

An IWA Report
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Building Bridges: Wales' democracy – now, and for our future





About the author

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About the IWA

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Background

This paper is based on a roundtable discussion convened by the Institute of Welsh Affairs (IWA) on 12 June 2023 titled 'Wales' Democracy: Now and in the Future'.

The event formed part of the IWA's two-year project focused on strengthening Wales' media and democracy, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. It was the second project the IWA has run in collaboration with The Open University in Wales (OU), the first being a citizens' panel that resulted in the publication of a report called *Citizens' Voices, People's News: Making the Media Work for Wales*, launched in November 2022.

That project brought together 15 Welsh citizens to discuss the relationship between changing patterns of news consumption and the widely discussed state of citizens' general knowledge of and engagement with politics and our democratic institutions at local, Wales and UK levels. The report led to many further discussions with a wide range of stakeholders about the state of Wales' democracy today, and to an awareness of much effective work being done to strengthen citizen engagement and to further democratise electoral processes – work that was nevertheless not being joined up effectively to secure widespread impact.

This roundtable therefore brought together stakeholders from across government, the civil service, academia, the third sector, secondary and tertiary education, as well as statutory and non-statutory bodies working in the democracy space with an overarching aim to secure a joined up approach to strengthening such ongoing work in Wales.

The roundtable was chaired by IWA director Auriol Miller and comprised two substantive hour-long discussions stimulated by a small number of short provocations given by invited guests: Mick Antoniw MS (Counsel General and Minister for the Constitution, Welsh Government); Jessica Blair (Director, Electoral Reform Society Cymru); Dr Anwen Elias (Reader in Politics, Aberystwyth University); Jacob Ellis (Lead Change Maker: Public Affairs and International, The Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales); Eva Franklin (Assistant Producer, The Democracy Box), Yvonne Murphy (Artistic Director and Executive Producer, Omidaze Productions); Josh Whyte (Assistant Producer, Omidaze Productions and The Democracy Box); Dr Jennifer Wolowic (Principal Lead, Dialogue Centre, Aberystwyth University).

The first discussion focused on Democracy Now, and the second on Democracy in the Future, followed by a plenary session focused on identifying next steps.

Roundtable Participants

Mick Antoniw MS	Counsel General and Minister for the Constitution, <i>Welsh Government</i>
Jessica Blair	Director, <i>Electoral Reform Society Cymru</i>
Rachel Cable	Director of Policy and Public Affairs, <i>ColegauCymru / CollegesWales</i>
Kevin Davies	Head of Public Engagement, <i>Senedd Cymru</i>
Professor James Downe	Director of Research, <i>Wales Centre for Public Policy</i>
Ella Downing	Senior Communications Adviser (Wales), <i>The Electoral Commission</i>
Dr Anwen Elias	Reader in Politics, Aberystwyth University and Commissioner, <i>Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales</i>
Jacob Ellis	Lead Change Maker: Public Affairs and International, <i>The Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales</i>
Eva Franklin	Assistant Producer, <i>The Democracy Box</i>
Nicky Hagendyk	Area Lead - Humanities, <i>Central South Consortium</i>
Michael Kay	Deputy Director for Elections, <i>Welsh Government</i>
Michelle Matheron	Assistant Director, External Affairs, <i>The Open University in Wales</i>
Auriol Miller (Chair)	Director, <i>Institute of Welsh Affairs</i>
Yvonne Murphy	Artistic Director and Executive Producer, <i>Omidaze Productions</i>

Joe Rossiter	Policy and External Affairs Manager, <i>Institute of Welsh Affairs</i>
Dr Nia Thomas	Research and Campaigns Officer, <i>Electoral Reform Society Cymru</i>
Dr Matthew Wall	Associate Professor, Politics, Philosophy and International Relations, <i>Swansea University</i>
Harry Warne	PhD Student, <i>Aberystwyth University</i>
Joshua Whyte	Assistant Producer, <i>Omidaze Productions and The Democracy Box</i>
Gareth Williams	Chair, <i>Expert Panel to the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales</i>
Dr Jennifer Wolowic	Principal Lead, Dialogue Centre, <i>Aberystwyth University</i>

