

Local Councils have an active role to play in creating and enforcing NZ's laws.

The 2013 Elections – What are the Lessons?

Local Government New Zealand Submission to the Justice and Electoral Select Committee

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Summary

Total turnout in the 2013 elections was 41.3%, down from the 49% recorded in the 2010 elections, generally reflecting the significant reduction in the Auckland Council vote. Average turnout, that is the average of all 66 elections, was 47%¹. This figure was 4% less than the average 2010 turnout 51% and 19% below the 1989 average of 66%.

Analysis shows that the decline in turnout is likely to be the result of three factors:

- Changing perceptions towards voting and democracy. The change in local government turnout since 1989 closely mirrors the change in the turnout for parliamentary elections over the same period, suggesting that the cause is likely to be related to citizens' changing perceptions of democracy itself rather than issues specific to local government.
- Increasing complexity in the local government voting system. The major decline in local government turnout occurred in the 2001 and 2004 elections, which saw the introduction of District Health Board (DHB) elections, STV for DHBs and some councils; the removal of DHB constituencies, and the introduction of the three week voting period. International research shows that complex voting systems can reduce peoples' willingness to vote.
- Changes to the institution of local government itself. Over the last twenty years the size of councils has increased, representation ratios have increased and this has arguably resulted in a gradual reduction in 'salience' i.e. the degree to which councils are regarded as relevant. Each of these factors has a negative impact on turnout.

Recommendations

1. That LGNZ and central government work together to develop a coordinated approach to the promotion of local elections and the education of voters.
2. That a central/local government task force is established to review the state of citizenship education and identify options for its further development in schools and the community.
3. That urgent attention is given to the development of an online voting, and enrolment, system for the 2016 elections along with an alternative, such as ballot boxes, for those unable or unwilling to access the technology.
4. That online voting is trialled in any council elections that might be required as a result of a re-organisation scheme prior to October 2016 and/or for any by-elections and polls might occur in that time.
5. That the Government consider reducing the three week voting period to a one week event so as to allow better focused strategies to remind people to vote and return their envelopes.
6. That the Government develop guidelines to assist officials assess the likely impact on voter turnout of any future proposals to amend local government's regulatory and legislative framework.

¹ Please note. These figures are still election night figures and are yet to be adjusted for wards where no election took place. Once that adjustment has been made the percentage will increase slightly.

Introduction

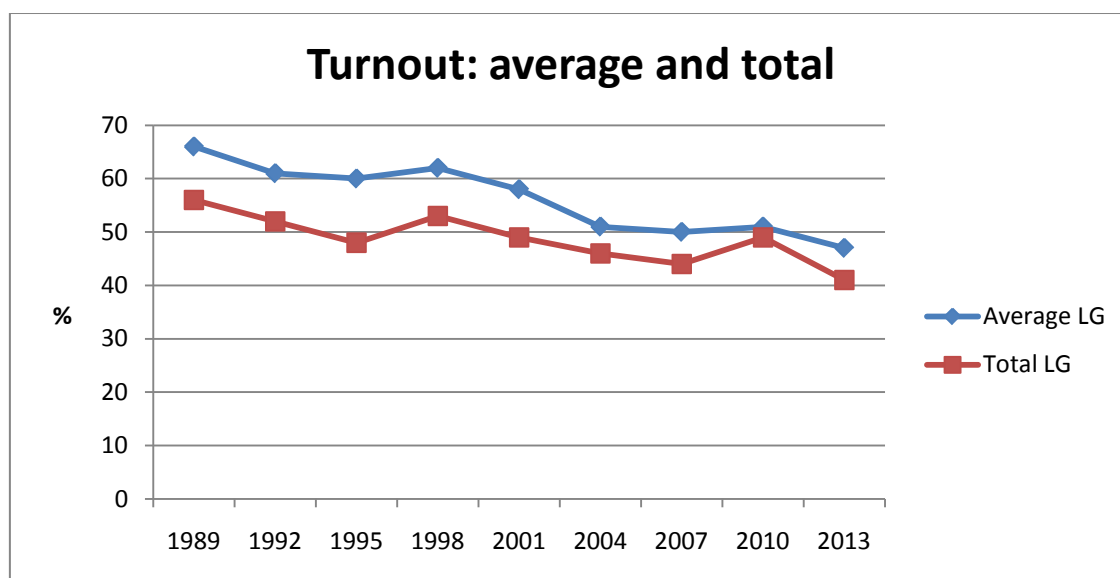
1. Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the Select Committee's inquiry into the running of the 2013 elections. Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ) has contributed to each of the Select Committee's reviews since 2004 and we were very pleased earlier this year that the Local Electoral Act 2001 was amended to incorporate many of the Committee's previous recommendations. The resulting changes were helpful for electoral officers and contributed to a campaign marked by a lack of any serious process or technical issues.
2. There are, however, a number of issues on the horizon, such as the viability of postal voting, given recent delivery changes signalled by NZ Post, and a broad desire to start using new technologies and how quickly and securely this can be done. In addition, this submission accompanies the submission from the SOLGM Electoral Working Party (EWP), which is primarily focused on the voting process and technical and procedural aspects of that process.
3. LGNZ's submission addresses the Select Committee's focus on the following issues:
 - factors behind voter turnout;
 - strategies for increasing participation; and
 - the complexity of the voting process and potential for voter confusion.
4. Our analysis of the turnout data since 1989 shows two important trends. The first is that changes in turnout in local government elections actually mirrors turnout changes in parliamentary elections for the same period. We ask the question; is it just a local issue or is the real issue the community's changing attitudes to democracy in general that is responsible for the declining trend?
5. The second examines the nature of the decline. In local government's case there has not been a consistent decline since 1989. In fact the data shows that turnout has been relatively stable except for a noticeable fall associated with the 2001 and 2004 elections, and a further fall of approximately 4% in average terms (or 8% in the total vote) in the recent 2013 elections.²
7. LGNZ is fully committed to building a strong and sustainable system of local government. If this is to happen participation by local voters is vital to ensure the system has a substantial and recognised mandate. We look forward to working with the committee to resolve these questions and identifying strategies which will help not only halt the drop in voter turnout but also reverse the decline.

