
Electoral
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A Manifesto for Democracy The 2021 Senedd elections

ERS Cymru
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Introduction

Welsh democracy is at a precipice.

Senedd elections have never reached 50% turnout, only 28% of councillors in Wales are women, and there are just 60 members for a tax-varying, legislation-passing Parliament.

In the four years since the last Senedd elections we have seen some progress. Crucially, the extension of the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds has been delivered, and we will see a younger set of voters turning out next year to have their say. We are also seeing legislation on extending the franchise for local elections, giving councils the option to change the voting system, and some major changes to the way voters register.

All of this is a fantastic step forward, but we need to go further if we want to address those serious systemic challenges to our democracy.

Despite becoming a 'Parliament', the Senedd is under attack, due to a crisis of trust we see across politics. The Assembly and parties must respond with more democracy, not less with a positive vision for deepening engagement and making the Senedd truly 'ours' - by and for the people of Wales.

Heading into the next election, our political parties must commit to making transformative changes on behalf of the people of Wales, to ensure their voices are properly heard and to ensure our institutions are able to respond to the challenges of the decades to come.

We are calling for four priorities for reform by the next Welsh Government, and ask for radical commitments in the party manifestos ahead of the 2021 elections:

1. Full implementation of the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform's recommendations,¹ to increase the number of Members of the Senedd to around 90, alongside implementation of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) with an integrated gender quota. This should happen early in the term of the next Senedd.
2. Further reform of local government to include the full rollout of STV for local elections in all authorities. Parties should also commit to decisive measures to promote diversity, such as gender quotas, collecting and publishing diversity data, and a far-reaching Access to Elected Office Fund to include support for people from a much wider set of backgrounds than current provisions. Quotas, in particular, are essential to ensure we do not continue to see low numbers of women elected in Local councils.
3. Adoption of deliberative democracy tools into standard policy making processes, with tools such as participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies regularly used to address lack of engagement in communities and to resolve particular political debates
4. A commitment to statutory political education within schools to tackle the democratic deficit and ensure young people leave school with much more knowledge of the political system than previous generations of school-leavers.

1. <https://senedd.wales/NAfW%20Documents/About%20the%20Assembly%20section%20documents/Expert%20Panel%20on%20Assembly%20Electoral%20Reform/A%20Parliament%20that%20Works%20for%20Wales.pdf>

Since 1999 devolution has rapidly developed. New areas of policy have been devolved including powers over elections. We also now have primary law-making powers and tax-varying powers that create a much more complex budget.

The purpose of a Parliament is to scrutinise and hold a government to account, and the power of a Welsh government is almost unrecognisable from the first years of devolution. But who holds that government to account? Who scrutinises legislation that can cover anything from the NHS right through to schools or even landfills?

The answer is that just over 40 people do that job.

Despite the political landscape changing fundamentally over the last two decades, the Senedd has remained at a total of 60 members. If you exclude members of the government, party leaders, and the Llywydd and her deputy, that leaves 41 backbenchers to do the day to day job of scrutinising policy changes that affect over 3 million people in Wales.

By any measure this isn't sufficient. Scotland has 129 MSPs sitting in Holyrood, while Stormont is back up and running with 90 MLAs.

In the Senedd 17 of the 41 Members who sit on Committees, a vital scrutiny function of any parliament, sit on three or more.

In 2017, an Expert Panel, chaired by Professor Laura McAllister, concluded that the Senedd needs around 80-90 members to do its job properly.

Alongside an increase in Members, the Expert Panel also discussed how the new larger Senedd should be elected, opting for a preferred option of a Single Transferable Vote electoral system (STV) with an integrated gender quota.

We have long been supportive of STV as a voting system for the Senedd. Firstly, it delivers a much higher level of proportionality but also ensures an equal mandate for all members. The current Additional Member System (AMS) delivers two types of members, which has led to some tension in recent years. Finally, STV's ability to include a gender quota to ensure equal representation in the Senedd is a vital step to promote and safeguard diversity in an institution that has previously been a world leader in this area.

