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REPORT

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# The 2019 local government elections in Aotearoa New Zealand

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## ABSTRACT

The election report describes the organization of local government and analyses the results of the 2019 local elections in Aotearoa New Zealand (the bilingual Māori-English name for New Zealand). The report reveals a trend of declining turnout. Districts with higher numbers of electors and those with lower numbers of elected representatives per capita had the lowest turnout. Apart from three large cities, Auckland, Christchurch and the capital city Wellington, most council and mayoral candidates do not stand for a political party or on a local ticket. As the report highlights, 2019 did see an increase in the number of women elected to positions on councils.



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**KEYWORDS** New Zealand; Turnout; Local government elections; Representation; Electoral competition

## Introduction

Local government and its elections in Aotearoa New Zealand<sup>1</sup> do not excite much attention or result in respectable turnouts. While turnout has been falling in recent times, low turnouts are not new. Political scientist Graham Bush wrote in 1980 that ‘torpor and apathy are deeply embedded in the local government psyche. ... The mundane nature of much local government caretaking is inimical to ebullient, rousing politics’ (244) and that ‘low turnouts at campaign meetings [mean] candidates and their spouses made up most of the attendees’ (200–201).

The 2019 local government elections in New Zealand were no exception, with an overall turnout of just over 42 per cent, a figure that masks considerable variation across local government districts.

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This report is the first inclusion of New Zealand for *Annual Review of Regional Elections* and as such, it contains contextual material and brief histories, where these help explain the 2019 results. The report begins with the structure of local government in New Zealand, followed by election-specific analysis. Political parties have a very limited role in local government, as communities want their elected representatives to be responsive to local voters, and not party apparatchik (Molineaux and Asquith 2022). Consequently, this report focuses more on turnout. The main factors associated with turnout include council size and level of competition, particularly for mayoralty races. Some councils held referendums on representation issues, and the results of these are noted, as is the success of women candidates in 2019. Two particularities of the New Zealand local government franchise are then outlined: results for those councils with separate rolls for voters of Māori descent, and the presence of voting based on property ownership, a hangover from a less democratic past.

## Local government in New Zealand

Local elections in New Zealand are held every three years, the year before Parliamentary (central government) elections. Voting is not compulsory. Ballots are delivered and returned by post, over a three-week period. Each Council arranges its own elections within a legal framework provided by the Local Electoral Act 2001. The 2019 elections were held between 20th September and the 12th of October, with most results being provisionally available in the evening of the 12th October, due to the processing of ballots as they were returned to electoral officers. The results covered 78 councils and 1605 positions, although a small number of positions were unfilled due to insufficient nominations and over 200 positions were filled uncontested, no election being necessary.

With a small population that only reached 5 million in 2020, the political structure of New Zealand is simple: at the national level is a single chamber of Parliament elected via the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) electoral system. The MMP system has political parties at its centre, and the make-up of Parliament roughly reflects the votes cast for political parties in a list vote. Voting is not compulsory, and turnout in parliamentary elections is reasonable high, at 82% of enrolled voters in 2020 (Electoral Commission 2020).

Turnout in local elections has consistently been below 50% for some decades, indicating the voting habit at general elections does not, for many electors, carry through to local elections (Table 1).

New Zealand does not have an entrenched constitution, and local government has no formal constitutional protections: its structure, size and scope is determined by central government and can (and does) change as central governments change (Molineaux and Asquith 2022). Government in New

**Table 1.** Turnout in local government and parliamentary elections since 2004.

	Election turnout %	
	Local	Parliamentary
2004/2005	46	80.3
2007/2008	44	79.5
2010/2011	49	74.2
2013/2014	42	77
2016/2017	43	79.8
2019/2020	42	82.2

Sources: Department of Internal Affairs [2021b](#); IDEA database [2022](#).

Zealand is highly centralized with functions such as policing, education, social welfare, health and most social housing being the responsibility of central government.

While local government has a large asset base (around NZ\$123b in 2018), its share of GDP is small, at less than 5% (Crawford and Shafiee [2019](#)). The 2002 Local Government Act (s10) says the purpose of local government is to 'enable democratic local decision-making and action by, and on behalf of communities; and to promote the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-beings of communities in the present and for the future'. Local government typically provides local infrastructure including drinking water and sewerage treatment, roads and footpaths, parks and recreation, rubbish and recycling services, long term plans on matters of the natural and built environment, issues building consents, maintains community facilities such as libraries and runs community events including festivals and parades.

