



Defining, Measuring, and Monitoring Democratic Health in Wales

Introduction

The Counsel General has asked the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) to explore how Wales' democratic health can best be defined, measured, and monitored. This work will help focus efforts to increase participation and engagement in national and local democratic processes in Wales, especially among under-represented groups.

Work is currently underway by the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales to help “strengthen Welsh democracy,” as well as several research projects in the area. A recent **Institute of Welsh Affairs (IWA)** report noted that a majority of people in Wales feel they are not able to influence decisions about their local area, and that this amounts to a major crisis for Welsh democracy (Moore, 2023).

This briefing note synthesises literature on how democratic health is defined, measured and monitored around the world, with specific focus on how this learning could be applied in Wales.



What does healthy democracy look like?

Analysis of how democracy has been defined and understood over time allows for a synthesis of key criteria which form a healthy democracy. These include:

1. **Free and fair elections and strong civil rights;**
2. **Widespread citizen engagement, awareness and participation; including a strong, active and dense civil society**
3. **Reasoned and constructive political deliberation**
4. **Political, social and economic equality, including balanced representation in government and legislators**
5. **Responsive government, reflecting citizens' wants and needs**
6. **Open access to accurate information, through transparent government and a strong, independent media**

In the Welsh context, these six principles apply not only to Welsh society and the devolved national political system, but also to the various local governments operating at different levels across Wales.

A healthy democracy in Wales is therefore one in which these six criteria are well-observed in the political systems at a devolved and local level in Wales, as well as the issues for which these actors are responsible.

What are the challenges and how is democratic health maintained?

Despite substantial support for democratic ideals across the world, support for democratic practices has declined. Trust in governing is declining in many countries, including the UK, with rises in polarisation and populism. There is concern that the reasoned opposition and constructive debate which is fundamental to democracy has been replaced by increasingly polarised identities, hateful rhetoric, and harmful cynicism.

As a result, actors in the political system are now seeking ways to strengthen democracy. Several initiatives have been successful in demonstrating that citizens can gain greater control of decisions, and many of these have taken place in devolved regions.

Evidence indicates that these processes can have significant positive outcomes: for example, participatory budgeting in Brazil was strongly associated with decreases in infant mortality rates (Touchton and Wampler, 2014). However, in many contexts, innovations aimed at improving democratic health have failed to meet their goals (Ryan, 2021). To understand what innovations work and when, it is critical to understand exactly what the existing state of democratic health is, and how potential impact can be monitored.

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How can we measure democratic health?

Given the criteria set out above for defining a healthy democracy, there are various ways in which the democratic health of Wales could be measured. The most common are **official**

statistics, public opinion surveys, and expert analysis.

The **Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project** measures to the extent to which five democratic ideals are met in a country: electoral, liberal, deliberative, egalitarian, and participatory democracy. Measures are based on the patterns of coding which is undertaken by different experts. It has published updated measures for the state of democracy in every nation-state. Similar quantitative indices which measure multiple aspects of democracy include **Polity IV / Policy 5**, the Political Rights measure provided by **Freedom House**, and **The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index**. Other measures of democracy, such as the **Electoral Integrity Project** and the **Discourse Quality Index** measure specific aspects of democracy, while the **Quality of Government Institute** collates measures of democratic health from secondary sources like those highlighted above. More qualitative measures of democracy have been provided by various comparative studies, especially from participatory interventions. **Participedia** and the **Healthier Democracies** are projects which provide examples of innovations to improve democratic health.

How can we monitor democratic health?

Monitoring democratic health requires reliable and regular measurement and there is a recognised need for more official statistics and other forms of measurement to understand the health of Welsh democracy. As highlighted above, there are a number of international projects providing measures of democratic health for most countries of the world, with V-Dem being the most comprehensive and useful of these sources. Unfortunately, while all of these sources include data for the UK as a whole, none of them include measures specifically for Wales.

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the health of Welsh democracy.

The full report highlights that while there are some existing measures which could help to assess the criteria of a healthy Welsh democracy, others would need to be developed in order to generate a more well-rounded picture. The table below highlights the different measures which could be used to assess the six criteria.

