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Revitalising New Zealand's Democracy From the Bottom Up

local government's contribution

Abstract

Established democracies across the world, with few exceptions, are grappling with the issues of growing distrust in public institutions and declining democratic participation. Governments have responded in multiple ways: by, for example, implementing strategies to address regional social and economic disadvantage, such as the United Kingdom's levelling up programme, and reforming electoral systems to address perceived unfairness, such as limits on political donations. There has, however, been little attention given to the role that local government plays, or could play, in a strong and resilient democracy. Councils play at least three major roles: namely, promoting active citizenship, building social cohesion, and strengthening community voice and choice. This article examines the first of those roles, promoting active citizenship, and sets out the reasons why it needs to be a priority for New Zealand councils.

Keywords local government, democracy, declining trust, active citizenship, deliberation

As mayors who are accountable every minute to our neighbours, we can inspire and lead. We can reinforce democracy with everything we do, because as the late Congressman and civil rights hero John Lewis said, 'democracy is not a state. It is an act'. (Myrick 2022)

The last three decades have not been particularly good for liberal democracy. Despite the triumphalism that followed the collapse of the Berlin wall, it took only a few years before opinion surveys began to highlight a declining trust in public institutions and growing discontent with liberal democracy (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2021). It was, and continues to be, a discontent that reflected citizen concern about the inability to control the forces governing their lives. Michael Sandel, who highlighted such concerns in his book *Democracy's Discontent*, argued that the discontent indicated an unravelling of the moral fabric of the community (Sandel, 1996). Nearly 30 years on, Sandel's observations seem even more salient, and not just in the United States.¹

The belief that governments are too remote to care about the problems at the

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grassroots while primarily serving elites is undermining trust in public institutions and is associated with the rise of populist movements of the nationalist sort. Not only are people growing more critical of their political leaders; a growing number are also 'more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system, less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives' (Foa and Mounk, 2016, p.7).²

Yet the reasons behind such attitudinal shifts towards the efficacy of democracy, both as an ideal and as a system, are less clear (see Giddens, 2000; Goodwin, 2018; Rashbrooke, 2018). There is more agreement about the existence of a problem than there is about its causes, or the remedies, but a critical factor is declining trust. In their report, *Trust Issues*, the Institute for Public Policy Research, a British think tank, argues that there are the two sets of factors causing this growing distrust, namely:

- government performance: this means the outputs (such as public services) and outcomes (such as social outcomes) that government delivers;
- government processes: this means the process by which these decisions are made (such as how well democracy functions). (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2021, p.29)

The first, the performance of government, concerns the belief that democratic governments, whether because of a lack of ability, or interest group capture, are unable, or unwilling, to address chronic social and economic inequalities, or address the major challenges societies are facing (also see Collier and Kay, 2021; Godfrey, 2023). This factor also involves the view that this failure of performance has led to widening social and economic divisions between communities, divisions that have undermined notions of collective solidarity/identity and diminished the willingness of people to contribute to the public good (Mounk, 2018; O'Ferrall, 2001; Gluckman et al., 2023).

The second, the processes of government, involves the belief that citizens are gradually being excluded from public decision making due to corporatisation, privatisation and the increasing reliance on experts. From this

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perspective, the Brexit debate was the latest episode in a centuries-old contest between expert rule and participatory democracy (Guldi, 2016). Such processes have created vacant political and cultural spaces that have been exploited by advocates of strong leaders and supporters of xenophobic policies. The result is growing disengagement, which, as Reid and Schulze point out, results in an erosion of both trust and respect for institutions (Reid and Schulze, 2023, p.7).

These trends are present to one degree or another in the majority of established democracies (International IDEA, 2023) and Aotearoa New Zealand is no longer an exception, especially since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which created a new constituency of citizens sympathetic to non-democratic narratives. The threats may not be existential, but they do serve to remind us that the health of our democracy cannot be taken for granted.

