



Article

Age and Environmental Citizenship: A Case Study of Media Coverage of the 2019 Local Body Elections in New Zealand

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Abstract: Environmental issues in the coverage of the elections are usually framed in relation to voters' attitudes towards the specific problems, for instance, water quality or land use. The environment is not given standing in these discussions, rather, it is an instrument or resource for voters. In this article we investigate the relationship between news and politics by looking at media coverage of the 2019 local body elections in New Zealand. We follow a call to put place at the centre of journalism research and to investigate the emerging forms of environmental citizenship. We focus on a media market at each end of New Zealand's two main islands and relate analysis of the coverage of local body elections coverage to related social groups engaged in environmental issues. The objective of our article is to consider the extent to which age plays a role in media representation of environmental issues in the context of local body elections.



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1. Introduction

Many domains of social life consider local to be of a less importance than national. In politics, despite a notable transformation towards “bringing government closer to the people so as to promote greater participation and active citizenship” (Reid 2015, p. 45), voters weigh participation in local body elections as being of minor importance. In the case of New Zealand, the voter turnout at the 2020 national elections was 81.54 percent (New Zealand Electoral Commission 2020), while at local body elections, only 42.2 percent of people cast their vote (New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs 2019). While there are national issues, pertaining to the democratic process, for instance, campaigns in local body elections are organised around issues that are inherently close to home—locally and geographically. While there are issues common to different local bodies and regions, they struggle to reach the national audience (Baker et al. 2017) and rely heavily on local reporting to illuminate them. In journalism, the same ordering of importance occurs. Local journalism is described in terms of the boundaries between communities that are served. Positioning this type of journalism as local, as opposed to national or international, carries implicit meaning. Örnebring et al. (2020) observe a process where “local journalism almost by definition becomes the ‘younger sibling’ of journalism, of course important, but not as important as its national senior” (p. 448).

Examining the relationship between news and politics on one hand, and between the local and national on the other, is particularly fruitful in the case of local body elections. Academic studies of election media coverage make clear that, in providing a forum for citizens' participation in public life, media outlets take on additional responsibilities in the formation of public opinion (Blumler and Cushion 2014). One of the most rehearsed pledges of the profession is that journalism provides the information citizens need to engage in public life. Critical examination of this pledge, however, demonstrates that what it means to inform citizens has changed over time (Rupar 2017). Looking at the relationship between news, politics and diversity in national and local body elections, AUT

Media Observatory researchers documented a trend towards a greater range of sources in the news since 2014. They noted, however, that what governs citizens' access to political processes comes from the complex relationships and the power structures within which political communication occurs (Rupar et al. 2015; Baker et al. 2017; Mills et al. 2018). What these and other authors are suggesting is that journalism in a democratic society ought to provide information that citizens need to engage in public life, but that what it means to be "informed" is more complex than it might once have been (Craig 2017).

In this article we investigate the relationship between news, politics and diversity by looking at the media coverage of 2019 local body elections in New Zealand. We follow a call to put place at the centre of journalism research (Usher 2019) and to investigate journalism and the emerging forms of environmental citizenship (Craig 2017). We focus on a media market at each end of New Zealand's two main islands and specifically locate analysis of the coverage of the local body elections as they relate to social groups referred to in the media coverage of environmental issues.

2. Theoretical Approach

Two previous studies of the media coverage of the elections in New Zealand (Baker et al. 2017; Mills et al. 2018) revealed the growing importance of young people as a social group. This time, we were particularly interested in identifying the connection between age and environment in the light of contemporary debates on citizenship.

2.1. Environmental Citizenship and Local Politics

The term environmental citizenship denotes a mode of citizen engagement in which the citizen places the interests of the many over their own, to the extent that they are willing to knowingly and consciously act against their own personal interest if they can see that it is the interest of the common good (Dobson and Bell 2006). The nature of environmental citizenship is global, rather than local or national (Bell 2005). Environmental citizens are invited to consider the global common good when considering decisions based on the socioeconomical impacts they may have beyond their ward, constituency or lifespan. Dobson (2007) writes that this international and intergenerational aspect of environmental citizenship is its distinguishing feature (p. 282).