Executive Summary

Democracy faces a global crisis which has multiple ramifications for Wales as well as specifically Welsh dimensions in the context of public understanding of the devolution settlement. There are dangers inherent in focusing heavily on democracy in a Welsh context, given the global nature of many of the issues and the importance of UK-wide structures to democracy in Wales. In order to strengthen Welsh democracy we need to develop a strategic vision and a set of metrics beyond electoral turnout statistics, in order to measure and design interventions to bring behavioural and attitudinal change. But we need to beware the wide gap that exists between the status quo and a perceived ideal. Pessimism can hamper progress and therefore we should not expect to be able to create a 'perfect' democracy.

Proposals for strengthening representative democracy in Wales through significant electoral reform were widely welcomed, but there was also a strong current of opinion urging all stakeholders to think beyond the electoral cycle, with a perceived negative effect of an intense focus solely on elections in political culture, media coverage and democratic education.

A key barrier to democratic engagement is a lack of information readily available and accessible to the intended audiences. Some appropriate resources exist but are not always easy to find. Language and jargon can often put people off politics. We also need to understand the barriers to people's motivation to engage, which can often be rooted in a lack of trust in politicians and the media.

Although it was widely acknowledged that there is no 'silver bullet', improved democratic education in formal and informal settings was agreed to be a vital part of solving many of the issues facing democracy. It is important that resources are co-created with target communities, tailored to their specific audiences and delivered with appropriately trained professionals. It is also vital that democratic education takes participatory forms through which people can see and feel real-life impacts of their engagement.

Despite poor election turnouts and a lack of engagement in other democratic processes and activities, most people in Wales do care deeply about their local communities and are often involved in activism or other voluntary activities. Being involved in informal neighbourhood groups or local campaigns, attending protests and signing petitions can sometimes be neglected when talking about 'democracy', and community activism and energy can be lost when attempts are made to channel it through unwieldy, broken, outmoded or bureaucratic 'official' systems.

There is significant opportunity for Wales to 'do democracy differently', both in terms of the opportunities provided through forthcoming Senedd and electoral reform and through a range of innovative practices in deliberation being trialled internationally and here in Wales. It was agreed that in order to produce detailed next steps toward strengthening Wales' democracy, partner organisations represented at the roundtable need to further engage with each other and with other relevant stakeholders to ensure that appropriate capacity and expertise is strategically focused and that duplication is avoided. An emphasis needs to be placed on forging 'unusual partnerships' between institutions and grassroots organisations and 'community champions' – to ensure Wales does things differently. More of the same will not work.

Democracy Now and in the Future

Although the focus of the Roundtable was democracy in Wales, it was widely acknowledged that our current 'democratic malaise' is a global issue and affects the whole of the United Kingdom as well as having a specifically Welsh dimension (especially in relation to the continued lack of public understanding of the devolved context). Democracy was described as being 'on a precipice' and participation as subject to a 'civic virus' for which there is no single 'silver bullet'; it was also noted that optimism bias means the situation is probably 'even worse than we think' and that Wales is 'good at diagnosis, but less good at cure'.

Turnout and representative democracy

The starting point for discussions around the health of a democracy is often turnout in elections, and the gap between turnout figures in UK general elections and Senedd elections was discussed. Poor turnout figures were variously attributed to a lack of awareness of devolved structures; electoral systems that make many people feel 'there is no point in voting'; the Labour Party's domination in Wales; the campaign tactics of political parties (targeting marginal seats and speaking to people more likely to vote for them); and the lack of power and resources devolved to local authority and town/community council level.

However, it was also noted that turnout is 'not a sophisticated measure' of the general health of a democracy, especially if we are to move away from a harmful narrative that frames the ballot box as the sum total of democracy. In order to strengthen a democratic culture in Wales, we need a set of metrics that monitor a range of behaviours and attitudes as well as blunt figures such as turnout.

