

Local Authority Turnout what's the story?

While the recent local authority elections attracted their fair share of media headlines, the dominant narrative, as in previous elections, was one of declining turnout and whether or not local government has a future. Little was heard about the nature of the role councils play in their towns, cities and regions, or about the future challenges facing communities and how candidates were planning to deal with them. Typical of the headlines were the following:

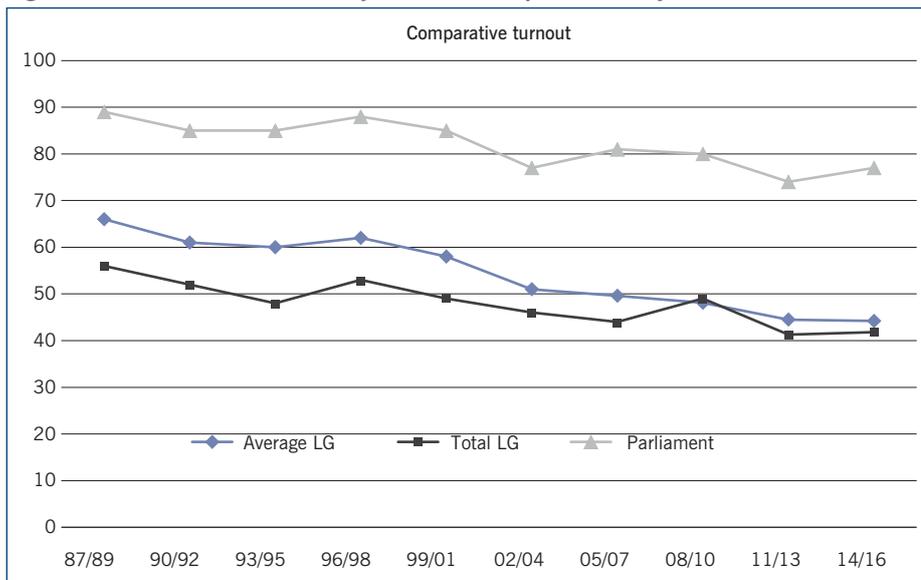
- Local democracy is broken, but whose fault is it?
 - New Plymouth's voter turnout for local body elections heading toward worst ever.
 - Initial voter turnout plummets in this year's local body elections.
 - Fixing dysfunctional local government.
- These headlines come from NZ Politics Daily, a blog compiled by Bryce Edwards which was essential reading for anyone wishing to follow this year's local elections. This particular issue

was headed with an item titled 'What's wrong with local government and can it be fixed?' The article suggested that the public are disengaged, that trust and confidence in local politicians was low and that there was a growing democratic deficit (Edwards, 2016a). A week later, in an opinion piece in the *New Zealand Herald*, Edwards provided his own ideas for solving this problem and observed that 'local government appears headed towards an existential crisis' (Edwards, 2016b).

Public concerns about the future of local democracy, let alone proclamations about its impending doom, aren't new. As long ago as 2001 the then minister of local government, Sandra Lee, was so concerned she suggested that 'when it comes to local government New Zealanders as voters are pretty switched off'¹ and mused on the possibility of introducing mandatory voting. (If only the current turnout was similar to the 2001 level which so concerned the minister!) A factor in the lower turnout levels in 2001 was the decision to increase the complexity of the voting process by incorporating elections for the new district health boards. The issue did not go away and, following the 2004 elections,

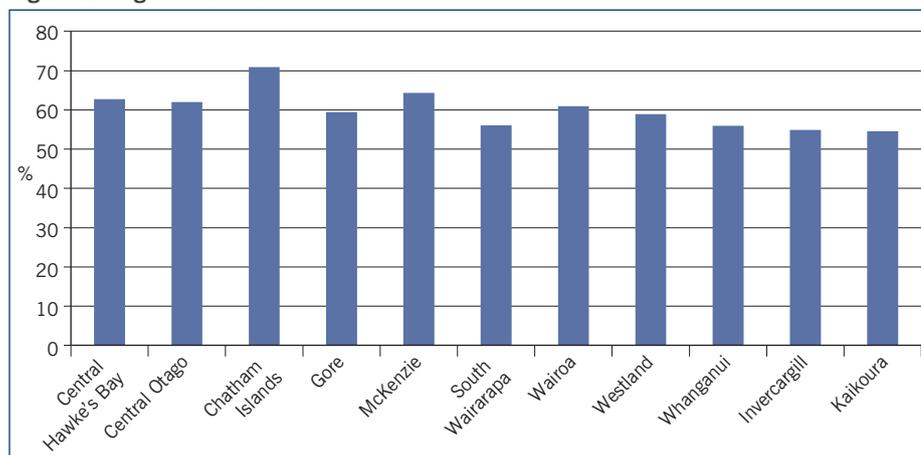
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Figure 1: Turnout in local authority elections and parliamentary elections⁴



