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# Making the Case for More Politicians: A Survey Experiment to Investigate Public Attitudes to an Expanded Welsh Parliament

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## 1. Introduction

Politicians—even democratically elected ones—are not popular. Given the now-extensive literature exploring public attitudes towards politicians (e.g., [Stoker, 2006](#); [Hay and Stoker, 2009](#); [Flinders, 2012](#); [Hatier, 2012](#); [Wright, 2013](#)), to make a public case that what a legislature requires is *more* politicians might appear to be a brave if not foolhardy political choice. Yet such a public defence for more politicians is precisely what has been attempted during the fifth and sixth terms of the Senedd, Wales' devolved parliament.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the terms of a cooperation agreement between the Welsh Labour government and opposition Plaid Cymru announced in November 2021, both parties agreed to increase the number of Senedd Members (MSs) from the current 60 to between 80 and 100 ([2021](#), p. 7). In May 2022, the respective party leaderships agreed on a total of 96 members ([Drakeford and Price, 2022](#)), a proposal that was subsequently endorsed by a special conference of the Labour party ([Deans, 2022](#)) and a vote in the Senedd itself ([Mosalski and Jones, 2022](#)). Legislation in the form of the Senedd Reform Bill is expected to be presented to the Senedd in the

<sup>1</sup>In May 2020, the National Assembly for Wales was renamed Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament, commonly known as the Senedd.

summer 2023, a bill that intends to introduce the proposed changes prior to the next devolved election in May 2026. While this reform has been strongly opposed by the Welsh Conservatives, support from Labour and Plaid Cymru Members of the Senedd (MSs) should be sufficient to meet the required supermajority to enact such changes.<sup>2</sup>

These reforms offer an invaluable and possibly unique opportunity to examine public attitudes towards a prospective increase in the number of politicians, brought about as the result of deliberate advocacy by political representatives themselves.<sup>3</sup> In the following article, we draw from a novel survey experiment contained in the March 2022 wave of the Welsh Election Study (Wyn Jones et al., 2022) to examine attitudes towards Senedd expansion among the Welsh electorate. In particular, we seek to identify the various factors that would appear to underpin public support and opposition this development and to ascertain whether any arguments in favour of the proposed expansion enjoy particular resonance.

Our discussion proceeds in three steps. First, we outline the context in which the proposal to increase the number of Senedd members has emerged. We argue that the case for expansion is rooted within broader efforts to strengthen devolution and to improve on an earlier institutional design of Welsh devolution that is widely regarded as having been deeply flawed. We also link arguments for Senedd reform to the wider academic literature on the size of legislatures.

Second, we introduce and outline the results of our survey experiment towards Senedd expansion. Unsurprisingly, the overall tenor of Welsh public attitudes is negative. There are, however, some significant differences across the electorate. Those most invested in the development of the Welsh polity—supporters of Plaid Cymru and/or independence—are most likely to support increasing the numbers of Senedd members. Conversely, those most hostile to home rule—Conservative supporters and/or those who support the abolition of devolution—are the most resolutely opposed. We also show that the ways in which arguments for increasing the number of politicians are framed *can* make a significant difference in terms of public support, especially among Labour supporters and those who identify as both Welsh and British. In particular, framing the policy in terms of the relative size of the Scottish Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly is particularly convincing to voters with more

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<sup>2</sup>The Senedd acquired the power to determine its own size and electoral arrangements pursuant to the Wales Act 2017. Section 111A of this Act requires that any changes to the electoral arrangements of the Welsh legislature require the support of at least two-thirds of its Members.

<sup>3</sup>As opposed to, for example, the expansion of the legislature due to the workings of a particular electoral system, as is the case with the German Bundestag (Barbaro and Specht, 2022). Meanwhile, the size of the UK's House of Lords continues to expand via the use of the executive's patronage powers (as discussed in Taylor, 2021). The use of these powers is not subject to direct democratic oversight.

median constitutional preferences. In the final section, we consider the significance of our findings in the Welsh context and explore their wider relevance in other contexts where increasing the number of elected politicians may be under active consideration either now or in the future.

The principal contribution of this paper is our investigation into a rare political event (changing the size of a legislature) using a novel survey experiment. While existing research does explore the various policy and fiscal implications of increasing legislative size, to our knowledge this is the first study to examine public attitudes towards such a change. While increasing the number of politicians is unsurprisingly unpopular, our results suggest that pro-expansion political actors may be able to deflect inevitable criticism if they frame their arguments in a way that takes into account voters' pre-existing party and national identities.