Local democracy can play an important role in strengthening our democratic narrative. Three critical roles are rebuilding trust in our public institutions by offering

voice and choice (addressing issues of central government performance); revitalising active citizenship; and strengthening the bonds between our increasingly diverse communities. This article examines the second of these factors, the need for councils to do more to strengthen active citizenship, noting the evidence that discontent with democracy appears directly related to a belief that individual agency is in decline.³ It is a view which draws directly on the narrative, given prominence during Brexit, that the realm of political decision making is being undermined by technocrats and non-democratically accountable agencies. Consequently, there is a growing gap between the policymakers and legislators in Parliament and citizens, many of whom feel excluded from having influence on the decisions that affect their lives – a loss of agency (Goodwin, 2018). In short, the article considers the evidence for why strengthening individual agency and promoting active citizenship should be a priority for councils, which is not necessarily well understood in either central or local governments.

The importance of active citizenship

Loss of individual agency creates a problem of legitimacy (for the state) and relates directly to the growing distance between governments and their citizens,⁴ the reframing of citizens as consumers, and the reduction of the public spaces needed to grow civic strength.⁵ Most of all, loss of agency undermines the traditional notion of citizenship; that is, the belief that being a member of a polity comes with rights (and duties) to be actively involved in decision-making processes about the public interest, at all levels of community. As O'Farrell argued:

A citizen is one who participates in the civil community, either in government or in the deliberative or judicial functions of the polity. Citizenship is the means to involvement in a shared enterprise orientated towards the realisation of the common good; and political participation is the necessary vehicle for the attainment of the good. (O'Ferrall, 2001)

The importance of participation to the act of being a citizen is acknowledged from multiple perspectives. Rashbrooke (2018) argues that participation in collective decision making (which he also refers to as self-government) is one of the most fundamental of all human acts. Reinforcing its psychosocial importance, Benjamin Barber suggests that participation is essential if people are to fully realise their potential as human beings (see Traub, 2024). Both perspectives remind us that citizenship is a learned activity – practice matters.

While the importance of citizenship is not a new idea, dating back to at least Aristotle (Sabine, 1937), it has come back into favour in recent decades, largely in response to socio-economic forces that have had the effect of turning citizens into passive consumers (see New Citizenship Project, 2021). Alongside the growth in citizenship discourse there has been a new interest in the work of writers and theorists who spoke up for active citizenship in the past, such as Hannah Arendt (Elshtain, 2000; O'Ferrall, 2001; Applebaum, 2022; Weinman, 2019).

Arendt argued that being a citizen is to have a capacity to think one's own thoughts, take initiative and act spontaneously – all of which are given effect through politics, and all of which can be undermined by the professionalisation and compartmentalisation of modern life, leading to disempowerment (Applebaum, 2022). In an argument prescient to our current concerns about echo chambers, Arendt called for a common political language to enable citizens to understand the common world, communicate, and identify interests in common. In this context Arendt is echoing Alexis de Tocqueville who, in his study of American democracy in the early 19th century, found evidence that participation in local self-governing associations, such as town councils, enabled citizens to come together to discuss common needs and increase their awareness of the needs of others (de Tocqueville, 1969). Similar views also underpin the more recent interest in civic republicanism, with Sandel arguing that to be free is more than the freedom to choose one's own ends; it is also to share in self-rule, which means participating in shaping

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the forces that govern the destiny of political communities (Sandel, 2000). Inherent in this notion of citizenship is the importance of local spaces in which communication and deliberation can occur. As John Dewey noted in the early 20th century:

'the public is a collective called forth by experience of common problems' ... the way that democratic societies deal with common problems is through public conversation – through what political theorists call 'public reasoning'. (Iverson, 2023)