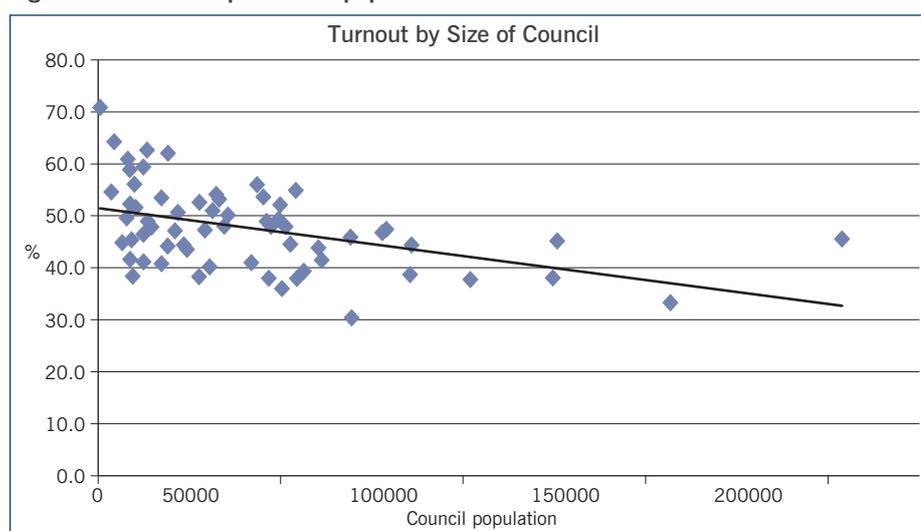
Source: Department of Internal Affairs, and Local Government New Zealand for 2016 election night counts

Figure 2: Highest turnout



Source: Provisional results provided by Local Government New Zealand

Figure 3: Relationship between population and turnout



the Justice and Electoral Committee initiated an inquiry into the way in which the elections were run. Inquiries have now occurred after every election since

2004 and a 2016 inquiry has already been signalled.²

So what is the story behind turnout in local elections? Does it reflect a

disenchantment with local government, or is it symptomatic of wider changes in New Zealand society? This article asks whether or not the extensive expression of concern is justified and, if so, where we might look for possible solutions. It is structured around two questions: why turnout in local government elections is consistently lower than in parliamentary elections, and why turnout is declining.

Turnout

The 2016 local authority elections took place on 8 October this year and, despite fears to the contrary, turnout increased slightly on the 2013 results, largely due to increases in Auckland and Wellington.³

Figure 1 shows a decline in both average and total turnout since 1989, although the decline has been far from uniform – dropping significantly between 1998 and 2004, and then again in 2013. (The significance of those years is discussed below.) Noteworthy for this analysis, parliamentary turnout shows a similar downward trend. Within the local government figure there is considerable variation, a fact that is not surprising given that there are 67 elections. Figure 2 identifies the ten councils with the highest turnout and Figure 3 looks at the correlation between size and turnout.

Looking at the councils which have the highest turnout figures for 2016, we find a concentration of largely smaller councils with populations of under 10,000, as well as councils based in the South Island. The relationship between council population and turnout is highlighted in Figure 3.⁵ As Figure 3 shows, smaller councils tend to have higher turnout levels than larger councils. Possible explanations for this correlation are discussed below.

The theory

A range of theories have been advanced to explain why people choose to vote or not, the dominant, at least in economics, being the rational voter model; but other factors, such as the level of social capital and political efficacy, also affect turnout (Gludovatz, 2014). The rational choice perspective generally assumes voters have selfish preferences: that is, people unconsciously apply a cost-benefit test when deciding to vote or not and take

into account the degree to which their utility is maximised (Edlin, Gelman and Kaplan, 2005). Voting has an opportunity cost, such as the cost of the time involved identifying candidates and assessing the efficacy of their various promises.

