STV in Wales. How it Could Be Made to Work (Easily), and What it Would Mean

Richard Wyn Jones & Roger Scully

Institute of Welsh Politics
Department of International Politics
Adeilad Llandinam
University of Wales, Aberystwyth
Ceredigion
SY23 3DA

sgc.iwp@aber.ac.uk

Tel: 44 (0) 1970 622 689
Fax: 44 (0) 1970 622709

Sefydliad Gwleidyddiaeth Cymru

Institute of Welsh Politics

Introduction

The Richard Commission Report, launched on March 31st 2004, proposed substantial changes in the devolution settlement for Wales. One of the major changes advocated in the report is to how the National Assembly is elected. It is proposed to replace the current semi-proportional AMS system with the Single Transferable Vote (STV).

The Richard report makes a powerful case for replacing AMS with STV. (For the record, this is a case with which we generally concur). Among the potential advantages of STV are:

- Eliminating the many problems associated with having two categories of elected AM.
- Retaining a strong element of local representation.
- Retaining a proportional element to the electoral system.
- Substantially enhancing voter choice (by allowing voters to select between both parties and candidates).

Nonetheless, the Richard Commission report is vague as to exactly *how* STV might be implemented in Wales. The relevant section of the report (in Chapter 12) states only that:

> The size and boundaries of the STV constituencies will be a matter for the Boundary Commission for Wales… a range of four to six Members (and exceptionally of three Members in some areas) per constituency should make possible a reasonable balance between local accountability and proportionality (p.239).

Here, we seek to move beyond this vague position. We make a specific proposal for how STV could be implemented in an 80-seat National Assembly. We explain the proposal below, and examine its likely electoral consequences.

The Proposal

Our proposal is simple and straightforward. We advocate that an 80-seat National Assembly be elected through *twenty, four-seat STV districts*. These twenty districts can be constructed by the simple mechanism of 'pairing' the existing forty Westminster/National Assembly constituencies.

Choosing which constituencies to pair with each other should not, in most instances, be very difficult. **Appendix 1** contains our initial suggestions as to the most appropriate pairings. However, it is important to bear in mind that *our overall conclusions as to the electoral consequences of STV are not dependent on the particular pairing choices that are made*.

This proposal has a number of immediate consequences. Some of these we believe to be clearly beneficial; others are more open to dispute:

- *The STV constituencies would all be quite small*. None would be substantially greater than 100,000 in population, and none would be extreme in size. (The largest in land area would be the Brecon/Montgomery pair, which is still smaller than several Scottish parliamentary constituencies). They would be much smaller than the existing list-regions; and by any international standard of comparison, these would still be small constituencies.
- Pairing existing constituencies would be *the least disruptive arrangement*, and would avoid protracted party battles over the fixing of new STV constituencies for the National Assembly.
- *Pairing would allow for several 'natural' constituencies to emerge*. The two Swansea constituencies, and the two Newport seats, for instance, make very natural pairings.
- In every STV district, *more than one political party would win some representation*.
- *Creating STV districts out of existing Westminster seats does, potentially, 'lock in' a 40-seat representation for Wales at Westminster*. Reducing the number of Welsh MPs in the future would become substantially more difficult as it would also mean disrupting the electoral arrangements of the Assembly. Whether this is a good thing or not will be something on which people will have different views.

It needs to be stressed that our proposal of 'pairing' does *not* create any major obstacles for the periodic reviews of electoral boundaries for Westminster elections. Provided that a 40-seat representation for Wales is maintained, the pairing arrangement could continue to work (although which seats are paired with each other might be periodically reviewed alongside the boundary reviews).

The Electoral Consequences

Knowing *exactly* what future consequences an electoral system will have is impossible. No-one can forsee perfectly the political circumstances under which future elections might take place.

We can, however, compare our proposed method for implementing STV with the result produced in 2003 by the existing AMS system. To conduct this comparison, we look at the votes gained by each party in the constituency (First) vote in May 2003.

We assume that if the election had been held under STV in paired districts, each party would have obtained the same number of first preference votes as the number of votes they secured on the first vote in May 2003. We make a number of further assumptions about how many candidates each party would stand, and how votes would be transferred. These are detailed in **Appendix 2**.

Based on these assumptions, we have calculated the results that would have been produced in May 2003 under STV. We present them below, alongside the actual result produced by AMS.

Party	AMS Actual Result	STV Estimated Result
Labour	30	40
Conservative	11	12
Liberal Democrat	6	8
Plaid Cymru	12	19
Others	1	1
Total	60	80

As can be seen, STV produces a result that is like that produced by AMS. Each of the major parties receive a similar proportions of seats. The overall proportionality of the electoral system is thus almost identical to AMS – the 'Gallagher Index of Disproportionality' score for STV is 8.6, compared with the 8.7 produced by the actual election under AMS.

