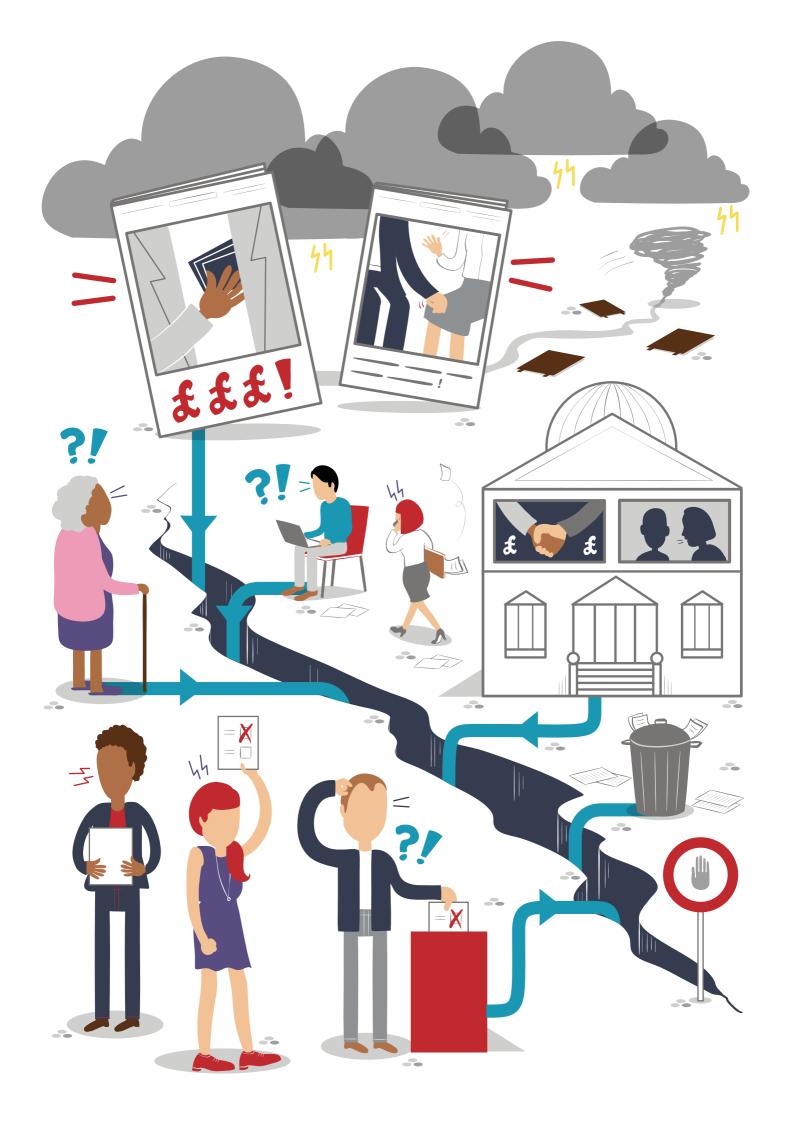
"I think people need to understand the processes and what happens because of the consequences. It's not about age it's about accessing the opinions of people and involving (people) in the process. We need a better political education system"

"Politics should be in schools. This time the conversations they are having (with my son) are great – he wants to know, his mates were having huge get togethers discussing politics and brexit"

"There should be courses, not just for our age for all ages"

It is clear from both our online surveys and our focus groups that knowledge, or a lack of it, is playing a big part in contributing to Wales' 'missing voices'. As a barrier to voting in the first place, or as a reason for why people who are voting don't feel they can trust the political system, confusion is playing a detrimental role in our democracy.

There are things that can be done to address this and these include the improvement of political education, a better level of communication from all forms of government to the public and also relates to the issue of poor news provision in Wales. Ultimately, these problems are significant and are seriously detrimental to the democratic health of Wales. Potential solutions, however difficult, must be explored.

2   Frustration

"Frustrating" – One respondent to our survey when asked to sum up what politics meant to them.

For many there is a sense of widespread disillusionment with politics at present.

While this part of the report is titled 'frustration', it could have easily have been 'lack of trust', 'widespread disillusionment' or possibly 'anger', 'worry' or 'disappointment'.

241 out of 807 responses to the project were in some way negative about politics, with 217 comments in the survey themed directly around frustration. Every single focus group discussed aspects of their frustration without prompting.

With so many visits to the ballot box over the recent years coupled with previous cases of the expenses scandal and more recently concerns over allegations of sexual harassment and tax evasion there are many elements of modern politics where frustration and distrust has been able to flourish.

This certainly bears out from some of the comments from people in the project who had no interest whatsoever in politics or saw it as an increasingly negative force in the their lives and in society in general. Two people during a focus group in Criccieth went further.

"Everything is politics and I don't like it"
"I don't do politics, I hate it"

This 'political malaise' was echoed in the survey responses.

When asked 'What does politics mean to you?' some respondents did not hold back: 'It's a mess.' 'load of old rubbish.' 'not a lot.' 'whoever wins the people lose.' and someone from Blaenau Gwent claiming 'it's full of sh*t.'