Recent research into voting behaviour shows that the rational voter is not concerned simply with personal utility but also with ‘social utility’, which is the degree to which the benefits from voting are likely to accrue to the community as a whole (ibid.).⁶ Voters’ willingness to consider social utility may be seen to be positively correlated with levels of social capital, and/or the presence of shared civic values (Webster, 2016), an assumption that aligns well with post-election survey results which show that nearly a third of respondents voted because they believed it was their democratic duty and because of their belief in democracy (Local Government New Zealand, 2004; Auckland Council, 2013).

When applying a rational calculus (whether for personal or social utility reasons), potential voters consciously or unconsciously assess the benefits of voting against the costs. The relevant factors are likely to be:

- the amount of time taken to search for information on candidates;
- the complexity of the voting process;
- the direct ‘cost’ of the sphere of government: that is, the amount spent in tax;
- the degree to which there is confidence in the integrity of the voting system;
- the salience of the sphere of government subject to the election. (Department of Internal Affairs, 2010; Local Government New Zealand, 2013)

In addition, there are also contextual and institutional factors with the capacity to influence turnout; for example:

- media interest, often created by local issues and a competitive mayoral race;
- the level of social capital, as localities with higher social capital vote more (Webster, 2016);
- demographic characteristics, as voting varies by age: an older community should vote more than

Table 1: Central and local government turnout (recent elections)

Country	National/federal	Local (average)	Difference
New Zealand	74%	47%	27%
Italy	75%	67%	8%
Switzerland ⁷	45%	49%	-4%
Norway	78%	63%	15%
Canada	61%	41%	20%
Ireland	71%	46%	25%
United Kingdom	66%	33%	33%

Source: Federal and central government figures sourced from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

a community with a younger age profile;

- diversity, as turnout is influenced negatively by the degree of heterogeneity in a community, such as the proportion of residents who are recent migrants (ibid.).

Both sets of factors help throw light on two frequently asked questions: why turnout is consistently below that of parliamentary elections and why turnout has been declining.

Explaining turnout

Figure 1 showed that since 1989 local government turnout has been consistently about 30% below the turnout at parliamentary elections, a difference often interpreted as indicating a democratic deficit. The difference, however, is not uncommon: see Table 1.

Other than Switzerland, where the decentralised model places most public responsibilities at the sub-national level, it appears the norm that turnout in national and federal elections will be higher than for sub-national governments. Employing the perspective of the rational voter, three explanations stand out: the level of salience; the level of elected member discretion; and the related issue of taxation levels.

Given that central government in New Zealand spends 89.4% of all public expenditure (the highest proportion in the OECD along with the Republic of Ireland and Greece), it has significantly more salience than local government, which is responsible for the remaining 10.6%. In comparison, local governments in Norway and Italy spend considerably larger shares of public expenditure, and, not surprisingly, citizens in those

countries have a stronger incentive to invest in the time and cost of voting.

The situation is similar with regard to personal taxation. On average New Zealand local government taxes are approximately 2.5% of household income, whereas central government taxes – that is, income tax, GST and levies – consume between 30% and 40% of household income. If approached from a rational voting perspective the incentive to vote for central government is much greater than for its local counterpart.

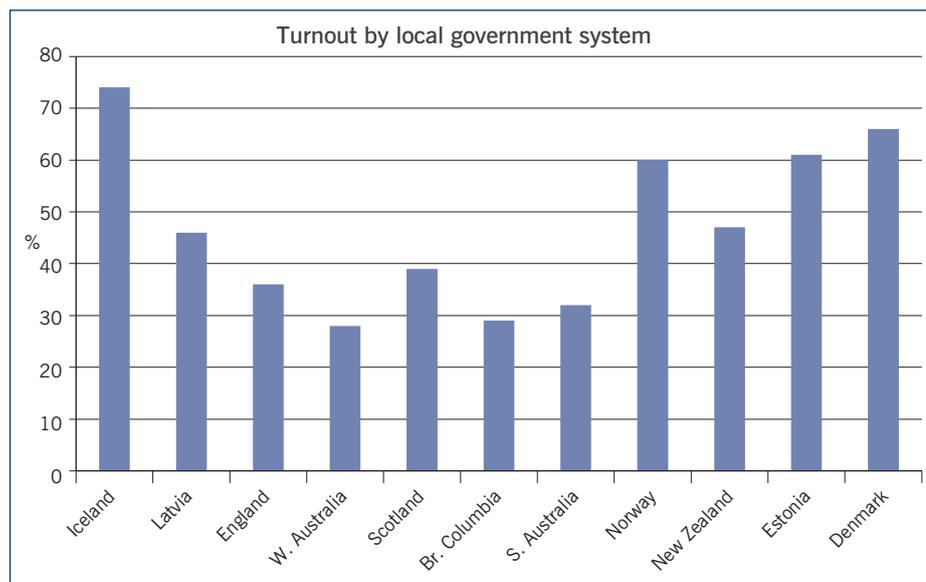
Another factor that can influence the propensity to vote is the presence or not of formal political parties, which play a minor role in local elections in New Zealand. While ‘party politics’ in local government can be problematic (such as substituting national priorities for local ones), it should reduce the cost of information search. For example:

