

10. Local Government Political Agendas: Observations and political orientation

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Introduction

A most crucial question to be asked of local authority councillors and candidates is what their political agenda is, that is what they hope to achieve during their term in office. This chapter begins to describe such agenda-sets and explores whether these seem to be embedded in wider ‘political ideologies’ held by candidates, or by candidates with particular characteristics. It draws evidence from a survey of candidates in the seven most populated regions of Aotearoa New Zealand, following the 2019 local government elections, which set out to understand the candidate experience of standing for local office. In the survey, we asked candidates what they hoped to achieve in their term in office and where they would place themselves on the political spectrum between left and right.

According to Kingdom (1995, cited in Birkland, 1998), agenda setting is the process by which officials, whether in local or national government, focus their attention on policy issues. The period following the triennial election in New Zealand local government is the opportunity for newly elected local representatives to influence the policy agenda for their locality. New Zealand is well known as an outlier for its limited local government, with its large number of authorities and its longstanding non-partisan nature, the latter with the exception of its largest city region, Auckland (Webster, Asquith, et al., 2019). Local government business in New Zealand traditionally focused on what was colloquially referred to as ‘the three R’s – roads, rates and rubbish’. The Local government Act 2002 and the 2012 amendments to the Act, both enacted by the Labour Government, attempted to expand the purpose of local government by including a power of general competence and a focus on sustainable development. This required local authorities to work towards the economic, environmental, social and cultural wellbeing of their communities (Memon & Thomas, 2006; Webster, 2013). Even so, there is an apparent tendency for political agendas to fall along a continuum between ‘pothole fixing’ only and community facilities, notwithstanding the need to give effect to the broader considerations of sustainable development, such as strategic infrastructure and environmental planning, region-building, and social and cultural policy initiatives. The former approach is known for its penchant for minimising the rates burden and focusing on the interests of ‘ratepayers’ i.e., property owners, compared to the latter, which accounts for the interests of all residents/citizens. Understanding the policy agendas of local candidates is important as not only does this have potential to influence council business but can impact on voter turnout (Goodman & Lucas, 2016).

This chapter starts by reviewing the relative paucity of international and Australasian scholarship concerning why local candidates stand and their policy priorities. It touches on agenda setting theory and how councillors reflect perceptions of sustainable development in terms of their political agendas. It then outlines the survey methodology and overviews the research cohort. The findings

are presented, first by exploring patterns within the variables; and then asking how the candidates' agenda priorities are influenced by their gender and ethnicity. Lastly, the chapter examines whether there is evidence of a relationship between candidate priorities and political ideology.

Why local candidates stand for office

The vexed question of why local candidates stand for office has received little attention internationally. Political participation has traditionally been explored from a voter turnout (McVey & Vowles, 2005) and citizen engagement perspective (Carmines & Stimson, 1986; De Vries & Hobolt, 2012; Meguid, 2008). We contend that standing for local office is a significant form of political participation that has been much overlooked, a view supported by Reid (2020, p.4) who argued that 'our local democracy will only succeed when citizens are prepared to participate in local civic life and stand for public office.'

Notwithstanding the extensive body of knowledge relating to national governments' setting and managing political agendas, there is a paucity of scholarship focusing on candidate agendas in local or provincial government, hence we know very little about why candidates stand for local office. Han et al (2021) explored candidate policy priorities in terms of their alignment with local government plans and Gavazza et al. (2019) turned their attention to use of the internet. The most pertinent recent study of local candidates is the work of Goodman and Lucas (2016) who surveyed candidates for municipal office in Ontario, Canada, following the 2014 municipal election. They explored the extent to which municipal candidates were 'policy seekers'; whether successful and unsuccessful candidates varied in the kinds of policies they believed were important; and whether policy priorities varied across different jurisdictions. They argued that the difference in voter turnout, lower at municipal than federal or provincial government, may be explained in part by the 'absence of political cues and the lesser salience of policy issues at the lower level of government, dictated by provincial, (or in New Zealand, by national) legislation. Notwithstanding this, there were reasons to suggest that in the absence of political parties that local candidates may be more policy driven than their federal or provincial counterparts, because the latter can get their policy prepackaged.