This mode of citizenship motivates behaviour such as the use of reusable shopping bags before this was incentivised by market instruments. While market instruments can motivate the same behaviour, there is nothing to indicate that this change to shopping behaviour will promote or result in any other changes in shopping habits or consumer behaviour. Dobson (2007) argues that this is important because market instruments can be added or removed at any time. He notes that, if the behaviour has become habitual, the changed behaviour might stick, but if it has not, then the behaviour reverts and the sustainability benefit is lost. While environmental citizens make a commitment to the common good, governments having to deal with a competing range of conceptions of 'the good' will be drawn to market-based instruments. Liberal states are reluctant to be seen to be 'shaping' the values of citizens and are formally committed to 'state neutrality' and value pluralism. Market instruments can be seen as prodding people in a particular direction, but without interfering in the values they hold (Dobson 2007, p. 280). However, positioning the use of 'market forces' as neutral, arguing or assuming that they do not impose values on people, is not a defensible idea. Regulation for the public good will often be necessary. For instance, the market is not left to arbitrate in the case of behaviours which advance sexist or homophobic value positions.

Reviewing the 2019 New Zealand local body elections and the number of women standing and subsequently elected therein, Drage (2019) notes the responsibility of local councils to protect the environment as a catalyst for change (p. 12). She points to events in 2019 which "revealed the white male older faces that were making many of these decisions" (p. 12) on local responses to climate change and climate action. She notes that "while this cannot be called a male problem, the younger climate change activists advocating for

councils to declare climate emergencies highlighted the poor representation of communities at council tables" (p. 12). Although the 125th anniversary of women's suffrage in New Zealand might have contributed to women's participation in the 2019 local elections, [Drage \(2019\)](#) questions if it is necessary to highlight any drivers additional to the rise of environmental topics as a catalyst for the increased participation of women in this election. Scholars of environmental citizenship variously note that this mode of citizenship requires "a commitment to making environmentally and ethically sound decisions on consumption practices and the nature of gender relations in the private sphere" ([Kurian et al. 2014](#), p. 439) (see also ([Dobson 2003](#); [Latta 2007](#); [MacGregor 2006](#))).

2.2. Age and Local Politics

A democratic life is based on the premise that all members of society actively participate in the political process. While this is normatively appealing, empirical realities might differ. The critical role of politics and political ideology, for example, affects the experience of intergenerational relations that operate both on the interpersonal and the societal levels ([Walker 2002](#)). The OECD ([Martin and Whitehouse 2012](#)) have identified that the ageing population "could prove a particular stress point for relations between generations" (p. 25). Writing on age discrimination and intergenerational equity in 2015, Garstka, Hummert and Branscombe are clear that "younger and older adults are consistently perceived as having lower status relative to middle-aged adults" ([Garstka et al. 2005](#), p. 322). This observation is linked to social identity theory which asserts that status relations between social groups are often unequal, and that this is significant because social groups are in competition for status and power (p. 322).

Looking at intergenerational relations in New Zealand, [Hayward et al. \(2015\)](#) write that young people talk about citizenship rights "primarily as individual attributes" (p. 22), viewing group participation as "contractual" (p. 23). In a sense, they describe these relations as "I will if you will" (p. 23). This contractual, exchange-based understanding of citizenship and participation is, as [Hayward et al. \(2015\)](#) contend, a reflection of the neoliberal market-based politics of New Zealand more broadly. The suggestion here is that this conception of citizenship does not lend itself to sustainability either for the environment or for citizenship.

Following this argument, [Kurian et al. \(2014\)](#) note that "if citizenship represents a normative guide for leading an engaged, meaningful, and active life, then the ethical concept of sustainability forms a foundational basis of rethinking the rights, requirements and responsibilities of citizenship in a global context" (p. 437). They go on to argue that the task of governing towards and within a sustainable world requires a sustainable citizenship—one which enables such a world to be imagined, achieved and maintained.

Environmental issues in the coverage of the elections are usually framed in relation to voters' attitudes towards a specific problem, for instance, water quality or land use. The environment is not given standing in these discussions ([Bell 2005](#)), rather, it is an underlining consideration for voters. Voters are only engaged in the environment in the sense that it should be managed to provide the best economic output or conditions for use. That is to say, pro-environmental decision-making and protection are at the whim of market forces which may or may not be put to use in favour of the environment. The use of these market forces can create what [Bell \(2005\)](#) calls 'liberal environmental citizens'. The use of the term 'liberal environmental citizenship' is part of Bell's work to locate environmental citizenship within liberal ideas of citizenship. He describes a liberal environmental citizen as someone who abides by (environmental) laws and likely complies with many principles of environmental citizenship. Campaigning for global environmental justice and a commitment to green spaces, for instance, might only go so far as to ensure the environment is able to meet the basic needs of citizens (pursuant to their own conception of the 'good environment') (p. 187). Fundamentally, liberal environmental citizens conceive of "the environment as the provider of basic needs and a subject about which there is reasonable disagreement" (p. 190).

The objective of our article was to identify if, and to what extent, age plays a role in media representation of environmental issues in the context of local body elections.