## 2. Debating the size of the Welsh legislature

When the then National Assembly of Wales was opened in 1999, it was a 60-member body elected through a variant of the Mixed Member Proportional electoral system. That the Senedd would constitute 60 members represented a relatively late revision to the Labour Party's original plans for Welsh devolution (cf. Wales Labour Party, 1995, 1996). Even as late as Spring 1996, Labour envisaged an 80-member chamber elected via single-member plurality ('First Past the Post'). This late shift was a consequence of the pressing need to attract support from smaller political parties that flowed from Labour leader Tony Blair's July 1996 decision that devolution could be only be introduced after an affirmative vote in a pre-legislative referendum (Gay, 1997, pp. 23–24). In late February 1997—just over 2 months before the general election that would see New Labour swept to power—the party's Welsh conference formally endorsed the limited form of proportional representation that would eventually be used in the first devolved election held in May 1999.

Little is known about the processes and calculations by which Labour arrived at the proposed total of 60 members. But there is no evidence to suggest any consideration of what would be required to ensure the effective operation of the new body. Rather, it seems likely that the number of members was retrofitted around the late-chosen electoral system. With 40 members elected in single-member districts using pre-existing Westminster boundaries and an additional 20 members elected via compensatory List PR from the then-five European parliamentary constituencies in Wales—60 gives every appearance of being a classic compromise, and one that would be just sufficient to assuage Plaid Cymru and Liberal Democrat supporters whose backing would be required during the now inevitable referendum campaign. But given the particularly disproportionate manner in which 'First Past the Post' operates in the Welsh electoral context (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2006), the compromise did

not threaten a level of proportionality that might seriously put Labour dominance and the culture that it sustains at any real risk.<sup>4</sup>

It would be wrong to suggest, however, that the size (per se) of any proposed devolved body was a matter of controversy or even interest during the run-up to the referendum held on 18 September 1997. Given that devolution had been so overwhelmingly rejected in a previous referendum held in 1979, securing majority support for *any* form of devolved body in the September 1997 referendum represented a hugely daunting challenge (Wyn Jones, 2009). For devolutionists of all political stripes, the size of any such body scarcely mattered. This was true not only for the proposed number of members, but for other key features of the initial constitutional design which were to prove so controversial later, including the lack of a formal division between executive and legislature and a cumbersome system of (secondary) legislative empowerment.

But once the referendum victory was secured (albeit by the narrowest of margins), the focus soon began to shift to the deficiencies of that design, and this scrutiny only intensified once the new body began to meet regularly. The story of the subsequent multiple revisions of Wales' devolved dispensation has been told elsewhere (Rawlings, 2003, 2018; Wyn Jones and Scully, 2012), and we shall not seek to rehearse it here. But the contention that the Senedd is too small has both been raised and authoritatively endorsed at regular intervals over subsequent years. Indeed, as early as 2004, the all-party Richard Commission concluded that the Senedd should have 80 members in the context of a shift to primary legislative powers (Richard Commission, 2004). Despite the size of the devolved legislature being specifically excluded from its terms of reference, this view was subsequently endorsed by another all-party commission, namely the Silk Commission in 2014.

The pace of elite-level debate over Senedd size has accelerated since 2017, not least because these considerations have been at the heart of a Welsh (not UK)-led debate over several aspects of Senedd reform. Key moments have included the publication of the report of an Expert Panel, chaired by Professor Laura McAllister, which recommended an increasing the number of MSs from 60 to at least 80, and preferably closer to 90 (Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform, 2017); the final report of the Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform (2020) which supported increasing the size of the Senedd to between 80 and 90 members; and a subsequent report by the Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform (2022) which recommended a 96 member Senedd. The upcoming Senedd Reform Bill, therefore, represents the outcome of almost two decades of discussion and deliberation.

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<sup>4</sup>Unguarded remarks by First Minister Rhodri Morgan to this effect are reported in Osmond (2005, p. 7).



The central argument in favour of Senedd expansion is accountability. A 60-member Senedd, it is claimed, is too small to hold the Welsh Government properly to account, especially in a context in which its powers and responsibilities have grown consistently since 1999. Increasing the number of Members would improve the capacity of the legislature to ‘fulfil its policy, legislative and financial scrutiny roles’ (Expert Panel on Assembly Reform, 2017, p. 89), a sentiment which would be effectively interchangeable with arguments made in any of the previously cited reports (e.g., Richard Commission, 2004, p. 257; Silk Commission, 2014, p. 90; Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform, 2020, p. 37; Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform, 2022, p. 21). Claims that 60 members are insufficient to ensure effective scrutiny are derived both from operational analyses of the legislature itself (most extensively by the Expert Panel of Assembly Electoral Reform, 2017), but from international comparisons suggesting that the Welsh legislature is small in relation to its population and level of responsibilities (e.g. UK’s Changing Union and Electoral Reform Society, 2013).