² The 2013 data is still based on election night returns. Final figures will not be known until DIA publishes its analysis of the 2013 elections next year.

The 2013 elections - turnout

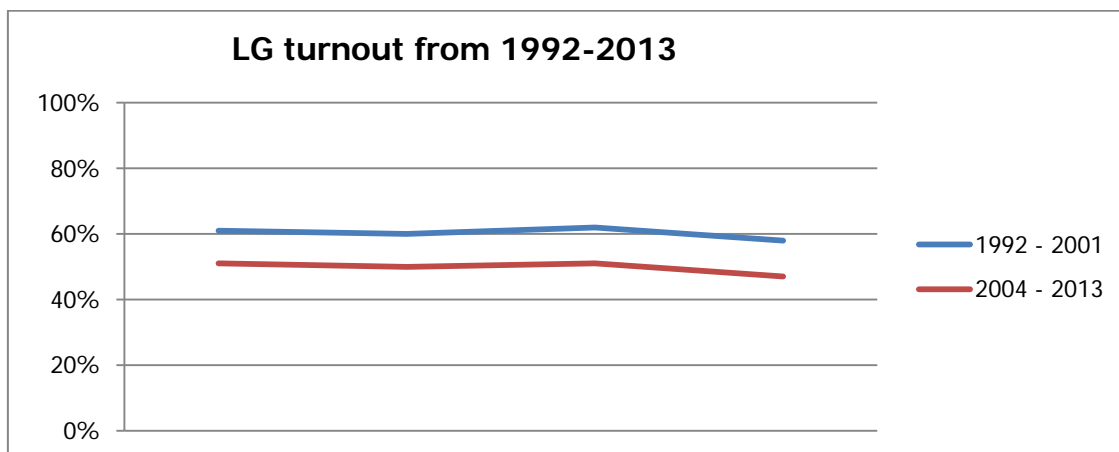
- 8 Total turnout in the 2013 elections was 41.3%, down from the 49% recorded in the 2010 elections. Average turnout, that is the average of all 66 elections, was 47%. This figure was 4% less than the average 2010 turnout 51% and 19% below the 1989 average of 66%, see Figure 1.
- 9 The analysis starts in 1989 as that was the first election after the re-organisation of local government and all councils had moved to postal voting. The turnout pattern was similar to previous years with smaller councils voting more than larger councils, and smaller councils in the South island voting most of all, at 55%. Turnout in Auckland Council dropped nearly 15% to be consistent with the metropolitan area's long term average of approximately 36%. Turnout increased in 17 councils while the highest turnout was in Westland District with 63% and the lowest turnout was in Waikato District, with 30.5%