3. Research Design

The study is based on a content analysis of news stories which appeared in publications across New Zealand between 21 August and 12 October 2019, a period of nearly 8 weeks prior to the election day on 12 October. The volume of coverage in this period was considerable, with the Newztext database used to extract news stories returning 1452 results from a search for “local election”. Research previously conducted by the AUT Media Observatory ([Baker et al. 2017](#); [Mills et al. 2018](#); [Rupar et al. 2015](#)) limited their searches by publication. Both studies, within their own samples, noted a focus on coverage relating to age. Analysis of the 2017 coverage took a subset of its data referring specifically to young people and further analysed it using thematic analysis. For this study of the 2019 local election coverage, building on previous research, we focused on age-based coverage. We used a combined search in Newztext Plus using the terms “local election” and “age” which returned 129 articles.

Articles were included if they made reference to the 2019 local body elections: in the headline; in the first three sentences and/or the first paragraph; in a minimum three sentences overall; if more than half of the story is taken up with discussing the election; or if the article centered on an issue of relevance to local body councils and made explicit reference to the election in the body text.

The final sample for coding included 110 stories. Each story was treated as a single unit of analysis, and coded according to genre, frame, topic(s), sources (based upon gender and affiliation) and reference to social groups. The list of social groups follows the potential discriminatory grounds outlined in the Human Rights Act 1993. The sample comprised 110 articles from 22 publications. A research assistant was hired for the coding with senior researchers monitoring the process. For all coding categories, reliability checks were conducted with a senior researcher on a daily basis during the pilot week. On September 18, a final reliability check was done by the research leader using [North et al. \(1963\)](#) formula $R = 2(C1,2) \div (C1 + C2)$, where C1,2 is the number of category assignments both coders agreed on, and C1 + C2 is the total category assignments made by both coders. Inter-coder agreement overall reached 94%, ensuring the reliability of results.

The most prevalent publications in the sample were the *Otago Daily Times* (23%) followed at some distance by *The Northland Age* (15%) and *Stuff* (13%). These three titles made up 51% of the sample. Of the 22 publications represented, 10 are regional outlets of *Stuff*, owned by owner Nine Entertainment, and 8 are regional publications of the *NZ Herald* owned by NZME. That more than 80% of the titles included in the sample are owned by these two companies reflects their dominance in the New Zealand/Aotearoa print media market. Of the 129 articles returned in the search, 110 are included in the study. Of the 19 excluded articles: seven were letters to the editor, five were not election related, three were in brief only, three records were empty (nothing behind the link returned in database and one candidate list only). By excluding these articles, the data no longer included pieces from: *Coastal News* and *The Northern Advocate**.

The sample includes articles from 22 different news outlets (Table 1).

Table 1. Publications and number of articles.

Publication	Number of Articles
Otago Daily Times	25
The Northland Age *	16
Stuff—Stuff.co.nz ^	14
Scoop	8
The Dominion Post ^	6

Table 1. Cont.

Publication	Number of Articles
Radio NZ	6
Manawatu Standard ^	4
The Press ^	4
Waikato Times ^	4
STUFF—Sunday Star Times ^	5
The Southland Times ^	3
Hawke's Bay Today *	3
Stratford Press *	2
Taranaki Daily News ^	2
The Marlborough Express ^	1
Horowhenua Chronicle *	1
Hamilton News *	1
The Timaru Herald ^	1
Bay of Plenty Times *	1
Oamaru Mail	1
Bush Telegraph *	1
The Guardian Manawatu *	1
Total	110

Note: Publications marked * are all regional publications by NZ Herald, owned by NZME; Publications marked ^ are all regional publications of Stuff Limited, owned by Nine Entertainment.

4. Results and Discussion

In this article we first present general trends in the media coverage of local body elections when journalists extract age as a relevant factor for understanding the political process, as identified in the quantitative content analysis of the articles. We then move to a discussion combining the quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the articles to link age and local body elections to environmental issues.

4.1. Genres, Frames, Sources and Topics of Election Stories

Scholars have noted that local body elections are low-intensity affairs (Hayes and Lawless 2015). While the mainstream news outlets that reach the largest audience segments tend to focus on the major races in the biggest cities (Baker et al. 2017), local newspapers open their space to opinion pieces written by local candidates and prominent citizens. Our analysis of a sample of articles revealed that news was the most prevalent genre (39%) with the remaining articles split almost evenly between interview/profile (31%) and opinion (29%).

The *Otago Daily Times* articles in the sample were dominated by interview/profile pieces. These confirmed their relevance in community papers (Baker et al. 2017). The *Otago Daily Times* included lengthy pieces where each candidate in each election in the region was invited to submit their answers to a set of question provided by the paper. The format for the pieces included an option for candidates to include their age (though some did not). The regular use of this genre by the ODT is reflected in these data.