However, conversation has the potential to be more than simply a collective way of solving problems. Arendt, who uses the analogy of the 'town square', argues that engaging in earnest debate involves experiencing a mutuality of interests. This is especially so where the subject of those conversations is defined by citizens themselves, rather than them being asked to provide feedback on matters defined by an external authority (such as providing feedback on a council consultation document). This importance of direct

engagement, or participation, was addressed in depth by the taskforce that reviewed the future of local democracy in Scotland in 2014. In their report, the taskforce concluded that participatory democracy doesn't just enhance transparency; it builds trust and ensures that policies reflect the community's voice and needs (Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy, 2014). Other benefits identified by the commission include:

- Citizens and government engaging in a more personal and meaningful way can generate a two-way learning process towards a more aware and active citizenship, and become, as a result, better informed and more responsive government actors.
- Citizens become better equipped and more able as a result of the knowledge and awareness that comes from real-life contact with officials.
- Citizens feel they have a stake in governance because they have opportunities to express their views and affect policy decisions.

The taskforce argued that a more responsive local governance system would lead to greater consensus, shared ownership, and citizens who are more likely to comply with local policy decisions voluntarily. It is by participating in the local polity that people acquire the skills and aptitudes necessary to become citizens, a role that local government is ideally placed to play. Municipalities, as de Tocqueville (1969) noted, not only give citizens the experience of government but also act as schools of citizenship. The Scottish Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy came to a similar conclusion:

Research evidence ... suggests that when local democracy is regarded by citizens as important in their lives, and where citizens are more engaged in the political life of their local community, then those citizens also tend to be more engaged and active within local civic society. (Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy, 2014, p.21)

Reinforcing this finding, a study on the impact of citizen participation in the Netherlands cities of Groningen and Eindhoven found that participation

increased respondents' understanding of decision-making processes, as well as providing the skills necessary for dealing with bureaucratic processes. The study also found that participation results in respondents having a more positive view of the municipality and being more willing to work with neighbours on local issues (Michels and De Graaf, 2010).

This proximity contributes to socialising democratic norms and building trust towards, and understanding of, local public institutions. It is an outcome that is in sympathy with the tradition of civic republicanism, which highlights the intrinsic value of political participation for the participants and, as O'Ferrall (2001) argued, reflects the highest form of living together that most of us can aspire to. He contrasts this notion of citizenship with what he calls the privatised and impoverished view of what it means to be a citizen, which, he notes, is long accepted and still current in democratic societies today.

A growing focus on local government and democratic participation

Increasingly, the municipality is being seen as a site for political engagement and civic transformation, a focus that has resulted in the emergence of new and innovative approaches to local governance. For example:

- The city government in Bologna is undertaking a reconceptualisation of how government might work in cooperation with citizens. Ordinary people, acting as commoners, have been invited to enter into a 'co-design process' with the city to manage public spaces, urban green zones, abandoned buildings and other urban resources (Carson, 2018).
- Cities like Barcelona, Seoul, Frome and Grenoble are experimenting with a poly-centric approach to governance in which policymaking is done at the grassroots level, empowering citizens' groups to make policy proposals (Troncoso, 2017).
- The Belgian region of Ostbelgien has sought to democratise the agenda-setting process by using both an agenda-setting citizens' council and a decision-making citizens' panel. The citizens' council is a longer-term body

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that sits for 18 months and monitors the implementation of recommendations made by the shorter-term panel.⁶

- The Scottish government and COSLA, the Scottish association of councils, agreed in 2017 that councils will allocate at least 1% of their budgets through participatory budgeting processes.

Other developments of interest include the way in which the Kurdish cities in the north-east of Syria (Rojava) have adopted Murray Bookchin's concept of democratic confederalism and established municipalities based on the principles of participation and inclusivity (Rojava Information Centre, 2022).

Two recent reports from the United Kingdom throw light on what councils can do to strengthen democratic participation and strengthen local voice. The first is the report of the Newham Democracy and Civic Participation Commission (2023). The commission had two tasks: to review the borough's existing system of governance, including its directly elected mayoral model; and explore the way in which local citizens could be more involved in local decision making and the council's work.