Figure 1: Average and total local authority turnout 1989 - 2013



- 10 Figure 1 shows both total and average turnout. Total turnout tends to be used where councils are of similar size and is calculated by calculating the number of people who voted as a percentage of those eligible to vote i.e. on the electoral rolls. It is calculated by taking an average of the turnout rates of each council. The average figure is less influenced by the voting behaviour of one or two very large councils and gives a more accurate picture of turnout in all the councils where an election took place. That is, it provides a more accurate indication of the state of democracy within each of our councils, not biased by a handful of very large councils.
- 11 The turnout trend in local authority elections is not consistently down. This is shown in figures 1 and 2, both of which indicate a relatively stable turnout either side of the 2001/04 elections. It is illustrated more graphically if we discount the turnout level in 1989 as unusually high due to interest caused by the reorganisation of local government and the novelty of postal voting. Figure 2 highlights the impact of changes made to the voting process and the electoral system in 2001 and 2004; see below:

Figure 2: Turnout: 1992 - 2013

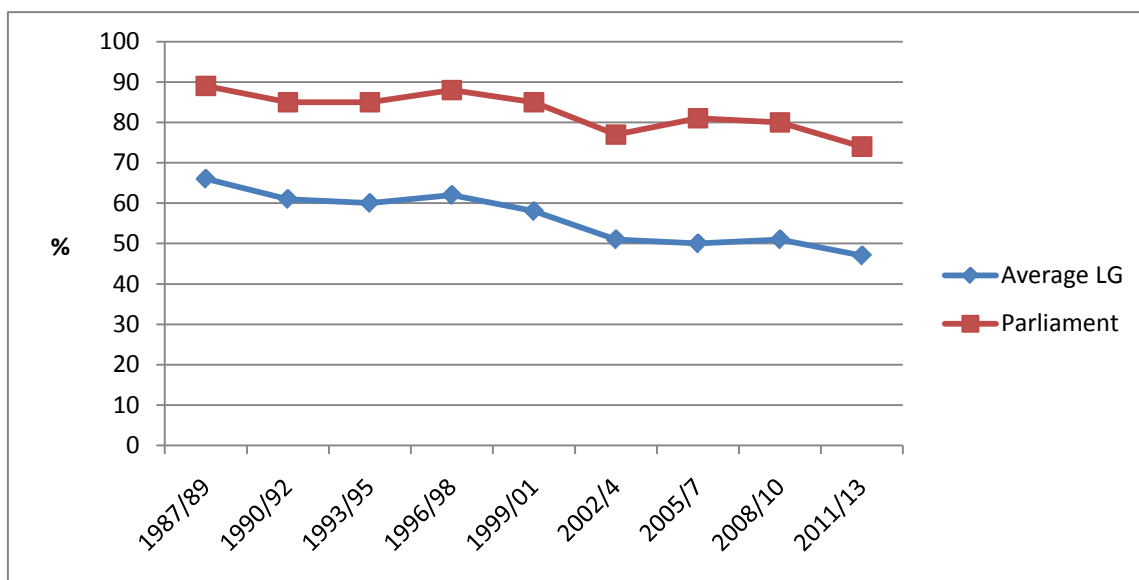


- 12 One of the questions facing the Committee is to understand the causes behind the drop in turnout between 2001 and 2004. To what degree is it associated with the fact that voting in 2001 and 2004 became more complex as a result of the introduction of DHB elections and STV?

Local government and parliamentary electoral turnout compared

- 13 A further question to consider is whether the declining trend in local government turnout is a result of uniquely local government issues or a reflection of social attitudes more generally? If change reflects shifting attitudes towards democracy in general then we might expect to see similar trends in parliamentary electoral turnout. Figure 3 compares turnout for both local and parliamentary elections over a similar period.

Figure 3: Local and parliamentary turnout



- 14 Figure 3 shows a strong correlation between turnout at the parliamentary level and turnout at the local government level. It suggests that similar factors might be behind the decline in both sectors, such as changing community attitudes towards democracy and politics in general. It suggests that to be successful any strategy intended to improve turnout must focus on attitudes towards democracy in general.

Factors influencing turnout

- 15 The Department of Internal Affairs' triennial reports analysing local authority elections provide excellent information on the different factors that are generally recognised as influencing local electoral turnout. In their Report "Local Authority Election Statistics 2010" the Department identified a range of relevant factors which are discussed below in Table 2.

Table 2: Factors affecting turnout

| Institutional arrangements | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Nature and scale of local elections | Complexity can reduce people's willingness to vote. As Figure 2 shows, a drop of 7% in average turnout in 2004 coincided with changes to DHB elections (removal of constituencies), the introduction of STV and the three week voting period. |
| Frequency of elections | If elections are held too frequently voters may get 'voter fatigue'. Whether this applies to a three years term or not is arguable. |
| Compulsory voting | Turnout is clearly higher when voting is compulsory although the number of informal votes is considerably higher and anecdotal evidence suggests that more voters engage in 'donkey' voting – that is they simply vote for the candidates listed first on the voting paper. |
| Electoral system | People need confidence that they understand how voting systems work and a certainty that the confidentiality of their votes is guaranteed. Turnout is likely to be less where confidence is lacking. Turnout data suggests that local citizens have equal confidence in both STV and FPP electoral systems. |
| Voting method | Voting method can have a direct effect on turnout. Postal voting is generally understood to increase voting, at least in beginning, by 20%. ³ |