When looking at news frames as the central organising idea of the studied texts, (Gamson 1989) three types were identified: strategic, issue and mixed frame. The strategic frame included coverage of political gains and losses, the power struggle between political actors, their performance and public perception of their performance, the electoral strategies of parties, speculations about coalitions and the support for/opposition to other political actors. The issue frame focused on relevant aspects of major social issues (e.g., education, employment, crime, health and inequality). A mixed frame contained both the strategic and issue frames, which means the story focused on political gains or losses as well as the larger social issue. The sample of 2019 coverage analysed here is limited to articles referring to “age”, and reporting relating to this social category was more likely to be issues-based than strategic.

Very few articles (5%) used a purely strategic frame. Articles in the sample were far more likely to have an issue frame (49%) or a mixed frame (46%). The proportion of the sample using a mixed frame closely matches that of the 2016 coverage sample, which Baker et al. (2017) reported at 45.5%. However, in the 2016 case, 37.4% of the sample had a strategic frame and only 17.2% had an issue frame, which suggests that “stories that just focus on social issues, without reference to strategy, are the least reported stories” (Baker et al. 2017, p. 144). Considering that the 2019 coverage being analysed here is limited to articles referring to “age”, we can consider that reporting relating to this social category is more likely to be issues-based than strategic.

Our analysis of story topics—each article was coded with between one and three topics included—revealed that almost one fifth (19%) of articles were about the political process. The next most prevalent topic was environmental issues (15%). ‘Environmental issue’ as a topic was most likely to occur with ‘political process’ (9), ‘transport’ (8) or ‘local government’ (7). ‘Environmental issue’ as a topic occurred in articles of each genre, mostly in opinion (15), followed by news (14) and finally interview/profile (8). What was interesting in the sample of articles under investigation was the relationship between the topic of environment and the sources of news: 41% of articles with ‘environmental issue’ as a topic did not quote any source. Where the article included ‘environmental issue’ as a topic and did quote a source, the most frequent first source was a direct quote from a politician.

We looked closely at the topic of articles published in the *Otago Daily Times* (ODT) and *The Northland Age* (TNA)—two newspapers representing local communities at the north and the south of New Zealand/Aotearoa. The most frequently occurring topic in both was ‘environmental issue’—the ODT (52%) and TNA (44%). In the ODT, this was followed by housing (36%), with transport (32%) tying with business and economy (32%) as the third most common topic. In TNA, the next most frequent topics were local government (25%) and the political process (25%), with housing (19%) being the third most common topic. Whereas transport (32%) was a frequent topic in the ODT, it did not feature at all in TNA. While the ODT included articles on business and economy, these were not found in TNA, though that publication did feature articles on employment (13%), which the ODT did not.

As in the analysis of the 2017 general election, our quantitative analysis found that the young age group was the most frequently mentioned (61%), followed by elderly (45%), with middle age remaining the least mentioned age group (27%). The idea that young people were mentioned more than twice as often as middle-aged people speaks to the ubiquity of middle age in the media in general.

Young people were mentioned evenly across the genres, but middle aged and elderly social groups were more likely to appear in interview/profile pieces than news or opinion pieces (Table 2).

Table 2. Age and genre.

Genre	Young	Middle Aged	Elderly
News	23	6	7
Opinion	23	6	16
Interview/profile	21	18	26
TOTAL	67	30	49
	46%	21%	34%

The candidate profile/survey articles from the ODT overwhelmingly included respondents’ ages and occupations. Several respondents indicated that they were retired, which marked them as ‘elderly’ for the purposes of this analysis (Figure 1).

