

# Different visions of representation among voters and candidates in Wales

*Whose opinions should Assembly Members prioritise when carrying out their duties in the Welsh Assembly? Here, **Siim Trumm** (University of Nottingham) compares the views of voters and candidates on how AMs should vote when confronted with competing pressures. He finds that candidates are more likely to think that it is acceptable for AMs to discard the views of their voters in favour of their own views or those of their party than voters.*



Official opening of the Welsh Assembly, 2016. Picture: [National Assembly for Wales](#), via [\(CC BY 2.0\)](#)

We live in an era where many voters in Britain [do not trust politicians](#), believe that they do not care about what ordinary people think and that they prefer playing party-political games over furthering public interests. In fact, politicians are now [less trusted](#) than estate agents and bankers, with less than a quarter of people expecting them to tell voters the truth. In Wales, we witnessed voters backing Brexit against the advice of most of the Welsh political elite.

But are voters correct in their belief that politicians are disconnected from those who elect them? In a [study](#) of the 2016 devolved election in Wales, I compared the views of voters and candidates on how AMs should vote when faced with competing pressures.

## Same voting dilemmas, different responses

It is not uncommon for parliamentarians to be confronted with competing pressures. There may be occasions when their own beliefs are not in line with the preferences of their voters or with the position of their party. They may also receive contrasting input from their party and voters. How politicians respond to dilemmas like these shape the kind of representation that is ultimately provided.

We can compare the visions of representation supported by voters and candidates using data from the pre-election wave of the [2016 Welsh Election Study](#) and the [2016 Welsh Candidate Study](#). Both surveys were conducted in spring 2016 and include several compatible questions on representation.

Table 1 shows whose views voters and candidates believe AMs should prioritise in case of three voting dilemmas: i) own views or party position; ii) own views or voters' views; and iii) party position or voters' views.

*Table 1: Whose views should AMs prioritise if a conflict exists?*

	<b>Conflict 1</b>		<b>Conflict 2</b>		<b>Conflict 3</b>	
	Party	Voters	Own	Voters	Own	Party
Voters (%)	16	84	25	75	63	37
Candidates (%)	41	59	55	45	59	41

There is one circumstance when voters and candidates have a similar vision of representation. If there is a conflict between an AM's own views and the position of her party, candidates as well as voters believe that the AM should prioritise her own views (63% versus 59%). But this is where the shared vision seems to stop. Whereas most voters suggest that AMs should prioritise their voters' views over their party position if the two conflict, far fewer candidates share this view (84% versus 59%). In addition, voters are more likely to say that AMs should vote in line with their voters' views, rather than their own opinion, where the two conflict (75% versus 45%). Taken together, a rather telling story emerges. Most voters believe that AMs ought to prioritise the views of their voters over their own views or those of their party. Most candidates, however, see AMs in quite independent-minded terms, with their voting choices guided mainly by their own opinions.

What about the different types of candidates? It is quite plausible that constituency candidates and regional list candidates may see representation in slightly different terms. For example, one could imagine regional list candidates suggesting a more partisan approach to representation and constituency candidates a more independent-minded one.

Table 2 compares the responses of different types of candidates to the three voting dilemmas. The most telling discrepancy relates to the situation where there is a conflict between an AM's view and that of her voters. Almost two-thirds of constituency candidates say that the AM ought to prioritise her own views in these circumstances, but less than half of regional list candidates share this opinion (62% versus 48%). In addition, constituency candidates are more likely to suggest that AMs should vote in line with their own views, and not their party position, where the two conflict (66% versus 54%). Although the differences here are not as stark as those we saw in Table 1, there is still variation among different candidates' visions of representation. Constituency candidates are more likely to see AMs as independent-minded parliamentarians than regional list candidates.

*Table 2: Does candidacy type matter?*

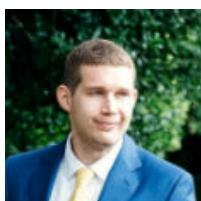
	<b>Conflict 1</b>		<b>Conflict 2</b>		<b>Conflict 3</b>	
	Party	Voters	Own	Voters	Own	Party
Candidates: constituency (%)	34	66	62	38	66	34
Candidates: dual (%)	37	63	55	45	54	46
Candidates: regional list (%)	48	52	48	51	54	46

The story here highlights two key elements. First, there is a degree of disconnect between the visions of representation supported by voters and candidates in Wales. In general, candidates are more likely to think that it is acceptable for AMs to discard their voters' views in favour of their own opinions or those of their party. One should be cautious about generalising from this evidence as it does not distinguish between elected and unelected candidates, but it does still highlight another potential source of public disillusionment with how the political system works. Debates on representation will continue to focus on policy agenda and policy positions, but a more prominent role should also be given to the principles that guide how politicians ought to approach parliamentary representation. Second, candidacy type matters. Constituency candidates are more likely to suggest that AMs should prioritise their own views over those of their voters and their party than regional list candidates.

*This article represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.*

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### About the author



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