Although no one has presented an in-principle argument in favour of the current size of the Senedd (see Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform, 2020, pp. 28–29), the central objection to expansion—made by the Conservative opposition in particular—focuses on the opportunity cost of employing more politicians and associated staff.<sup>5</sup>

In response, proponents of expansion have countered cost-based arguments by claiming that more scrutiny and better accountability can potentially save taxpayers’ money (UK’s Changing Union and the Electoral Reform Society, 2013; also, Silk Commission, 2014, p. 136). Moreover, the expansion case has recently been made in the context of the impending reduction in the number of Welsh Members of the Westminster Parliament from 40 to 32, with the implication that the cost of increasing the number of MSs will be offset to some extent by this reduction in the number of MPs (Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform, 2022, p. 21).

That the political debate on Senedd expansion has been framed in terms of better accountability versus increased costs has clear echoes in the wider literature. As Marland argues (2019, p. 151), the ‘prevailing justification for a large number of legislators is a greater capacity to hold the political executive to account’. Larger legislatures may also be able to represent the interests of more groups within society, increase the possibilities for deliberation, and increase the representation (and knowledge) of local issues (Luce, 1974). Drawing evidence from Brazil, Mignozzetti et al. (2022) suggest that adding legislators to a legislature is also associated with improved policy outcomes in at least some policy areas.

<sup>5</sup>One now familiar if wildly hyperbolic claim is that the cost of expansion is equivalent to the cost of employing an additional 300 fully qualified General Practitioners in the Welsh Health Service (see <https://twitter.com/WelshConserv/status/1566357651243532288>).

Although increased costs frequently feature in the political economy literature as a potential argument against expanding legislative size, rather than focusing on the direct and opportunity costs of expansions this approach tends to theorise the longer-term costs arising from larger legislatures. Public choice theory tends to associate larger legislatures with higher transaction costs, because the greater the number of members, the more expensive the formation of legislative majorities (Weingast and Marshall, 1988) and the more challenging the demands of collective action (Crain 1979). The *Law of 1/n* (Weingast et al. 1981) posits that each individual member of a legislative majority has the incentive to demand particularistic projects in their home districts to support legislative passage, an additive process which connects larger legislatures with higher levels of public spending (see e.g., Gilligan and Matsusaka, 1995, 2001; Chen and Malhotra, 2007).

Within this broader literature on the size of legislatures, however, vanishingly little research exists on public attitudes towards the potential costs and benefits of increasing the number of elected members. Even if it seems reasonable to assume that increasing the size of any legislature—and, therefore, the number of politicians—is unlikely to generate much popular enthusiasm, we are unaware of any scholarly literature exploring this issue. In particular, it is not clear that *any* possible justification for expanding the size of a legislature might resonate with the public. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding not only how the Welsh public may react to Senedd expansion, but also how voters might respond to proposals to change the size of other legislatures in the future. In the next section, we, therefore, begin to fill that gap.

### 3. Attitudes towards Senedd expansion—a survey experiment

To explore public attitudes towards Senedd expansion as discussed in the previous section, we use a novel survey experiment which fielded as part of the Welsh Election Study (Wyn Jones et al., 2022). This survey was undertaken by *YouGov* between 18 March and 6 April 2022 and yielded a representative sample of 2988 respondents. The full questionnaire is provided in the supplementary materials.

#### 3.1 *Experimental design and empirical strategy*

We employed a simple vignette design with respondents randomly assigned to one of five treatment groups.<sup>6</sup> Each group was first shown the following text:

*There are currently proposals to increase the number of Senedd Members from 60 to 100.<sup>7</sup>*

<sup>6</sup>See supplementary materials for demonstration of random assignment.

<sup>7</sup>The experiment was fielded in the period between the signing of the cooperation agreement between the Welsh Labour Government and Plaid Cymru (in November 2021) and the announcement (in May 2022) of an agreement between the party leaderships that there would be 96 members of the reformed Senedd. As such, the reference to 100 members reflects the state of play at the time, and specifically the maximum number of MSs envisaged in the cooperation agreement.

In the control group, respondents received no additional prompts of information. In our four treatment groups, respondents were then exposed to an argument for why the number of Senedd members should be increased; the wordings for each are reported in [Table 1](#).

Respondents were then asked, ‘To what extent do you agree that the number of Senedd Members should be increased?’ with responses measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Non-responses are dropped from our analysis (419 respondents in total). Levels of non-response are similar across our prompts (see [Supplementary Appendix](#)). The descriptive distribution of responses is provided in [Figure 1](#) (collapsed into three categories for ease of display and interpretation).

[Figure 1](#) demonstrates that the Welsh electorate is generally not supportive of increasing the number of Senedd members. Only 22% of the control group supported the proposals, compared with 49% who opposed. Each of the prompts increased the proportion agreeing with expansion, although to varying amounts. Compensating for the loss of MPs and the need for more members to deal with increased powers had the least impact on responses, while ensuring greater accountability and parity with Scotland and Northern Ireland had a larger positive effect.

