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Auckland, New Zealand – fair game for central party politics

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the influence of central party politics in Auckland local government, in New Zealand's largest city, following the 2010 amalgamation. Political parties have been an accepted and dominant presence in European representative democratic local government, throughout the 20th century. Not so, however, in New Zealand and Australia, where citizens have 'flocked to the banner "Keep Politics out of Local Government". Our analysis of the self-declared party accreditation status of candidates and elected members demonstrates that political affiliation, at least in the main centre Auckland, is on the rise, counter to assumptions that New Zealand local government is largely removed from central politics.

Introduction

This article traces the involvement of central government political parties in local government elections in Auckland, New Zealand. Our research is therefore concerned with the sub-national arena and in particular New Zealand. Political parties have been an accepted and dominant presence in western local government, specifically in the UK, the Nordic Countries and the Netherlands, throughout the 20th century (Bottom and Copus 2011; Copus and Erlingsson 2012; Copus and Wingfield 2014; Cutts 2014). However, in New Zealand, although political parties contest local elections, with the exception of the occasional New Zealand Labour Party incursion, they are on the whole not identifiable as central government actors. The degree to which political parties partake in western European local elections can be broadly broken into three categories: the political parties in these

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jurisdictions, non-partisan lists (Aars and Ringkjobt 2005; Copus and Erlingsson 2012; Cutts 2014) and independents (Bottom and Copus 2011; Copus and Wingfield 2014; Mouritzen and Nielsen 1988; Sweeting and Copus 2012).

For our purposes we settle on the definition of a political party derived from Ware (1996), which defines a local political party as

- Being formally organised to aim to influence public policy, typically engaging in public elections;
- Covering the whole country, or at least substantial parts of it;
- Existing over a long period of time;
- Seeking to represent more than a single narrow influence.

This closely adheres to the definition of political parties in New Zealand put forward by Chen (1993).

Bush (1980), writing specifically for New Zealand conditions, argued that political parties, or 'tickets' simplify the voting process by assisting electors to sort out policy pledges. Notwithstanding the three decades that have passed since this claim, political parties do broaden the choice of candidates and ensure the implementation of declared policies – provided of course that the majority group holds power. Further, party politics in local government can provide a 'stepping stone' at the local level for candidates seeking experience in political campaigning before contesting a central political seat.[1,2,3,4,,5]

In New Zealand and to a lesser extent Australia, citizens have, since the 1980s,'flocked to the banner, "Keep Politics out of Local Government",' to express their repugnance for the idea of central government party politics influencing local governance (Bush 1980, 178). Halligan and Paris (1984) emphasised this historical antipodean characteristic by describing the Australian local government as being defined by its non-party political nature, characterised by localism and ratepayer ideology. Economou (2010) concurred, and utilising the Victorian elections as a proxy for all sub-national Australian contests, that the 2008 Victorian elections were dominated by independents and disappointing performances of party-endorsed candidates. This echoed previous comment that mentioned Australians 'see great virtue in keeping councils free of the dialectics of national party politics' (Power, Wettenhall, and Halligan 1981, 68).

Asquith (2012) described 'the apparent lack of overt political activity in New Zealand local government as one of its most distinctive features'. He, however, acknowledged what he termed as 'covert' political activity in terms of the National Party masquerading as *Citizens and Ratepayers*, and the Labour Party as *City Vision*.

In terms of non-partisan groups, Aars and Ringkjobt (2005, 167) described these actors as being 'principally opposed to established and nationally organised political parties running lists.' They recognised these groups as

being heterogeneous, party-like in the organisation, single-issue political actors. Which brings us to the Independent parties.

Independent parties have no ties with central parties, and play a distinct role in local politics. They are more clearly focused on local issues than party branches, and their political positions cannot be easily reduced to national political cleavages. For these reasons, independent parties are commonly regarded as an extraordinary phenomenon in local politics. This is the variant most often seen in the New Zealand context. To clarify, the variant of political party affiliation most often seen contesting New Zealand local elections is a less formal group, bound together to contest 'an' election. These groups may not have the same name from election to election. However, they are identified as having a shared ideology.

Bottom and Copus (2011) recognised that in the UK, Independent candidates are a variant of the Independent Party described above. More often than not these Independent councillors are in a minority within a council which will often be controlled by well resourced, big political parties (Bottom and Copus 2011). Bottom and Copus described the independent politician as having no supporting organisation, rather relying on 'family, friends and well-wishers' (Bottom and Copus 2011, 281). It is worth noting here that prior to their research into candidate motivation to stand for office, Bottom and Copus (2011) observed independents to be acutely aware of local issues, often standing against central government parties. Being an independent candidate was viewed as an alternative to mainstream politics, particularly in circumstances where a single issue was adequately recognised by the mainstream, and resulted in an anti-mainstream mood and disconnection by constituents with central party politics.

Against this background of parties in local government, we examine the nature of political affiliation across Auckland; the most populous region in New Zealand covering a land mass of 4894km2 and a population of 1.6 m out a total national population of 4.7 (Stats NZ 2016). Given the dominance of this region within a national context, it would be reasonable to expect central political parties to seek control of its local government apparatus.

In the Auckland region at least, this assumption has played out. Following the 2010 amalgamation, the 2010 and 2013 elections have seen an increase, in the former Auckland City area, of political party activity. Certainly, this is the case if we take the description offered by Bottom and Copus (2011) regarding candidates who either revealed or concealed their affiliation to political parties. For example, in 2013, the Labour and Green parties overtly stood candidates at the local board level, and under the *City Vision* banner. The Conservative Party and Mana Movement stood under their own banners. The National Party, a central government political actor took a more covert approach, keeping many of its existing local *Citizens and Ratepayers*

groups and established a new collective; *Communities and Residents* as a new National Party local brand which in the 2016 election was joined by *Auckland Future*. Yet, it is clear that despite the banner candidates stood under they adhered in many respects to a political party as outlined above.