When envisioning a future democracy for Wales, we should agree that perfection is not achievable, and instead seek to learn from the features of some of the world's 'best' democracies, for example New Zealand and the Nordic countries. Norway was cited as a particularly strong example, with turnout at 77.2%, a figure reached through innovations such as automatic voter registration, multi member proportional representation, and 19 'adjustment seats' with the aim of preventing the domination of parliament by larger parties. There is strong correlation between turnout and levels of trust in politics, with trust levels also running at 77% in Norway (compared to an OECD average of 47%).

Optimism for potential improvements in Wales' democratic health was engendered by the Welsh Government's perceived willingness to listen; forthcoming major reforms to both the Senedd and the electoral system in Wales; the engagement programme being run by the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales; as well as specific examples of democratic innovations such as The Democracy Box project. Although this was tempered by wide acknowledgement of the current 'depressing' reality as detailed above and the fact there is 'a long way to go', it was noted that elections have only been devolved since 2017 and there is therefore much scope for Wales to 'do democracy differently' in the future.

Influence and participatory democracy

It was agreed that some of the national indicators contained within the Well-being of Future Generations Act are useful in broadening the range of metrics we can use to assess the general 'health' of Wales' democracy. National Indicator 23 (the percentage of people who feel able to influence decisions in their local area) can be supplemented by indicator 26 (the percentage of people satisfied with their local area as a place to live) and indicator 28 (the percentage of people who volunteer), and it was also posited that useful additional questions for correlation might include those related to belonging and identity, such as 'Do I feel like I belong to my neighbourhood?' Responses to such questions in other countries reveal generational differences, with older people more place-based in their sense of belonging to a community and younger demographics more interest-based. This difference demands a wider range of metrics to account for (especially younger) people who might be highly engaged in democracy online yet relatively unattached to their local community.

The Future Generations Commissioner for Wales reported that progress has already been made against National Indicator 23, with the number of adults aged 16+ reporting through the [National Survey for Wales](#) that they agree or strongly agree with the statement 'I feel able to influence decisions in my local area' rising from 19% in 2019 to 26% in 2020 and 30% in 2022. It was noted that the Covid-19 pandemic appears to have had a positive effect on these figures, and that it would be worth assessing the impact of election periods on these figures. Other notable points beneath the headline figures include that those aged 16-24 and non-white, non-British people were more likely to agree with the statement (which could well have been impacted by the extension of the franchise to these groups for the 2021 Senedd elections), as well as – more predictably – those in good general health, and those with qualifications at degree level or above.

Although these improvements are welcome, it is worth noting that reversing the most positive figure here still tells us that 70% of people in Wales don't feel able to influence decisions about their locality, and that this amounts to a major crisis for our democracy. There was also a question about internal versus external efficacy, a problem inherent in the question with regard to a potential gap between a person 'feeling knowledgeable' about how they might go about seeking to influence decisions and the degree to which they are actually able to impact a power structure.

Elections and the electoral cycle

Voting was described as ‘the best way to have your voice heard’ and inevitably there was a heavy emphasis on electoral reform throughout conversations about the overall health of democracy – but there was also a significant feeling that the electoral cycle is over-emphasised by politicians and the media, and that citizen engagement initiatives should be focused on a much wider conception of democracy and a much wider timeline encompassing the entirety of the electoral cycle, with some participants saying that relentless focus on elections is actually unhelpful.

Electoral cycles make it difficult to broker organic relationships between decision makers and citizens. It was posited that major cut-through issues such as the Well-being of Future Generations Act’s focus on climate, and the Welsh Government target of one million Welsh speakers by 2050 proves that politicians and the public are more than capable of thinking about issues that go well beyond five-year electoral cycles. There was also a link made between those who vote/don’t vote and policies that affect the lives of the electorate; for example, the Bedroom Tax affected people in an income bracket within which a majority of people don’t vote. Such policies might not be floated or implemented were more people experiencing poverty to exercise their democratic right.