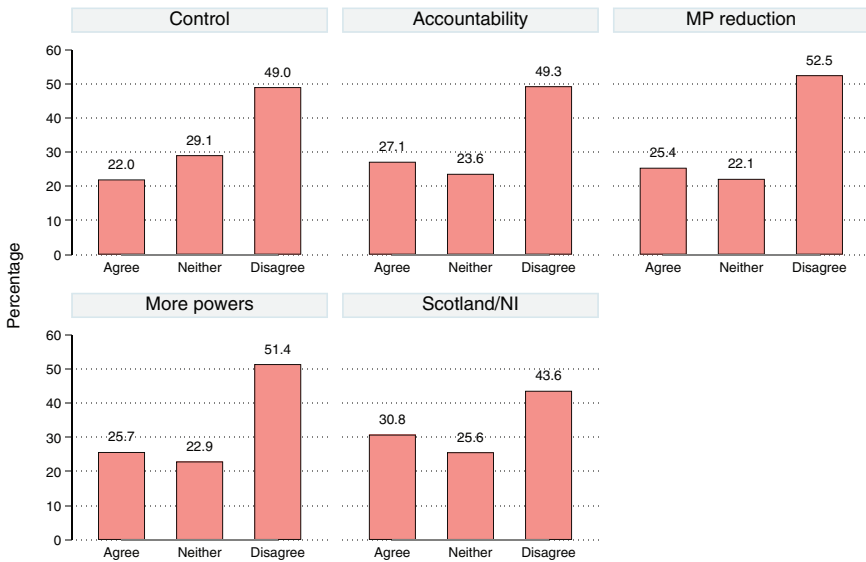
### 3.2 Who supports Senedd expansion absent of treatment?

To predict support for the proposals in the absence of any treatment, we first run a binary logistic regression model on the control group only. Support for Senedd expansion is our dependent variable, recoded as a binary variable indicating

**Table 1** Experimental manipulation

Group	Wording
Control	[No prompt]
Greater accountability	One argument for doing so is that it will increase the ability of the Senedd to hold the Welsh Government to account for its decisions
Compensate for MP reduction	One argument for doing so is that it will compensate for the reduction in the number of MPs from Wales that will occur after the next UK General Election
Needed for new powers	One argument for doing so is that the Senedd now has tax and major legislative powers and so needs an increased membership
Parity with Scotland and Northern Ireland	One argument for doing so is that the Senedd is currently much smaller than the Scottish Parliament and Northern Irish Assembly and should be of roughly equal size





**Figure 1** Distribution of outcome variable responses

Control (*N*: 493), Accountability (*N*: 537), MP reduction (*N*: 552), More powers (*N*: 536), Scotland/NI (*N*: 504). Source: 2021 Welsh Election Study (March 2022).

whether someone (strongly or slightly) agrees with Senedd expansion (1) or not<sup>8</sup> (0). We examine three different cleavages in Welsh politics (party support, constitutional preference and national identity) in separate models given the likelihood that they are endogenous (i.e., responses on one independent variable correlate heavily with responses on another), which may lead to inaccurate regression coefficients (Avery, 2005).

In relation to party support, the survey asked respondents whether they support a particular party in the Senedd, an important inclusion because voters consistently differentiate between UK-wide and Welsh parties (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2006). Due to a low sample size once split across all five groups, we are unable to include supporters of the Welsh Liberal Democrats, Abolish the Welsh Assembly Party or other parties.

For constitutional preferences, we include an item from the November 2021 wave of the WES. Respondents were asked whether they favoured independence, more powers for the Senedd, the same powers, fewer powers or the abolition of the Senedd. We recode the latter two categories together into a single

<sup>8</sup>This includes those who neither agree nor disagree, slightly disagree and strongly disagree with Senedd expansion. We find the same results when treating our dependent variable as an ordinal variable but treating it as a binary, in this case, aids interpretation.

category due to the very low number of respondents selecting ‘fewer powers’. Although this resulting in the four-month gap is a slight limitation because some individuals may have changed their minds between the two waves, this is the most recent information available. Our analysis of constitutional preference changes between March 2021 and November 2021 (as reported in the supplementary materials) suggests that people rarely change such preferences over relatively short periods of time.