Although not all of the commission's ten core recommendations are relevant to New Zealand, those most pertinent to the topic of this article are:

- that a permanent citizens' assembly, meeting twice a year, is established to consider important and emerging local issues;
- that the borough expand participatory and area-based democracy with a minimum of 20% of the council's community infrastructure levy allocated through neighbourhood or area-based participation. The process for setting neighbourhood priorities should be aligned with the council's annual budget-setting process;
- that a community-wide community governance review is carried out to co-produce, with local people, a framework on how devolution and area-based governance will work;
- that the borough work with local people to develop a statement of mutual expectations around participation and involvement, to be an integral part of the Newham mayoral model; and
- that a 'one Newham' partnership is established as the key vehicle for the council to engage with the voluntary and community sector.

Some of the critical themes in the commission's recipe for strengthening local democracy involve the creation of a permanent citizens' assembly, a focus on co-production with communities, and the empowerment of neighbourhoods. The commission's recommendations reflect a growing view that representative democracy, which generally engages with people only occasionally (during elections or formal consultations), is unable to meet people's expectations for having influence. Consequently, interest in deliberative and participatory approaches, which are designed to bring different voices to the decision-making table, has been growing. As Carol Harlow noted more than two decades ago, 'today the argument has shifted. Models of deliberative and participatory democracy are increasingly fashionable' (Harlow, 2002, p.1).

New Local, a UK-based think tank, argues that, despite the high profile of recent national deliberative initiatives, deliberative and participatory activities are

Deliberation brings together claims on public agendas and resources with reasons, and requires agents and institutions to listen to the reasons, weigh them against competing ones, and do so visibly.

Direct forms of participation are those in which citizens are personally engaged in providing input, making decisions and solving problems (Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015, cited in Rashbrooke, 2018).

most likely to have impact at a local level (see Pollard, Studdert and Tiratelli, 2021). This reflects the degree to which people believe they are more able to influence decisions at the local than the national level. In terms of their ability to promote active citizenship, deliberative and direct forms of democratic participation can be constrained by their episodic nature and the fact that their existence and topic of consideration depend on the discretion of an authorising body, in this case a local authority. Representative deliberative approaches rank highly for their ability to make well-reasoned and researched recommendations reflecting the diversity of the affected community (which is also trust-enhancing in itself), but are unlikely to build citizenship skills amongst the majority of people, skills which are learned through practice. This is where participatory approaches, which are more broad-based and intended to involve large numbers of people, can help.⁷

To increase active citizenship, deliberative tools need to live alongside forms of engagement, especially those that are ongoing and occur in the context in which people live, work and play – in other words, ongoing and permanent mechanisms through which citizens can participate. Sandel makes this point when he states that ‘the formative aspect of republican politics requires public spaces that gather citizens together, enable them to interpret their condition, and cultivate solidarity and civic engagement’ (Sandel, 1996, p.349). More relevantly, he argues that contemporary issues make the politics of neighbourhoods more important as they constitute sites of civic activity and political power that can equip citizens for self-rule.

The significance of neighbourhoods to democratic government has received growing attention in recent years, the reasons for which were well summarised

by Leighninger in 2008 (see also Fyans and McLinden, n.d.). Leighninger concluded that neighbourhoods:

- aren't the only hubs for community, but they may still be the most important ones;
- are where conflict between residents and government is on the rise – over local land use decisions, crime prevention and policing strategies, traffic, environmental concerns, school closings, and so on;
- are often where new leaders first emerge;
- are the most immediate access points for confronting a wide range of public problems – and leveraging a host of community assets;
- are where you can foster cooperation, collaboration, and public work involving residents, government and other groups;
- are at least one important arena where government ‘of, by, and for the people’ can actually happen, on a regular, ongoing basis (rather than every once in a while, when a crisis occurs or a major decision approaches).