| Characteristics of the electorate | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Demographics | Voting has a direct correlation with age. Younger citizens vote less than older citizens. |
| Diversity | Turnout is often less in communities which have a high level of diversity or have large immigrant communities, often due to the previous experience of new citizens and a lack of knowledge about the way in which NZ democracy works. |
| Population and size | Citizens of councils with small populations vote at a higher rate than those living in councils with large populations. For example, turnout in councils with populations under 20,000 averaged 49% (55% in the South Island) in 2013 compared with turnout for councils with populations of over 100,000, which averaged 39%. |

³ When Hutt City reverted to ballot box voting for the 1992 elections turnout dropped from 46% to 26%.

| Elector behaviour | |
|--|---|
| The salience of the election | Salience involves the importance people place on local government and its activities. It is directly influenced by the extent of local government's powers and the level of taxation raised locally. Turnout is higher where salience is greater (which largely explains why local government turnout is higher in many European countries where local government plays a bigger role in social service provision.) |
| Knowledge about elections and candidates | According to LGNZ and Local Government Commission surveys a lack of knowledge about candidates is one of the major reason why people say they don't vote (approximately 30% of non voters cite this as a reason). |
| Influence of electors on outcomes | People will tend to vote more if they believe their vote is likely to count. On the other hand, as the Switzerland example illustrates, they may vote less if there are more direct ways of directing their governments. |
| Barriers to voting | Complexity can be a barrier to voting. Since 2004 most local voters have been faced with two voting systems and often have to rank a large number of candidates. |

| Local issues/role of media | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Local government re-organisation | Turnout is frequently higher in the election immediately following a re-organisation, after which it returns to the long run trend. |
| Performance | Voters generally turn out in larger numbers when faced with an issue of poor performance by their council. |

- 16 The New Zealand local government systems has confronted changes in a number of these factors over the last twenty years, particularly changes to electoral systems, increased complexity of voting and the question of salience. Some of these changes may have had an impact on turnout and are discussed in the Appendix.
- 17 The factors identified above highlight the complexity of trying to find a single "magic bullet" to address turnout. As the table shows, voter turnout is directly influenced by such factors as the community's attitude towards democracy; local issues; the institutional structures of local government and the voting process itself.

Strategies for increasing local and national turnout

- 18 LGNZ's conclusion is that turnout in local government elections should not be treated as solely a local government issue – it involves the general community's attitude to democracy and what some describe as our sense of civic responsibility. We believe that changing attitudes towards democracy are an important factor behind the current trend that has seen electoral turnout decline in both central and local government elections over the last twenty to thirty years.
- 19 In addition, however, there are a number of factors that are specific to local government and help explain not only why turnout is below that of parliamentary elections, but why it has been declining at the same or greater rate. These factors, such as the level of salience, electoral complexity and the move to larger councils, can be influenced positively or negatively by

government policy. Ultimately, however, both spheres of government face the same issues – a general reduction of interest in the democratic process itself.

Local government specific strategies

- 20 International research clearly indicates that if we wish to raise the level of voting in local government we need to address the salience question, that is, how important is local government in peoples’ lives and settle on an electoral process and voting system that is not subject to frequent change. Attention therefore, needs to be given to the following:
- Reversing policy settings that diminish the salience of local government (that is policies that undermine decision-making autonomy and councillors’ discretion). LGNZ has endorsed ‘localism’ as a strategy that can do this.
 - Ensuring, when re-organisation processes are under consideration, that final proposals strengthen rather than diminish representation. This means paying close attention to representation ratios, particularly of councillors but also ensuring sub-municipal bodies have meaningful roles.
 - Requiring that electoral and voting process should as much as possible be clear and diminish the risk of voter confusion. Over the last decade local voters have been faced with a number of changes to their electoral and voting systems – we suggest that such changes largely explain the drop in turnout between 1998 and 2004.⁴
- 21 Other specific issues that we believe should be examined by the Select Committee are:
- Shortening the three week voting period to a one week event to enable a more concentrated publicity campaign focused on encouraging voters to return their envelopes.
 - Online voting and enrolment – given that more and more of peoples’ lives and business are conducted online, why not voting? Another advantage of online voting is that it will enable people with disabilities, such as the blind, low visions and older people who struggle with paper work, to vote privately. Some lack a trusted person to assist with filling in a voting form – online and mobile technology should empower this part of our community and increase their participation. (Alternatives must also be available).
 - Coordinated approach to promotion: Clarity is required with regard to which agency(s) should be taking the lead to promote local elections and provide information to candidates and prospective voters. Those organisations involved with the different aspects of local elections must meet as early as possible to agree a coordinated approach and strategy.

