

Briefing on local Single Transferable Vote (STV) for Members of the Senedd

3rd November 2020

Introduction

ERS Cymru welcomes the move to permissive proportional representation (PR) for local government elections as set out in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill as a step forward in improving democracy in Wales. However, this falls short of the full PR necessary to truly strengthen our local democracy.

Local politics in Wales is rife with uncontested incumbency due to the current First Past The Post (FPTP) system. In the last local government elections (2017) nearly 100 councillors in Wales stood unchallenged, with one councillor in Powys remaining unchallenged for a 37th year.¹ ERS Cymru's *New Voices* report (2018)² highlighted a dearth of diversity at this local government level with only 28% of councillors identifying as female and a paucity of complete information relating to other areas of diversity such as age, ethnicity or sexuality.

There is a real risk that allowing individual councils to choose whether to move to an STV electoral system or continue with FPTP would mean that those who the current system benefits will be unlikely to vote for change. This would hamper the ambitions in Wales to increase diversity in local government so that councils are more reflective of their electorates.

There is evidence from Scotland that a move to STV for local elections could refresh local democracy. While 61 Scottish councillors did not face a contest in the last FPTP local elections in 2003, not a single seat was uncontested in 2007 when STV came in.³ In Wales turnout for local elections is low with just 42% of the electorate voting in 2017, a move to STV could help counter this by making all seats competitive with every vote counting.

STV explained

The Single Transferable Vote (STV) is a form of proportional representation created in Britain. Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Malta, New Zealand and Australia use this system for some or all of their elections.

The basis of STV is to give voters a choice of candidates and fair representation for their views. Although STV tries to give voters what they want, it is also fair to candidates and parties in how they can obtain representation.

Rather than one person representing everyone in a small area, as under First Past the Post (FPTP) for example, slightly bigger areas elect a small team of representatives. These representatives reflect the diversity of opinions in the area.

Candidates don't need a majority of votes to be elected, just a known 'quota', or share of the votes, determined by the number of people voting and the number of positions to be filled.

Each voter gets one vote, which can transfer from their first preference to their second-preference, so if their preferred candidate has no chance of being elected or has enough votes already, their vote is transferred to another

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-39751858>

2. <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/new-voices-how-welsh-politics-can-begin-to-reflect-wales/#sub-section-8>

3. <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/looking-back-at-a-decade-of-proportional-representation-for-local-elections-in-scotland/>

candidate in accordance with their instructions. STV thus ensures that very few votes are wasted, unlike other systems, especially First Past the Post, where only a relatively small number of votes actually contribute to the result.

Advantages of STV

The Single Transferable Vote offers more proportionality and means that everyone's vote counts, it reduces uncontested seats, encourages diversity among candidates and encourages voter engagement. Voters are more likely to have representatives they want and the overall result is likely to be broadly proportional to the number of votes cast for each party. Each area will almost certainly be represented by a number of people from different parties. STV uses a single ballot paper like FPTP but instead of voting only for their top candidate, voters can rank as many or as few candidates as they want on the ballot sheet in order of their preference.

Proportionality:

- Fair representation to parties: STV gives fair representation to political parties in proportion to their support. Under STV, minor parties with a significant degree of support will have a voice. Arguments that 'X can't win here, so vote for Y' no longer apply. Whereas a party's support may be significantly understated under FPTP due to tactical voting, STV ensures that latent support becomes apparent. A party whose vote has in the past been squeezed for tactical reasons can bounce upwards because people are now free to cast first preferences for the party they support, rather than a negative vote to stop the party they like least from winning.
- All seats are competitive: safe and uncontested seats are virtually eliminated. Under STV, parties are incentivised to campaign in all seats, as – depending on their level of support – they might stand a chance of being elected. In turn, this leads parties to pay more attention to the local issues affecting voters as a way of obtaining their preferences. Further, it also changes parties' campaigning techniques – being overtly vitriolic about other candidates/parties is unlikely to be helpful in attracting second and lower preferences, and in forming a coalition post-election.

Diversity:

- Candidates that reflect society: Parties have an incentive to put up a team of candidates who reflect the diversity of society.
- Candidate over party choice: Because each party typically puts up a number of candidates and voters can choose between them, the voter is not stuck with the party's favourite. They can choose who they think will work hardest; or on the basis of gender or age; or for people they agree with on a particular issue.
- Increased diversity of elected candidates: STV could increase diversity by eliminating uncontested incumbency and making every vote count thus allowing new candidates to stand and successfully win seats.

Accountability:

- Locally accountable: STV maintains the link between an elected representative and a local constituency area. Although the wards would likely be larger than under the current FPTP system they would still be regional within local council areas allowing for hyper-local issues to be raised. In addition, there will be voters who voted for an unsuccessful candidate with their first preference but for a winner with their second or subsequent preference.

Voter Choice:

- Maximising voter choice: STV maximises voter choice, allowing voters to express as many or as few nuanced preferences as they wish. Voters are able to rank all the candidates in order of preference, which means few votes are wasted. It also removes the incentive for tactical voting, thus enhancing voter choice. With STV, a voter can safely give their first preference vote to their favourite candidate in the knowledge that, if that candidate cannot win or already has sufficient votes to be elected, the vote will be transferred according to their instructions.
- Power to voters: STV gives voters, rather than parties, power to choose which candidates represent them.

How it would work

Instead of the current mix of single and multi-councillor wards, under an STV system ward size would need to slightly increase so that the number of councillors per area would likely be between three and five (there are many wards in Wales that already elect this number of councillors). Larger sized wards allow greater proportionality, but it is important that wards still represent natural communities. Determining the size of the wards would need to consider the number of parties attracting significant local support and the population density of the area (small wards with fewer councillors may be preferable in rural areas to ensure effective local accountability due to a more sparse population).

Conclusion

ERS Cymru recommends that local government elections move to a full STV electoral system. This would not only avoid the confusion of a dual electoral system based on county for local elections, but also strengthen democracy while increasing diversity and revitalising engagement in local politics.