- the party ‘brands’ signal distinct and well-recognised policy styles;
- there is more likelihood of candidates’ policies being implemented should their party become a majority;
- candidates will have been through a ‘filtering’ process to get on the ticket, so the risk of electing eccentric or unpredictable candidates is less.

While theoretically appealing, the evidence that the lack of political parties in local elections has diminished turnout does not appear to be strong, or is undermined by other factors, such as salience. The United Kingdom, where formal political parties play a major role in local elections, has turnout rates of between 30 and 40% (but also has local salience).

While local government turnout is generally less than turnout at the national

Figure 4 International turnout rates

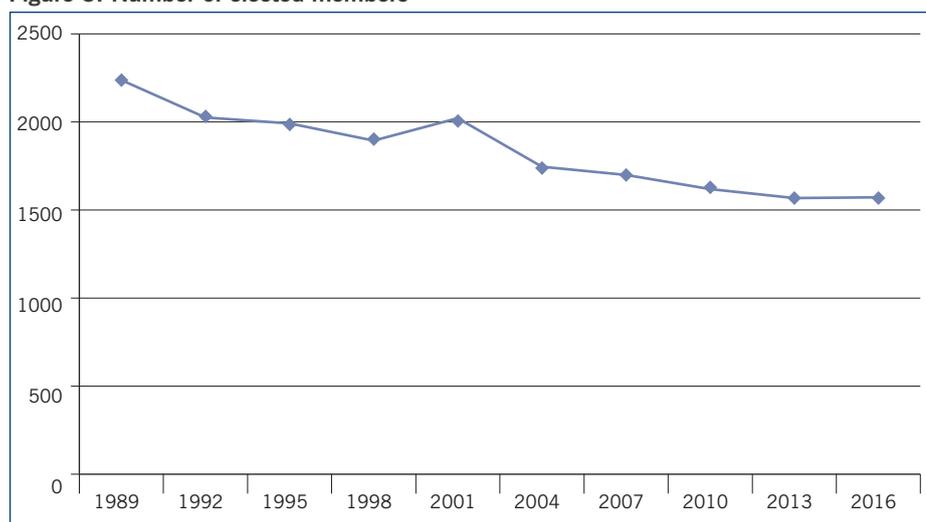


Source: Local Government New Zealand, 2013

Table 2: International turnout trends

Country	Turnout 1980–90	Turnout 2010–13	Change
Israel	80%	67%	-13%
Norway	84%	78%	-6%
United Kingdom	75%	66%	-9%
Canada	75%	61%	-14%
Denmark	88%	88%	0%
Finland	75%	67%	-8%
Netherlands	85%	71%	-14%
New Zealand	89%	74%	-15%

Figure 5: Number of elected members



Source: www.dia.govt.nz

level, it also varies according to the nature of the local government system. Figure 4 shows this variation. Figure 4 highlights an important theme found in local government studies, that turnout rates are strongly correlated to the range of services councils provide, the way they are funded, the degree of elected member

autonomy and their constitutional status. The Zealand system is part of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, along with those of Canada, Australia and the Republic of Ireland. Such local government systems have a narrow task profile and take a small share of national GDP. As Figure 4 shows, turnout in these systems is lower

than in systems found in northern and southern Europe, where councils play a major role in the delivery of social services, such as education, health and police, and possess the authority to levy income and consumption taxes.