Need for a coordinated approach

- 22 The need for a more coordinated approach to promotion and the provision of information was highlighted during the 2013 campaign. A number of agencies were involved.
- LGNZ:
 - published a candidates’ booklet which was distributed to all councils – the booklet covered everything a prospective candidates needs to know about standing for councils;
 - developed a generic presentation on local government for electoral officers to use when running candidates’ seminars;
 - published a journalists guide to local government;

⁴ LGNZ understands the decision to hold local government and DHB elections together. It does, however, mean that turnout expectations may need to be adjusted and/or better communication methods introduced.

- published a series editorials in major newspapers highlighting the coming elections and the importance of voting; and
 - prepared and distributed generic press releases and media articles for councils to use to promote the elections in their local papers.
 - Local Government Online - operated the website www.vote.co.nz;
 - The Society of Local Government Managers – managed the registration of non-resident property owners;
 - The Electoral Commission - provided information on enrolment services;
 - The SOLGM Electoral Working Party - trains and represents statutory Electoral Officers who conduct the elections; and
 - Department of Internal Affairs - has an over-arching interest in the smooth running of the elections and the provision of information.
- 23 There were, however, a number of gaps that the agencies have agreed will need to be addressed before the 2016 elections. These include establishing a single point of contact (such as an 0800 number) for people wanting more information about the elections as well, as a single comprehensive website. We also acknowledge the contribution of the Electoral Commission, even though local elections do not fall within their primary brief.
- 24 LGNZ sees itself as taking a lead in the process of bringing agencies together and setting priorities, however, the issue of funding for such a role is yet to be addressed.

Strategies to enhance democracy

- 25 Given that voter turnout is declining at both the national and local level LGNZ believes that the most important challenge involves increasing the community's understanding of our democratic system and the way in which the political structure in New Zealand works.
- 26 At one level more needs to be done in our schools so that students better understand the nature of our system of government so that they are better prepared, once they become adults, to be active citizens. Civics education, from what we understand, is a discretionary rather than mandatory, topic in the current curriculum.
- 27 LGNZ and its members have supported a number of initiatives that have contributed to increasing the community's understanding of our political system by:
- The Growing Active Citizens group which is a network of officials from agencies with an interest in citizenship education, such as the Electoral Commission, Parliamentary Services, LGNZ, the Ministry of Education and Auckland Council.
 - Promoting local government and voting in schools. A number of councils have invested in the development of resource kits for local schools to raise understanding about local government and what it does and a number of councils and schools have adopted the Kids Voting programme that assists year nine teachers to run a parallel council election in their class. Auckland Council operated this on an online basis in the last election.
- 28 We believe that the Electoral Commission and the Ministry of Education should play a critical role in the process of building citizenship and both should be resourced appropriately. Youth must be a key issues and strategies and tactics need to be developed that resonate with young people and enthuse them to want to take a greater role in the public life of their communities.

Conclusion

- 29 In LGNZ's view turnout at the local government level is not in a state of crisis, although we do agree that strategies need to be developed to reverse the decline, this, however, is both a local and national issue. The level of voter turnout provides political leaders with a mandate to represent the community's interests and potentially strengthens their leadership role, thus the higher the turnout the stronger the mandate. Turnout is related to legitimacy and the creation of what academics describe as an 'authorising' environment, that is creating the authority that allows officials to do their work.
- 30 Given that voter turnout is falling at both the local and national levels at a similar rate, a joint approach must be taken to improving the community's knowledge and understanding about our political system. Such a programme will need to be multi-faceted, operating in both schools and the community in general. As a first step a local central government task force should be established to identify appropriate strategies. A certain level of collaboration is already in place with the Growing Active Citizens network.
- 31 In addition there are issues specific to local government and its voting process that must also be addressed. The recent delivery changes by NZ Post raise into question the ability to continue to hold an effective postal ballot. There is widespread agreement that the three week voting period is too long and we prefer a week. However, with a diminished delivery service there is a risk that papers may have to be delivered before the voting period even starts! Consequently it is urgent to find an alternative. Our preference is to offer citizens the choice between online voting and ballot box. It is a model that has been operating well in Estonia since 2006.
- 32 Poorly devised policy and legislative can have a direct impact on the willingness of people to vote. The local and international evidence shows a correlation between voting, council size and councillors' decision-making autonomy. Officials should consider the impact on voter turnout when considering measures that either increase council size or reduce council autonomy.
- 33 Finally, turnout in local government elections will always be affected by the small role that NZ councils play in the governance of our country. Governing systems with higher levels of fiscal, administrative and political decentralisation will tend to have higher average levels of turnout if for no other reason than that they are seen to be more relevant. LGNZ's has made a commitment to localism so as to strengthen the relevance and salience of the sector.