The current structure of local government has been in place since 1989, although there have been specific changes for a few council areas since then, mostly involving the creation of unitary councils (see below).

Local government in New Zealand has several layers. Regional councils are responsible for regional planning, environmental protection (including air, land and water quality), public transport in Auckland and Wellington, pest control and biosecurity, and emergency management (civil defence) across a whole region (Molineaux and Asquith [2022](#), 318). It should be noted that regional councils are a regional layer of local government and not a form of regional government (Bush [1995](#), 117). They are covered by the Local Government Act. McNeill ([2008](#), 247) describes regional councils as a form of multiple special purpose authorities that handle mainly environmental resource management issues; in other jurisdictions many of these functions would be carried out by a central government environmental agency without elected members. Regional councils do not have a hierarchical relationship with the local territorial authorities and their necessary interactions are between organizations on 'an equal footing' (Bush [1995](#), 117).

There are 11 regional councils and each one's territory covers several Local Territorial Authorities (LTAs). The LTA layer of local government consist of city councils, which have populations of 50,000 or more and are largely urban, and district councils, which contain smaller towns and rural areas. There are 61 LTAs, 11 of these are city councils and the remaining 50 are district councils. Six councils are unitary authorities, combining the functions of both regional and LTA. Some city councils also have community boards; these total 110 and the largest council, Auckland Council, has a layer of 21 Local Boards. In all, there are 78 local government councils, which all hold elections: 11 regional and 67 LTAs. Unitary councils are usually counted as LTAs (Molineaux and Asquith 2022, 318).

A voter might only be voting for one layer of local government, as is the case in some unitary council areas, or two (regional council and LTA), plus in some cases also community or local boards. Additionally, between 2001 and 2019, the local government election ballot also contained elections for District Health Boards, which were part of the central government public health system structure until 2022, and, in a few areas of the country, local liquor licencing trusts or other trusts. Hence some voters in 2019 had ballot papers for a mayoralty and five different bodies. Previous research on local elections has suggested the complexity of the ballot is one factor in low turnout (Local Government New Zealand 2013).

Councils can decide to use either the First Past the Post (FPP; Winner Takes All) or Single Transferable Vote (STV) electoral systems. In 2019, 11 council elections were run using STV, including several for the first time. Councils can also choose between at-large elections or the use of wards. At-large elections mean the voters vote for all positions (for example, a voter in Palmerston North would vote for all 15 City Councillors), while wards divide the territory into electoral districts. Voters may have a mix of electoral systems and district magnitudes (how many positions they are voting for) on the one ballot. Some FPP elections, such as those for Auckland's Local Boards, are for multiple positions.

The law was amended in early 2019 giving councils, in particular their Chief Executive, the mandate to promote participation in elections. Under the amended 2002 Local Government Act the Chief Executive is now tasked with, 'facilitating and fostering representative and substantial elector participation in elections and polls' (Local Government Act 2002, s42(2da)). This clarification of mandate probably came too late to affect actions by councils with regard to the running of the elections in 2019. Notably, it does not include targets or specify minimum participation levels.

Council funding comes mostly from rates, a form of property tax, although the mix of rates and other incomes (for example public transport fares or income from investments) varies from council to council. Central

government provides about 15 per cent of local government funding, often through ad hoc grants or the funding of specific projects (Molineaux 2021). Owners of properties are billed for their rates annually and are referred to as ratepayers. Ratepayers play a central role in local government politics.

## **The role of political parties in local government**

New Zealand's central government elections have political parties as an organizing principle. One of the two votes voters have in the MMP elections is for a party list, the results of which determines the distribution of parliamentary seats among registered political parties. Mostly though, these same political parties do not – openly at least – contest local government positions in a comprehensive way.