While there is widespread pessimism about ‘the state of democracy’ in Wales, it was noted that elections only came into devolved competency in 2017, and already major steps have been taken to modernise and reform the electoral system in Wales with an emphasis on inclusivity. Forthcoming changes to Welsh elections and to the Senedd itself were contrasted with the approach of the current UK government whose moves toward policies such as introducing voter ID were characterised as ‘vote suppression’. A large constituency on the right of UK politics, it was noted, would have no time for the kinds of developments under discussion in this paper, or in the Electoral Reform White Paper (for example, digitisation, the use of technology to maximise accessibility and automatic voter registration).

There was broad support for widening the accessibility of elections by placing polling stations in ‘places people actually go to’, for example supermarkets; increasing the period of time in which people have the chance to cast their vote; and introducing online voting, with current UK elections and the FPTP system described as ‘probably the most outdated electoral system in the world’. There was a general consensus that as Wales moves further away from the Westminster system through forthcoming Senedd Reform and Electoral Reform, we should also consider adopting features of electoral systems in some of the ‘best democracies in the world’, particularly the Nordic countries. But there was considerable debate around the targeting and prioritisation of particular groups of voters, such as first time voters (where research suggests if you vote the first time that you are eligible, you are more likely to vote throughout your life) and people who vote in general elections but not in Senedd elections (who can be viewed as ‘low hanging fruit’ in terms of driving up turnout in Welsh elections). It was widely felt that in targeting particular groups of potential voters, other groups should not be left behind, and there was also a clear warning that we could end up ‘using new technology to deliver an old system’.

The Information Gap

The primary barrier to democratic participation was widely acknowledged as an ‘information gap’. Voting in elections requires an informed decision, and all the evidence suggests very low levels of knowledge about our democratic system and the way it works. Therefore many citizens do not have the information they need to make informed decisions, and this forms *the* major barrier to voting. However, it was also noted that reasons people don’t vote, or don’t feel empowered to influence decision makers are highly varied and can be related to motivation as much as knowledge.

It was widely agreed that for the minority of citizens who are well informed about politics and democratic processes, the main source of their knowledge is the family home. Research suggests that if you were brought up in a non-voting household, you are far less likely to vote yourself. It was also acknowledged that in addition to basic knowledge about democratic systems, widely perceived as ‘dry’ or ‘boring’, there is a need to ‘win hearts and minds’ through emphasis on *why* democracy is important rather than simply *what* it is.

Language and trust

Barriers here include offputting jargon and language that has become problematic or developed negative connotations (such as the word ‘politics’ itself) as well as the tendency to tie democratic education to elections. It was contended that ‘every person wants to understand democracy’ but that there is a requirement for attitudinal shift, not within the public but within those who hold positions of power; this was described as the ‘ivory tower problem’: a fundamental disconnect between those in the political class and the media and institutions that surround it and the public at large. Poor information flow from democratic institutions and through the media between elections was seen by some roundtable participants as a symptom of ‘managed democracy’ where decision makers are content to maintain legitimacy from a low base of public engagement, exacerbating all of the fundamental problems described above. However, other participants pointed out that democratic institutions, most politicians and party activists work very hard to engage the public both at election time and throughout the year.

The problem of trust in both the political class and the media was also attributed to the presentation of stories in episodic form, often tied to flagpole events such as elections, failing to allow people access to wider narratives that would help them understand UK democracy. Information provision therefore needs to be embedded in a much wider strategy to foster a more widely conceived democratic culture all year round, bridging the gap between participatory and representative forms of democracy. Specific solutions include democratic education in formal education settings, informal modes of democratic education, public information campaigns and walk-in democratic hubs, all of which have undergone innovative prototyping in Wales in recent years.

Democratic education

It was widely agreed that a key method of addressing the information gap is democratic education, delivered through schools, colleges and adult learning.