As in other 19th century colonies of Britain, the evolution of local government was based on the Westminster system of representative democracy. In New Zealand, this lasted until the first Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) election in 1993, where political parties became not just nice to have but actually integral to the makeup of parliament (Chen 1993).

Based on the Auckland experience, we propose a hypothesis for the New Zealand situation – that politicisation of local government is in fact on the rise. Albeit within the confines of loose affiliation. A quantitative analysis has been undertaken of local candidates self-described party accreditation status (central political party affiliation, local grouping, independent or no status declared) during the Auckland 2007, 2010, 2013 and 2016 local elections. Particular attention is paid to the findings following the 2010 formation of the unified Auckland Council.

To give context the following sections describe the New Zealand local government system, discuss the Auckland reforms and overview the nature of politicisation in Auckland local government. This is followed by the research design and findings. We conclude by drawing insights from the international literature to propose an explanation for the apparent increase in politicisation in Auckland.

The central government landscape in New Zealand

New Zealand, traditionally followed a Westminster tradition of government, following colonisation by Britain in the 1840s. Whilst New Zealand does not have a written constitution as such, the 1852 New Zealand Constitution Act provided parliamentary procedures and Standing Orders, Treaty of Waitangi[1] and broader constitutional principles such as democracy, the rule of law, the separation of powers, and ministerial responsibility (Palmer and Palmer 2004).

New Zealand has a strong unitary centralised system of government, featuring two tiers: central government, comprising parliament, the executive and the public service; and local government (Haidar, Reid, and Spooner 2011; Palmer and Palmer 2004). Significant reform has been the hallmark of both tiers. In the 1980s as a result of 'neoliberal' reforms of the labour government the Local Government Amendment Act 1989 (1) and (2) were introduced which established a managerialist ideology into local government and restructured local government entities (Asquith 2016; Cardow 2007); see below. In the mid-1990s, after a long public debate about the unbridled power of the Cabinet and the governing party under the *first-past-the-post* (FPP) electoral system, the MMP electoral system was introduced. This

effectively moderated the previous Westminster style of representation (Cheyne and Comrie 2005; Palmer and Palmer 2004).

The dominant political parties in the New Zealand Parliament have been: the National Party (on the centre right); the Labour Party and the Green Party (centre left); the Maori Party (completely defeated in the general election of 2017), and New Zealand First. Minor parties who contested elections – both local and national – during the period covered by this research included: the ACT Party, Conservative Party, and United Future (on the right) and the Mana Movement and Internet party (on the left).

Local government in New Zealand

New Zealand local government has its beginnings in the provincial legislatures that were part of the New Zealand Constitution Act 1852 (Cheyne 2006) and has been notable for radical reform, which has endured to the present day. Local government in New Zealand is described as a creature of statute with its powers determined on the whim of Parliament (Palmer and Palmer 2004).

The most radical restructuring of local government in New Zealand took place in 1989, with the amalgamation of 453 local entities and single purpose authorities to form 87 multi-purpose local authorities and quasi-governmental community boards (Local Government Amendment Act 1989, (1) and (2)). The new bodies included 75 territorial authorities (comprising 16 city councils and 59 district councils) delivering local services (Department of Internal Affairs 2008), and 12 regional councils[2] fulfilling a regional planning and a regulatory role[3]. In 2017, New Zealand local government system had amalgamated further to comprise 78 local authorities – 11 regional councils; 61 territorial authorities (11 city and 50 district councils); and six unitary councils (territorial authorities with regional council responsibilities) (Local Government New Zealand 2017b). This was followed by the enactment of the Local Government Act 2002 which introduced a new purpose for local government .[4] Collectively, the sector is a significant contributor to the national economy, at 3.8% of GDP and 11% of public spending (Department of Internal Affairs 2008) (Local Government New Zealand 2017a). New Zealand local government reform has been closely associated with neoliberal economic reforms, specifically with the managerialist reforms of the Lange-led fourth Labour Government in 1989, and more recently, the reforms instigated by the Local Government Act 2002.

Auckland local government reforms

Since the 1990s, scholars have considered the contest between local administration and local democracy (Clarke and Stewart 1991; Kersting and Vetter 2003; Mouat and Dodson 2013; Memon and Fooks 2007). The normative view argues a need for change because of some degree of local government

failure to perform its two-fold role – local democracy and local administration (Clarke and Stewart 1991). These roles have been the subject of the debate for and against amalgamation, the desirable objective being to achieve economic efficiency, albeit at the detriment of quality democracy (Aulich, Sansom, and McKinlay 2014; Dollery and Johnson 2005; Reid 2013).

The 2010 reforms of Auckland local government were driven by a growing dissatisfaction with the performance of the Auckland metropolitan area, the perceived lack of effective regional leadership, and concern that the Auckland economy was underperforming (Royal Commission on Auckland Governance 2008, 2). According to Reid (2013) 'the councils had a reputation (not necessarily deserved) for parochialism, and central government had found it increasingly difficult to work within a region without a single voice.' The Labour government of the day appointed the 2008 Royal Commission on Auckland Governance to:

> receive representations on, inquire into, investigate and report on the local government arrangements (including institutions, mechanisms and processes) that are required in the Auckland region over the foreseeable future in order to maximise, in a cost effective manner – (a) the current and future well-being of the region and its communities; and (b) the region's contribution to the wider national objectives and outcomes (Royal Commission on Auckland Governance 2008, 2).

While not the primary driver for reform, economies of scale were keenly anticipated by the Minister of Local Government Rodney Hide (Hide 2010; North Shore City 2009; Radio New Zealand 2010). Although these particular outcomes were not foreseen by the Royal Commission (Salmon, Bazley, and Shand 2009) or supported by recent Australian studies (Drew and Dollery 2014; Drew, Kortt, and Dollery 2016).