Magnussen (1983, cited in Goodman & Lucas, 2016) argued the tendency for policy agendas at the local level to be oriented around two opposing ideologies. The first being 'boosters' who advocate 'aggressive promotional techniques, relocation incentives and attractive local cultural and recreational institutions' (p.37); and the second, 'cutters' who 'wish to keep taxes and spending low'. Within this framework, Goodman and Lucas identified six main categories of policy agendas, in order of priority: (1) good governance and administration, which focused on accountability, transparency, honesty and engagement; (2) the economy, tourism and industry; (3) Finance, taxation and expenditure; (4) social and environment; (5) transportation; and (6) planning housing and land use (Goodman & Lucas, 2016).

These priorities which feature in the Canadian local government context are pertinent to the Aotearoa New Zealand landscape, as much like Canada (with the exception of Auckland and Christchurch¹), local government is not dominated by political parties (Webster, Greaves, et al., 2019). Similarly, in New Zealand, significant functions such as health, education, policing and social housing are the prerogative of central government. Notwithstanding this, the range of local government functions is broad and spans the four well-beings (social, environmental, economic and cultural), They encompass infrastructure (water, wastewater, stormwater), place-based development, some social housing and social policy, environmental management (freshwater, land, air, coastal waters), emergency

¹ These are New Zealand's most populous regions at approximately 1.6m and 600,000 people respectively (Stats NZ, 2018).

management and civil defence, safety and health, regional land transport and harbour navigation and safety (Department of Internal Affairs, 2011).

Reid (2018) described the philosophy underpinning the Local Government Act 2002 in New Zealand as one of 'community governance', for its emphasis on place, taking a joined-up approach to the provision of public services and for the opportunities provided for community steering. He describes the governing legislation varying in the extent to which it authorises the local authorities to focus on the interests of ratepayers, and argues that building local government capacity has been something of an historic project for the Labour Government since 'the major local government reform events, such as the creation of the Local Government Commission in 1947, new legislation in 1974 and 2002, and the consolidation of local government in 1989, were all Labour initiatives' (Reid, 2018, p.5). Soon after the 2017 election, Reid highlighted

a number of clues indicating the new government's attitude, as local government is mentioned in other policy domains, for example: support for councils playing a more active role in social housing, a role also supported by its coalition partner New Zealand First and the Green Party (Reid, 2018, p.5).

Undertaking an inquiry into the cost pressures facing local government (such as adapting to climate change and changing demographics), became part of the governing coalition agreement. This history positions local government in New Zealand as highly political – a platform for both political parties and independent councillors to promote policy agendas that extend beyond the local.

With much media attention focused on national elections, the importance of local democracy can be overlooked. Local governance, which impacts directly on peoples' lives, is dependent on the skills, knowledge and motivation of locally elected representatives (Reid, 2020), along with their policy agendas. Just prior to the 2019 local authority elections, Local Government New Zealand (2020) asked candidates and councillors their main reason for standing. Among their respondents, the top policy agendas were to 'protect/enhance the natural environment' (14%), see Table 1, followed by 'better value for council services' and 'improve community facilities' (both on 13% support).

TABLE 1: MOST COMMON REASONS FOR STANDING (11 CATEGORIES) BY ORDER OF IMPORTANCE

Reason for standing	% respondents
Better value for council services	13
Address water quality	11
Address climate change	9
Improve public transport	8
Advance walking and cycling	8
Protect/enhance natural environment	8
Improve roading	7
Improve community facilities	7
Address housing shortage	7
Improve building regulations	6
Reduce rates	4

Data: LGNZ, 2020.

Most categories achieved a 6-11% support level, with 'reduce rates' ranking last with just 4% support. Men were found to rank improving building regulations, improving roading and better value council services higher than women. In contrast, women more likely to rank addressing the housing shortage,

protecting/enhancing the natural environment, improving community facilities and advancing walking and cycling. The most significant difference between men and women were in improving roading and advancing walking and cycling. Māori and the under 30's also favoured protecting/enhancing the environment. Of interest was the low concern shown for reducing rates. This could be explained by the survey respondents being given the opportunity to cite just one reason for standing, when undoubtedly most would have had more than one policy priority (Local Government New Zealand, 2020).

Methodology

Following the 2019 local government elections, candidates from seven of New Zealand's most populated regions were invited to complete a survey exploring their experience in standing for local office (Greaves et al., 2020). Invitations to participate were emailed to local authority candidates following the 2019 local government election in: Auckland, Waikato, Horizons (Palmerston North), Bay of Plenty (Tauranga), Wellington in the North Island; and Canterbury and Otago in the South Island.