Finally, we consider the relationship between ‘state’ and ‘sub-state’ national identities within Wales and support for Senedd expansion. In sub-state territories, researchers have long recognised that individuals can hold ‘state’ and ‘sub-state’ identities to varying degrees (see [Mendelsohn, 2002](#)). Contemporary methods of operationalising relative state/sub-state identities include the Linz–Moreno scale<sup>9</sup> and relative territorial identity scales,<sup>10</sup> but both approaches have limitations with regards to the strength of an individual’s identity and ‘dual’ identities (see [Griffiths, 2022](#)). Here also, Wales contains a large proportion of individuals who were born in England ([Mann and Fenton, 2017](#)), which presents a further challenge because Englishness tends to interact with Britishness in a different way than Welshness interacts with Britishness (see [Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2021](#); [Henderson et al., 2021](#)).

To address these conceptual challenges, we separate individuals into seven national identity categories as delineated by [Wyn Jones and Lerner \(2021\)](#) and reported in [Table 2](#). We discuss our recoding in [Supplementary Appendix](#), but note that we focus on ‘strong’ identifiers because the vast majority of respondents report at least one ‘strong’ identity. Those who do not report either a ‘strong’ British, Welsh, or English identity are placed in an ‘other identity’ category.<sup>11</sup> Due to very low sample sizes across the five vignettes, we recode the ‘strongly British only (born in Wales)’ and the ‘strongly British and Welsh’ into a single category. We do the same for the ‘strongly English only’ and ‘strongly British and English’ for the same reason, leaving us with five sufficiently large identity categories.

In each model, we control for age, whether a respondent graduated from university and gender. We also apply the WES’s weights. Results are presented in [Figure 2](#), which illustrates the predicted probability of someone supporting Senedd expansion by each of our independent variables.

<sup>9</sup>The Linz–Moreno measure asks a respondent whether they identify as ‘only state’, ‘more state than sub-state’, ‘equally state and sub-state’, ‘more sub-state than state’ and ‘only sub-state’ (e.g., [Moreno, 1995](#)).

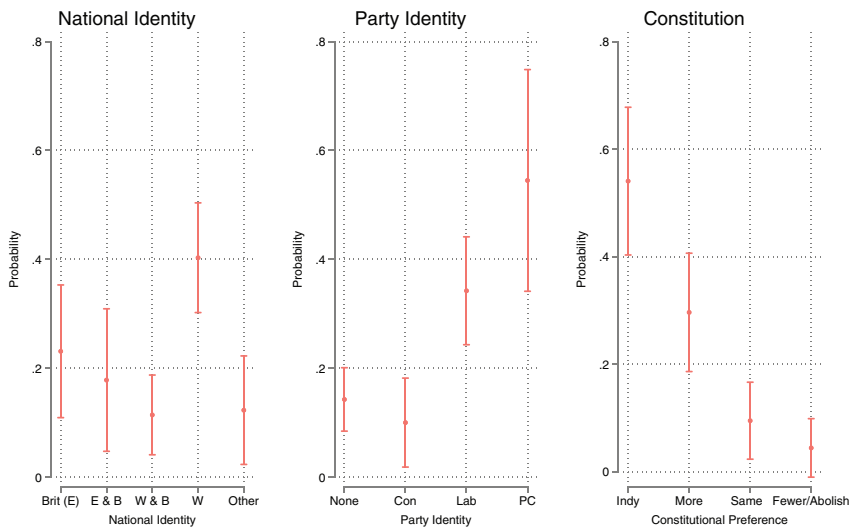
<sup>10</sup>Researchers capture the strength of a respondent’s state and sub-state identity on a scale, ranging from low to high, and then subtract their state identity from their sub-state identity to create a scale from ‘only state’ to ‘only sub-state’, with dual identifiers in the middle ([Henderson et al., 2021](#)).

<sup>11</sup>Consequently, this category may contain ‘citizens of the world’ who feel no attachment to a specific nation, or migrants who identify strongly with another nation that is not included here.

**Table 2** National identity categories and their size, March 2022

Category	Percentage of sample
Strongly English only	2.46
Strongly Welsh only	35.59
Strongly British and English	9.94
Strongly British and Welsh	28.15
Strongly British only (born in England)	7.50
Strongly British only (born in Wales)	5.42
Other identity	11.15

Source: 2021 Welsh Election Study (March 2022 wave). *N* = 2855.



**Figure 2** Predicted probability of feeling positive about Senedd expansion by our independent variables

Source: Welsh Election Study (March 2022). *N*: 2662.

Turning first to national identity, those who identify as ‘strongly Welsh only’ are clearly most supportive of Senedd expansion. The probability of a member of this group supporting expansion is around 0.4, indicating that they are still more likely than not to oppose expansion. However, the strongly Welsh only are still far more supportive than those who identify as strongly Welsh and British (or strongly British only and born in Wales); British only (and were born in England); and those who felt either strongly British-and-English or English only.

In relation to constitutional preferences, we unsurprisingly find that support for Welsh autonomy correlates with support for Senedd expansion. Those who support independence are the most likely to support Senedd expansion, with

around half of the respondents in this category supporting the policy. Support for expansion then declines as a respondent becomes less supportive of Welsh autonomy, with those who support the status quo or fewer powers/abolition of the Senedd being the least likely to support the policy.