The resulting 2010 structural reform of Auckland local government (enacted by the Local Government Act (Auckland Council) 2009) (disestablished the existing eight local authorities and established one unitary council for Auckland. A two-tier shared governance model was introduced, comprising a governing body, led by a mayor elected at large, and 21 local boards organised into 13 wards. Local boards consist of between 5 and 9 members each (based on population) and are responsible for 'local place making', described as: determining 'local wishes and priorities; adopting a local board plan following the triennial election; developing and delivering a local board agreement to the governing body' (LGA (Auckland Council) 2009 s. 14).

The 20 strong governing body comprises one or two members elected from each ward, responsible for decision-making regarding a range of regulatory activities (Resource Management Act 1991, Health Act 1956, Building Act 2004 and Civil Defence and Emergency Management Act 2002) and non-regulatory decisions that are Auckland-wide in nature, such

as services and facilities; governance of the council-controlled organisations; long term and annual planning; and reaching agreements with each local board (LGA (Auckland Council) 2009 s. 15).

Notwithstanding the Royal Commission recommendation for Māori wards, an Independent Māori Statutory Board was established by law as an entity completely independent of the Auckland Council. This was to provide a voice for Māori in the governance of Auckland, and to assist the Auckland Council to make informed decisions and meet its statutory obligations in relation to the Treaty of Waitangi.

Of particular relevance to our examination of the politicisation of Auckland local government are the observations made by Shirley et al. (2016) in their report, *The Governance of Auckland: 5 years on*. They found that Aucklanders' and their elected members have all been disadvantaged by the reforms, which have reduced the number of elected members and created larger local electoral areas. They assert, 'ironically, though, any suggestion that the numbers of elected members be increased is bound to be resisted by ratepayers' concerned with the cost of running the city (Shirley et al. 2016, 31). As the population grows, this will become more of an issue, with uneven effects across the ward and local board boundaries, and likely impacts on candidate profile.

Research design

This mixed method cohort study set out to ask the question: Is a local government in Auckland, becoming increasingly politicised following the 2010 reforms? The objective was to determine whether the proportion of political affiliation was trending upward. A secondary consideration was whether political affiliation was associated with electoral success over four election cycles (2007, 2010, 2013 and 2016). We utilised New Zealand Department of Internal Affair's (DIA) candidate political affiliation data – one election pre-amalgamation (2007), and three elections post-amalgamation (2010, 2013 and 2016), along with Auckland local government election statistics and booklets, comprising candidates' self-described affiliation.

The DIA data provided: Candidate name; election result; and a statement of 'party accreditation'. Our Analysis focuses on Auckland candidates and elected members at the ward and local board level. The candidate name, gender, self-declared political affiliation and year data were analysed with software R 3.4 (R Core Team 2017). The variable types are summarised in Table 1.

Defining party accreditation

Methodological problems are not uncommon in local political studies, as all political systems have their own characteristics (see, for example, Aars and

Table 1. Variables.

Variable	Type	Description
Self-declared central party affiliation	Categorical	1. No affiliation (Unknown) 2. Independent 3. Local group 4. Political affiliation
Local government level	Categorical	Overall, ward, local board
Year	Continuous	2007, 2010, 2013, 2016
Electoral success	Categorical	Yes, no

Ringkjobt 2005; Put and Maddens 2015). One of the methodological challenges of this study has been defining the categories of candidate party accreditation status in New Zealand, and in particular, the Auckland local government. As highlighted in the previous section, there are significant differences between the nature of politicisation of Auckland local government, and that observed elsewhere. Analysis of party accreditation data demonstrated that New Zealand candidates used this category in different ways: it was left blank; used for an advertising slogan or key message; or to declare independent or political affiliation status. In selecting categories to describe political affiliation, typologies proposed by scholars (Boswell et al. 2018; Flinders and Dommett 2015; Katz and Mair 1992, 2002, 2012; Mair 1994) were considered, but did not relate well to the political context being studied. Hence, our reference to both Chen (1993) and Bush (1980). We have therefore devised our own typology to reflect the influence of politics in New Zealand local government.

Based on a thematic interpretation, candidates' political affiliation was allocated to one of four categories that align with the research question, and the political paradigm in New Zealand government: (i) No affiliation declared (unknown); (ii) Independent; (iii) Local group; and (iv) Affiliated to a central political party[5]. The status of affiliation was based on the description provided in Table 2.

The 'no affiliation declared (unknown)' category includes all those candidates who left this section of the nomination form blank and whose political affiliation is therefore unknown. The 'Independent' label refers to those who self-declare as independents and those individuals who identify themselves by a marketing phrase, or slogan, and are not part of a group.

The 'local group' category includes those candidates who declare affiliation to a local group that has not associated with a national political party, for the purpose of campaign advertising and promotion during the election period. These groups are informal, localised and have limited or no visible party structure. They may be a one-election entity, or reform only at the time of elections. Following Aars and Ringkjobt (2005) and the definition offered earlier by Ware (1996), it is clear that these groups are not the same as non-partisan lists, a distinction from the European models of local politicisation.

Table 2. Description of candidate self-declared accreditation status and categories of political affiliation.

Self-declared accreditation	Description
No affiliation declared (unknown)	Field left blank
Independent	Self-declaration
	Individual use of marketing slogan
Local group	Association formed for purpose of campaigning
	No association to national political party
	May be temporary in nature and disband following election or work collaboratively
National political party	Group recognised as a local entity of a political party
	May receive funding and/or support from the party
	May be subject to party discipline
	Described as: Left of centre; or Right of centre

The group 'affiliated to a central political party' (abbreviated as political affiliation) includes all candidates who self-declare an affiliation with a group publicly recognised as a local entity of a central political party or an entity that may receive funding or public support from such a party. In Auckland, this category meant an association with at least one of the central political groups. Broadly, these groups were the Labour Party, City Vision, Future West and the Mana Movement, on the left of the political spectrum; and on the right, The National Party, Citizens and Ratepayers, Communities and Residents, and Auckland Future, United Future and the Conservative Party.