Despite these excellent recommendations, nearly three years on very little has changed.

The report of the Expert Panel made a number of important recommendations to strengthen the Senedd but to date only the recommendation to extend the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds has been enacted. We have major concerns about the cherry-picking nature of how the report's recommendations have been delivered so far.

The Committee on Senedd Reform's September 2020 report echoed many of the Expert Panel's recommendations, confirming that we still have a long way to go to ensure the Welsh Parliament delivers for the people of Wales.

We believe it is vital that the recommendation to increase the capacity of the Senedd, increasing its membership to up to 90 members, alongside the introduction of a STV voting system with an integrated gender quota, is implemented imminently.

Manifesto ask 1: Full implementation of the Expert Panel recommendations to increase the number of Members of the Senedd to around 90, alongside implementation of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) with an integrated gender quota. This should happen early in the term of the next Senedd

Modernising Local Government

Local government in Wales is also in need of major reform.

The last elections in 2017 continued a pattern of a lack of representation in terms of both diversity and voter choice.

Just 28% of councillors elected in 2017 were women. Throughout 2017 and 2018 two local authorities had all-male cabinets.

Under a one-person-takes-all system, people found their votes weren't being effectively represented. In Cardiff, Labour received 53% of seats with just 36% of the vote. In Conwy, the Conservatives took just 27% of seats despite securing 37% of the vote, while Plaid Cymru took 17% of seats with just 8% of the vote.

This all adds together to create a situation where there is a stark disconnect between voters and the councillors that represent them. Either because they are largely male, older and have often held seats for a number of years, or because people feel their votes haven't counted and their voices haven't been heard. At the last local elections turnout fell to just 42%.

Local authorities across Wales provide some of the basic services that enable a community to thrive. From ensuring transport to school, to delivering social services for elderly people, local government is at the very heart of how our lives are run. That's why it must be responsive to voters' views in a more direct way'

Fair results shouldn't be optional

In terms of how to reform local elections in Wales, initial steps have been made in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill, which proposes a model of 'permissive PR' where individual councils can choose to move to using STV as the voting system for their elections.

We have major concerns that this will not be enough to address the democratic deficit within Welsh local government. It is likely that very few councils will opt to reform themselves, as their members quite clearly benefit from the unfair status quo of winner-takes-all results.

What we need to see is a full move to STV similar to what happened in Scotland, where STV has been used in local elections since 2007. Successive local elections there under a new system have shown an increased level of proportionality,² far higher voter choice and voters getting quickly used to the system.

2. <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/2012-scottish-local-elections/>

Diversity

In terms of diversity, it's time for progress. Councils are not currently representative of the diversity seen in their constituencies. We have long called for the introduction of quotas in local government. Given the difficulty in regulating independent candidates, this must start initially within the party structure with parties putting forward a much higher number of female candidates.

One of the major barriers to addressing a lack of diversity in local government in Wales is the paucity of accurate data around the demographics of candidates and those elected. We have long been calling on the UK Government to enact Section 106 of the Equality Act, but in the absence of that parties should commit to collecting and publishing

their own data. The next Local Government Minister should commit to ensuring all Electoral Registration Officers collect this data as part of the registration process for candidates.

Mechanisms to support candidates from other groups less likely to be represented should also be introduced. The current Welsh Government has been working on introducing an Access to Elected Office Fund. We are keen to see this implemented and done so in a way that ensures it goes beyond the model used in England. This fund could provide access to elected office for people with a range of disabilities, people from BAME and LGBT communities, and those for whom financial barriers would normally stop them standing.

Manifesto ask 2: Further reform of local government to include the full rollout of STV for local elections in all authorities. Parties should also commit to decisive measures to promote diversity, such as gender quotas, collecting and publishing diversity data, and a far-reaching Access to Elected Office Fund to include support for people from a much wider set of backgrounds than current provisions. Quotas, in particular, are essential to ensure we do not continue to see low numbers of women elected in Local councils.