We also find substantial effects for party identity, which align with the constitutional positions of the major parties. Those who support pro-autonomy Plaid Cymru are the most likely to support Senedd expansion, while supporters of Welsh Labour (a pro-devolution unionist party) are slightly less likely to support the policy. Respondents who support the Welsh Conservatives, a party that has taken a devo-sceptic turn in recent years (Larner et al., 2022), are the least likely to support Senedd expansion. Those with no party identity are also very unlikely to support Senedd expansion.

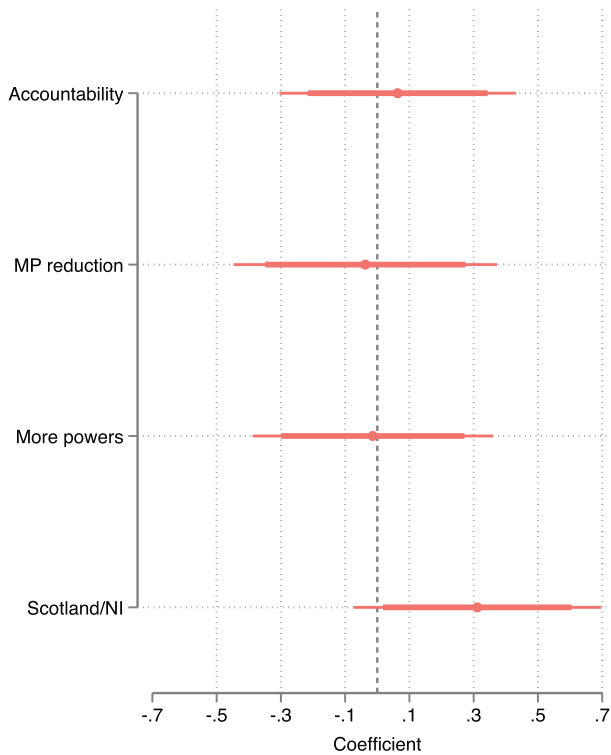
Across each model, we find consistent effects for age and gender (see [Supplementary Appendix](#)). Although we find no significant effect for a respondent's education level, younger people and men are more supportive of Senedd expansion than older people and women respectively.

### *3.3 What is the effect of the treatments on support for Senedd expansion?*

The experimental design also tested whether any of the arguments that have been offered in support of Senedd reform resonate with respondents. To address this question, we run an ordinal logistic regression with location in a treatment group as our only independent variable. To avoid losing information, we treat attitudes to Senedd expansion as a five-category variable ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. [Figure 3](#) illustrates these results. The only treatment that had a statistically significant effect (at the 95% level) was the argument that the increasing the size of the Senedd would create parity with the devolved parliaments of Scotland and Northern Ireland. When exposed to this argument, respondents were more supportive of the proposed expansion. All other treatments failed to move support in either direction.

### *3.4 Interacting treatment with party support, constitutional preferences and national identity*

As we have seen, political parties in Wales have taken very different positions on Senedd expansion. To what extent is this reflected among their respective supporters? To answer this, we focus on whether any arguments offered in support of this reform make party supporters more inclined to support legislative expansion. To do so, we interact party support with each treatment group. Note here that once party supporters are divided into five groups sample sizes of approximately 500 individuals are relatively small. For example, in the control group, there are only 146 Labour supporters, 90 Conservative supporters and 38 Plaid Cymru

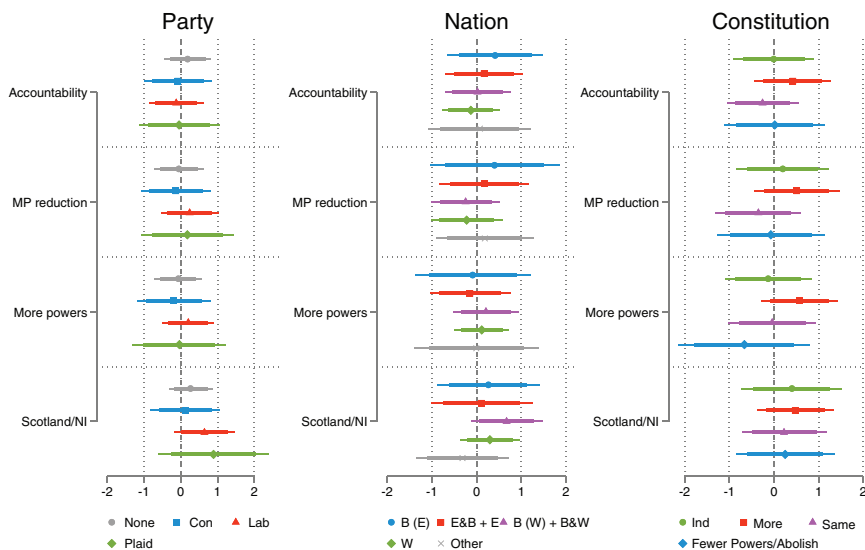


**Figure 3** Coefficient plot of main effects with 99% and 95% confidence intervals  
 Note: All estimates are relative to control. Positive coefficient = more supportive, negative coefficient = less supportive. Thinner lines indicate the 99% confidence intervals, the thicker lines indicate the 95% confidence intervals. Source: Welsh Election Study (March 2022). *N*: 2662