Limitation of this research – When commenting on electoral success, this paper only considers candidates' political affiliation. Future work will explore the relationship between electoral success and other factors such as candidate public profile, gender and incumbency. The next section presents the findings of the study.

Findings

In this section, we present an analysis of the cohort showing the proportion of candidates and elected members in the four categories of self-accreditation (see Table 2 above) over the four electoral cycles. We first present the cohort of candidates and elected members overall (all); then focus specifically on the ward candidates and ward councillors; and lastly on local board candidates and the local board-elected members.

Analysis of sample

As represented in Table 3 a total of 2262 candidates stood for the Auckland local government elected positions over the period under review. In 2007, prior to amalgamation 778 candidates stood for 258 city and district council and community board seats. Between 2010, 2013 and 2016, 546, 470 and

Table 3. Number of candidates and elected members over the four election cycles.

Cohort	2007 N (%)	2010 N (%)	2013 N (%)	2016 N (%)	Total N N (%)
Total candidates	778	546	470	468	2262
Candidate withdrawals	3	3	4	0	10
N	775	543	466	468	2252
Winning candidates (Elected members)	258 (33)	170 (31)	170 (36)	170 (36)	768 (34)
Losing candidates	517 (67)	373 (69)	296 (64)	298 (64)	1484 (66)

468 candidates stood for the 170 seats (including the mayor). Ten candidates withdrew during the campaign periods leaving a sample of 2252 candidates. As shown in Table 1, candidate numbers remained relatively steady between 2.8 (468/170) and 3 (775/258) candidates per seat. Overall, 34% (768) candidates won seats and 1484 failed to be elected over the period.

Political affiliation

In 2010, the year of amalgamation there was a spike in political party affiliation (up 10% from 28% pre-amalgamation to 38% in 2010). Between 2010 and 2016, the proportion of elected members declaring independence decreased 7% from 33% to 26% and the percentage associated with a local group rose from 29% to 38% (an increase of 9%) (see Figure 1).

The data shows not only a marked increase in political affiliation at the local level, but that those candidates who affiliate to a central political party are more likely to be elected. This is illustrated by 25% of all candidates affiliating with a central political party, against 34% of all elected members (see Figure 2 and Table 4). However, local group association was also a successful election strategy, with 30% of candidates choosing this option, comprising 34% of the winners. Correspondingly, declaring independence or no accreditation status proved less successful strategies,
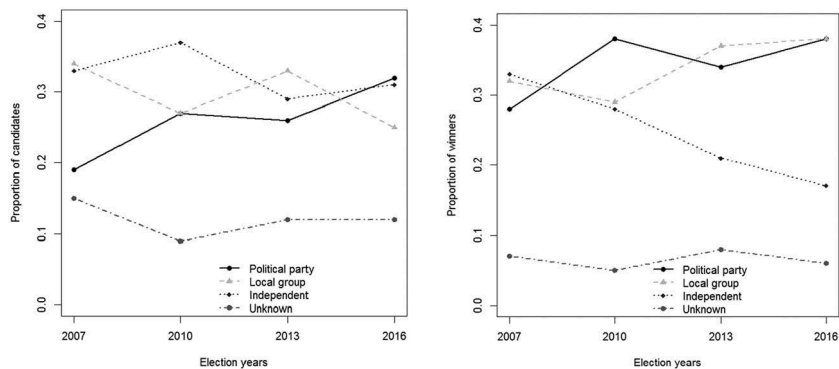

Figure 1. All candidate and elected member party affiliation by election year.
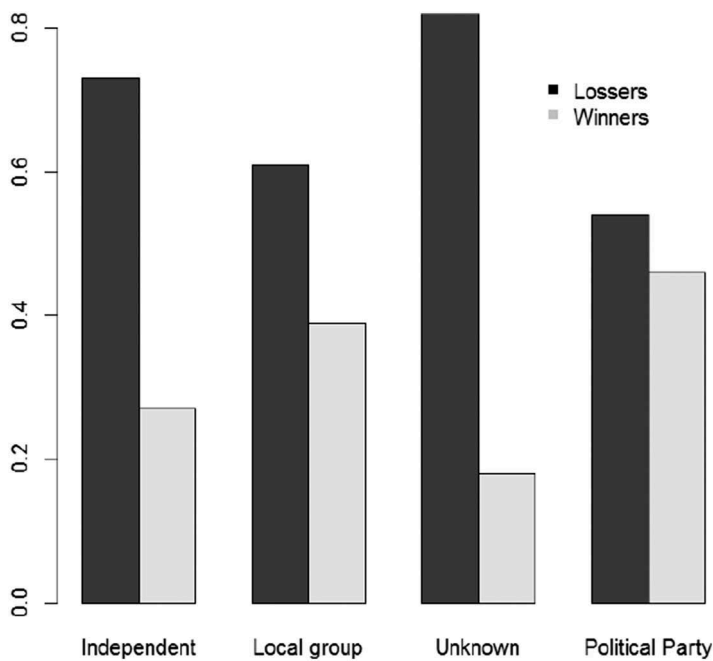
Figure 2. Proportion of electoral success across the four categories of affiliation for all candidates in four elections.

Table 4. All candidate group accreditation and winners by year and on average.