This chapter draws on two key questions asked in the survey. In the first question, candidates were asked what they hoped to achieve in this term. In this question, candidates were asked to select up to five priorities of the sixteen choices offered. The second question asked candidates to place their views on the political spectrum between left and right, with a 'don't know' option. The responses were further explored to identify any relationship between the participants priority agendas and their region, gender, ethnicity and political orientation.

Preselected answers were provided for the questions, along with an option for open-ended (type in) responses for some responses. Interestingly, the open-ended field did not generate any new categories of policy agendas, rather was used to provide context for the choices made by the respondents.

We acknowledge the potential for some bias among respondents to self-selection questionnaires, and this is accounted for in the analysis and considered when results are generalised across all candidates who stand for local office.

Statistical analysis

To identify common themes among the 16 agenda responses provided to candidates, we conducted an Exploratory Factor Analysis. First, a Bartlett's test of sphericity (Gorsuch, 1973) and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test (Kaiser, 1970) were used to confirm sampling adequacy from the survey. Next, a polychoric correlation matrix was generated from the responses of all candidates. Using the Kaiser-Guttman normalization rule (Kaiser, 1960) and inspection of the scree plots (Cattell, 1966), 5 factors were found to encapsulate most of the variation in candidates' responses. To minimize correlation between the factors, a promax rotation was utilized (Sass & Schmitt, 2010).

Linear models were then used to ask whether there were patterns in a candidate's likelihood to respond to these factors, and the candidates' demographics. Separate models were generated with each factor as the response variable, and either i) gender, ii) ethnicity, iii) age, iv) region running, or iv) political spectrum, as categorical predictor variables.

All analysis was conducted in R version 3.5.2 (R Core Team, 2019). Factor analysis was performed using tools from the psych package (Revelle, 2023). All models were generated with the MuMIn (Bartoń, 2019) and lme4 (Bates et al., 2014) packages. Model assumptions were checked with use of tools in the DHARMA package (Hartig, 2022). Normality of residuals and homogeneity of error were evaluated from residual plots of fitted models.

Sample

The survey sample for this research incorporated the regional, city and district councils, and the local and community boards and district health boards (DHB) and licensing trusts (LT) within the seven most populous regions of New Zealand. Email contact data were received for 1274 candidates. After duplicates were removed, 794 candidates were sent an invitation to participate, of which 343 completed the survey, a response rate of 43%. Of the total, 42 candidates stood solely for a DHB or LT were removed from the sample for this analysis, leaving 301 observations. The distribution of candidates across the local authorities in the seven regions and the regional population is detailed in Table 2. Note that approximately 10% of respondents did not answer some or all of the survey demographic questions.

TABLE 2: THE DISTRIBUTION OF CANDIDATES ACROSS THE SEVEN LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND THE REGIONAL POPULATION

Region	Population	Number of respondents	% respondents
Auckland	1.7m	72	23.92
Waikato	497,000	10	3.32
Bay of Plenty	132,000	17	5.65
Horizons	88,000	19	6.31
Wellington	528,000	57	18.94
Canterbury	382,000	61	20.27
Otago	129,000	34	11.3

More males (52%) responded to the survey than females (37%). Curiously, 10% of respondents did not respond to this question. The majority of respondents were of New Zealand European ethnicity (80%), 9% were Māori, 11% Pacific and 3.8% Asian. Almost ¾ of respondents were New Zealand born, with UK born candidates being the next largest group at 9%. The remaining 8% were born in other countries, including Australia, the USA, Canada, South Africa and India. Almost 10% of respondents did not declare their place of birth. With respect to age, 58% of respondents were between 51-70 years, just 15% were under 40 years of age.

The local authority types and first choice of seat that candidates stood for are shown in Table 3. In our sample 26% of respondents were candidates for a city council, 19% for a regional council, and 40% for a local board or community board as their first choice. Many respondents stood for more than one type of seat. While the sample represents a good spread across the types of local authority seats, the majority of respondents stood first for a community or local board, followed by a seat on the city council.