supporters. Lower sample sizes reduce the likelihood that differences between the conditions will be found to be statistically significant.

Results for party ID are presented in the first column of [Figure 4](#) as a coefficient plot. As in our baseline model, there are no significant effects in the first three treatments among any of the party support groups. The final treatment (parity with Scotland/Northern Ireland) results in a positive effect for all groups, though the effect is only significant at the 95% level for supporters of the Labour Party. There is also a positive effect for Plaid Cymru supporters, but this fails to reach statistical significance.

Considering national identity effects in the central section of [Figure 4](#), we find that one prompt has a significant effect on a national identity group. Those who identify as British and Welsh (or British only but were born in Wales) are more likely to support Senedd expansion when faced with the Scotland and Northern Ireland prompt. This effect was significant at the 95% level but failed to reach the 99% level. There were no significant effects for any of the other prompts.



**Figure 4** Party ID, National Identity and Constitutional preferences interacted with treatment Note: All estimates are relative to control. Positive coefficient = more supportive, negative coefficient = less supportive. Thinner lines indicate the 99% confidence intervals, the thicker lines indicate the 95% confidence intervals. Source: Welsh Election Study (March 2022). *N*: 2662

The final column in Figure 4 considers constitutional preferences, and whether there is any experimental treatment that can nudge individuals who are sceptical of devolution to support Senedd expansion. Consistent with the earlier analyses, note that small sample sizes may limit our ability to observe statistically significant associations. Nonetheless, those who favour more powers for the Senedd are more likely to support Senedd expansion when faced with any prompt (particularly the prompt concerning the extra powers that the Senedd has recently received), but none of these associations reach statistical significance.

Convincing people to support more politicians is always likely to be a difficult task. Aside from a generally low general base of support for increasing the size of the Senedd, *how* the argument in favour of change is made also makes relatively little difference to its reception at the poles of the constitutional debate in Wales. Those who support independence (or voted for Plaid Cymru) are already predisposed to support Senedd expansion. Conversely, those who oppose devolution or supported the Conservatives in 2021 are highly unlikely to support an increase in the number of Senedd members irrespective of the arguments presented to them.

#### 4. Discussion

The results of the novel survey experiment presented in this article demonstrate that a clear plurality of the Welsh electorate opposes increasing the number of



Senedd members. Neither do any of the treatments utilised seriously challenge this generalised picture of hostility. That said, there are significant differences in attitudes across Welsh society that are worthy of note. Groups most positively inclined to support the development of the Welsh polity are also the most positive about expanding the size of the Senedd. Voters who identify as Welsh, are pro-autonomy, support Plaid Cymru, and skew younger—groups among which there tends to be considerable overlap—support an expanded Senedd.

Conversely, those in Wales who are most negative about home rule—opponents of devolution, Conservative supporters, those who feel British not Welsh, and older voters—are the most strongly opposed. It is also the case that way the arguments for Senedd expansion are framed can make a significant difference to their reception. Specifically, framing expansion in comparative terms—that Welsh Parliament should be comparable in size to its sister institutions in Scotland and Northern Ireland—renders Labour supporters and those who identify as Welsh and British more supportive.

The utility of such a comparative frame in Welsh constitutional debates has a long pedigree. The 1997 referendum to establish the National Assembly for Wales took place one week after the parallel referendum for Scotland, a timing delay that directly facilitated comparative arguments. *Yes for Wales*' 'Wales must not get left behind' slogan (Andrews, 1999) became the campaign's core message in the days following the Yes vote in Scotland (see Andrews, 2000). More recently, senior Plaid Cymru and Welsh Labour politicians have invoked comparative arguments to argue for consistent set of powers to those held by the Scottish Parliament; arguments such as 'Offer Wales same powers as Scotland, says Carwyn Jones' (BBC, 2014), and 'Plaid Cymru seeks funding parity with Scotland' (FT, 2015) have featured prominently during constitutional reform discussions and election campaigns. Pro-devolution parties in Wales are now accustomed to making comparative arguments, and our results provide evidence that such a frame can be a convincing one.