In short, neighbourhoods are a setting where politics can be reunited with community and culture – a place where people can maintain social connections, exercise political power, and feel like they are part of something larger than themselves (Leighninger, 2008, p.5). More recently, noting that neighbourhoods are the home to associational life at the local level, Fyans and McLinden identified three principles underpinning an ‘empowered’ community. They are:

- autonomy: residents are free to define the problems, or possibilities, of their neighbourhoods and are facilitated and supported to do so;
- participation: residents are brought into the process of local decision

making in a democratic and consequential way;

- results: residents’ engagement leads to tangible results for their neighbourhoods, with clearly defined pathways of accountability.

If participation is to lead to active citizenship, then approaches need to not only include representative deliberation such as citizen assemblies, citizen juries and citizen panels, but also include structured opportunities for communities to learn citizenship skills through participatory style mechanisms: for example, participatory budgeting, neighbourhood budgets, and processes for recognising (and incorporating into decision making) self-defined communities, whether communities of place, interest or identity. Local government, reflecting its democratic mandate, can play a key role in building civic strength. That role includes being stewards of the local commons and creating spaces (actual and virtual) within which political conversations and dialogue can occur in a non-threatening way, essentially facilitating public deliberation.

As Head notes:

Respect for plural forms of knowledge and experience is central to promoting democratic participation and more decentralised forms of civic discussion. Given the many forms and sources of policy-relevant knowledge and experience, it is argued that multiple venues and forms of discussion are necessary to address complex and contested issues and to improve trust and legitimacy in decision-making. (Head, 2023, pp.10–11)

Head emphasises the importance of public spaces that promote dialogue between communities, including iwi/Māori, to both give expression to the diversity of values and viewpoints in communities and, as a result, strengthen trust in our democratic infrastructure.

The concept of a ‘local commons’ involves identifying those matters that people have a common interest in and where processes for reaching agreement, or at least recognising differences, are critical for community well-being. Councils that take their democratic enhancing role

Table 1: Citizen participation approaches

New Zealand	Denmark	England	Scotland
Community boards which are primarily advisory.	Participation primarily through local civic, sports and cultural organisations. Limited use of service user boards at municipal level, some mandatory but with little influence.	Local referenda required to approve neighbourhood plans on planning and development.	Elected community councils give community views on planning and development, though concerns about representativeness and lack of influence.
Māori communities involved in co-governance over significant natural resources.	Little use of local referenda. This is now legally binding but unused and no citizen initiation.	Some local experimentation in the use of deliberative approaches. Low-level use of participatory budgeting.	Growth in use of participatory budgeting to allocate relatively small local budgets. Infrequent use of local advisory referenda.

Source: Scottish Government, 2021

seriously should be actively protecting, if not enhancing, the spaces, events and processes that constitute the commons within their jurisdictions, given that they are opportunities within which communities can recognise differences and identify matters in commonality. Head (2023) highlights this role in relation to the obligations inherent within te Tiriti o Waitangi, obligations that ultimately require engagement between communities of place and mana whenua. It is only at the local level that meaningful conversations to reconcile whānau and hapū aspirations with those of the community can be aligned, or mediated.

While local government plays a critical role in creating opportunities for diverse communities to interact, it can also contribute to the creation of civic-enhancing cultures, or civic infrastructure. High levels of civic infrastructure, supported by rules and processes in the managerial, political and civic domains, can encourage participation by incentivising citizens to mobilise.

Local government in New Zealand

Even though few, if any, make it a priority, New Zealand councils don't lack for reasons to promote democratic participation. In fact, promoting democratic participation is a duty that sits front and centre in its purpose, as set out in the Local Government Act 2002, which states that the purpose of local government is:

- (a) to enable democratic local decision-making and action by, and on behalf of, communities; and
- (b) to promote the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of communities in the present and for the future. (s10)

Although a critical element of local government's purpose since 2002, the requirement to enable democratic local decision making by communities is not well understood. In fact, we have no information at all about the degree to which councils have intentionally sought to implement it, unlike the second part of the purpose, which is concerned with the 'four' well-beings.⁸ Despite the lack of overt recognition, the case for New Zealand councils playing a more active role in building active citizenship has been made in recent years by both the Future for Local Government panel and the Helen Clarke Foundation.

