

MVM submission to the consultation on electoral systems and boundaries

1.1

Make Votes Matter is the cross-party campaign for Proportional Representation. We believe that every voter should be equal, every vote should matter, and no-one should feel like their vote is worth less purely because of where they live. We believe that each party should have seats in the Assembly roughly in proportion to their level of support among the people of Wales. These are goals supported not just by us but by broad sections of the public.

1.2

It is clear that the First Past the Post voting system currently used for Westminster and Welsh local councils does not achieve these goals. While the current way of electing the Assembly is certainly an improvement on First Past the Post, it could be so much better. We welcome this opportunity to respond to this consultation and offer our thoughts on how to make every Welsh vote matter.

1.3

The key point we wish to make is that Wales should use a voting system which adheres to the principles of the [Good Systems Agreement](#). Adapted for the Welsh Assembly, these are:

- **Proportionality:** good systems ensure that seats closely match votes, with representation in the Welsh Assembly at least as proportional as the Scottish Parliament.
- **Representation:** good systems ensure Assembly Members and the Welsh Government represent the views of Welsh voters.
- **Equal votes:** good systems ensure the value of individual votes is not distorted by factors such as geography, and minimise the need for tactical voting.
- **Local links:** good systems maintain links between Assembly Members and specific geographic areas.
- **Diversity:** good systems encourage the election of an Assembly reflecting the population.
- **Voter choice:** good systems allow voters a wide choice of parties, and allow voters to express preferences for people rather than just parties. Any lists used must be democratically determined.

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- **Accountability:** good systems ensure Assembly Members and governments are accountable to the voters.
- **Balance of stability and flexibility:** good systems engender stable, flexible government that has the ability to compromise.
- **Sustainability and adaptability:** good systems are able to respond and adapt to changing needs without requiring frequent or fundamental change.
- **Voting simplicity:** good systems and ballot papers are easy for voters to understand and use.

Examining the implications of the electoral systems and boundaries recommended by the Expert Panel for democratic representation in Wales, and considering how the principles identified by the Expert Panel might be weighted to ensure that the Assembly's electoral arrangements are appropriate to the Welsh context

2.1

With a view to increasing the proportionality of Assembly elections, Make Votes Matter recommends putting special emphasis on the Expert Panel's first and fifth recommendations.

2.2

The fifth recommendation (that multimember Assembly constituencies should return no fewer than four and ideally no more than six Members) is important because returning more Members per constituency is an opportunity to increase the proportionality of Assembly elections. In general, the more Members per constituency, the more proportional the result. A system which would otherwise be proportional may become disproportional if the minimum constituency size is too small. Therefore, setting an adequate minimum number of Members per constituency is important. However, we would suggest that the minimum district magnitude is set at five, in keeping with the Northern Ireland Assembly which has produced very proportional results while maintaining strong local accountability.

2.3

The first recommendation (that the number of Members be increased) is important not only because it provides the assembly with more capacity, but because increasing the number of Members is an opportunity to

increase the proportionality of the Assembly while improving the local link between Members and voters. An increase in the total number of Members allows the return of more Members per constituency without using overly large geographical constituencies, and would make the Assembly better represent Wales.

Exploring public sentiment and understanding of the Assembly's current electoral arrangements and boundaries and the options recommended by the Expert Panel

3.1

Studies show that turnout and satisfaction with democracy are both higher under more proportional systems.

3.2

A [Cambridge University report](#) found that 2019 had “the highest level of democratic discontent on record”. It said:

A second literature that is pertinent to explaining the trajectory of the Anglo-Saxon democracies suggests that satisfaction with democracy is lower in majoritarian “winner-takes-all” systems than in consensus-based, proportionally representative democracies, and this could explain why New Zealand – the lone member of this group with elections by proportional representation – appears to have avoided a trajectory of soaring public discontent.

...

There are positive stories amongst our findings which must not be lost. Countries such as Switzerland, Denmark, Norway and Luxembourg are at all-time highs for contentment with their democracies, and may have lessons to offer regarding the role of electoral systems in enhancing democratic responsiveness and representativeness.

3.3

The Expert Panel recommends that “if the Assembly does legislate to lower the minimum voting age for Assembly elections to 16, the Assembly Commission should work with the Welsh Government, the Electoral Commission, political parties and others to support and encourage young people to exercise their right to vote”. Low levels of disproportionality have

been shown to increase turnout.¹ When people feel that their votes matter, they are more likely to use them.

3.4

In light of the dissatisfaction with government under non-proportional systems and the effect of disproportionality on turnout, Make Votes Matter recommends increasing the proportionality of Assembly elections as a high priority.

Considering the implications for political parties in Wales of changing the electoral system and boundary models

4.1

Make Votes Matter recommends a more proportional system, allowing all major parties to achieve representation in every community in Wales, and giving smaller parties a fair hearing. Non-proportional voting systems often artificially divide nations into areas that “always vote for X party” and places where “Y party always wins here”. Semi-proportional systems, such as the one currently used for Assembly elections, don’t adequately avoid this shortcoming of majoritarian systems. In parts of the country where a party has support from half the voters, they might get 100% of the elected representatives, and where they are a significant minority, they often get 0% representation. This means that their elected representatives will disproportionately come from a narrow range of heartlands. A more proportional system removes this lopsided party representation. In areas where a party has 51% of the vote they will get roughly 51% of the seats in that area, and in areas where parties have 20% of the vote they will get roughly 20% of that region’s seats. This allows parties to better connect to and more fully represent all parts of an entire nation.

¹“There is wide agreement among scholars that the proportionality of electoral systems (i.e., the correspondence they tend to produce between party vote shares in the electorate and party seat shares in the elected bodies) is positively associated with voter participation.” Selb, P. (2009). [‘A Deeper Look at the Proportionality-Turnout Nexus’](#). *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol.42(4), p.527-548

Exploring the principles and practicalities of establishing boundary review arrangements for Assembly electoral areas; considering the cost and resource implications of reforming the electoral system and Assembly boundaries

5.1

Make Votes Matter believes that an advantage of multi-member constituencies is that they introduce reapportionment as an alternative or complement to boundary reviews as a method of keeping constituencies in check with population changes. That is, when the population of an area changes, instead of changing the boundaries of the constituency, it is possible to change the number of Members per constituency. For example, in Finland, each constituency's number of seats is allocated based on the population of that constituency six months prior to a general election. This allows constituency boundaries to better represent natural communities, localities, and regions. These firmer constituency boundaries could allow elected representatives to develop firmer and more long-term links with their constituents. Even very proportional systems do need occasional boundary changes, but multi-member constituencies reduce the required level of changes and disruption in each boundary review. This also saves (public) money. As the Expert Panel report says "seats can be apportioned using the Sainte-Laguë method based on electorate numbers, or taking account of specific local geopolitical factors".