		2007 N (%)	2010 N (%)	2013 N (%)	2016 N (%)	Total N (%)
Group Accreditation	No Affiliation	116 (15)	50 (9)	55 (12)	56 (12)	277 (12)
	Independent	252 (33)	202 (37)	137 (29)	145 (31)	736 (33)
	Local Group	260 (34)	145 (27)	154 (33)	116 (25)	675 (30)
	Political Party	147 (19)	146 (27)	120 (26)	151 (32)	564 (25)
Winners by group Accreditation	No Affiliation	18 (7)	8 (5)	13 (8)	11 (6)	50 (7)
	Independent	85 (33)	48 (28)	36 (21)	29 (17)	198 (26)
	Local Group	83 (32)	50 (29)	63 (37)	65 (38)	261 (34)
	Political Party	72 (28)	64 (38)	58 (34)	65 (38)	259 (34)

falling from 12% and 33% of candidates, respectively, to just 7% and 26% of winners. The reason for this is unclear. However, the literature suggests that this may be attributed to local government issues becoming increasingly viewed as being of national importance by the voting public in Auckland. For instance, housing problems in Auckland are a matter of national politics. Issues faced by immigrants in Auckland speak to the national agenda. Similarly, Auckland is seen a representing all that is modern about New Zealand.

Political affiliation and electoral success – ward candidates and elected members

When we turn our attention towards candidates and elected councillors over the same election cycles we see a similar pattern, with more candidates self-declaring affiliation to a central political party, and fewer affiliating with a local group, over each election since 2007 (see Figure 2). The proportion of councillors with a political affiliation peaked in 2010 at 40%, slipping back to 30% in 2013 and rising to 35% in 2016. Following amalgamation, there was a 16% drop (from 31% to 15%) in councillors affiliating with a local group, followed by a fluctuation, with 25% in 2013 and 20% in 2016. Ward councillors declaring independence decreased 4% from 2007 to 40% and remained steady between 2010 and 2016 (Figure 3).

Figure 4 and Table 5 confirm that at the ward level, those candidates affiliating with a central political party were overall more successful at being elected. They were followed by local group and independent councillors who were elected at the same proportion as they stood. Over the four electoral cycles examined, the electoral success of candidates affiliated to a central political party rose from 21% of candidates to 29% of eventual winners. This was balanced by a drop in the electoral success of candidates not declaring their accreditation status from 15% of candidates to 7% of winners. Over the same period, those ward candidates declaring independence or local group association were relatively steady at 38% (within 1%) and 27%.

Political affiliation and electoral success – local board candidates and elected members

Similar to the wards, local boards, demonstrated more candidates affiliating to a central political party, while the association with a local grouping
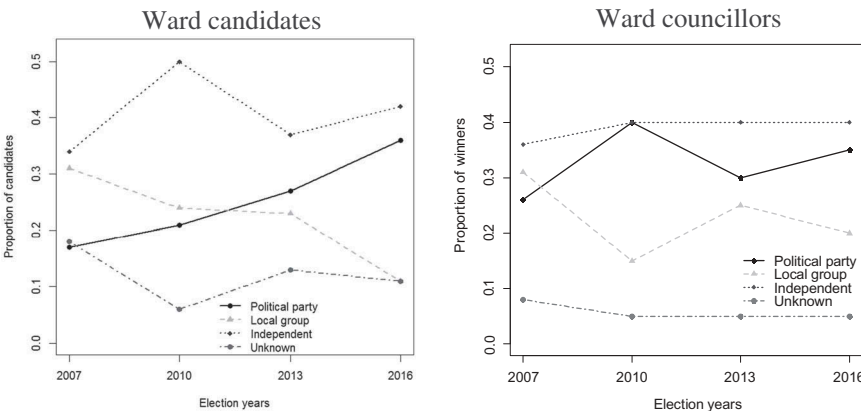

Figure 3. Ward candidate and elected councillor self-declared affiliation by election year.
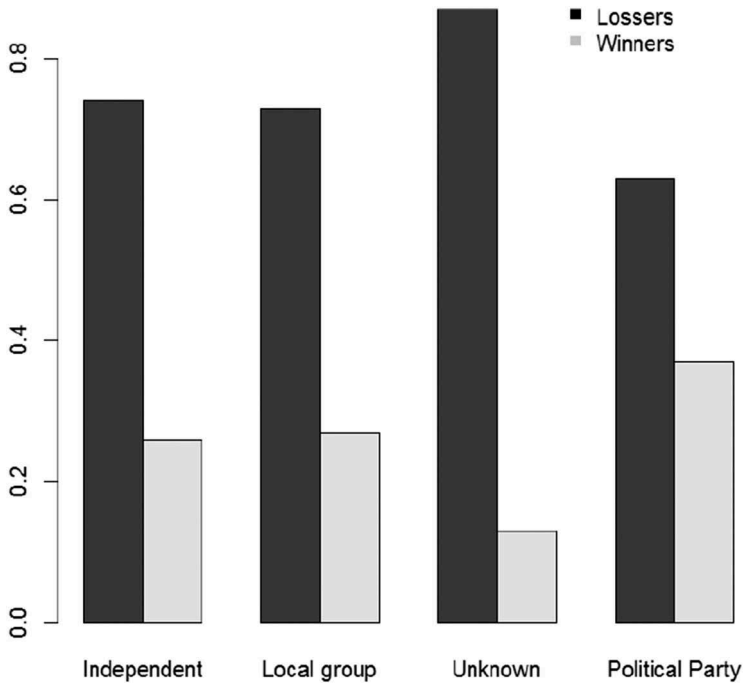
Figure 4. Ward candidates – Average electoral success across the four categories of affiliation status 2007–2016.

Table 5. Ward candidate group accreditation and winners by year and on average.