Recommendations

1. That LGNZ and central government work together to develop a coordinated approach to the promotion of local elections and the education of voters.
2. That a central/local government task force is established to review the state of citizenship education and identify options for its further development in schools and the community.
3. That urgent attention is given to the development of an online voting, and enrolment, system for the 2016 elections along with an alternative, such as ballot boxes, for those unable or unwilling to access the technology.
4. That online voting is trialled in any council elections that might be required as a result of a re-organisation scheme prior to October 2016 and/or for any by-elections and polls might occur in that time.
5. That the Government consider reducing the three week voting period to a one week event so as to allow better focused strategies to remind people to vote and return their envelopes.

6. That the Government develop guidelines to assist officials assess the likely impact on voter turnout of any future proposals to amend local government's regulatory and legislative framework.

Appendix: Explaining the decline in voter turnout

- 34 The first question for the select committee is to determine whether or not turnout decline reflects issues specific to local government or is more a case of an overall change in society's attitudes towards democracy in general. Both possibilities are discussed below.

Changing attitudes towards democracy

- 35 In our 2010 submission we highlighted what Professor Anthony Giddens' (Reith Lectures 2000) described as the paradox of democracy. He was observing that interest in democracy in developed countries was declining at the same time that it was increasing in non-democratic countries. His solution was to advocate for a 'deepening of democracy', essentially giving local citizens and their communities a greater say in the running of their towns and cities - in other words, more of a say in how things work and more meaningful engagement.
- 36 Consistent with Giddens observations declining turnout is not unique to New Zealand; many countries in the OECD are experiencing exactly the same. Table 3 compares a sample of countries with similarities to our own. Of the sample only Denmark stands out as having maintained voter interest over this period.

Table 3 Declining turnout at the national and federal level

| Country | Turnout 1980 - 90 | Turnout 2010 - 2013 | 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% |

- 37 Addressing changing attitudes to democracy and civic values will require a national response, such as a stronger emphasis on civics education in schools and communities and other programmes to highlight the important role democracy plays in building a strong and healthy community.

Factors unique to local government

- 38 While recognising national trends that may impact locally, there are also a range of local factors, as noted by DIA in their report on the 2010 elections, which can and do have a direct influence on peoples' willingness to vote. A number of these factors are changing and will potentially have a negative effect on citizens' willingness to vote. Some of the critical ones are discussed below.

Diminishing salience

- 39 One of the strong observations made in the Department's report on the 2010 elections concerns the relation between turnout and salience, that is, the perceived importance of local government in the governance of the nation/locality. This would suggest that turnout is likely to

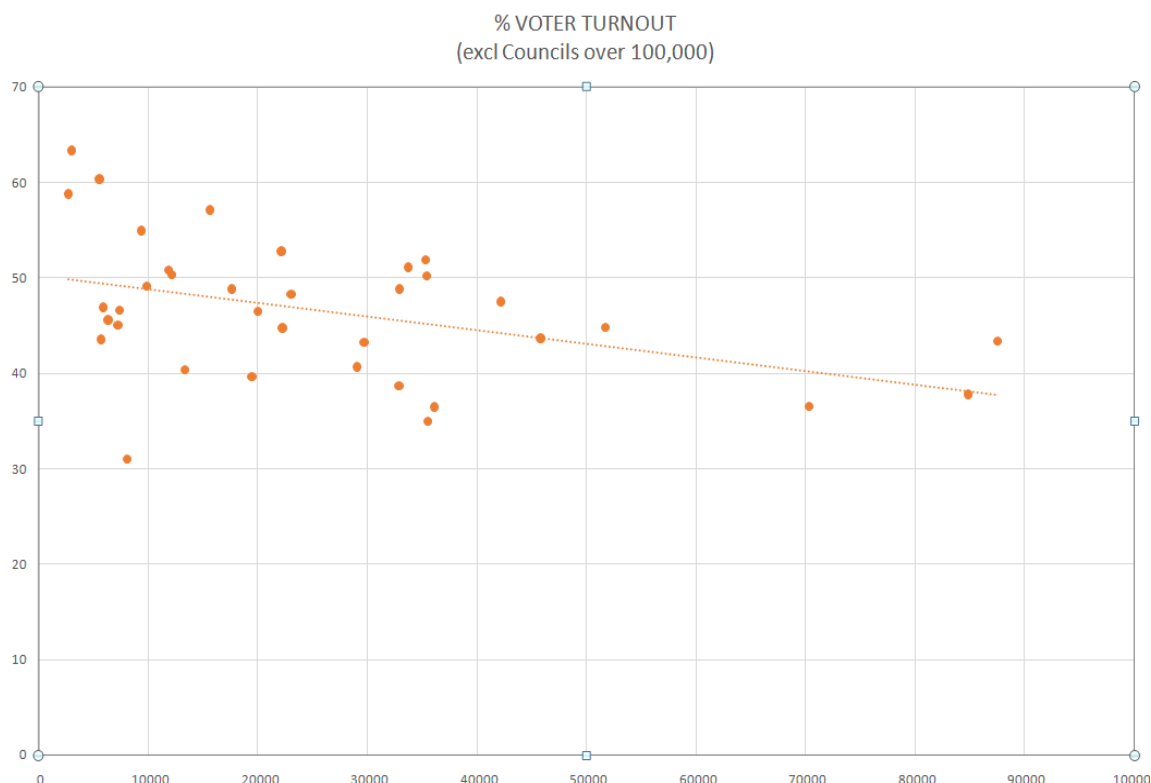
be greater in decentralised countries (where councils play a larger role) such as Norway and Italy, than centralised countries, see Table 1.