The Future for Local Government panel was established to review and make recommendations about the potential role of local government at a time when it appeared that councils would be playing little to no role in traditional functions like the 'three waters' and town/city planning (and, in the view of some commentators, roading). Among its findings, the Panel emphasises the opportunities for councils to play a larger role in promoting well-being, building inclusive communities, and investing in local economic development (e.g., through anchor institutions). It also argues for a more participative form of local government:

local democracy needs to expand beyond voting and traditional forms of engagement towards greater citizen-led democratic participation and innovation. People need the opportunity to fully participate in decision-making on policies and issues that affect their futures and future generations.

The Panel recommends that local government and councils develop and invest in democratic innovations, including participatory and deliberative democracy processes. (Review into the Future for Local Government, 2023, p.82)

Similarly, Reid and Schulze, writing for the Helen Clarke Foundation and BERL, argue, in their report on strengthening civic life, that councils 'must commit to fostering genuinely engaged communities to prevent an erosion of trust and cooperation, and to improve the lives of the people that they represent' (2023, p.5). They recommend that councils become 'enablers of community-led development' (ibid.) by supporting mediating institutions and the people who facilitate communities of place, identity and interest.

Both reports highlight the fact that New Zealand councils have been slow to adopt innovative engagement and participatory approaches despite the options available to them, an observation also made recently by a comparative study undertaken by the Scottish government (see Table 1).

As Table 1 highlights, New Zealand councils tend to have a smaller palette of participation and engagement tools than countries like England, Denmark and Scotland; however, even in those countries the use of deliberative and participatory mechanisms is still in its early stages. It is telling that, when looking for evidence of innovative approaches to participation, the Scottish researchers could only identify community boards, which, when used well by councils, bring citizens closer to decision making, and the increasing number of co-governance arrangements between

councils and iwi/Māori (which will be examined in more detail in a later paper).⁹

If they are to be successful in deepening democracy and strengthening active citizenship, local governments in New Zealand will need to embrace their democratic purpose and establish new and innovative processes for meaningful engagement. Such processes must go beyond the episodic use of deliberative and participatory tools, noting the important role they play to embrace democracy as a core purpose. This means that elected members must start seeing themselves less as boards of directors and more as assemblies of citizens. In other words, councils need to aspire to be democratic spaces in which residents can come together as citizens and contribute directly to the political conversations needed to ensure their communities have sustainable and prosperous futures. It is a challenge that involves local champions, new systems of local representation and a willingness, amongst elected members, to embrace the diverse and plural voices of their communities.

Encouragingly, as noted by Wright, Buklijas and Rashbrooke (2024) in their article on deliberative practices in New Zealand over recent years, councils are beginning to make more use of such tools: for example, the use of citizens' assemblies to identify future options for Auckland's Watercare and priorities for Wellington City' Council's long-term plan. There are, however, many more interventions that councils could make to promote active citizenship, such as:

- create local forums to provide input into council decision making and where appropriate delegate responsibilities, such as empowering community boards or community committees as practised by Manawātū District Council;¹⁰
- make greater use of citizen governance options, including co-governance, co-commissioning and citizen panels, including citizen appointments on committees to improve inclusivity;
- invest in civics education by encouraging youth involvement and building relationships with educational institutions;
- examine and look to replicate successful co-governance initiatives between

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- councils and iwi/Māori, such as the Mana Whakahono partnership agreement between Taupō District Council and Ngāti Turangitukua;
- ensure that deliberative and/or participatory approaches are used to frame options before consultation on major issues is undertaken;
- build enduring relationships with local media;
- ensure that a proportion of each annual budget is allocated through participatory budgeting mechanisms;
- support local and neighbourhood networks that are actively investing in civic infrastructure, including support for building organisational capability;
- redesign their own governance and decision-making structures to create democratic spaces which can reflect the plural nature of their districts and

facilitate the development of a strong civic culture.