		N (%)	2010 N (%)	2013 N (%)	2016 N (%)	Total N (%)
Group Accreditation	No Affiliation	65 (18)	6 (6)	8 (13)	8 (11)	87 (15)
	Independent	122 (34)	50 (50)	22 (37)	31 (42)	225 (38)
	Local Group	112 (31)	24 (24)	14 (23)	8 (11)	158 (27)
	Political Party	62 (17)	21 (21)	16 (27)	26 (36)	125 (21)
Winners by group Accreditation	No Affiliation	8 (8)	1 (5)	1 (5)	1 (5)	11 (7)
	Independent	35 (36)	8 (40)	8 (40)	8 (40)	59 (37)
	Local Group	30 (31)	3 (15)	5 (25)	4 (20)	42 (27)
	Political Party	25 (26)	8 (40)	6 (30)	7 (35)	46 (29)

declined (see Figure 5). Candidates' affiliation to central political parties rose 10% (between 23% and 33%). Over the same period, association with a local group fell 9% (from 38% to 29%). Similarly, there was an appreciable decline in candidates declaring independence of 19% (from 32% to 13%).

Among winning local board members, political affiliation increased 10% following amalgamation (from 29% to 39%). It is clear that local group association among local board elected members rose 9% over the period, from 32% to 41%. This was at the expense of independent candidacy, which fell from 32% to 13% (see Table 6).

Table 6. Local board candidate group accreditation and winners by year and on average.

|		2007 N (%)	2010 N (%)	2013 N (%)	2016 N (%)	Total N (%)
Group Accreditation	No Affiliation	33 (11)	39 (9)	43 (11)	45 (12)	160 (15)
	Independent	89 (29)	136 (32)	105 (27)	99 (26)	429 (38)
	Local Group	117 (38)	121 (29)	139 (36)	108 (29)	485 (27)
	Political Party	70 (23)	124 (30)	102 (26)	124 (33)	420 (21)
Winners by group Accreditation	No Affiliation	8 (6)	7 (5)	12 (8)	10 (7)	37 (6)
	Independent	44 (32)	39 (26)	27 (18)	20 (13)	130 (22)
	Local Group	45 (33)	47 (32)	58 (39)	61 (41)	211 (36)
	Political Party	40 (29)	56 (38)	52 (35)	58 (39)	206 (35)
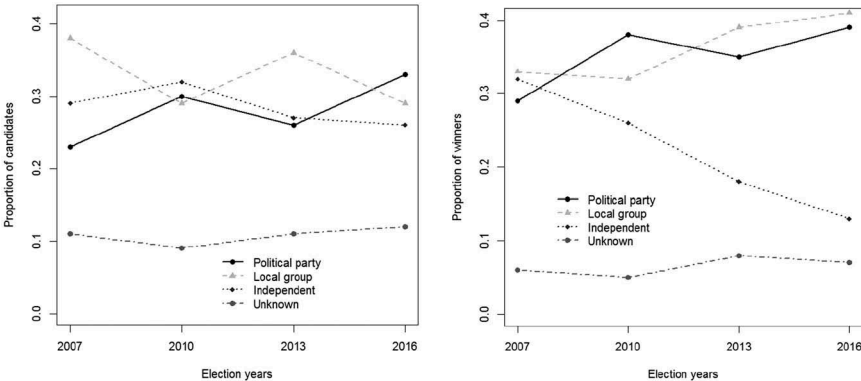
Figure 5. Local board candidate and elected member party affiliation by election year.

As shown in Figure 6, successful local board members were more likely to be affiliated with a central political party or local interests. While an average of 21% of candidates over the period were affiliated to a political party, they comprised 35% of elected members. Just 27% of candidates were associated with a local group, yet comprised 36% of the winners. In contrast, on average 38% of candidates stood as independents, yet comprised only 22% of the winners. The success of local group association and the performance of independent candidates set the local boards apart from the wards. As is evident, those candidates not declaring accreditation status were markedly the least successful group – 15% of candidates, yet just 6% of those elected.

Discussion

The data shows that since amalgamation, across all candidates, those candidates affiliated to a central political party have a markedly better chance of electoral success than those candidates affiliated to a local group (see Table 4). Among the all-candidate cohort, politically affiliated candidates are
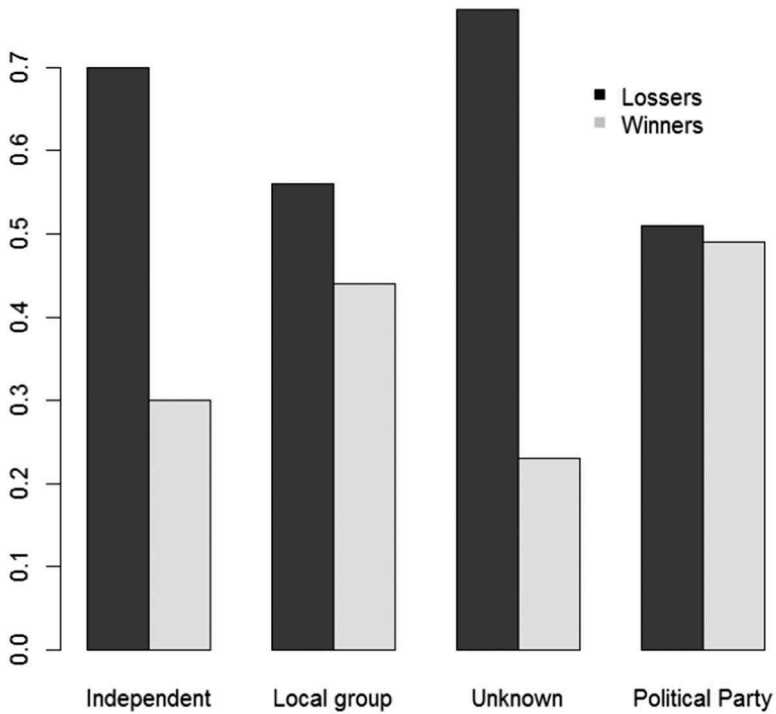
Figure 6. Local board candidates – Average electoral success across the four categories of affiliation status 2007–2016.