- 40 Surveys generally confirm that citizens' willingness to vote is strongly influenced by the level of decision-making, or discretion, their councils possess – as discretion declines so does turnout. Local government in Ireland is sometimes used as an example of this effect. At the end of the 1970s average turnout in local government elections in the Republic of Ireland was approximately 70%. More than thirty years later turnout has diminished to 46%. Academics explain the decline as a result of the Irish government's decisions to abolish property rates (recently reinstated) and funding councils through an annual grant from the Centre with a consequential decline in council discretion – the local government sector becoming what is essentially a service provider for central government rather than government in its own right.
- 41 Surveys in England indicate that citizens see little point in voting largely because elected members have minimal decision-making discretion, a result of the fact that most service delivery decisions and funding are determined by Whitehall. The Cameron Government is committed to a policy of localism as a way of reversing the dominance of Whitehall and decades of centralisation. In recent years NZ councils have experienced a noticeable reduction in their decision-making authority, for example:
- legislation giving various ministers the ability to over-ride council decisions, for example, in relation to aquaculture and urban land use boundaries;
 - legislation to limit financial discretion, as with the recent financial prudence measures; and
 - legislation to allow easier government intervention in councils affairs, such as the enhanced ability of the Minister of Local Government to intervene when he/she identifies "a problem."
- 42 Such measures, while undermining the constitutional separation of local and central government, ultimately erode the incentives for citizens to invest time and energy in local political processes as they come to realise that councillors are less able to respond to their concerns and expectations.

Increasing scale

- 43 The population of a local authority can have an impact on voter turnout. Within New Zealand there appears to be a correlation between council size and citizens' propensity to vote, with turnout declining as council size increases (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Relationship between turnout and council size



- 44 An example of the effect of scale is the turnout of smaller councils in the South Island. In 2013 average turnout for South Island councils with a population less than 20,000 was 55%, eight per cent higher than the national average. Similar trends are also found within councils themselves. The Banks Peninsula ward of Christchurch City Council voted at a markedly higher level than city wards and in Auckland Council turnout was noticeably higher in island local boards, with turnout on Waiheke Island reaching 55% and Great Barrier 66%.
- 45 In terms of scale a future question is whether or not the Local Government Commission's proposed re-organisations, such as the Hawkes Bay and Northland proposals, will have a negative impact on voter turnout. Whether this occurs or not will likely be influenced by the level of representation provided the Commission, such as the number of councillors and the size and roles of local boards.

Representation ratio

- 46 The ratio between citizens and councillors can also affect turnout with a tendency for turnout to be higher when the ratio is lower (Drage 2008). In councils where the ratio is smaller people are more willing to vote. In these communities candidates are more likely to be known by citizens and as a result voters have more information about their strengths and weaknesses. The more distant a councillor is from her/his voting public the more difficult it is for them to be evaluated by voters thus diminishing their willingness to vote. Compared to many OECD countries New Zealand has a very high representation ratio, see Table 4.