TABLE 3: SAMPLE BY LOCAL BODY SEAT

Local body seat	Frequency	Percent
Mayor	27	8.9
City Council	71	23.5
District Council	2	0.7
Regional Council	54	17.9
Local/Community Board	119	39.5
No response	28	9.3
Total	301	100

Forty-one percent of respondents were elected to office. Of those not elected, just 23% (69) had previously stood for local office and 67% had not previously stood. Interestingly, 34% of respondents did not answer this question. Just 15% of candidates (44) had run for a general election. The no response rate raises the question as to how many candidates had stood for local office previously and been unsuccessful. Just under a third of respondents (31%) were serving as an elected member leading into the 2019 local election. A majority (88%) of candidates were standing for the first time. Just over 10% were standing for the second time and 1% had stood 3 or more times.

Almost two thirds of respondents were educated to university level, with 60% having an undergraduate, postgraduate or higher degree and 22% having a trade or professional certificate or diploma.

Candidates were asked to place themselves on the political spectrum on a scale of one to 10, with one being left and 10 being right. Generally speaking, almost 30% of candidates positioned themselves on the left of the spectrum (score 0-3 out of 10), 40% positioned themselves in the middle (between 4-6), with just under 17% on the right of the spectrum. As the non-response rate to this question was 13%, there is a possibility that the sample was biased to a left political orientation.

Councillor agendas

When candidates were asked to list up to five priorities reflecting what they hoped to achieve in their term, the three ambitions which emerged at the top of the table (see Table 4) were infrastructure and environment related. Public transport and natural environment were the top two priorities selected by 52% and 46% of participants respectively. These were followed by community facilities and better value council services (both close to 38%). Addressing climate change and water quality were next, followed by contributing to diversity of views.

TABLE 4: AGENDA ITEMS IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE RANKED

Issue	Frequency	% of respondents
Improve public transport	155	52
Protect enhance natural environment	139	46
Improve community facilities	115	38
Better value council services	113	38
Address climate change	105	35
Address water quality	97	32
Contribute to the diversity of views	89	30
Improve roading	74	25
Advance walking and cycling	71	24
Address housing shortage	58	19
Reduce rates or stop further increases	52	17
Help business	45	15
Improve building regulation and controls	32	11
Advocate for more local green spaces	28	9
Improve public health	24	8
Improve public mental health	18	6

Findings of the frequency analysis of candidate agendas

A closer analysis of the frequency of agendas by gender and ethnicity revealed some interesting priorities, Table 4 shows that improving public transport, the top priority overall, was the either a first or second priority responses in all regions except Horizons, the least populated region at just 88000 people (Stats NZ, 2023).