At schools level, it was noted that democracy is embedded throughout Curriculum for Wales, through participation, social action and understanding. The curriculum was described as 'a curriculum for life' and praised for mandating democratic education, but it was also agreed that currently this is 'not delivered in the right way, nor by the right people'. There is a pattern of non-specialists being tasked with delivering civic education as a 'bolt-on' to much wider job roles. For example, teams within already under-resourced local authority departments are often tasked with delivering sessions on democracy to a wide range of groups. Conversely, where 'outside agencies' and organisations with specific expertise are used they often are not equipped with the relevant teaching skills to meet the wide ranging needs of the target groups, including school and college students. Many teachers are not confident in their own knowledge about democracy in the first instance, and initial teacher education does not adequately prepare teachers for delivering content in this area. It was noted that while there is a new GCSE qualification being developed in Social Studies in Wales, there is no current teacher training pathway in this subject, and therefore no route for practitioners to specialise in democratic education. In many schools this can lead teachers to reach for 'off-the-peg' worksheets or films that offer generic explanations of democracy. This leads to poor experiences for many learners, who are still leaving school unsure and confused about many aspects of democracy even after having theoretically 'studied' the topic. Another barrier to effective delivery of citizenship education is the requirement for impartiality, where again there is a lack of training for teachers to consider and address the very real associated issues.

Education through participation

Effective pan-Wales work is already being conducted through regional consortia and organisations such as The Democracy Box (with its Creative Cascade© model), the Project Vote initiative from the Children's Commissioner for Wales (which ran parallel 'mock' elections for the Senedd in 2021 and local elections in 2022) and The Politics Project, but 'there is more to be done' in terms of join-up and resourcing. With so many other competing priorities for teachers and schools it is often also difficult for good quality democratic education to cut through to delivery. One key method of delivering good quality democratic education should be through encouraging learners' participation in real-life exercises in democracy. Many educational institutions organise elections for the school council or Head Girl/Boy positions. The Electoral Commission have worked with schools in Flintshire and Cardiff to develop guidelines for wider democratic exercises such as referenda on, for example, a charity to support or the location for end of term trips. It was posited that best practice here suggests these exercises are not called 'mock elections' and there should be tangible and immediate results, in order for participants to feel the benefits

and impact of the process. Target groups should also be involved in designing the process, and it is also important to gain buy-in from the whole school community, including teachers to engender the idea that 'we're learning about this together'. There could be an important role for universities in Wales to support schools and colleges in developing appropriate resources and delivery mechanisms for civic education.

There exist significant opportunities for bridge building with families through their children, and work has been done on family learning, looking at questions of how to involve parents, guardians and family members in more active citizenship, particularly at primary school age. It was also noted that in The Talking Shop, parents often followed their children in their engagement. Hope for change is realistic given the Minister for Education's stated interest in the 'students as citizens, citizens as students' agenda. However, barriers were acknowledged with regard to scale-up, roll-out and funding for projects that had already proved effective as pilots, and the point was made that in some areas there might not necessarily be a need for 'new money' to be found; 'existing money' should be used differently, for greater impact.

Democratic culture

A strong theme of the discussion around the current state of democracy was the widespread observation that there is a disconnect between big political issues that people care about and movements that inspire activism such as Black Lives Matter, Pride and Extinction Rebellion, and mainstream party politics. It was noted that popular movements – often rooted in a sense of identity and belonging – have to an extent supplanted more traditional movements which previously provided such emotive identification, such as trade unions, religious organisations and mass membership political parties. This trend can also be linked to the fact that minority groups are marginalised by majoritarian electoral systems. It was also posited that since at least the 1990s, the policy agendas of mainstream UK political parties have converged, making space on left and right for populism – a trend that also has a global context and parallels in other liberal democracies.

Activism, influence and 'community champions'

There is therefore a need within democratic education and engagement programmes to affirm and celebrate that activism exists in many forms and in many spaces, and to explode stereotypes such as the 'activist-as-hero' trope, and to encourage pluralism in participatory forms of democracy. Another harmful stereotype is that of the young person under the (often negative) influence of social media. While it was acknowledged that online 'influencers' do have an effect on cultural, social and political attitudes, real and arguably more lasting influence is still held by 'people you know in real life', primarily family and friends.

A major problem is that organic, grassroots expressions of democratic culture can be incompatible with the rigid structures of formalised 'politics' in its narrowest definition. As a result, we often lose the energy of activism, bludgeoning new ideas into old systems, digital innovations into analogue understandings of culture, and the idealism of young people into broken and often unwieldy systems.