There is a strong sentiment against political parties being involved in local elections in New Zealand, with surveys of New Zealand voters in the 1960s and 1970s revealing a dislike for the idea, and support for elected officials to be independent of political party influence (Bush 1980). The lack of overt political party branding for candidates has been described as one of the distinctive features of local government in New Zealand (Asquith 2012). Various labour organizations supported or promoted candidates in local government elections before the current Labour Party was formed in 1916 (Overacker 1955; Bush 1999) but the Labour Party only stands candidates for some positions, for some local elections. More recently the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand has stood a few candidates in the larger cities. The National Party, a right of centre catch-all party formed in 1936, has been in central government for more than half the time since its formation, but has never entered candidates under its own name in local elections. Instead, the interests of businesses and those wanting to keep rates (local property taxes) low have formed ratepayer or residents' groups to promote these ideas, and in some cases put forward a slate of candidates (Bush 1999).

Candidates standing for election have the opportunity to enter, on their nomination form, an affiliation next to their name. In many cases this is left blank; in more recent years a few enterprising candidates have used the affiliation space to provide an electioneering slogan, such as 'Keep Free Parking'. In contrast to the lack of state-wide political parties on the ballot, there are local political groupings (tickets), ranging from small single-election tickets to more enduring multi-ward organizations, although these are predominantly a feature in the larger cities.

Leaving the affiliation space blank was the most common option in 2019, followed by the label 'Independent', which is a signifier by the candidate that they will take their direction from local residents, not a political party or a local ticket. The larger cities of Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington

**Table 2.** Affiliation of LTA councillors in 2019 elections.

Affiliation of all LTA councillors	N	%	Affiliation of 'Metro' councillors	N	%
Left blank	418	60	Left blank	0	0
Independent	122	18	Independent	11	22
Slogan	52	8	Slogan	6	12
Political Party	23	3	Political Party	11	22
Local Party or Ticket	26	4	Local Party or Ticket	19	38
Unknown	51	7	Unknown	3	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>692</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Affiliations compiled from individual Council website elections information. 'Unknown' includes councillors elected unopposed, whose results were not included in the election data due to an election for their position not taking place. 'Metro' is the three largest councils by population: Auckland Council, Christchurch City Council and Wellington City Council. These councils are included in the 'All LTA councillors' column.

(New Zealand's capital) had more party and local tickets than the country as a whole. Excluding these three 'metro' councils, 82% of winning councillors were not part of a team, either leaving their affiliation section blank, or standing as an independent (Table 2).

### The role of the mayor

LTAs and Unitary councils have a Mayor, elected directly by the public in an at-large election, and a deputy mayor, who is a councillor appointed to the position by the Mayor. Regional councils have a Chair, who is also a councillor and elected by the winning councillors after the election. New Zealand has a weak-mayor model. Mayors have some leadership power – for example, appointing the deputy mayor and deciding what council committees there will be and which councillors chair them, as well as chairing meetings and leading planning processes – but for the most part they are just one vote around the Council table and to be successful must build strong relationships with the councillors. Mayors cannot veto council decisions, but the standing orders of some councils allow the mayor to cast a tie-breaker vote. The mayoral office brings with it some

**Table 3.** Affiliations of Mayors in 2019 elections.

Mayoral affiliation	Frequency	Percentage
Left blank	44	65.67
Independent	9	13.43
Slogan	6	8.96
Political Party	2	2.99
Unopposed	4	5.97
Unknown	2	2.99
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Affiliations compiled from individual Council website elections information. 'Unopposed' includes those mayors voted in unopposed and whose affiliations were not included on electoral returns.

symbolic power and ceremonial roles and has a higher profile than the council administration or the other elected officials (Cheyne 2016).

Most mayors voted into office in 2019 were unaffiliated (Table 3).

## Turnout

Turnout for local elections in New Zealand is low and 2019 was no exception, when the average turnout across the councils came in at 42%. While turnout is low, it does vary across the country, by council size and type, by representation levels, whether there is competition for key positions such as the mayoralty, or if there is an important issue at stake. There is no regional pattern distinct from these features.

Turnout is highest among the isolated Chatham Islands, which are 800 km east of New Zealand, at 70.8% in 2019. This is a natural community with a clear geographic boundary and strong identity, small population (at only 663 people in 2018) and high levels of representation (1 mayor and 8 councillors). The next highest turnout levels in 2019 went to district councils – those more rural areas of the country with smaller cities and towns. As with previous elections, turnout was lowest in the largest cities, where populations are higher and representation ratios worse (Reid 2016). The greatest variation in turnout was at the district council level, which also contains the largest number of council bodies (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Turnout for local authority elections based on type of council body.