"Money, poverty for the most vulnerable, as the rich get richer"

"Politics to me is essential, although I find myself always on the wrong side and having to fight for my rights. I don't think we can avoid politics but it is often exhausting and damaging to my well-being to constantly fight for rights, laws and fair treatment"

"I think it is smoke and mirrors. A select few have all the power and pretend we have a say"

"Frustration, fighting, regression, some positivity, a lot of double standards"

"Power grabbing, scoring points, self-interest, league tables, statistics, arrogance, depressing"

"I don't want vote, politics is in a state. I vote because I have to"

"Spin. Bluster. Theatre. Disappointment. Lies. Division. Impossible task"

It is still interesting to note that two of these respondents voted in every election they were able to.

Many of those surveyed homed in on a sense of the politics being an arena dominated by corruption and lies. 37 people mention the words 'corruption' or 'lies' in response to our online survey asking 'What does politics mean to you?'.

"Corrupt and no straight answers"

"A system that is in thrall to money and not social values"

"As I get older I realise how corrupt it is"

"It means politicians feathering their nest and not representing the people at all"

"Fed up of MP lies and spin"

"People telling lies and not answering questions"

"Broken promises from power hungry liars"

"Politicians promise the world and deliver nothing. Very little change"

"False promises by self-interested, power hungry leaders"

"Frustrating and corrupt"

Trust

There is also a divide between where people see themselves and where they see politicians. Despite devolution bringing politics theoretically closer, for many politics in fact seems further away. 38 comments on the survey show that some people's frustration with politics as a whole was targeted at politicians specifically.

"Politics matters - but not to the people we elect."

"hot air egocentrics for people with their own agendas"

"Promises made today, broken tomorrow by politicians"

"A lot of politicians are in it for themselves"

"Politicians promise the world and deliver nothing. Very little change"

"It highlights the difference between politicians and people"

"A lot forget they represent us not themselves"

Within the survey's quantitative questions the lowest result by far was to "When people like me get involved in politics they can really change the way things are run". Respondents gave this an average of 5.8 out of ten. As well as a lack of faith in politicians themselves, the voting system was seen to confound frustration. A number of people in both focus groups and in the online survey without prompting mentioned this.

"My vote in the last general election, and this made me frustrated, my vote was pretty pointless – I couldn't vote for the party I wanted because their candidate had no chance in this constituency"

"Until our vote counts it doesn't matter how we do it"

"The biggest thing to me is that my vote should count. Yes let's change the electoral system"

Politics is at its most divisive in recent memory. With last year's Brexit referendum resulting in a narrow Leave victory, and a snap General Election resulting in a minority Conservative government, the landscape has become more volatile and this has clearly had some effect on how people in Wales perceive the state of politics.

These frustrations reflect major issues around trust, a lack of change and improvement in people's lives over many decades and that issues around people feeling removed from their elected representatives. If an element of Wales' 'Missing Voices' is that people don't trust their voices to be heard properly, or that they don't trust the system to properly reflect their views, then that is a very serious situation.

3 Hope

As already intimated, right now politics isn't winning any popularity contests but the truth of it is, we can't do without it.

It's certainly unfair too to say that there are no bright spots of hope in amongst some of the negativity and confusion we've already examined in this report.

For those 718 survey responses that completed the question 'In 10 words or less, what does politics mean to you?' compared to 141 neutral, 241 negative, the overwhelming response (336) was positive.

Out of all those positive statements 26 people used the words 'chance' and 'opportunity' while the words 'change' and 'future' feature 60 times.

"Possibility of change"

"Something we all need to engage with to ensure change"

"The ability to change things for good"

"I love them. Our local AM has helped us personally as a family and we wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for her input and help"

So far, politicians seem to have been given a hard time with some of the findings. That is only one side of the story.

"[Our former MP] was a wonderful constituency MP"

"[Our current MP] is a good lady who is trying to get things done"

"[Our local AM] He is fantastic. I wrote to my local AM about help with my son and he responded quickly"

Alongside stories of change and examples of individual AMs and MPs giving hope to people are those that inherently have hope in the political system, including a new type of optimism caused by the divisive changes that for others have caused disillusionment.

"It affects everything. Why wouldn't you want a say in that?"

"Politics is life, its effects my life and those around me. You can't turn a blind eye and ignore it, issues need to be addressed, voices need to be heard. There's a real shift in the way 'young' people like me see 'politics' and it's good. There is a revolution coming"

"A better world"

"My future, my money, my services. My children's future"

"Democracy is the heart of our life together as human beings"

"Politics means having a voice"

"It means empowerment and involvement in shaping our lives"

"Politics is about changing the world and saving it. It's about coming together through the hard times to defeat evil and to build a stronger country as well as a better world. It's about sacrificing things we want for things we need. It's about helping those in need and empowering people to achieve success by themselves"

While issues like Brexit and the results of the 2017 General Election have caused some to become frustrated in the political system, for some it's also led to hope.

In the focus groups we ran, particularly those with young people, there was much discussion about the reinvigoration of politics and of people being interested and believing their voices could be heard for the first time.