Community groups are already solving many challenges facing individuals and neighbourhoods on the ground, and it was posited that the key 'influencers' in society are neither politicians nor celebrities but the many highly active 'community champions' running collaborative projects that have multiple positive societal and democratic benefits for people in communities across Wales. Recent examples cited included an African music festival in Bethesda and the innovative community outreach programmes run by Grangetown Pavilion in Cardiff.

It was widely agreed that leveraging peer to peer influence is really important when attempting to engineer significant behavioural and attitudinal changes. Democratic projects already underway in Wales have proved that, when targeting specific groups of people for greater participatory engagement, there is a need to involve people from the target communities in co-creating and co-delivering the work. All also agreed that these community champions for democracy need to be paid, as a minimum, the real living wage for their vital work.

Political parties

Despite the fact that political parties have to a large extent lost the mass memberships and connections to wider social movements that birthed them, participants felt it important to recognise that political parties themselves are not the enemies of democracy and they therefore should be engaged in much deeper, wider conversations about the brokenness of democracy. There is also a need to create spaces for people who don't feel aligned to existing political parties to be involved in politics, through independent candidacy, as well as spaces for democratic education and political parties themselves to do more to reassure the public that members do not need to agree with the entirety of the party's constitution or policy platform.

Doing democracy differently

Discussion around the importance of encouraging a deeper, wider democratic culture between elections focused on the importance of dialogue and deliberation. Citizens' assemblies, citizens' panels and citizens' juries have all become popular and useful democratic exercises built on the concept of a 'mini public', but there remain significant questions about their cost, impact and levels of inclusion. It was posited that there is a significant opportunity in Wales to 'do democracy differently' by drawing on the experiences of international examples, and pooling experiences and expertise from a range of organisations to inform and plan a programme of research and development and capacity building. The point was made that deliberation needs to be preceded by dialogue.

Conclusion and next steps

It was agreed that in order to produce detailed next steps toward strengthening Wales' democracy, partner organisations represented at the roundtable need to further engage with each other and with other relevant stakeholders to ensure that relevant capacity and expertise is strategically focused and that duplication is avoided. Organisations should continue to focus on the issues where they have expertise, interest and specialism according to their statutory responsibilities, charitable objects etc, but it is vital we ensure 'read-across' to ensure that strategic work on democratic health is joined up and complementary within and between organisations and individuals. By working together across institutional boundaries and by ensuring existing and new funding is strategically targeted, we can strengthen democracy in a joined up way, with greater capacity and reach.

Next steps

- Identify and map organisations/networks able to offer (a) convening power and 'read-across' between sectors, and (b) specific sectoral expertise and delivery capacity
- A mapping exercise should be carried out across institutional boundaries to disaggregate work on (a) elections/voting, (b) democratic education, (c) participatory/deliberative approaches between elections, sharing currently available evidence bases and relevant resources across all areas to ensure coordination
- Convene individuals and organisations working in the democracy sector to explore and co-design a programme of activity focused on 'doing democracy differently'
- A scoping exercise should develop a robust blueprint for work on deliberative democracy, for example ensuring minimum levels of engagement for projects to be effective
- Identify effective projects and ensure opportunities for scale up and roll out

Unusual partnerships

In addition to the organisations represented at the roundtable, the next steps for this work need to engage with the following sectors and actors with the aim of curating a series of 'unusual partnerships' – to drive innovation and connection, building a more democratic culture within organisations as well as within communities:

- the media
- political parties, with the suggestion that party Chairs and staff involved in running electoral and engagement campaigns are invited to a forum to share views
- third sector organisations, many of which are already working on democratic engagement
- community champions working individually and in key grassroots organisations throughout Wales' diverse communities
- local authority electoral services teams
- employers and institutions with larger and different audiences (for example faith groups, sports organisations and other bodies well-placed to engage people)
- universities

The IWA would like to thank all those who participated in the roundtable and we welcome views and discussion on this paper.