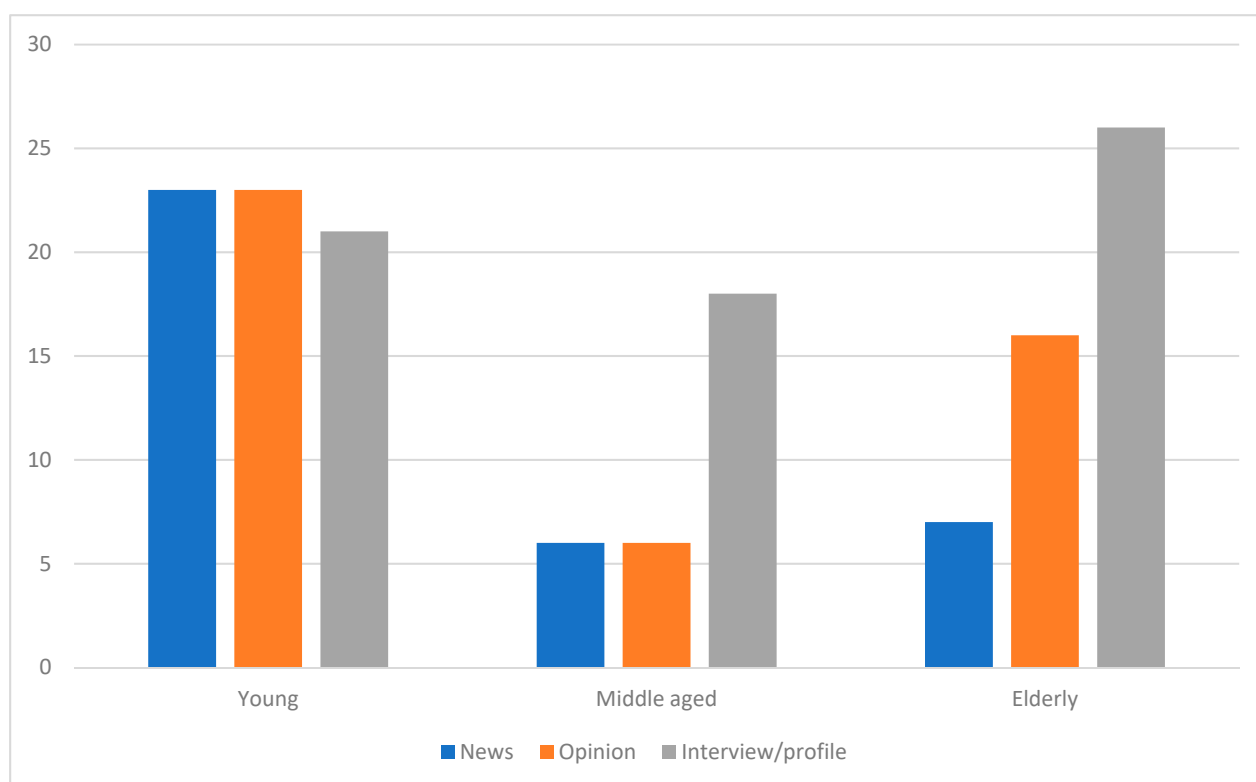


Figure 1. Young, middle aged and elderly by genre.

Of those sources quoted in articles referring to young people, most of them were politicians (75%), which follows the overwhelming presence of quotes by politicians across all articles in the study. This may include quotes by young candidates or politicians themselves.

Overall, 81 articles (74%) included at least one source; 18 articles (16%) included at least 10 sources. It is worth noting that some articles included more than 10 sources, but the study only coded the first 10 sources cited. Fifteen of the articles with 10 or more sources were interview/profile pieces, of which 11 were from the *Otago Daily Times*. These relate to the candidate profile pieces mentioned earlier.

This skew of age prevalence combined with the predominance of the topic of environmental issues invites a close qualitative analysis of these aspects.

4.2. Elections, Age and Environment in Two Local Newspapers

The qualitative analysis focused on the two predominant outlets, the *Otago Daily Times* (ODT) (25 articles) and *The Northland Age* (TNA) (16 articles). Articles from these two outlets provided a useful comparative sample, being that they represented opposite geographical regions of the country, with differing demographics in terms of age, ethnicity and income/wealth. A thematic analysis of articles from these outlets illuminated the interplay between age as a social marker and environmental issues as a topic.

Work on previous election coverage noted differences in engagement relating to age and between generations (Baker et al. 2017; Mills et al. 2018). This election was no different. While the focus of much media coverage was on the voting activity or otherwise of young people, little attention is paid to older and middle-aged voters who were obscured as a group by their ubiquity as voters. Even without the intergenerationally polarising pandemic in which we currently find ourselves, the youth climate movement had given rise to media portrayals of older people as having failed as environmental citizens. Action by youth climate justice campaigners was a reaction to the collective inaction of their elders in the face of decades of climate science evidence that their future quality of life is threatened.

Analysing the qualitative sample with particular reference to age and the environment (see list of articles in Appendix A) demonstrates the ways in which these social markers relate to one another in the sample. The coincidence of terms suggesting age or life stage (for example, 'generation', 'young', 'youth', 'old', 'senior', 'retired', 'student', 'pensioner', 'child/ren') with terms relating to environmental issues (such as 'environment', 'climate', 'sustainable') is striking.