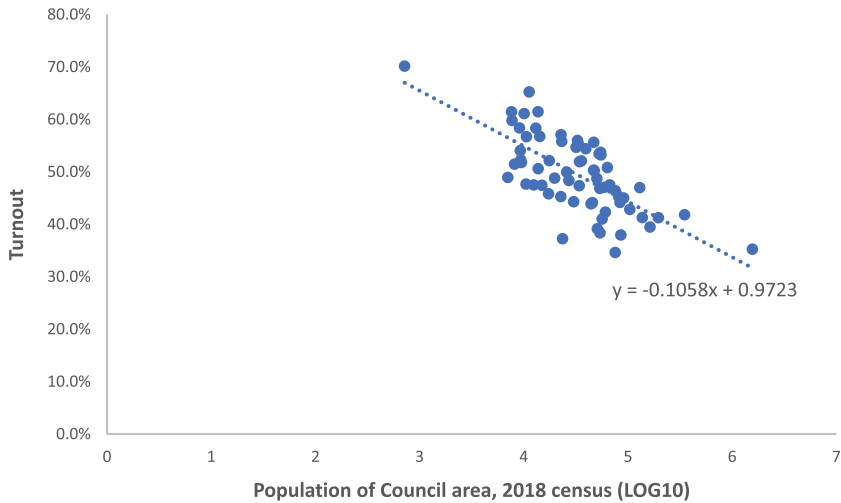
Type of council body	Turnout for council election (Mean)	Std. Deviation	Number of councils
Metro cities	39.3%	3.87%	3
Other cities	44.1%	3.56%	9
Districts	50.9%	7.09%	54

Source: Department of Internal Affairs 2021a. Kaikoura District Council was excluded due to insufficient data. 'Metro' is the three largest councils by population: Auckland Council, Christchurch City Council and Wellington City Council. The Eta measure of association is moderately strong at .442, suggesting there is a relationship between the type of territorial authority and turnout. Eta squared was .196.

The larger the population covered by a Council, the lower its turnout in 2019 (Figure 1). The following graphs exclude Auckland Council which has a population of one-third of the country; its turnout in 2019 was 34.8%.

## Uncontested elections and the role of competition

A close race aids turnout (Blaise 2000), particularly at the mayoral level. In some cases there is no election because the number of nominations is equal to or less than the number of positions. When this happens the nominee is declared the winner when nominations close, and the competition for that position is not on the ballot. When there is no mayoral race



**Figure 1.** Turnout by population size for LTAs and Unitary Councils. Source: Department of Internal Affairs 2021a for turnout; Statistics New Zealand 2018 for population. Kaikoura District Council was excluded due to insufficient data.

(or the only competitor is a joke candidate who is unlikely to win), there are down-ballot effects, with a lower turnout for the other council positions (regional councillors, LTA councillors, community or local board members). All else being equal, an exciting mayoral contest drives turnout for all positions on the ballot.

Table 5 shows the turnout by the status of the mayoral competition. The highest turnout was for those elections where the incumbent mayor did not stand again, thus guaranteeing a new mayor. The next highest turnouts were where the mayor faced competition, whether being re-elected or defeated. The lowest council turnout was when the mayoral race was not on the ballot as the new mayor was elected unopposed. Voters still had other elections on their ballot – regional council (where relevant), councillors, community board members (where relevant), and District Health Board members, but a mayoral race seems to have some association with turnout.

**Table 5.** Turnout for local authority elections based on Mayoral election competition.

Mayoral competition level	Turnout for council election (Mean)	Std. Deviation	Number of councils (%)
Incumbent Did not stand	53.83%	6.67%	16 (24%)
Incumbent Re-elected (with competition)	48.95%	7.13%	34 (52%)
Incumbent Defeated	47.78%	7.21%	10 (15%)
Mayor elected unopposed	43.38%	4.54%	6 (9%)

Source: Department of Internal Affairs 2021a. Kaikoura District Council was excluded due to insufficient data. The Eta measure of association is moderately strong at .403, suggesting there is a relationship between incumbent Mayoral competition level and turnout. Eta squared .162.