Hope isn't necessarily a theme we anticipated getting out of this project but it's certainly one that is prevalent among many people across Wales. The challenge is to build on this hope, bringing in those that are currently frustrated, distrustful and confused. It is also to realise the change that many who are hopeful are seeking.

Conclusion

When we began this project we were unsure how many people would engage with the work and what they would say. Our findings are the result of hundreds of people across Wales taking the time to participate in a discussion that they perhaps wouldn't normally, and for the first time we have a clear idea of what people across the country think about politics beyond the polling station.

Putting it simply, what we've found is that for many politics means everything and for others politics means absolutely nothing. Bridging this divide is what is now important.

Our three themes of 'confusion, frustration and hope' are not meant to be exhaustive or reductive of the nuances of what people have taken the time to tell us but to try and bring together some narrative and consistency in a huge range of information.

These themes also offer an opportunity for improvement. As we said in our introduction with new powers Wales now has the chance to do things differently and alongside practical efforts to make Welsh elections run more effectively, there is now the opportunity to live up to the hopes and expectations of those who see politics as something positive in their lives and to change the minds of those who don't.

From these themes it is clear that political education is not delivering at present for all. While political education is generally seen as something for younger people, there is also a gap in knowledge of politics for those outside of the education system. A fundamental challenge is how we can address this information deficit, in a Wales where the means of communicating news are limited.

A number of charities, some of whom we were fortunate to have as partners on the project, raised barriers to voting which are pertinent to the people they represent.

The new powers being devolved to Wales over elections allows the Welsh Government to look in detail at how these barriers can be removed and take practical steps to ensure elections are more inclusive.

Communication generally, beyond education, from all layers of government needs to be improved. There is a systemic challenge for all individual politicians to more effectively interact with their constituencies and reach those that are 'harder to reach'. For some people who are massively turned off from modern politics a leaflet through the door at election time is not enough. This gives us the opportunity to look at other methods through deliberative democracy that can fundamentally change the way people interact with politics, and bring politics closer to the people it is meant to represent.

Appendix

Full methodology

This project used a combination of approaches to address the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions and interpretations of 'politics' among a cohort of Welsh respondents?
2. How do the participants in this study perceive 'politics' in terms of its relevance and prevalence in their day to day lives?
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Focus groups by their very nature varied much more in terms of their content but we put in place set questions so that we could create some comparisons between them. Focus group participants were also asked to fill in the survey but this was always at the beginning of the sessions to avoid influencing the findings of the survey.

The focus group participants were all asked to identify a range of politicians including more well known figures such as Donald Trump, Jeremy Corbyn and Carwyn Jones but they were

also asked to identify a picture of their local AM and MP. In addition to this we asked each focus group how they felt about Votes at 16.

All focus group answers to this question were recorded on a grid and held separately from the surveys. Following each focus group we transcribed an audio recording which has allowed us to use direct quotes from members of the groups in this report.

In terms of interpreting the data from the online surveying and the focus groups we have collated all surveys and analysed and compared the two groups. After certain focus groups we also created a small video to highlight the work that was done but also to promote the project further. On Facebook between the 12th July and 19th October, there were sixteen posts containing video.

Facebook
Likes 96
Shares 139
Comments 32
Reach 47,351
Twitter
77 tweets
Impressions 81,301
Retweets 183
Likes 122
Link clicks 194
Engagement 1101

Survey
A copy of our survey can be found here:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1eXnAs_kx_zg9rVha_FFwegk_DiLKOM2lu0qS5U7OWwM/edit?usp=sharing

List of focus groups
July 4 Llamau, Cwmbran.
July 6 Llamau, Pontypridd
September 11 Torfaen Voluntary Alliance, Pontypool.
September 17, Llamau, Bridgend
September 19 Zumba Class Hirwaun
September 19 Blaenau Gwent People's first, Ebbw Vale
September 20 Bridgend Association Voluntary Organisations Maesteg
September 21 St David Catholic 6th form College, Cardiff
September 22 National Autistic Society Cymru, Swansea
September 25 Torfaen Voluntary Alliance, Pontypool
September 26 Starlight Players amateur theatre group, Criccieth

September 27 Creatasmile, Towyn
September 27 Cambrian college, Wrexham
September 29 Wales Council of the blind, Carmarthen
September 30 Young Farmers club Cymru, Aberystwyth
October 3 RNIB, Cardiff
October 4 Dewis Centre for independent living
October 4 The Willows youth centre Troed y rhiw
October 5 RCT peoples first, Gelli
October 5 Brecon youth RFC, Brecon

List of focus group questions

While each focus group was subjective in terms of the topics discussed, we ensured there was some consistency by doing the following in each of them:

Asking the group to identify pictures of politicians. The pictures always included;

1. Theresa May
2. Jeremy Corbyn
3. Donald Trump
4. Carwyn Jones
5. Leanne Wood
6. Their local AM
7. Their local MP

Asking the group to identify three things that matter to them that politicians can impact. Asking them 'What would you do to make you more likely to vote'? We ended the sessions by asking a series of relatively rapid fire questions:

1. Do you think that the voting age should be lowered to 16?
2. Should we have polling stations in different places such as supermarkets and libraries?
3. Should elections be held on more than one day and on days other than a Thursday?

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