Art 117 "Growing our region in a sustainable and economically viable way that will benefit all". ("Questions For Central Otago District Council Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 117 "Our main priorities are affordable and sustainable housing for all, including our ageing population". ("Questions For Central Otago District Council Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 116 "Taking care of our environment for future generations is a key focus for me in all aspects of decision-making". ("Questions For Queenstown Lakes District Council Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 99 "Council and community are under pressure from growth; it is the responsibility of council to ensure that growth is sympathetic to, not at the expense of, our environment". ("Questions For Central Otago Mayoralty Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

The candidate profile/survey articles from the ODT overwhelmingly included respondents ages, along with their occupations. Most candidates supplied this information, making the exceptions notable. Some of them were recorded as 'Declined to provide age', though one participating candidate answered the question saying "Age: Under 50" ("Environment Southland Nominees", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Environmental issues feature significantly in the sampled media coverage. Issues are framed in relation to votes, and as an instrument or resource for voters. As mentioned earlier, the voters were identified as being responsible for the environment in the sense that environment should be managed to provide the best output or conditions for use. That is to say, pro-environmental decision-making and protection are at the whim of market forces—always seen as positive reference point—which may or may not be put to use in favour of the environment. The use of these market forces can create what Bell (2005) might call 'liberal environmental citizens'. He describes this kind of citizen as someone who abides by (environmental) laws and likely complies with many of the suggestions of environmental citizenship. However, they might only go so far as to ensure the environment is able to meet the basic needs of citizens.

In our sample of articles, references to environment were often linked with references to community and economy. They fall broadly into three propositional categories:

- (1) Do what we can with what we have, environmentally, but make sure it works for us financially, as in following examples:

Art 98 "There is an urgent need to add value to the goods we produce and to ensure that the sector is financially and environmentally sustainable". ("Questions For Southland Mayoralty Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 123 "To find the balance between a healthy environment and maintaining a thriving, connected community". ("Environment Southland Nominees", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 128 "Why can't we do both? Environmental management is the responsibility of the ORC, not a "nice to have". Fiscal responsibility is a statutory requirement, also not negotiable. Greenhouse gas emissions are on the rise, our waterways are degrading and our biodiversity is at risk. I think it is clear we need to increase environmental work and develop climate change action

plans but also look at the bigger picture of ORC budgeting". ("Questions for Otago Regional Council", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

(2) Recognise the environment as essential to our survival and put it first:

Art 99 "Progress should be measured in health and prosperity and never in growth and should never threaten the health and safety of our environment, community and biodiversity. We must have a solid environmental protection template". ("Questions For Central Otago Mayoralty Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 128 "The role of the ORC is not saving money but balancing out capitalism's negative effects on our local environment. Flood control and erosion are ORC responsibilities and saving South Dunedin isn't going to be cheap. The ORC must spend as little as possible and as much as necessary for this crucial role". ("Questions for Otago Regional Council", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 116 "It shouldn't be growth at all cost, it must be within the constraints and capabilities of our environment and community". ("Questions For Queenstown Lakes District Council Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

(3) Use our environmental resources as we wish:

Art 114 "And we need to improve our environmental footprint so we leave a better Southland for further generations without crippling our farmers". ("Questions For Southland District Council Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 116 "We must protect our sense of community and the environment, at the same time giving clear and positive signals to future investment to keep our local economy strong". ("Questions For Queenstown Lakes District Council Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 129 "The ORC, the farming community and our urban populations have common cause: a prosperous economy with farming at its heart, and a healthy environment". ("ORC Candidates Quizzed On Future Of Farming", *Otago Daily Times*, 19 September 2019).

Articles from *TNA* included coverage of the climate strike, organised globally by young people. In their first article, the reporting on plans for the "mass demonstration" ("Students organise another Strike 4 Climate", *The Northland Age*, 17 September 2019), does not mention other global actions, instead focusing on the route of the march, naming local streets and landmarks. It does quote the spokesman saying "... this will be intergenerational, as climate change is an issue that affects people of all ages" ("Students organise another Strike 4 Climate", *The Northland Age*, 17 September 2019). The article from 1 October, reporting on the protest, refers to 150 people attending, "including many more adults than on previous occasions", and makes explicit reference to the global nature of the protests, saying that attendees "added their voices to nationwide (and global) calls for action" ("Water purifying demonstration", *The Northland Age*, 1 October 2019). This article refers to the presence of "older folk" at the speeches. It also links the Kaitia action with an action in Kerikeri, attended by "close to 200 people". There, by contrast to the "older folk" in Kaitia, most were "students", some of whom had travelled from nearby towns to participate.

Both these articles included quotes from the Kaitia College Climate Action Group spokesperson. The second article also quoted an election candidate and former MP and the current Northland MP, as well as the Kerikeri High School students who led the Kerikeri march. One student is quoted speaking specifically to the intergenerational nature of the work,

Art 62 “Jaiden McGrath, who said he was protesting because he feared for his future and his dreams of having a family”. (Another Call For Climate Action”, *The Northland Age*, 1 October 2019).