Conclusions

STV as an electoral system for the National Assembly has a number of strong advantages over other systems, including AMS. However, the Richard Commission has not specified exactly how STV might be implemented.

We have proposed a method of implementing STV for National Assembly elections. Over and above the other benefits of STV, our proposal offers, we believe, at least two compelling advantages:

- It is clear, simple, and could be implemented quickly and without protracted arguments over new constituency boundaries.

- It achieves an almost identical level of proportionality to the system that was approved in the 1997 referendum. Thus, the basic principle of an electoral system with a degree of proportionality is maintained.

We therefore commend this proposal for further consideration.

Appendix 1: Suggested Constituency Pairs, and Estimated Results by Constituency

Constituencies	Estimated Results
Ynys Mon/Conwy	2 Plaid Cymru, 1 Labour, 1 Conservative
Caernarfon/Merionydd nant Conwy	3 Plaid Cymru, 1 Labour
Clwyd West/Vale of Clwyd	2 Labour, 1 Conservative, 1 Plaid Cymru
Delyn/Alun & Deeside	2 Labour, 1 Conservative, 1 Lib-Dem
Wrexham/Clwyd South	2 Labour, 1 Independent, 1 Plaid Cymru
Montgomeryshire/Brecon & Radnor	2 Lib-Dem, 1 Conservative, 1 Labour
Ceredigion/Preseli Pembroke	1 Plaid, 1 Labour, 1 Lib-Dem, 1 Cons
Carm. E & Dinefwr/Carm. W & S. Pemb	2 Plaid Cymru, 2 Labour
Llanelli/Gower	2 Labour, 2 Plaid Cymru
Swansea East/Swansea West	2 Labour, 1 Lib-Dem, 1 Plaid Cymru
Neath/Aberavon	3 Labour, 1 Plaid Cymru
Bridgend/Ogmore	2 Labour, 1 Conservative, 1 Plaid Cymru
Rhondda/Cynon Valley	3 Labour, 1 Plaid Cymru
Pontypridd/Vale of Glamorgan	2 Labour, 1 Conservative, 1 Plaid Cymru
Cardiff West/Cardiff North	2 Labour, 1 Conservative, 1 Lib-Dem
Cardiff Central/Cardiff South & Penarth	2 Labour, 1 Conservative, 1 Lib-Dem
Merthyr/Caerphilly	3 Labour, 1 Plaid Cymru
Blenau Gwent/Islwyn	3 Labour, 1 Plaid Cymru
Newport East/Newport West	2 Labour, 1 Conservative, 1 Lib-Dem
Monmouth/Torfaen	2 Labour, 2 Conservative

Appendix 2: Assumptions Made for Estimating an STV Election

The following assumptions have been made for estimating the results of STV elections:

1. In each pair of constituencies, a party gets the exact number of first preference votes as the total number of votes received on the first (constituency) election in May 2003.
2. Each party is assumed to stand three candidates per seat.
3. The party's aggregate total of votes is initially divided among the three candidates on the following proportions: 0.7, 0.2, 0.1.
4. All voters are assumed to transfer votes initially to candidates of the same party
5. If one party's candidates are all eliminated from the count, these votes then transfer to candidates of other parties according to the proportion of that party's voters who told the 2003 Wales Life and Times Survey that they considered another party to be their second preference (see precise percentages for all parties below). For example, 46% of survey respondents indicating they voted Labour gave the Liberal Democrats as their second preference. Therefore, 46% of any surplus Labour votes in our calculations are – if there is no other Labour candidate to whom they can be transferred – transferred to the Liberal Democrat candidates.
6. The exact figures for vote transfers are:
   Labour: 46% of surplus Labour votes transfer to the Liberal Democrats; 36% to Plaid Cymru; and 10% to the Conservatives. The remainder (equivalent to the proportion of Labour voters in the 2003 Wales Life and Times Survey who failed to indicate another party as a second preference) were not transferred.
   Plaid Cymru: 40% of surplus votes transfer to Labour; 30% to the Liberal Democrats; 19% to the Conservatives. The remainder were not transferred.
   Conservatives: 38% of surplus votes transfer to the Liberal Democrats; 24% transfer to Plaid Cymru; 19% transfer to Labour. The remainder were not transferred.
   Liberal Democrats: 45% of surplus votes transfer to Labour; 27% to Plaid Cymru; 9% to the Conservatives. The remainder were not transferred.
   Wrexham/Clwyd South: For the special case of the Wrexham/Clwyd South pairing, surplus votes from John Marek were transferred on the following proportions: 0.3 to Labour, 0.3 to Plaid Cymru, 0.3 to the Liberal Democrats and 0.1 to the Conservatives.