Another difference between New Zealand and other countries is the lack of constitutional status and the resulting ease with which central government can amend local government’s status and powers. Why, for example, would citizens spend time and effort assessing candidates when there is a relatively unconstrained ability for higher-level governments to intervene to protect ‘national interests’ or overturn local decisions? Recent examples, such as the removal of the elected councillors at Environment Canterbury, the marginalisation of Christchurch City Council in the post-earthquake rebuild and the government’s intervention in Auckland, act to reinforce the subaltern status of local politicians in this country.

Why is turnout declining?

Voter turnout has demand and supply characteristics. From the demand perspective, the decision to vote is influenced by individual and community values and traditions, as well as expectations that the act of voting will improve personal or community utility. Any change in community values, the introduction of new ways of political participation, or a change in salience (such as a reduction in services or autonomy) may consequently reduce the attractiveness of voting. From the supply perspective voter turnout is susceptible to increases in the cost of voting; for example, if the voting process becomes more complex the consequential ‘cost’ of voting will increase and we can expect that the number of people who choose to vote will diminish. In relation to recent turnout both factors appear to be at work.

Turnout decline is not simply a New Zealand local government issue. In his report on how to increase turnout Gludovatz states that

‘voter turnout in elections in Canada has decreased at the federal and provincial levels to under 60% ... but

in municipal elections the number of people voting has dropped even more dramatically' (Gludovatz, 2014, p.2).

Table 2 shows turnout trends in a number of central and federal governments.

In his 1999 Reith lectures Anthony Giddens referred to the 'paradox of democracy', by which he meant the phenomenon of turnout declining in the 'advanced' democracies at the same time that democracy was spreading and the number of democratic states expanding (Giddens, 1999). Why, he asked, were people in states that had a long tradition of democracy losing interest? His explanation highlighted changing values and the rise of consumerism: that is, the re-conceptualisation of people as consumers rather than citizens, whereby voting is set against Netflix in a competition for 'out time'.

The one country that stands out as having dodged the trend is Denmark. Robert Peden, chief executive of the Electoral Commission, has looked at the Danish experience and notes that in response to signs of a decline in turnout the government adopted a proactive strategy of civics education.⁸ The strategy was built on a programme targeted at schools and younger people and designed to 'induce local discussions and initiatives on how to better cultivate democratic virtues and national belonging among pupils. The main argument and concern was that citizenship education is more important in a globalizing world' (Kriegbaum and Mouritsen, 2015, p.1).

While changing values and perceptions are likely to apply to all spheres of government at the local level, there are a range of additional contextual factors which, should they change, may have an impact on turnout. These are discussed below.

Increasing representation ratios

The ratio between citizens and councillors (the representation ratio) has, if increased, the potential to reduce turnout by diminishing engagement with elected members and increasing the cost of search. Local governments with a low ratio (that is, a small number of residents

per elected position) tend to have a higher turnout than those where the ratio is high (Drage, 2008). The New Zealand ratio is one of the highest in the OECD, and it has increased over the last two decades due to a reduction in the number of elected members and an increase in population: see Figure 5.⁹

Salience

As discussed above, a government's level of salience represents its ability to effectively meet citizens' needs and preferences.

... [voter] turnout was relatively stable in the 1990s, until 2001 when it fell by 4%, to be followed by a fall of 7% in 2004 ... [as] changes to voting processes ... increased voter 'costs'.

Evidence suggests that the salience of the New Zealand local government system, while relatively low due to a narrow task profile, has declined further over recent years. Likely factors are:

- legislation giving various ministers the ability to override council decisions: for example, in relation to aquaculture and urban land use boundaries;
- legislation limiting financial discretion, as with the recent financial prudence measures; and
- legislation enabling ministerial intervention in councils' affairs, such as the enhanced ability of the minister of local government to intervene when he or she identifies 'a problem'.

Such measures, while undermining the constitutional separation of local and central government, also disincentivise potential voters when they realise that elected members are less able to respond to their concerns and expectations.

Alternative mechanisms for influencing local governments

As the Swiss example in Table 1 shows, citizens may prefer alternative ways of influencing their local governments to

voting (Ladner, 2009). While the New Zealand local framework lacks the direct democracy mechanisms found in the majority of Swiss cantons and communes, it does provide a range of formalised opportunities for citizens to take part in decision making, namely the right to be consulted on significant decisions and on councils' annual and long-term planning, budget setting and work programmes.