4.3. Environment and Intergenerationality

As indicated, Dobson (2007) saw the international and intergenerational aspects of this mode of environmental citizenship as unique. While the international aspect is largely absent from these articles, with the exception of references to tourism and visitors, overtures to intergenerational thinking are regularly reflected in the sample:

Art 15 ““Unlike our other strikes, this will be inter-generational, as climate change is an issue that affects people of all ages”, Kaitaia College Climate Action Group spokesman Ethan Nemeroff said”. (“Students organise another Strike 4 Climate”, *The Northland Age*, 17 September 2019).

In many of the articles, candidates make explicit reference to future generations:

Art 117 “By upholding our district’s “World of Difference” values and using council’s strong sustainability strategy as a benchmark, we can progress while protecting our world for future generations”. (“Questions For Central Otago District Council Candidates”, *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 124 “It’s imperative to keep Oamaru hospital services for future generations”. (“Questions For Waitaki District Council Candidates”, *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 114 “And we need to improve our environmental footprint so we leave a better Southland for further generations without crippling our farmers”. (“Questions For Southland District Council Candidates”, *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 128 “Our future generations’ ability to enjoy the dynamic landscapes and pristine water Otago offers is not negotiable”. (“Questions for Otago Regional Council”, *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 124 “It’s imperative to keep Oamaru hospital services for future generations”. (“Questions For Waitaki District Council Candidates”, *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Arguably, however, this was not an intergenerational outlook so much as it is a projection. This same projection was remarked upon in analysis of the 2017 New Zealand General Election by Mills et al. (2018). He referred to previous studies which argued that “adult depictions of young people tend to be a projection of their [own] hopes for the future, and their fears of change” (p. 168).

Truly intergenerational thinking, that is, thinking *between* generations, is less prevalent. Where they are made, explicit reference to the responsibilities of current, co-existing generations are revealing. Older generations are asked to make way for current generations, who will, in turn, create opportunities for future generations, as this 77-year-old candidate declares:

Art 114 “My goals are to increase maintenance regards to our essential infrastructure, provide housing for our elderly thus freeing up their three bedroomed house for working families and generally supporting tourist services, assist with business funding and facilities in order to supply and create future opportunities for our generations to come”. (“Questions For Southland District Council Candidates”, *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

This framing suggests that the middle generation will be providing housing for the older generation (while acknowledging they already have housing) and a future for the forthcoming generation. These are market-defined rather than environmentally-grounded generational responsibilities. The older generation, no longer productive in either an

economic or biological sense, must make way for the next generation so that they can prepare for the generation that will follow them in turn.

Outlining the responsibilities of different generations in this way brings attention to a generation often obscured in this discussion—the middle generation. Although there are no explicit references to environmental matters, there is plenty of reference to future generations (see above) and there is some mention of older generations:

Art 62 “The march made its way north through the town’s main street then returned the same way to Te Ahu, where a much smaller number of people, mostly older folk, heard a number of speakers”. (“Another Call For Climate Action”, *The Northland Age*, 1 October 2019).

Art 117 “By rezoning sensibly, we provide land for affordable housing and employment for our young people. Look after our older residents by enabling retirement villages, hospital and rest-home care. Balance with protecting our amazing environment”. (“Questions For Central Otago District Council Candidates”, *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 122 “This is becoming a major concern for many due to the rise in the number of persons identifying as having a disability and the rise in the number of elderly”. (“Questions For Dunedin City Council Candidates”, *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

There is an environment related reference to the ‘middle generation’ by this candidate who is 53 years old:

Art 122 “However, all decisions on council must be taken within the context of climate change—THE CHALLENGE OF OUR GENERATION!” (“Questions For Dunedin City Council Candidates”, *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Art 114 “By making Southland a great place to live, work, play, raise families and retire, we enhance everyone’s quality of life”. (“Questions For Southland District Council Candidates”, *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

The following declarations refer to the fact that those seeking to become or remain representatives see themselves as responsible for making intergenerational decisions:

Art 129 “It remains a work in progress, but the decisions the ORC makes over the next term will shape Central and the Lakes for a generation to come. I want to ensure it makes the right ones”. (“ORC Candidates Quizzed On Future Of Farming”, *Otago Daily Times*, 19 September 2019).

Art 128 “Our province has reached a point where it is essential for all of us to take responsibility to deliver an exciting and sustainable environment for future generations”. (“ORC Candidates Quizzed On Future Of Farming”, *Otago Daily Times*, 19 September 2019).