Table 4: Representation ratios

| Country | Ratio |
|-----------------|----------|
| France | 1 : 120 |
| Germany | 1 : 250 |
| South Australia | 1 : 2088 |
| Wales | 1 : 2376 |
| UK | 1 : 2800 |
| NSW | 1 : 3942 |
| Scotland | 1 : 4229 |
| New Zealand | 1 : 4847 |

- 47 Since the consolidation of local government in 1989 there has been a steady reduction in the number of elected members and an increase in the representation ratio, Table 5 shows the absolute reduction in the number of councillors.

Table 5: Number of councillors

| 1992 | 1995 | 1998 | 2001 | 2004 | 2007 | 2010 |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1156 | 1128 | 1098 | 1081 | 1023 | 999 | 911 |

- 48 High representation ratios make it difficult for voters to 'connect' with elected members and for elected members themselves to have the sort of presence necessary to create interest in local authority affairs or elections. It partly explains why turnout in larger councils is less than the average.

The effect of complexity

- 49 One of the challenges in measuring local government turnout, compared to parliamentary turnout, is that the rules and process governing the way elections are held change from time to time, and these changes impact on peoples' propensity to vote.

Table 6: Turnout by 1992 - 2013

| Decade | Election Turnout | | | |
|-------------|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| 1992 - 2001 | 61% | 60% | 62% | 58% |
| 2004 - 2013 | 51% | 50% | 51% | 47% |

- 50 Table 6 shows that turnout has been quite stable except for certain elections, particularly the 2004 election, where it dropped 7% and has since stabilized at approximately 10% below the previous decade. That election saw some key changes, namely:

- the introduction of STV for DHB elections and some councils;
- the removal of DHB constituencies; and
- the three week voting period.

- 51 As voting processes become more complex and/or time-consuming citizens are required to make choices about how their time is used and assess just how important it is to vote. Today, citizens seem to be less prepared to commit the time and effort that previous generations gave to fulfilling their civic responsibilities. It is something that should be considered when changes to electoral processes and voting systems are considered.

Explaining different turnout levels between central and local government

- 52 Commentators often compare turnout levels between central and local government, suggest that councils have a lower democratic mandate, and appear to assume that this reflect badly on the performance and reputation of councils. However, the two spheres of government are not the same and citizens are differently motivated when deciding whether or not to vote for central or local government.
- 53 Within New Zealand citizens are more likely to vote in greater numbers for central government than local government. This is typical of most countries, although more noticeable in Anglophone local government systems, although there are exceptions, see Table 7.

Table 7: Central and local government turnout (recent elections)

| Country | National/Federal | Local (average) | Difference |
|-------------|------------------|-----------------|------------|
| NZ | 74% | 47% | 27% |
| Italy | 75% | 67% | 8% |
| Switzerland | 45% | 49% | -4% |
| Norway | 78% | 63% | 15% |
| Canada | 61% | 41% | 20% |
| Ireland | 71% | 46% | 25% |
| UK | 66% | 33% | 33% |

- 54 Economists often explain the lower turnout in local government elections as the result of a correlation between a person's willingness to vote and the amount of tax paid to that sphere of government. In other words voters take into account the salience of their councils when deciding whether to vote or not. The higher the tax the more likely they are to vote.
- 55 For example, Statistics NZ's Housing Expenditure Surveys (HES) show that 2.25% of household expenditure is spent on local government taxes (a slight decline over the last two decades). In comparison central government receives approximately 35% or more of household expenditure in taxes and charges. In short, when making judgements about the efficacy of turnout levels it is important to compare apples with apples. Local government in New Zealand spends only 11% of all public expenditure down from 50% in 1930), central government is the wrong comparator.

Comparing turnout with other local government systems

- 56 Local government systems around the world are very different. Many European systems, for example, play a major role in the delivery of social services, such as education, health and police, and many have the ability to levy income taxes along with their property taxing powers. For example, local government in Denmark spends approximately 50% of all public expenditure whereas local government in NZ spends approximately 11%. See Table 1 for an illustration of recent local government turnout rates in a range of countries.

Table 1: Local government turnout (recent elections)⁵

| Country | Local (average) |
|-------------|-----------------|
| NZ | 47% |
| Italy | 67% |
| Switzerland | 49% |
| Norway | 63% |
| Canada | 41% |
| Ireland | 46% |
| UK | 33% |

- 57 Reflecting New Zealand's colonial past our local government system is generally described as an Anglophone system and has important similarities with local governments in Australia, Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom. Comparisons with Australia are made more difficult by the use of mandatory voting in many states; however, voting continues to be voluntary in West and South Australia. In the recent Western Australian local authority elections on October 19th 2013, turnout fell from 41% to 28%, the lowest ever recorded. In some countries local elections are held in tandem with national elections giving local turnout a major boost.

⁵ Sample selected to compare Anglophone and European local government models.