**Table 6.** Number of uncontested constituencies 2019.

Number of uncontested constituencies 2019			
	Total positions	% uncontested	Uncontested N
Mayors	67	8.95	6
Regional Councils	127	8.66	11
District Councils	494	10.12	50
City Councils	137	0.73	1
Unitary councils	79	5.06	4
Community Boards	552	27.72	153
Local Boards	149	1.34	2
TOTAL	1605		227

Source: Department of Internal Affairs [2021a](#).

There are typically a large number of uncontested positions, although these are more common at the less powerful community board level, and less common for councillors on city councils ([Table 6](#)).

Research comparing STV and FPP outcomes in local government elections in New Zealand, controlling for the role of district magnitude, showed a higher number of nominations per position for those councils using the STV electoral system than those using FPP, with fewer positions being won unopposed (Vowles and Hayward [2021](#)). While the STV electoral system has offered more competitive elections, incumbents had a higher chance of being re-elected than under FPP (Vowles and Hayward [2021](#)).

## The non-voter

Research has been done by Statistics New Zealand into non-voting generally, and by others specifically looking at non-voting in local elections (Statistics New Zealand [2014](#), [2018a](#); Local Government New Zealand [2016](#); Smith Consulting [2019](#)), has asked self-identified non-voters about the reasons for their voting behaviour. Given the almost 40% percentage gap between turnout in general and local elections, we know there is a substantial chunk of the population who are on the electoral roll, have voted in parliamentary elections, but, for whatever reason, do not vote in local elections.

Research by Smith Business Consulting for the Auckland Council in 2019 divided non-voters into four categories: entrenched non-voters who thought voting was a waste of time (18%); the apathetic, who could not be bothered (29%); people who lacked awareness about local government, the elections, the candidates or their policies (29%); and people who meant to vote but did not get around to it (24%) (Smith Consulting [2019](#), 17). Local Government New Zealand, the peak organization for councils in New Zealand, found that in 2016: non-voters reported a lack of interest (23.4%); not having enough information (32.6%); and other reasons such as being busy or forgetting (23.2%) (Local Government New Zealand [2016](#),

20). The lack of information about candidates and their policies is significant given the absence of information shortcuts and candidate screening that political parties would provide were they involved more in local elections.

Does low turnout matter? In some cases, it may signal residents are satisfied with elected officials. However, the 40% or so who vote are not a snapshot of the public as a whole; Pākehā New Zealanders (New Zealanders of European descent) are more likely to vote than Māori (indigenous New Zealanders) and other ethnicities (Pacific people, who were 8% of the population in 2018 and Asian who made up 15% the same census); the elderly more likely to vote than the young (Local Government New Zealand 2016); people with higher education and income levels are more likely to vote than people with lower socioeconomic status (Statistics New Zealand 2014; 2018a). Home ownership also strongly correlates with voting in local elections; homeowners receive the rates bill for a property (Vitz 2022).

Whether low turnout changes the election results or not, there may be an indirect effect on the policy platforms of councils (Lutz and Marsh 2007), which disproportionately focus on ratepayers (property owners) over residents as a whole (New Zealand Productivity Commission 2020) when planning and investment decisions are made.

This report now turns to other features of the 2019 election: referendums on representation issues, the success of women candidates, and two areas of representation, Māori wards and ratepayer roll voters.

## Referenda on representation issues

Councils in New Zealand engage in a review of their representation arrangements every six years, which sometimes result in recommendations for change. In the 2019 elections two councils took their proposed changes to the voters; with one council (Tasman) experiencing a higher turnout for 2019 compared to 2016 and 2022, and the other (Whanganui) a lower turnout than the bracketing elections, no conclusion can be drawn as to whether a referenda on the ballot impacts turnout (Department of Internal Affairs 2016c; Taituarā 2022). The Tasman District Council asked voters to decide whether to switch from the existing FPP electoral system to STV; they voted to remain with FPP for 2022 and 2025, with support for FPP 58.8% (Tasman District Council 2019).

The Whanganui District Council asked voters about three representation issues. Voters opted to keep two existing provisions: the electoral system to stay at FPP with 75% support, and to keep votes for councillors at-large instead of introducing wards (electoral districts) with 73% support. The one change was a closer result, with 57% voting to reduce the number of councillors from 12 to 10 (Whanganui District Council 2019).

