



Democratic renewal: Evidence synthesis to support local government electoral reform

Executive Summary

1. Background and aims

- 1.1 Democratic renewal is a broad concept that includes methods of enhancing representation through voting, the delegation of power from governments to communities, and the identification of a need to improve current democratic practices. The concept is relevant to proposed local government electoral reform in Wales, which aims to improve voter engagement and includes proposals to widen the voting franchise.
- 1.2 To help inform the development and implementation of local government electoral reform, this review provides a synthesis and appraisal of international evidence on democratic renewal related to:
 - civic and democratic engagement;
 - voter engagement (particularly in local elections); and
 - extending voting franchises to 16-17 year olds and foreign nationals.

2. Civic and democratic engagement

- 2.1 Civic engagement (the participation of citizens in their community) and democratic engagement (which relates to political, social and community-based practices) are considered to be key parts of democratic renewal in the literature. Civic engagement often relates to the delegation of power to communities, while democratic engagement is viewed as a means of enhancing representativeness.
- 2.2 Evidence suggests that positive feelings about the neighbourhood are powerful predictors of civic behaviour. This can include sharing of emotional connections in a neighbourhood, as well as perceptions of influence, integration and fulfilment of needs. Although wellbeing also correlates with civic behaviour, the relationship is not linear, with evidence suggesting that democratic participation increases with wellbeing up to a certain point before decreasing at the highest levels of wellbeing.
- 2.3 Successful civic engagement appears to be influenced by the following factors:
 - **Local context:** with engagement easier to build on in areas already characterised by historically strong engagement (e.g. industrialised areas with a history of trade unions and collective action).
 - **Leadership:** innate characteristics (e.g. charismatic leaders), continuity of leadership and civil leadership training have all been found to increase citizen engagement.

- **Public administrators' attitudes:** having trust in citizens so that local knowledge can be galvanised.
- **Ownership:** where citizens own some or all of the plans or project.
- **Scale of change:** limiting citizen involvement to smaller scale projects or small localities, where there are more defined relationships between communities and public services.

2.4 Mechanisms for stimulating civic engagement include:

- **Nudge theory:** including the use of pledges (e.g. making a public commitment to undertake a civic activity or to vote), or reframing decisions to utilise social norms (e.g. providing information about the number of signatories to increase likelihood of other people signing).
- **Inclusive design:** where citizens are listened to and provided with evidence that their voices are heard.
- **Utilising technology:** for example using online petitions, deliberative polls, or social media as a method of interactive communication.

3. Voter engagement

3.1 Democratic renewal includes methods of enhancing representation through voting, and one way of achieving this is through improving the engagement of the electorate. According to the literature, the following demographic and socio-economic factors influence voter engagement:

- **Age:** voter registration and turnout is lower amongst young people, despite younger age groups exhibiting high engagement with other forms of civic behaviour such as volunteering.
- **Education:** people educated to degree level are more likely to vote than those without a degree.
- **Ethnicity:** in the UK, BME citizens are less likely to be registered to vote than the population in general. Turnout rates for most BME groups are also lower compared to the population average and this effect is more pronounced amongst young BME citizens.

3.2 A review of existing literature regarding explanations of voter turnout revealed three themes:

- **Sense of importance and understanding of local elections:** the evidence suggests that people with a strong sense of civic duty are more likely to vote in local elections. However, little research to date has attempted to explain why certain people have a strong sense of civic duty and others do not. Surveys have also revealed that a lack of political knowledge and understanding could potentially be affecting the perceived importance of local elections in Wales.
- **Intrinsic influences:** survey data has indicated that a lack of diversity amongst elected representatives may be negatively affecting perceptions of influence amongst voters.
- **Extrinsic influences:** voting behaviour can be affected by the behaviour of others, with the probability of voting strongly increasing when there is another voter in the household. Nudge techniques to remind individuals of their civic duty have also been demonstrated as being effective in voting experiments.

3.3 Voter registration is lower amongst young people, BME citizens, recent home movers and people living in rented accommodation. Whilst voter registration campaigns can be effective in improving awareness of voter registration, it is unclear as to what extent they have impact on registration rates.