Inter-territorial comparisons such as these raise important questions for scholarship that uses quantitative methods to explore territorial politics and nationalism. The role of comparisons or—to evoke the title of Benedict Anderson's seminal study—*The Spectre of Comparisons* (1998) is a familiar theme in nationalism studies. Comparison with other territories that are deemed to offer lessons for 'ours' are regarded as playing a key role in the 'nationalist imaginary', acting both as sources of inspiration and/or objects for emulation (e.g. Hroch, 1968; Nairn, 1997; Gellner, 1983). In Spain, for example, the two-track federalism process instituted by the 1978 constitution encouraged entrepreneurial elites in regions without a self-rule tradition (such as Castile and León or Murcia) to construct distinctive identities that would help substantiate claims for comparable powers to those already held by prominent historic nations such as Catalonia and the

Basque Country, a process Luis Moreno terms ‘ethnoterritorial mimesis’ (Moreno, 1997). In general, such work tends to focus on the elite or activist level, but evidence from our survey experiment suggests that we also need to be attentive to the potential popular resonance of comparisons. Particularly striking in the current context is the way that this framing appears to be persuasive beyond what might be termed to ‘core’ group of supporters of autonomy. While the terms of the Welsh debate over Senedd expansion—as well as the attitudes of various groups in Welsh society towards it—appear to be very much context-specific, the role of international or inter-territorial comparisons in framing debates appears much more frequently, and the impact of such comparisons a worthwhile subject for empirical investigation.

## 5. Conclusion

Wales’ proposals at the start of the 2020s to expand the size of Senedd Cymru—the Welsh Parliament—have been long in the making. Increasing the number of elected members is a proposal that, along with changes to the institution’s name and electoral system, forms one part of a wider process of reforming a devolved constitutional dispensation whose earliest iterations were almost universally regarded as hopelessly inadequate.

In the contemporary debate over Senedd expansion and its potential electoral consequences, the first implication of our findings is that the parties located at opposite poles of the constitutional spectrum have the least to fear from their current standpoints. Conservative opposition aligns not only with that of their own electoral base but also with the preferences of a large proportion of the Welsh electorate. Plaid Cymru support for expansion is also closely aligned with the views of the party’s own supporters and those it regards as key target group among the Welsh electorate, namely those who support independence but who do not vote for the nationalist party (recalling here that in the 2021 devolved election, more than half of independence supporters voted for parties other than Plaid Cymru).

Welsh Labour’s support for Senedd expansion poses more *potential* challenges, since Labour is the only party that draws significant support from voters holding divergent constitutional preferences and national identity positions (Larner et al., 2022). Here, however, our finding that a comparative framing with Scotland and Northern Ireland boosts support for expansion (in particular, among Labour’s own supporters) offers pointers to the party’s leadership as to how the proposals might be most effectively presented. That said, given that Labour in 2022 celebrated a centenary of being returned as the largest party in Wales at every UK general election, it seems highly unlikely that any controversy over Senedd expansion will threaten the party’s dominant position.

The second implication of our study follows from our analysis of the patterns of support and opposition to Senedd expansion, as well as the type of arguments for expansion that appear to enjoy at least some popular resonance. Although making an argument for more politicians in Wales is indeed very challenging, not only are there some groups that may be more receptive than others to the idea, but also certain framings of the argument may elicit a more positive response than might otherwise be the case. Paradoxically, however, the nature of those groups and arguments only serves to further underline how difficult it is likely to be for anyone seeking to make the case for more politicians in other jurisdictions. Indeed, the most persuasive argument in favour of expansion (as far as popular opinion is concerned) is an argument that relies on comparison with other devolved territories within the same state whose legislatures are proportionately larger. Although similar patterns have been identified in other asymmetric decentralised systems such as Spain (Moreno, 1997), none of these factors or conditions are straightforwardly replicable or generalisable. Indeed, it is striking that the argument in favour of increasing the number of politicians that is perhaps most easily generalisable—the democratic argument focused on better accountability—turns out to be one of the least persuasive as far as Welsh public opinion is concerned.

Support for Senedd expansion is integrally related to support for polity building, a project that enjoys popular support for reasons that have little to do with the specific size of the Welsh legislature, but rather to its very existence and purpose. The current proposal for expansion to 96 members is backed by pro-devolution parties that, between them, were supported by 60.2% of those who voted in a constituency ballot at Wales' most recent devolved election. While it is perhaps possible to imagine other cases in which calls for more politicians could emerge as part of a wider process of polity building and development (and enjoy some measure of popular resonance as a result), such cases are likely to be very rare. As far as mature or more settled polities are concerned, making the case for more politicians will likely remain the quintessential 'hard sell'.

### **Supplementary data**

Supplementary data is available at *Parliamentary Affairs* online.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.



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