Criteria	Measures
1. Free and fair elections and strong civil rights	Integrity of elections
	Competitiveness of elections
	Civil rights protections
2. Widespread citizen engagement, awareness and participation	Electoral turnout
	Other citizen engagement with formal politics (e.g. writing to representatives)
	Alternative forms of citizen engagement with politics (e.g. protest participation)
	Citizens' political interest and knowledge
3. Reasoned and collective political deliberation	Use of reasoned justifications among politicians in debate
	Use of justifications for decisions among political that appeal to common good (rather than partisan or personal benefits)
	Respect for counterarguments and opponents among politicians
	Quality of debate in the public sphere

4. Political, social, and economic, equality	Equality of political engagement
	Equality of access to politics
	Policy congruence with different social groups
	Balanced demographic representation in government and legislators
5. Responsive government, reflecting citizens' wants and needs	Citizens' satisfaction with government and the political system
	Citizens' trust in politicians, governments and institutions
	Policy congruence with public opinion
	Citizens' belief in their ability to influence politics
6. Open access to accurate information through transparent government and a strong independent media	Government consultation with citizens and civil society
	Government transparency
	Media freedom

The **Wellbeing of Wales** national indicators include at least three measures relevant to democratic health, each collected as part of the National Survey for Wales. These are:

- The percentage of people who feel able to influence local decisions
- The percentage of people who feel they belong to their area
- The percentage of people who volunteer

These indicators can be used to assess aspects of the second criteria.

The **Welsh Election Study** includes a wider variety of measures over a longer period of time, although less frequently than the national indicators. Most of these surveys include measures of interest in politics, electoral turnout, and trust in the Welsh and UK governments and parliaments. More recent surveys also include measures of citizens' satisfaction with democracy in the country, participation in politics in ways other than voting, and political knowledge. These surveys provide opportunities to measure and monitor various elements of democratic health, relating to criteria 1, 2, 4 and 5. To enable more reliable measurement, these measures should feature consistently in future surveys and also in the more frequently collected national indicator surveys in addition.

Representation and political equality (criteria 4) can be monitored by comparing the demographic characteristics of candidates and elected representatives with the general public, using official statistics and candidate surveys. Information is already collected in Wales at the local level through the **Local Government Candidate Survey** but this could also be extended to the Senedd level.

Alternatively, a **bespoke tracker survey of attitudes to democracy and representation in Wales** could allow for better integration of measures and greater visibility of democratic health. A more innovative measure could be to trial a Welsh Democratic Observatory using a citizen science approach: place citizens in the role of expert assessor and engaging them periodically to record evidence for a healthy democracy in their area. Other innovative approaches may include argument mining and mapping to obtain a measure of deliberation (criteria 3) and policy congruence (criteria 5).

Wales could also ask one of the existing projects, such as V-Dem, to include Wales in their coverage and provide annual expert coded measures, but this would require consultation and consideration of costs. The Welsh Government could also commission its own expert analysis, potentially following the approach taken by V-Dem. This would provide

an important foundation for measuring and monitoring democratic health in Wales over time, especially given that some measures are difficult to capture using objective data.



Conclusion

Growing fears over the erosion of trust in government and democratic “backsliding” emphasises the importance of understanding and monitoring democratic health in Wales.

Wales can learn from the experiences of other small nation-states and regional governments who have encouraged democratic innovation in recent years, relying on a range of approaches.

There is a need for specific measures tailored to Wales to assess its democratic health.

Incorporating measures of democratic health into existing surveys can gather data on citizen attitudes, behaviours and satisfaction. The report suggests utilising a range of sources, including expert analysis and official statistics, as well as experimenting with bespoke methods using citizen science or language models.

These potential measures, if designed well, would allow Welsh Government to focus efforts on ways to increase participation and engagement among citizens. By understanding the benchmarks for a healthy democracy and assessing democratic health regularly, Wales can address existing challenge and work towards strengthening its democratic institutions. The report serves as a valuable starting point for policymakers and stakeholders in their efforts to promote a healthy and thriving democracy in Wales.

References

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Find out more

For the full report see: Valgardsson, V., Ryan, M., Jennings, W., Downe, J., and Notman, G. (2023). **Defining, Measuring and Monitoring Democratic Health in Wales.** Wales Centre for Public Policy

About the Wales Centre for Public Policy

Here at the Centre, we collaborate with leading policy experts to provide ministers, the civil service and Welsh public services with high quality evidence and independent advice that helps them to improve policy decisions and outcomes.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and Welsh Government, the Centre is

based at Cardiff University and a member of the UK's What Works Network.

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