

Written Evidence Submission to Reform Bill Committee

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October 30, 2023

1 Introduction

1.1 Cardiff University's Wales Governance Centre has carried out wide-ranging research into the topic of public attitudes and elections in Wales for over two decades. In this written submission I focus on two points highlighted in the general call for evidence relating to proposed changes in the Senedd Cymru (Members and Elections) Bill. These are:

- The increase in the size of the Senedd to 96 Members.
- Changing the Senedd's electoral system so that all Members are elected via closed list proportional representation, with votes translated into seats via the D'Hondt formula.

2 Increasing the size of the Senedd to 96 members

2.1. Evidence provided in this section is primarily taken from a 2023 research article published in *Parliamentary Affairs* by Dr James D. Griffiths (University of Manchester), Dr Ed Gareth Poole, Prof. Richard Wyn Jones, and myself (Cardiff University). Please see references section for the full citation.

2.2. As part of the 2021 Welsh Election Study (Wyn Jones et al., 2022) we explored public attitudes towards plans to expand the Senedd. We did this using novel survey experiment fielded between 18 March and 6 April 2022 on a representative sample of 2,988 voting age adults. Respondents were randomly split into five groups and shown one of four arguments for increasing the size of the Senedd

Group	Wording
Control	[No prompt]
Greater accountability	One argument for doing so is that it will increase the ability of the Senedd to hold the Welsh Government to account for its decisions
Compensate for MP reduction	One argument for doing so is that it will compensate for the reduction in the number of MPs from Wales that will occur after the next UK General Election
Needed for new powers	One argument for doing so is that the Senedd now has tax and major legislative powers and so needs an increased membership
Parity with Scotland and Northern Ireland	One argument for doing so is that the Senedd is currently much smaller than the Scottish Parliament and Northern Irish Assembly and should be of roughly equal size

Table 2.1: Survey experiment wording.

(the fifth ‘control’ group was not shown any argument). These arguments are displayed in Table 2.1.

2.3. Respondents were then asked, ‘To what extent do you agree that the number of Senedd Members should be increased?’ with responses measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Figure 2.1 displays the responses.

2.4. A clear plurality of the Welsh electorate opposes increasing the number of Senedd members and none of the arguments seriously challenge this generalised picture of hostility. That said, there are significant differences in attitudes across Welsh society that are worthy of note. Groups most positively inclined to support the development of the Welsh polity are also the most positive about expanding the size of the Senedd. Voters who identify as Welsh, are pro-autonomy, support Plaid Cymru, and skew younger—groups among which there tends to be considerable overlap—support an expanded Senedd.

2.5. It is important to caveat these stark findings by saying that politicians — even democratically elected ones — are not popular. This is not a situation that is unique to Wales (e.g, see Stoker, 2006; Hay and Stoker, 2009; Flinders, 2012; Hatier, 2012; Wright, 2013). Indeed, when previous polls have asked about attitudes towards the numbers of politicians within a legislature the modal response is in favour of a reduction (for example, similar numbers across the UK oppose any further increase to the House of Lords (Yougov, 2017)). Beyond the occasional opinion poll, our research was unable to identify any scholarly literature that addresses public attitudes towards increasing the size of any legislature. Therefore, we cannot say with any level of certainty the extent to which these results



Figure 2.1: Distribution of outcome variable responses Control (N: 493), Accountability (N: 537), MP reduction (N: 552), More powers (N: 536), Scotland/NI (N: 504)

Alt-text: Bar charts showing the distribution of survey responses to question on increasing number of Senedd members, separated by treatment group. The Data shows a plurality of respondents in every treatment group disagree with increasing the number of members.

reflect unique hostility to the proposed Senedd expansion or wider antipathy to politicians.

3 Change to the Senedd's Electoral system

3.1. **Proportionality:** To date, work on electoral reform in Wales has highlighted the importance of proportionality of election outcomes (Expert Panel, 2017, p.97, p.129-149; Committee on Senedd Electoral Reforms, 2020, p.42; Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform, p.26). The selection of seat allocation method will have a significant and substantial impact on the proportionality of electoral outcomes. An example is provided in Table 3.1 using real electoral data combining regional list vote shares from two adjacent Welsh constituencies.

3.2. The table illustrates the difference between the two allocation methods considered by the Committee on Senedd Electoral Reforms: Sainte-Lagüe and D'Hondt (2020,2022). The two methods produce different effective thresholds for parties: D'Hondt favours large parties, Sainte-Lagüe favours smaller parties.

Party	Vote Share	Sainte-Laguë Allocation	D'Hondt Allocation
A	31%	2	3
B	14%	2	1
C	30%	2	2
D	8%	0	0
E	5%	0	0
F	8%	0	0
G	4%	0	0

Table 3.1: Example of seat allocation under different systems using real constituency level data.

3.3. The use of D'Hondt in constituencies with a magnitude of six will introduce a relatively high effective electoral threshold (especially in 'strong' party systems). For example, the 2021 Senedd election results modelled across 16 hypothetical constituencies suggests that there would have been an effective electoral threshold of 12% in 12 of the 16 constituencies. Unless voting behaviour were to shift dramatically in light of the new electoral system it remains unlikely that 'smaller' parties would secure representation in the Senedd.

3.4. Sainte-Laguë is also not without potential issues. The inclusion of smaller parties does not necessarily entail a more proportional electoral outcome. As the example illustrates it also introduces inequalities in electoral thresholds with Party A winning one seat for every 15.5% of votes they received, compared to 7% for Party B. However, previous modelling by the Expert Panel (2017) has demonstrated that when results are aggregated, Sainte-Laguë would produce the more proportional election outcomes.

3.5. **Familiarity with current electoral system:** The logic provided by the Committee on Senedd Electoral Reforms for its choice of D'Hondt was related to voter familiarity: "It was noted that this is the formula currently used for allocating regional seats to parties, and therefore has some familiarity." (2022, p.37). It is questionable whether citizens have any familiarity with the specific system used. Survey evidence measuring public knowledge of electoral procedures in Wales is limited, but the findings all suggest that there is a lack of understanding of the current mixed-member proportional system. For example, since the very first elections to the (then) National Assembly for Wales a large proportions of voters, sometimes majorities, have believed that the two votes represented a first and second preference or did not understand how vote shares in the list ballot translated into seats (Larner,

2020, p. 7).

3.6. There is no survey data directly measuring knowledge of the electoral system since 2016 however. It may be the case that knowledge of the method of seat allocation has increased substantially over this period. However, other areas of political knowledge over policy responsibility and knowledge of political actors in Wales has not measurably increased over this period (Wyn Jones et al., 2022).

4 References

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