While anecdotally some citizens may claim to be over-consulted, we have no research that would substantiate

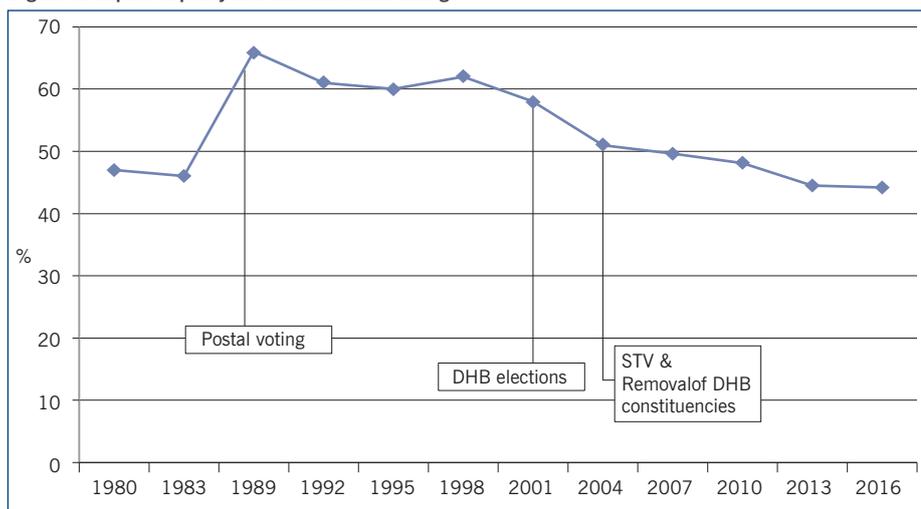
the view that citizens see consultative and engagement opportunities as an alternative to voting. Given that recent legislation has greatly reduced requirements on councils to consult with citizens, this is unlikely to feature as a factor in turnout in the near future either.

Role of elected representatives

Related to the issue of salience is the degree to which politicians have the discretion (statutory authority or institutional mechanisms) to implement the promises on which they stood, or respond effectively to community needs and preferences. Should politicians lack this discretion, voting may cease to be rational.¹⁰ The introduction of New Public Management and corporate-style service delivery models in 1989, and the increased use of council-controlled organisations since (as occurred in the Auckland model), has distanced elected members from decision making on a number of services, many of which are important to citizens.

Chris Trotter describes this trend as a growing democratic deficit created not by a shift in community values, but by government efforts to marginalise local politicians by shifting decision making

Figure 6: Impact of policy and institution and change



Note: Figures for 1989 and 1983 reflect mayoral turnout results (an accurate proxy).

about local public goods into what he refers to as corporate entities. As Trotter argues:

even before the Government sacked environment Canterbury in 2010, it was clear to voters that the ability of their elected members to translate election promises into practical policies has been seriously compromised ... what possible motivation could voters have for treating local government elections as anything other than an increasingly pointless political ritual. (Trotter, 2016)

Complexity

Given that potential voters will consider the ‘cost’ of voting in relation to the degree to which personal and social utility are enhanced, any changes that increase the cost should see a resulting decline in turnout. Figure 6 attempts to identify this effect. It uses average turnout data (and the data starts prior to 1989 which was an unusual peak year due to reorganisation and universal postal voting).

Removing the one-off factors, it would appear that turnout was relatively stable in the 1990s, until 2001 when it fell by 4%, to be followed by a fall of 7% in 2004. Both of those elections were associated with changes to voting processes which potentially increased voter ‘costs’.

- The introduction of the district health board elections in 2001 increased the number of candidates

that voters had to assess and thus the time it took to vote (and, reflecting the lack of political party platforms, information on candidates was not easy to come by).

- The removal of the DHB constituencies in 2004 significantly increased the number of candidates that voters were required to assess;
- The introduction of single transferable voting (STV), also in 2004, meant that almost all voters were confronted with two voting systems, which required additional time to ensure that local government candidates received ticks and DHB candidates numbers (this writer admits to having failed on more than one occasion).
- An off-setting factor to the increased cost of search was the introduction of 150-word profiles (in a booklet) in 2004. The profiles (for good or bad) appear to have become increasingly relied on by many people to assess the efficacy of candidates.

Despite the fall in turnout in both national and local elections, Figure 6 suggests that changes in voting processes can have an effect on the willingness of people to vote. Increased complexity and search time arising from the changes made in 2001 and 2004 appear to have had a discouraging effect on potential voters.