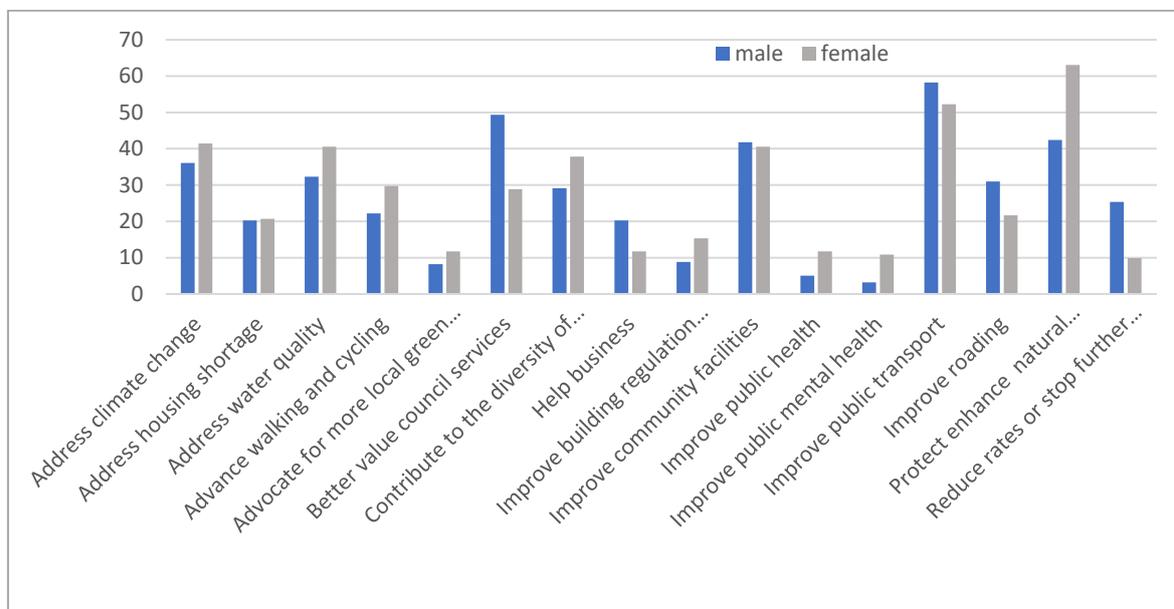


FIGURE 1: FREQUENCY (%) OF AGENDAS BY GENDER

An analysis of the frequency of agendas by gender presented an interesting picture of gender priorities. Improving public transport and protecting and enhancing the environment featured in the top three priorities for male and female participants. More males prioritised better value council service, while more females prioritised addressing climate change.

When analysed by ethnicity, two agenda items were ranked in the top 2 by candidates in all ethnicity categories: Improving public transport; and contributing to diversity of views (Table 5). The priority ranking of public transport was the top-ranking priority non- New Zealand European candidates. While the sample size of Pasifika was small at only 6 respondents, 100% ranked public transport, indicating that it can be interpreted as a major agenda for Pasifika candidates and a key motivation for them to stand. Pasifika respondents also ranked Address climate change higher than any other ethnic group, emphasising the importance of this relatively recent concern for their communities. Although local government does not have full jurisdiction over public transport and climate change action, they are clearly seen as the integral social determinants, including housing, public transport and community facilities.

For Māori the second priority by frequency was improving public health, followed by better value council services and contributing to the diversity of views, again reflecting the cultural preference of Māori and Pasifika for consensus decision making. Asian candidates equally ranked contributing to a diversity of views, better value council services and improving public transport their top priorities. Close behind the priorities of contributing to diversity of views and improving public transport, 'other' ethnicities and Pasifika were the only two groups to rank improving building regulation.

TABLE 5: FREQUENCY OF ISSUES BY ETHNICITY (%)

Issues	NZE	Māori	Pasifika	Asian	Other	NA
Address climate change	38	27	67	45	35	3
Address housing shortage	21	23	33	9	21	3
Address water quality	39	31		27	14	
Advance walking and cycling	28	15	17	18	28	
Advocate for more local green spaces	9	12		9	21	3
Better value council services	40	42	17	64	36	10
Contribute to the diversity of views	59	42	50	64	57	3
Help business	34	15	17	18	29	
Improve building regulation	42	42	50	27	43	10
Improve community facilities	7	12	33	18	7	7
Improve public health	53	46	33	36	43	3
Improve public mental health	28	27	17	9	29	3
Improve public transport	55	58	100	64	50	3
Improve roading	17	19		36	36	3
Protect enhance natural environment	12	12	17		7	7
Reduce rates or stop further increases	7	12				
N	215	26	6	11	14	29

Lastly, we address the question whether candidates' agenda priorities are influenced by political orientation. While the range functions offered by local government cover the full spectrum of concerns of the left and right of the political spectrum, the findings of this research indicated that agenda preferences for the respondents, quite distinctly, aligned with the preferences generally advanced in a national political arena. Local candidates who identify with a left political orientation prioritised agendas such as protecting and enhancing the natural environment and water quality, addressing climate change, and improving public transport and advancing walking and cycling (see Table 6). Similarly, the local candidates who identified with the political right prioritised better value council services, helping business and improving roading. The political centrists in our sample joined the left in protecting and enhancing the environment and the right in prioritising better value council services. A clear priority for the centrists was improving community facilities. Interestingly, improving public transport was prioritised by all respondents to this question.

TABLE 6: FREQUENCY (%) OF ISSUES BY POLITICAL ORIENTATION

Agenda Political orientation	Political Spectrum			
	Left	Centre	Right	NA
Address climate change	57	29	8	31
Address housing shortage	20	19	13	21
Address water quality	41	37	17	12
Advance walking and cycling	48	15	17	17
Advocate for more local green spaces	13	8	4	10
Better value council services	20	51	63	13
Contribute to the diversity of views	29	32	42	17
Help business	3	21	42	4
Improve building regulation	4	16	8	6
Improve community facilities	37	46	42	15
Improve public health	12	7	4	6
Improve public mental health	9	5	4	6
Improve public transport	65	53	50	27
Improve roading	7	37	42	6
Protect enhance natural environment	61	48	29	27
Reduce rates or stop further increases	61	24	46	8
N	86	150	24	41

Findings of the five-factor analysis

The factor analysis undertaken to explore themes in the priorities expressed by candidates were generally consistent with the findings of the frequency analysis presented above. Five clusters or agendas were identified: (1) Affordable infrastructure; (2) Sustainable transport; (3) Natural environment (including water quality); (4) Community facilities (including local green space); and (5) Health and housing. As shown by Figure 2, **factor 1 Affordable infrastructure** groups the priorities of roading, rates and council services. **Factor 2 Sustainable transport** groups public transport and walking and cycling. **Factor 3** is concerned with natural environment and water quality. **Factor 4** groups community facilities and local green space; and **factor 5** groups a focus on health and housing.