When it comes to how they organise their governance arrangements and engage with communities, New Zealand's councils have considerable discretion, so we need to better understand why the adoption of deliberative and participatory techniques has been slow, particularly when compared to Australian councils, which have very similar systems of local government (Wright, Buklijas and Rashbrooke, 2024). While the question is yet to be properly researched, it is likely to reflect the design of our local government model, particularly the way in which the reforms introduced in 1989 took an instrumental approach (Reid, 2016a). As a result of those changes, New Zealand councils are now, on average, the fifth largest in the world by population and second largest in the world by area – both of which are factors inhibiting participation.¹¹ Other factors that are likely to have contributed to the slow take up include:

- representation – New Zealand councils have one of the highest ratios of citizens to councillors in the OECD (Reid, 2016b), making it more difficult for elected members to engage with, and represent, their constituencies;
- political culture – reflecting New Zealand's small number of councillors, there is a tendency for governing bodies to act more like boards of directors than elected assemblies. This diminishes their ability to represent the diversity of their communities;¹²
- managerialism – along with the public sector generally, organisational structures mirror those of corporations, with subject experts typically found as third-level managers, a phenomenon that largely preferences managerial above subject matter skills;
- processes – although designed to provide a mechanism through which citizens could determine the future direction of their communities, the long-term plan has become almost the opposite – a complex tool that can be used to restrict the ability of communities to participate in decision making, exclude unwanted voices and narrow the policy.¹³

Most of the challenges listed above are within the discretion of elected members to address, should they be motivated to do so.¹⁴ What is needed, however, is greater recognition, from both the public and the government, of the role that councils play in our democracy, although it is not entirely clear where such recognition should come from. In the absence of a parliamentary commissioner for the state of our democracy, or equivalent, it will be up to non-governmental organisations and think tanks, including Local Government New Zealand, to take the lead.

Conclusion

The case for local governments to see themselves at the forefront of efforts to strengthen, if not save, our civic and democratic cultures is well summed up by Svante Myrick, the mayor of Ithaca, when he states:

As mayors, we are alarmed by the looming risk of authoritarianism, and we are keenly aware that we are on the forefront of the effort to preserve people's faith in democracy ... we also know that when people feel ignored or abused by politicians and institutions, they reject those institutions ... They may look for answers in extremist groups or under destructive leaders. Mayors represent many people's most immediate connection to and experience with democracy. We need to make that experience a good one. (Myrick, 2022)

This article has sought to show that the belief that personal agency is in decline is contributing to both a distrust of public institutions and a tendency for people to reject democratic norms. It argues that the only way to address concerns about diminishing agency is to in fact strengthen active citizenship by increasing opportunities for citizens to be involved in meaningful decisions about the governance of their communities. Achieving this, however, has implications for how local government currently works, how local decisions are currently made, and for the range of public decisions that are made locally.

It would be nice to think that central government and its relevant public agencies would be showing more interest in what councils could do, but to date local government's potential democracy-enhancing role is missing from public policy discourse. This is not unique to New Zealand. As Elinor Ostrom points out, democratic systems that neglect local-scale governance have the effect of disincentivising civic engagement and unravelling the social fabric of real communities (see Kaye, 2020). The solution to the problem of democracy is not less democracy (by supporting more centralisation, corporatisation and bureaucratisation), but more democracy (by increasing the involvement of citizens in the decisions that affect their lives and communities and creating more spaces within which local conversations and deliberation can take place). To be meaningful, citizen participation requires a real shift in power and citizen control.