70% more likely to be successful than independent candidates, and almost 20% more likely to be successful than a candidate with a local group association. At the ward and/or governing body level, politically affiliated candidates were again the most successful, at 40% more likely to be elected than a candidate affiliated to a local group or an independent. At the local board level, the success of political affiliation as a campaign strategy was 60% more than that of independents, but only 13% more successful than candidates with a local group association. This presents a distinctive difference across the ward and local level – as at the local level, local groups focusing on local issues appear to be more successful at being elected than independents. Across the three levels, candidates affiliated to a political party are 200–300% more likely to be elected than the unknowns.

Across the review period, an increase in candidate political affiliation post-Auckland Council amalgamation is evident overall. This reflects both the challenges to win support in larger municipalities and the advantages for political parties of winning local seats in the country's largest and most populous region. Candidates affiliated to a central political party, have

demonstrated markedly better electoral success than those candidates affiliated to a local group.

Among the all-candidate cohort, politically affiliated candidates were 1.7 times more likely to be successful than independent candidates, and almost 1.2 times more likely to be successful than a candidate with a local group association. At the ward level, independent candidates were marginally more successful than local group candidates at 1.4 times. At the local board level, the success of political affiliation as a campaign strategy was 1.6 times that of independents, but only 1.3 times more successful than candidates with a local group association. This presents a distinctive difference between the ward and local level – as at the local level, local groups appear to be more successful at being elected than independents.

With much larger electoral areas to campaign across, affiliated candidates benefit from the established party structure that supports the national election campaign: public relations advice, campaign education, experience, and party profile of the national organisation. With this level of resource, candidates are better placed to lift voter awareness of their campaign (Bush 1980; Cutts 2014) and compete with lesser resourced opponents. Arguably, political party ideology goes some way to augment the paucity of candidate information lamented by voters. This is particularly important in Auckland where there has been a subtle and unstated political battle for the soul of the city in which the National and the Labour parties have been engaged, since 1938 when the right-leaning Citizens and Ratepayers group was formed with the intention 'to preserve local government in all its then present forms, protecting it from any influence and interference of party politics' [sic] (Auckland Star, 1938). For instance, it is revealing how both the Labour Party and the National Party use immigration as an excuse for housing problems in Auckland and make Chinese immigrants the scapegoat (Walters 2015).

In Auckland, the sustained use of somewhat informal local groups provides a mechanism for otherwise independent candidates to pool resources and raise their profile to achieve greater recognition within the campaign budget cap, in the lead up to a local election.[5] This approach delivers some of the benefits offered by political affiliation, specifically a raised marketing and public relations profile, and in some cases better signals to voters, candidates' priority issues and ideology. Of note is that the increase in political affiliation in Auckland over the review period runs counter to the DIA 2010 electoral report findings that nationally, where candidates with no declared affiliation (the unknowns) overall had the highest success rate (Department of Internal Affairs 2010).

Aars and Ringkjobt (2005) observed that tensions between the national and local level were inevitable: voters in larger municipalities tended to regard party ideology as important for deciding the vote; whereas, voters in

smaller municipalities were less oriented towards parties. This may help explain the increase in political affiliation in Auckland, which runs counter to the national picture.

From a national political perspective, local elections occurring the year preceding the national elections, present an opportunity for political parties to raise their profile ahead of the official national campaign. The involvement of political parties in local government provides a formalised training ground for political aspirants who wish to use local politics as a 'stepping stone' to national politics (Asquith 2012; Cutts 2014) and also for candidates looking to use local government as a 'stepping stone' to national politics.

On average, at the ward level, the electoral success of independent candidates was on a par with that of candidates associated with a local group. At this level of Auckland governance, the majority of successful candidates have been sitting councillors or local board (or in 2007, community board) members and as such enjoy a higher local or regional profile and name recognition than many of their rivals. This reduces the advantage of political affiliation – such as access to the party public relations machine, campaign experience and media profile – observed overall and at the local board level. Further, association with a local group recognises the historical distaste for party politics in New Zealand (Bush 1980; Cutts 2014) and, as in the case of Australia, the focus on clientelist politics, localism and political neutrality (Economou 2010; Halligan and Paris 1984). Based on the UK and European experience, independent councillors, similarly, promote a distinctly local view and prioritise local issues (Bottom and Copus 2011; Copus and Wingfield 2014). This appeals to voters who are antagonist towards central party control, and resist promotion of national politics down to the local level and closed caucus decision-making (Aars and Ringkjobt 2005; Put and Maddens 2015).

At the local board level, where elected members represent 149 of the 170 sitting member seats across the Auckland Council shared governance structure, the marked increase in political affiliation represented a fundamental change in central political activity at the local level and could be interpreted as a signal that the involvement of political parties in local government is no longer abhorrent to the majority of citizens (Bush 1980), at least in Auckland. This was evidenced by the three-fold increase in the number of candidates affiliated to Citizens and Ratepayers, the National Party supported group for the first election of the Amalgamated Auckland Council. This demonstrates the 'central impulse to reach out to local level', described by Aars and Ringkjobt as perhaps a 'final step in a general process of nation-building' (Aars and Ringkjobt 2005, 164).

Conclusion

The increase in political affiliation to a central political party was evident in Auckland local government following the 2010 amalgamation, and aligns with the progressing politicisation of the UK and European local municipalities from the post-war period. With candidates affiliated to a central political party and those associated with a local group being more likely to be elected than independent candidates, 1.7 and 1.5 times, respectively, and with this positive relationship being stronger at the local board level, the big question is what this means for New Zealand local government politics.