Art 124 “Protection of wildlife, heritage buildings and heritage parks for future generations to enjoy”. (“Questions For Waitaki District Council Candidates”, *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Reference to the need for protecting the environment on behalf of future generations in these articles is problematic for two reasons. It is not designated whether this is a future generation of adults (who will soon need the environment to uphold these market values), or another, as yet unborn generation. This lack of clarity belies a misunderstanding of the timeframes on relevant climate change impacts upon the Earth and its people. In light of the point made by Mills et al. (2018) that references to future generations are projections, the lack of specificity concerning the identity of the frequently cited ‘future generations’ is telling. By casting the requirement for protection from climate change onto ‘future generations’ but not identifying when those generations will unfold, the articles obfuscate about the need for urgent action. The reference to ‘future generations’ serves as a decoy.

The students represented in the *TNA* articles seem to appreciate this more keenly than the candidates representing themselves in the *ODT*. The students organising the march are worried about impacts on *their* lives, just not the lives of those yet to come:

Art 62 “Jaiden McGrath, who said he was protesting because he feared for his future and his dreams of having a family”. (“Another Call For Climate Action”, *The Northland Age*, 1 October 2019).

This lack of clarity over which generation exactly the environment should be protected *for*, is echoed by a lack of clarity over when children move into adulthood (such that they cease to be a ‘future generation’):

Art 89 “Confusion remains about the age our society considers young people to be adult”. (“Merit In ‘Making It 16’”, *Otago Daily Times*, 30 September 2019).

Other than an imagined future generation, there is another potential role for young people reflected in these articles:

Art 124 “My goals are to represent the younger generation and bring fresh new ideas into the council”. (“Questions For Waitaki District Council Candidates”, *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019).

Owing to the scarcity of young representatives, those willing to step forward become a default representative of youth. By contrast, none of the retired or middle-aged candidates are said to be representing *their* generation.

5. Conclusions

Our analysis of the coverage of local body elections and the local media’s focus on environment and age highlighted the understanding of the environment as a provider of basic needs consistent with taken-for-granted market forces. Such is evident in the sample of articles published during the 2019 Local Body Elections in New Zealand. Journalists, opinion writers and candidates alike mostly assume that readers and potential voters are not environmental citizens. Groups are framed as ‘farmers’ or ‘visitors’, for instance, and their interests are put forward. The language in these pieces suggests that ‘citizenship’ or enfranchisement is conferred in relation to the payment of rates or taxes, rather than custodians of environmental sustainability. The suggestion is that elected bodies act in the interests of voters in particular local municipalities, rather than in the interests of the ecological commons. The need to locate green citizenship in civil society and the importance of “fleshing out notions of sustainability citizenship that cannot be reduced to vote and taxpayer” (Barry 2006, p. 39) remains pressing.

The objective of our article was to identify the extent to which age played a role in media representations of environmental issues in the context of local body elections. While we found evidence of local politics oriented towards future generations, the idea of liberal environmental citizenship that stands behind it needs more investigation. Future research might focus on the tensions between neo-liberalism, as evidenced in journalists’ references to market forces as unquestionably good for the society and the principles of environmental sustainability, inclusivity and intergenerational justice.

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Appendix A

Articles:

- Art 15 "Students organise another Strike 4 Climate", *The Northland Age*, 17 September 2019.
- Art 36 "Water purifying demonstration", *The Northland Age*, 1 October 2019.
- Art 37 "EC technology draws a crowd", *The Northland Age*, 3 October 2019.
- Art 39 "A Platform For The Lady Candidates", *The Northland Age*, 3 October 2019.
- Art 60 "Is It Open And Honest?", *The Northland Age*, 22 August 2019.
- Art 62 "Another Call For Climate Action", *The Northland Age*, 1 October 2019.
- Art 80 "But Who Is Going To Pay For It?", *The Northland Age*, 26 September 2019.
- Art 89 "Merit In 'Making It 16'", *Otago Daily Times*, 30 September 2019.
- Art 98 "Questions For Southland Mayoralty Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019.
- Art 99 "Questions For Central Otago Mayoralty Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019.
- Art 107 "Environment Canterbury Nominees", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019.
- Art 114 "Questions For Southland District Council Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019.
- Art 116 "Questions For Queenstown Lakes District Council Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019.
- Art 117 "Questions For Central Otago District Council Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019.
- Art 118 "Questions For DCC Mayoralty Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019.
- Art 122 "Questions For Dunedin City Council Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019.
- Art 123 "Environment Southland Nominees", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019.
- Art 124 "Questions For Waitaki District Council Candidates", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019.
- Art 128 "Questions For Otago Regional Council", *Otago Daily Times*, 18 September 2019.
- Art 129 "ORC Candidates Quizzed On Future Of Farming", *Otago Daily Times*, 19 September 2019.

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