Governance in Wales faces a big challenge where too many people feel disconnected from decision making. If we are to revitalise democracy in Wales, we need to start a conversation about how to put power into the hands of citizens at a local level.

Deliberative democracy has a fundamental role to play in this, and so far in Wales we have been slow on the uptake.

Other nations have been leading on models of engagement such as citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting.

For example, Ireland has demonstrated how a citizens' assembly can be used to break a blockage in policy making among decision makers, with the successful referendum on abortion rights, a direct recommendation of the Irish Citizens' Assembly,³ a long-term model which has examined a number of issues.

The Scottish Government have also set up their own Citizens' Assembly⁴ to look at wide-ranging issues for the future of Scotland. Scotland also passed legislation to empower local communities⁵ in 2015 and has recently consulted on a Local Democracy Bill.⁶ In addition they have also established a Community Choices Fund⁷ which provides funding to support and promote

3. <https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/the-eighth-amendment-of-the-constitution/>

4. <https://www.citizensassembly.scot/>

5. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2015/6>

6. <https://www.gov.scot/policies/improving-public-services/local-governance-review/>

7. <https://www.gov.scot/policies/community-empowerment/participatory-budgeting/>

participatory budgeting, where people or organisations can pitch to their local community for funding for a specific project. This empowers and engages local communities and is a practice used across the world.

There is an absence of this kind of wide-scale engagement in Wales, and yet there is a direct need for these kinds of practices to build communities and provide more effective links between people and decision makers.

There is a battle brewing to abolish our representative institutions. This is a battle for hearts and minds, and we must be on the front foot - responding with more democracy, bringing power and decision-making closer to the public.

The next Welsh Government must consider how it can institutionalise progressive engagement tools into its standard policy making process and should commit to much more effective engagement with the public.

Manifesto ask 3: Adoption of deliberative democracy tools into standard policy making processes, with tools such as participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies regularly used to address lack of engagement in communities and to resolve particular political debates

One of the major challenges we have in Wales is how to tackle the democratic deficit. We know three things; that turnout is low in Wales-only elections, that there is a poor provision of local/Welsh media and that understanding of devolution in Wales is very limited across all ages.

These are major issues, with very few easy answers. The next Welsh Government will have only a limited ability to create a stronger Welsh media, for example. So, we have to think how governments can compensate for these limitations.

Political education in schools is a good, and relatively easy, place to start.

In the last two years we have been working with young people to co-produce recommendations to improve political education in schools. ERS Cymru's *Our Voices Heard* report details the findings, developed through conversations with hundreds of young people.⁸

Through the course of our work across Wales, young people consistently told us they weren't receiving sufficient political education, but that they very much wanted to learn about the way Wales worked. The recommendations from the project were all proposed and voted on by the young people themselves.

8. <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/our-voices-heard-young-peoples-ideas-for-political-education-in-wales/>

The principal recommendation from the young people was that statutory political education should be introduced into the curriculum. Given the extension of the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds we believe this is even more important.

While there are currently plans for a new curriculum in Wales which includes aims to have learners become ‘ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world’, and a progression step around participating in decision making, we need statutory political education implemented as soon as possible with much more explicit expectations of schools across Wales.

Parties should also consider how this could be extended to post-16 education, given the average age people will vote for the first time will be around 18. This could be delivered in further education settings and through youth workers.

Manifesto ask 4: A commitment to statutory political education within schools to tackle the democratic deficit, and ensure young people leave school with much more knowledge and confidence in the political system than previous generations of school-leavers.

These four manifesto asks reflect a much wider voice than ERS Cymru alone, and are supported by Colleges Wales, Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services (CWVYS), Oxfam Cymru, WEN Wales, IWA and Chwarae Teg.

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