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Just the ticket? The problem with local body candidates aligning with national political parties

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With accusations flying thick and fast last year about supposed “dysfunction” and a “shambles” at Wellington City Council, Local Government Minister Simeon Brown stepped in and appointed a Crown Observer.

Announcing the move, Brown said the “financial and behavioural challenges” facing the council represented a problem under the Local Government Act. Part of the issue, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon claimed recently, was that there had been “way too much ideology and party politics”.

With the Green-endorsed current mayor Tory Whanau withdrawing from the next election, and former Labour cabinet minister Andrew Little announcing his mayoralty bid, it remains to be seen whether those partisan perceptions have diminished.

But at the other end of the political spectrum, the ACT Party is actively recruiting candidates to stand at the 2025 elections using its branding and policy platform. The ACT website states clear policy positions for prospective candidates to campaign on.

The Local Government Act, on the other hand, requires elected members to consult with people affected by their decisions and to do so with an open mind. Reinforcing this point, the Office of the Auditor-General says those managing public resources must avoid holding pre-determined positions:

You are not required to approach every decision as though you have given it no prior thought, or have no existing knowledge or opinion. However, you are required to keep an open mind, and you must be prepared to change or adjust your views if the evidence or arguments warrant it.

If ACT is successful in building a local government ticket nationally, this tension – and the kind of tensions recently at play in Wellington – could be seen in other councils.

Benefits of party branding

Political party affiliations in local government are not actually the norm. In 2019, winning councillors around New Zealand mostly left the affiliation section of their nomination forms blank (60%) or stated they were “independent” (18%).

Only 3% of winning councillors were affiliated with a registered political party, and 4% with a local grouping or ticket.

But the picture changes in our three largest councils: Auckland Council, Christchurch City Council and Wellington City Council. No winning councillors in those cities left the affiliation section blank in 2019, 38% ran on a local ticket, and 22% for a political party.

And there are good reasons for local body candidates to run as party-endorsed or on a local ticket, as former local body politician Shirin Brown outlined in her PhD thesis on Local Boards in Auckland: shared costs, shared resources (such as party volunteers to deliver leaflets), shared expertise and brand recognition for voters.

Importantly, a candidate with low name recognition can coat-tail on higher profile candidates on the same ticket, or the public profile of the ticket overall. Other research suggests the strategy works: in Auckland, at least, those who stand with a group affiliation are more likely to be elected than those who do not.

In larger urban areas, with high populations and low levels of representation per capita, visible groupings of local government candidates make sense. Research reveals a major obstacle to voting in local elections is a lack of information about candidates and what they stand for.

Blurred party lines

Once elected, though, there are questions about the cohesion of groupings. Shirin Brown found the ad-hoc nature of some local tickets for Auckland’s local boards – formed for strategic election reasons but with little coherence or discipline once elected – sometimes collapsed once in office.

In Auckland, ward councillors and the mayor have run with group branding, but there is little evidence of whipping along party, ticket or broad ideological lines.

As a councillor for the Manukau ward (2016-2022), the late Efeso Collins stood for election as a Labour Party candidate, but he voted against some initiatives of the Mayor Phil Goff, a former leader of the Labour Party.

Communities and Residents (C&R) councillors have mostly been aligned with the National Party, but have also included ACT and unaffiliated centre-right candidates.

While they often voted against Goff, and earlier against Labour Party member Len Brown (mayor from 2010-2016), it wasn't always as a uniform block. Indeed, Brown's initiatives were simultaneously opposed by Cathy Casey (City Vision) on the left and Cameron Brewer (C&R) on the right.

Keeping an open mind

As this year's local elections approach, the Crown Observer for Wellington City Council, Lindsay McKenzie, has written [candidate guidelines](#) about political affiliations and their legal obligations to avoid predetermined positions.

These cover the promises they make on the campaign trail as well as how they act once elected. They address the tension between the democratic act of signalling your values and policy positions to voters, and the requirement under the Local Government Act to make decisions based on local concerns rather than political affiliation.

As McKenzie points out, having an open mind is not just an issue for party members. It also applies to those who stand as independents and adhere rigidly to policy positions they campaigned on.

Irrespective of their affiliation, candidates in the upcoming local elections have a tightrope to walk – between declaring their values and policy positions, and being receptive to new information and perspectives once elected.

Voters need to accept elected members may have access to information that was not available when they were campaigning. And the political media needs to give some leeway to councillors and mayors who change their positions.