## The success of women

Candidates are not asked to supply demographic information with their nominations, but post-election surveys and trawling publicly available information about winning candidates enables demographic data to be constructed. The 2019 local elections saw a slight increase in the number of women elected to local government at 39% overall, a 1% increase on the 2016 results and up from 25% in 1989. The greatest concentration of women was in lower-order positions with less power: following the 2019 elections, women made up 41% community board members and 51% of local board members, but there was also a big jump in women elected to be councillors on city councils, up to 43% from 34% in 2016. 27% of mayoral positions were filled by women, who were also elected to 31% of regional council positions and 38% of district councils (Department of Internal Affairs 2021a). STV elections have not led to higher numbers of women being elected, and women still under-nominate regardless of the electoral system (Vowles and Hayward 2021).

## Māori wards Results

New Zealand parliamentary elections have had seats set aside for Māori representation since 1867 (Bargh 2021). Voters of Māori descent can choose to go on a general electoral roll, or a Māori electoral roll. If on the latter, they vote in different electorates and for a different slate of candidates, but the party list vote is the same. Only three councils had an equivalent representation for Māori voters in the 2019 local elections: Bay of Plenty Regional Council, in which Māori roll voters voted for 3 of the 13 councillors; Waikato Regional Council, in which Māori roll voters voted for 2 of the 14 councillors; and the smaller Wairoa District Council, with a population of around 9000, where Māori roll voters and general roll voters each voted for half of the six councillors, and for the same line-up of mayoral candidates. A change in the law in 2021, the Local Electoral (Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Bill, has made it easier for councils to adopt separate Māori representation, and this will take effect for some councils in 2022 and others in 2025. Māori wards are one way to ensure some representation on councils by candidates with a mandate to represent Māori interests. Councils adopting a high district magnitude STV electoral system have not resulted in greater Māori electoral success at the local level (Vowles and Hayward 2021).

## Ratepayer roll

Since the late nineteenth century elections for central government in New Zealand have been one person one vote, based on citizen and residency

status. Women gained the vote in 1893. The franchise for local government voting has had a somewhat different path: non-ratepaying residents in rural areas could not vote until 1944, and it was only in 1971 that plural voting in rural areas was abolished. There is still one anomaly in the franchise between the layers of governments, called the Ratepayer Roll. This is an additional electoral roll for property owners who are not resident in a Council area, conferring voting rights based on property ownership. This may be a family who owns a holiday property, a landlord with properties in different LTA areas, or non-persons (businesses and other groups) who are property owners.

The electoral roll for residents is compiled by the independent government quango the Electoral Commission and is the same roll for both local and parliamentary elections. Qualifying ratepayers must request to be on the ratepayer roll; numbers are low, but unsurprisingly turnout is high at 86.1% in 2019 (Department of Internal Affairs 2021a). The highest proportion of ratepayer voters is in a district with high numbers of holiday homes, the Thames-Coromandel District Council area in the North Island, where the ratepayer roll constituted 4.5% of total votes cast. Turnout for the ratepayer roll was 86.4%, lifting the overall turnout for the District from 53.2% to 54.6% overall. The winning margins of some councillors was very small – 5 votes in one case – and if people on the ratepayer roll have different voting patterns to those on the residential roll, it would be possible for them to swing marginal elections (Thames Coromandel District Council 2019).

## Conclusion

It is not uncommon for lower order elections to have lower turnout (Lijphart 1998) and New Zealand is no exception. The average turnout in 2019 continued a long-term decline, and this is concerning because of the socioeconomic and demographic inequalities of those who vote and those who do not. Turnout does vary by population size and representation levels, but representation levels are worsening not improving over time.

The relative absence of political parties in local government elections makes the decision-making task for voters harder. It has also been put forward by researchers as an explanation for the STV electoral system not delivering higher Māori representation (Vowles and Hayward 2021). Other roles of political parties, such as candidate vetting, and discipline in voting around the council table creates unpredictability in the operation of individual councils.

## Note

1. Aotearoa is a Māori name for New Zealand, and the combining of the two names into Aotearoa New Zealand is becoming more common within New Zealand.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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