Conclusion

The two questions this article set out to answer were why turnout in local elections

is consistently below the level achieved in parliamentary elections, and why turnout in both elections has been declining.

The first question is straightforward. Voters act rationally and trade off the benefit (in personal and social utility terms) to be gained from participating in an election against the associated costs. The importance – that is, the demand side – is directly proportional to the salience of the governing system and the degree to which politicians possess the discretion and autonomy to put into effect policies and programmes to meet the needs and preferences of the relevant jurisdiction. As the discussion shows, New Zealand local government has relatively low salience: it has a narrow task profile, spends a small share of public expenditure and consumes an even smaller share of GDP.¹¹ And compared to central government, council taxes are a small share of a citizen’s annual income.¹² In addition, the last decade has seen an erosion of local politicians’ autonomy and discretion, both of which are vote-diminishing over time.

The reasons for turnout decline in local government, a phenomenon not limited to New Zealand, are more complex. This is because citizens are not only affected by whatever democratic malaise is sweeping the advanced democracies, but are equally susceptible to government actions that affect the context and institutional settings which apply to local governments, particularly in this case since there are 67 separate elections. In addition to the demand-type factors, such as salience and elected member autonomy, the context and institutional factors, such as population size, demographics, diversity, representation ratios and complexity, all play a role in affecting the propensity of citizens to vote.

Many of these factors are likely to be affected, in a vote-diminishing way, by recent and planned local government reforms. These include efforts to create large local authorities based on the Auckland model (a bill to amend this process is before a select committee); proposals to shift services into council-controlled organisations and thus remove them from the direct

control of citizens and local politicians (contained in the same bill); proposals to set national performance measures which, if implemented, could diminish local discretion; and plans to increase the opportunities for ministers to intervene in local government affairs. The reforms are designed to improve the efficiency of local services and ensure that the 'national interest' is not compromised by local decision making.

Should, on the other hand, the reform objectives be concerned with strengthening local democracy, then a different menu of changes is required. These should be designed to:

- increase local government salience through a programme of decentralisation and (in Giddens' view) deepening democracy;
- recognise local government's constitutional status in order to

provide greater certainty about its role and powers;

- reduce the cost of voting by exploring alternative voting processes, including the use of new technologies; and
- invest in programmes to increase the awareness of all citizens about the nature of our democracy and raise their civic awareness.

- 1 Morning Report, RNZ, 15 October 2001.
- 2 The terms of reference for inquiries tend to vary according to issues that might have arisen leading up to and including the election itself. The big issue for 2004 was the failure of the STV election process in a number of areas.
- 3 Figures for 2016 are still provisional. Final figures will be released by the government in early 2017; they are expected to show a small increase.
- 4 This analysis uses 'average' turnout of councils (the average of the 67 territorial authorities) rather than the total turnout figure (the number of enrolled voters who voted), for two reasons: in the first case, because average turnout is less sensitive to turnout figures in our two largest cities, which contribute virtually 50% of all turnout; secondly, because international turnout data is expressed as averages. As it turns out, the 2016 average and total figures are almost exactly the same. Total turnout figures are included for information.

- 5 For presentation purposes Auckland Council (turnout 38%) and Christchurch City Council (38%) are excluded from this graph. Their exclusion does not affect the correlation.
- 6 Paradoxically the theory would suggest that people are more likely to vote in smaller than in larger elections, as their votes will have more chance to affect outcomes.
- 7 While people will tend to vote more if they believe their vote is likely to count, they may vote less if there are other ways of influencing their governments, such as in Switzerland, which provides extensive opportunities for direct democracy approaches, such as referenda.
- 8 Presentation given to the New Zealand School of Local Government Managers' Electoral Working Party Conference, Wellington, December 2015.
- 9 Includes community and local board members.
- 10 In a survey undertaken by the *Local Government Chronicle* (a UK publication), the major reason citizens gave for not voting was their belief that councillors had no authority to adopt policies and implement programmes to address local issues. Despite UK local government's role as a provider of social services, at that stage services were delivered according to performance standards set by Whitehall.
- 11 Local government taxes represent approximately 2% of GDP, the same proportion as found in 1950 and similar to the share that existed 50 years earlier in 1900, when it was 1.8%.
- 12 This is not the case for many older people who own properties and live on fixed incomes. Not surprisingly this group votes in extremely high numbers.

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