The strength of the association to a local group and affiliation to a central political party at the local board level was especially dominant. This reflects two key challenges faced by candidates. The first, for local board candidates, is that of campaigning across a larger field and wider geographic area. As Auckland and other New Zealand centres continue to grow and engaging with citizens becomes more problematic and costly, affiliating to a political party in order to access the public relations machine and campaign expertise will become increasingly attractive. The ability for the party to attract competent candidates, vet them and improve voter access to information on candidate policy positions could lift the quality of calibre of local government.

The second challenge, for the central political parties, is that of enhancing their profile amongst Auckland's 1.5 m people – one-third of the national population. This is pertinent ahead of the triennial national election which occurs in the year following local government elections. By trailblazing during the Auckland local election parties can overcome the constraints imposed by the campaign period (Local Electoral Act 1993, part 2) which restricts advertising and campaigning activity to the calendar month prior to the election, and begin raising the party profile and credibility a year out from the forthcoming national campaign. It is no surprise that central political parties engaged in battles for council and local board seats, and a spirited fight for the mayoralty of Auckland in 2010 and 2016.[6] Inarguably, the political struggles for power add a high level of interest to the local campaign and attract considerable media attention, providing an impetus for public engagement in local democracy and delivering political profile for the mayoral contenders. Evidence in New Zealand and UK (Asquith 2008; Copus 2004; Local Government New Zealand 2019) demonstrates that mayoral election has the potential to stimulate not only interest but voter turnout in elections. This was evidenced in the first election for an amalgamated Auckland where the voter turnout was slightly elevated to 51% then in subsequent elections falling to 38%. A visible spike of candidates declaring themselves independent at the ward level in 2010, may be attributed to the traditional perception, described by Aars and Ringjobt (2005) that political power is potentially problematic in the local government arena.

While the directly elected mayor in Auckland holds only limited executive powers (Cheyne 2017), the region's reforms appear to lift their investment in winning seats in the Auckland local elections. In much the same way that the introduction of the directly elected mayor revitalised local democracy in British local government (Asquith 2008; Copus 2004), the increasing politicisation of local government in Auckland is providing a new dimension that has the potential to enhance transparency of and participation in local government. This aside, for central politics to win out in the local arena, politicians' personality, character and conduct will need to overcome the inherent scepticism amongst a broad group of New Zealanders for party politics at the local level. With the strong tradition of non-partisan politics in New Zealand local government, it is debatable that party political positions could ever be widely imposed on New Zealand local government. The nuanced nature of political affiliation and the obvious choice many candidates known to have past political affiliations make to stand as independents raises an important question about the transparency of local politics. A declaration of independence sends two possible signals: (1) that the candidates want to convey to voters a priority for local issues; or (2) that candidates fear reprisals from voters to the overt intrusion of national politics into the local arena. Whichever, the concealed nature of political affiliation in Auckland local government is problematic, and impacts negatively on the integrity of the local political system. As a result, the 'Kiwi' characteristics of independence and fairness will likely see a continuance of the independent Mayor councillor in Auckland and New Zealand local government.

Clearly, political affiliation is but one factor influencing electoral success. A range of candidate and party factors including gender, incumbency, previous national political profile, local community profile and campaign spending could all influence electoral success. Notwithstanding this, the resounding success of political affiliation as an electoral tactic in Auckland runs counter to the findings of the national findings following the 2010 local election (Department of Internal Affairs 2010) and is a significant and popularly ironic move away from the historical voter preference to keep politics out of local government.

For future research:

This paper presents a baseline for exploring the other factors likely to influence electoral success, such as gender, candidate personal profile and incumbency history (local and national). Research of Auckland specific issues on voter preferences and political party perspectives on participation in local government is needed to enhance understanding of the changing political nature of Auckland local government and its impact on central politics. Comparative work will establish whether increasing politicisation is an Auckland only or a national trend. Alongside this, the challenge of candidates, and indeed elected members, with known central political party

affiliations who declare themselves as independent or part of a local group needs to be better understood.

Notes

1. The Treaty of Waitangi, signed by the British Crown and more than 500 Maori (New Zealand's indigenous people) chiefs in 1840 (Orange 1987) holds a pre-eminent place in New Zealand's constitutional arrangements. The Treaty confirms Maori rights to the full exclusive and undisturbed possession of their lands, forests, fisheries and other collective and individual property, and extends to Maori all the rights and privileges of British subjects. Conflict regarding different interpretations of the Maori and English versions of the Treaty arose almost immediately following the signing of the Treaty, and has resulted in grievances between Maori and The Crown. This came to prominence in the 1970s through Maori activism. The government of the day responded by enacting the Waitangi Tribunal Act 1976, which provides for grievances to be heard and claims addressed (Webster 2009, 260–263). References to the Treaty are widely incorporated in New Zealand statutes, including the Local Government Act 2002, and the Resource Management Act 1991, thus passing on to local authorities Crown obligations to honour the Treaty.
2. This empowering legislation, introduced a broad and intergenerational purpose for local government, namely to enable 'democratic local decision-making, and to promote the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of communities, in the present and for the future' (LGA 2002, Part 2, s. 10). In 2012, amendments refocused local authorities' efforts on the provision of 'good-quality local infrastructure, local public services, and performance of regulatory functions.'
3. The average population of a regional council in 2003 was 286,000. The population of the Auckland region was 1.3 million (Bush 2003).
4. Among the regulatory functions were responsibility for administering the RMA 1991 and the Land Transport Management Act 2003, and planning for growth. It is notable that there was no hierarchical relationship between the territorial and regional authorities.
5. Campaign spending is regulated under the Local Electoral Act and is based on population. It ranges from an expenditure limit of $3500 for a council population of up to 4,999, up to a maximum of $100,000 (plus 50c for each elector) for populations of over one million, see http://www.lgnz.co.nz/assets/Candidate-guide-to-local-authority-elections.pdf.
6. The model of the directly elected mayor has been fairly widely established in New Zealand local government since the late 19th century, and mandatory since the 1989 reforms (Cheyne 2017).

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