The community is the starting point of citizenship, as community enables citizens to truly feel and exercise their power and voices in a way that is respected by their fellow citizens. Governments' role in promoting community building and active citizenship should be to facilitate and support citizens ... empowering them to participate in their own development. (Bishop and Davis, 2001, p.181)

New Zealand local governments are well placed to promote active citizenship, whether developing spaces for communities to consider and deliberate on topical and future issues or shifting decision making closer to communities themselves. This objective is well-aligned with the purpose of the Public Service Act 2020, which places a duty on the public services to facilitate active citizenship (s11). This creates a real opportunity for the development of a joined-up approach to increasing active citizenship between central and local government (while noting that for the purpose of the Public Service Act, local government is not part of the public service). Changing to a more inclusive and collaborative model, however, will require

committed leaders, in both local and national organisations, prepared to advocate for more investment in local civic cultures. As Samuel Moyné noted in an article about the future of liberalism, agency 'doesn't just materialise – the conditions must be built for it' (Moyné, 2023, p.6). It is at the local level that this investment (which is not simply material) is needed.

- 1 The most recent assessment of the state of global democracy shows that the number of full democracies has fallen from 28% in 2007 to 24% in 2022, with a corresponding increase in the number of hybrid regimes like illiberal democracies (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022). Some countries, however, have bucked the trend. Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and Luxembourg are examples of countries where support for democracy has not only not declined but has reached all-time highs.
- 2 A recent survey by Onward (a UK-based think tank) found that young people in the UK are increasingly disillusioned with the efficacy of democracy as a way of governing. For example, it found that 61% of 18–34-year-olds think that 'having a strong leader who does not have to bother with Parliament and elections would be a good way of governing this country'. A 2024 IPSOS poll (<https://www.ipsos.com/en-nz/populism-global-advisor-survey-2024-nz-edition>) found that 66% of New Zealanders agreed that New Zealand 'needs a strong leader to take the country back from the rich and powerful', compared with a global survey average of 63%.
- 3 Further papers are prepared that focus on the practical measures councils can take to strengthen active citizenship, as well as the other two major roles that councils play which contribute to a strong democracy, namely their role in strengthening community cohesion (as highlighted by Gluckman et al., 2023) and their role as a check and balance on central government (by offering voice and choice).
- 4 Citizens in the wider sense of the word, not simply people who have citizenship in a polity.
- 5 Civic strength is a concept recently developed by the Young Foundation (2021) which involves three dimensions – public and social infrastructure, relationships and social capital, and democratic engagement.
- 6 By removing agenda-setting from either vested interests or politicians, the process – in theory – allows for matters of genuine public concern to be raised. In practice it means that things in the politically 'too difficult' basket get onto the agenda, and that political grandstanding has little effect on the process (https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/paris_creates_permanent_citizens_council).
- 7 For a discussion on the similarities and differences of deliberation and participation see the OECD library at <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/e133cc3c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/e133cc3c-en>.
- 8 Many councils report on the state of well-being in their jurisdictions. With regard to democratic participation, the tendency is to report on the rate of voter turnout, which is not, by itself, a helpful guide to the level of democratic participation.
- 9 What the research does not show is the degree to which many councils appear to actively diminish the ability of community boards to contribute to decision making, thus diminishing their scope for promoting active citizenship.
- 10 Manawatu District Council has a policy of establishing committees in all of its small villages and townships, of which there are almost 20, and supporting them to develop community plans as well as allocate community grants.
- 11 Calculated by the author using OECD and UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments) databases.
- 12 Many councils have now abolished their committee systems, which traditionally provided a mechanism for dialogue with their communities, in favour of centralising all decision-making with the governing body.
- 13 An indication of how the long-term plan can be used to diminish local participation is the growing number of councils which no longer consult on their annual plans. Consequently, the only formal opportunity for citizens to engage with these councils is the three-year LTP engagement process.
- 14 A possible disincentive is the fact that councillor remuneration is correlated with the number of councillors. A reduction in the number of members results in higher salaries for the remaining councillors, although proposals to change the number of councillors are ultimately appealable to the Local Government Commission.

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