Unsurprisingly, when we take account of the correlation coefficients, the results suggest that Factor 1 ‘Affordable Infrastructure’, traditionally a greater concern of the political right, is negatively correlated to Factor 2 Sustainable Transport, which is a greater priority for those candidates on the left. ‘Contribute to the diversity of views’ appeared to be negatively correlated to Factor 3 Natural Environment. ‘Address climate change’ was negatively correlated to Factor 4 Community Facilities.

Regression analysis of the factors against the candidates’ demographic variables produced some noteworthy if not entirely unexpected results. The findings in terms of gender tended to mirror the negative correlation between affordable infrastructure and sustainable transport, as males were more likely than females to prioritise affordable infrastructure, as with the political right; and slightly less likely to prioritise the natural environment, as per left leaning candidates.

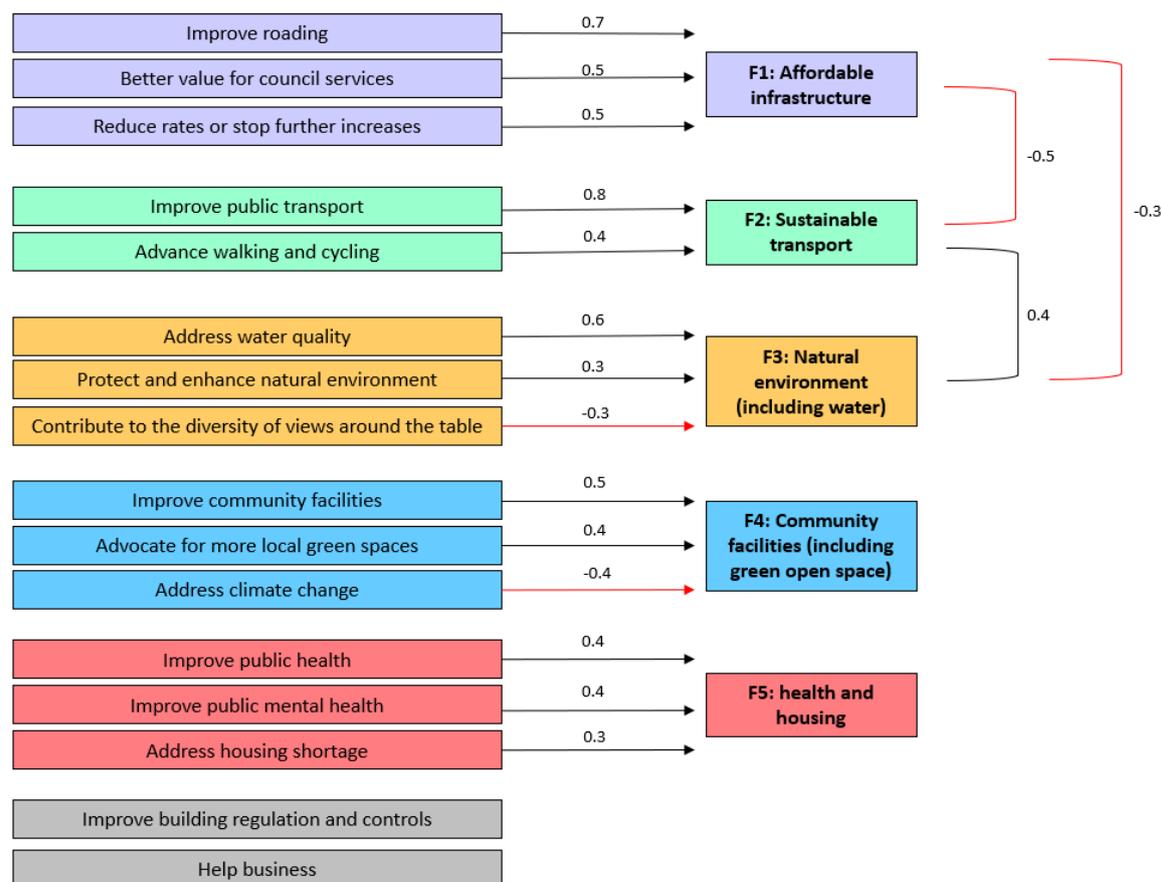


FIGURE 2: FACTOR ANALYSIS TO IDENTIFY PATTERNS WITHIN THE AGENDA ITEMS

Discussion

This enquiry into political agendas of local councillors and candidates, and what they hope to achieve during their term in office has suggested some interesting associations between the agendas themselves and the respondents' gender, ethnicity and political orientation. The policy priorities revealed by the female candidates in this study and those on the political left, align with the work of feminist scholars who have evidenced the contribution that women in local office make, by advocating for a broad range of priorities including social concerns, over the traditional focus on 'roads, rates and rubbish', prevalent amongst male representatives (Conroy, 2011; Htun, 2004; McGregor & Webster, 2017; Pini & McDonald, 2011a, 2011b; Webster, 2009). The preferences of male candidates and the political right for affordable infrastructure and its negative correlation with the preferences of women and the political left for sustainable transport and the natural environment, is supported the anecdotal evidence of political policy preferences in the New Zealand context

From a perspective of New Zealand's ethnically diverse candidates, the findings can be attributed to the prominent concerns facing the diverse communities. For Pasifika it is unsurprising that the second priority was addressing climate change and the third, contributing to views around the table. These priorities reflect the concern for families and loved ones, not just here in New Zealand, but in the Pacific Islands, who are at risk from climate change. Further, for Māori and Pasifika closing the inequity gap (Simpson, 2020) between their people and non-Māori and Pasifika in New Zealand is the paramount consideration and was prioritised by almost 60% of Māori respondents and 100% of the Pasifika respondents who prioritised public transport. The climate emergency faced by New Zealand's Pacific neighbours features as the next concern for Pacific candidates at almost 70%.