3.4 Voter turnout can be affected by accessibility issues which could be overcome through more flexible and convenient voting methods. While the evidence regarding alternative voting methods is still emerging, the research to date suggests that the provision of online voting has a negligible impact on improving voter turnout, although the method may appeal to certain under-represented groups and may help to prevent further decline in turnout rates.

4. Extending the franchise

- 4.1 Extending the voting franchise to other groups in society so that their views can be democratically represented is another aspect considered in the literature.
- 4.2 With regard to extending the voting franchise to 16-17 year olds, four themes are evident in the extant literature. It should be noted that these are often arguments of principle although empirical analysis has been incorporated where relevant:
- **'It makes sense'**: 16-17 year olds contribute to society and therefore ought to have a say in how the country is run.
 - **'They aren't ready'**: Younger people lack experience, education or maturity to make informed voting decisions. However, the evidence does not necessarily support this view with survey data from Wales showing that while younger respondents are less likely to know that the NHS is devolved, they are at least as likely as older people to know who is responsible for education and policing in Wales.
 - **'They aren't interested'**: Turnout amongst 18-24 year olds is low and so it might be expected that the same would apply to 16-17 year olds. However the evidence from other countries that have introduced votes at 16 is mixed and does not necessarily support this viewpoint.
 - **'This will improve long-term voter turnout'**: Despite limited evidence in this domain, early experiences of voting are thought to be habit forming and therefore lead to life-long voter turnout.
- 4.3 There is conflicting evidence regarding the impact of enfranchising foreign nationals. While foreign nationals often have lower turnout rates at elections, this appears to be partly due to the demography of foreign nationals compared with the wider population (for example, being younger with lower educational attainment). However there are also specific factors related to being a migrant which may lead to lower likelihood of voting. Evidence suggests these factors relate to having a stake in the community, which corresponds to the finding in the wider literature that positive feelings about a neighbourhood increase civic and democratic participation.

5. Concluding remarks

- 5.1 Three key factors have been noted throughout the evidence on democratic renewal:
- **Engagement is uneven and tailored methods are required to successfully involve politically disengaged groups.** Representativeness is incompatible with uneven engagement, especially when there are systematic biases in who engages. Demographic and socioeconomic factors are predictors of civic and democratic engagement, and the method by which government chooses to engage with citizens can further exacerbate disparities. To overcome this, governments could consider tailoring methods of engagement with the more disengaged groups taking account of different preferences as to how they wish to engage in democratic behaviour.
 - **Education has the potential to improve understanding of local democracy and impact on levels of engagement.** Second-order effects may be a factor in relation to lower turnout at local council elections. Education regarding the role of local government and greater awareness of what local councillors are doing may facilitate increased motivation to engage with local democracy. Furthermore, educating people on political issues has been shown to generate interest and understanding whilst also increasing political awareness and the ability to make informed decisions, thereby strengthening democracy.
 - **Perceptions of influence are a key predictor of the likelihood of democratic engagement.** This can be seen in the civic sphere (whereby projects such as those

involving participatory budgeting facilitate engagement by creating a sense of ownership) and electoral sphere (where voting systems such as first past the post can lead to lack of interest in voting due to perceived lack of impact). The language used in communicating with citizens can also be powerful in conveying the influence that citizens can have when they participate.

5.2 Despite there being a range of areas where there is a strong evidence base, there are also aspects of the literature where gaps or conflicting evidence make recommendations difficult. Further research may therefore be useful in the following areas:

- **Replications of findings in a relevant context** would be beneficial. For example, investigating drivers for democratic engagement specifically among 16-17 year olds (rather than generalising findings from 18-24 year olds), and with regard to local government level (as opposed to national).
- **Further research using representative samples** (e.g. through well designed surveys) would provide more reliable evidence of the views of the wider population on proposed electoral and democratic reforms, helping to build on evidence from consultations which are reliant on self-selecting samples.
- **Understanding the interplay** between the high interest of young people but relatively low electoral turnout would also be helpful. In a broader sense, this could extend to understanding how civic engagement can be successfully harnessed into democratic engagement or action.

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