Contributing to diversity around the governance table was the most prominent concern for all ethnicities, topped by the Asian candidates who ranked this first equal with better value council services. The overarching concern for voice in local democracy is a reflection on the rapidly growing diversity of New Zealand communities (McGregor & Webster, 2017; Webster & Crothers, 2022; Webster & Fa'apoi, 2017) as the country looks to a future where the population is forecast by 2043 to reach 7.7 million and for the proportion of the population identifying as New Zealand European to fall from 70% in 2018 to 64% in 2043 (Stats NZ, 2021). Similarly, the proportion of Asian people will rise from 27% to 43%; Māori from 17% to 21%; Pasifika from 12% to 16%.

While the policy agendas of candidates who declared their political orientation largely conformed to the left-right continuum of issues anecdotally accepted as political preferences of the left and right, of note is the significant number of respondents, who did not declare their political orientation. Between 27-31% of respondents to the policy agendas with an environmental sustainability focus (addressing climate change, protecting and enhancing the natural environment and improving public transport) did not indicate their political leaning. While improving public transport had bipartisan support, the overall results may indicate a bias in the data to left-leaning concerns. Notwithstanding this, the effect of any bias is on distributions, rather than typology, and there are sufficient 'conservatives' for their views to be represented in the analysis, if not their weighting. The conformity of the data to traditional preferences of the left and right of the political spectrum strongly suggests that the political orientation of local councillors and candidates influences their preferred policy agendas.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to provide an overview of the policy priorities or agendas, of candidates standing for local office in the 2019 triennial election, across seven of New Zealand's most populous regions. In conclusion, factor analysis suggested five priority policy agendas: Affordable infrastructure; sustainable transport; Natural environment (including water quality); Community facilities (including local green spaces); and Health and housing. Regression and frequency analysis suggested patterns of priority by the variables, gender, age, ethnicity, and candidates' political orientation. In summary, local candidate and councillor agendas were evidenced to be somewhat dependent on the candidates' gender and ethnicity. Indeed, where the candidate placed themselves on the political spectrum played an important role in their priority agenda.

This chapter only begins to explore what local councillors across Aotearoa seek to achieve during their term in office. Further research will explore the contextual influence of locality and other demographic factors on local political agendas.

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