LOCAL ELECTIONS: QUICK FACTS

2022 - 25

Ko Tātou LGNZ.

“...If democracy is to do with self-government, the control of one’s own life and environment, then the most important area of control is the most immediate environment, the locality in which one lives. Home and neighbourhood should take precedence over the wider and more remote units of region, state or nation”

Richard Mulgan.

Local government is our primary level of democracy. It provides a mechanism for people to participate in local public affairs and have a say in the way their communities are run and the services they receive. It also enables people to learn about democracy through practice and become active citizens in their own right.

A healthy local democracy involves more than simply voting – a healthy democracy involves active competition for seats and governing bodies that not only represent communities, but are also representative of the diversity of those communities.

These quick facts are designed to provide a snapshot of the 2022 local authority elections, covering turnout, competition for seats and a description of who stood and who was elected.

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Overview >

Local elections occur on the second Saturday of every third October, unless there is an event like a natural disaster. In 2025, elections will be held on Saturday 11 October.

Elections are held for Mayors, territorial authorities, unitary councils, reigonal councils, licensing trusts, community baords and local boards, and some miscellaneous boards. In 2022, there were 1610 vacancies.

Voting documents will be sent to all eligible voters by post between Tuesday 9 and Monday 22 September 2025. Voters will have three weeks to complete and return their voting documents. Polling places for issuing special voting documents and receiving completed voting documents will be available from 9 September until 12 noon on Saturday 11 October 2025.

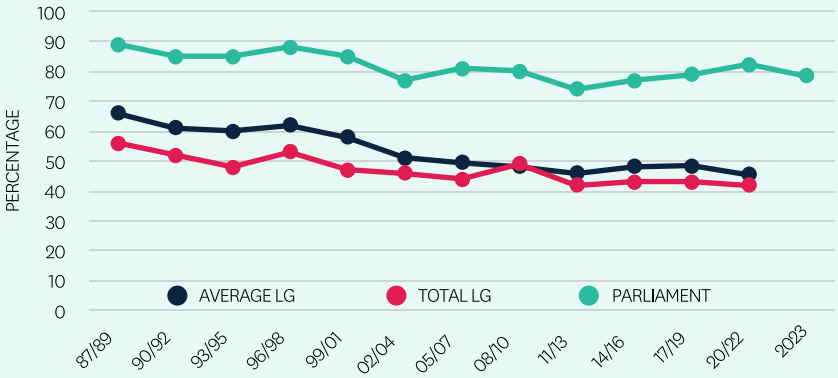
Key dates for the 2025 elections

- Nominations open Friday 4 July 2025
- Nominations close noon, Friday 1 August 2025
- Delivery of voting documents Tuesday 9 September-Monday 22 September 2025
- Appointment of scrutineers by noon, Friday 10 October 2025
- Depending on your council policy: removal of election signs by midnight Friday 10 October 2025
- Voting closes noon, Saturday 11 October 2025
- Preliminary results available as soon as practicable after close of voting on Saturday 11 October 2025
- Official declaration of results approximately Thursday 16 October 2025
- Return of expenses form approximately Friday 13 December 2025.

Turnout >

Beginning in the late 1980s, voter turnout has gradualy declined in both local and parliamentary elections, with the gap between the two increasing from 23% in 1987/89 to 36% in 2022. Turnout for both local and parliamentary elections declined at a similar rate until 2011/13 when it began to reverse, with total turnout for local authority elections having plateaued at approximately 42%. Figure 1 describes total and average turnout in the local authority elections, as well as parliamentary elections, from 1987 to 2023.

Figure 1: Voter turnout 1987-2023



Source: LGNZ/Electoral Commission

New Zealand is not alone in having experienced turnout decline – most countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are experiencing the same.

There are two common ways of measuring turnout in local authority elections – **total percentage** and **average percentage**.

01/

Total: the percentage of those who voted in all local authority elections as a proportion of all those eligible to vote

02/

Average: the average turnout rate of all local elections, calculated by adding together the percentage turnout of each council, divided by the total number of councils.

While the total percentage provides a snapshot of the number of eligible voters who voted in local government elections, and therefore interest in local government, it overlooks the fact that there are 78 separate elections, each unique in their own way. It can also be influenced by turnout in a small number of very large councils, thereby failing to provide an indication of the level of interest in local elections in New Zealand as a whole.[1]

[1]The gap between total turnout and average turnout has been narrowing. In the 2022 elections the gap was 3.7%, compared to 12% in 1995 and 5% in 2019. This narrowing reflects the fact that turnout in smaller councils has been gradually falling faster than turnout in larger councils.

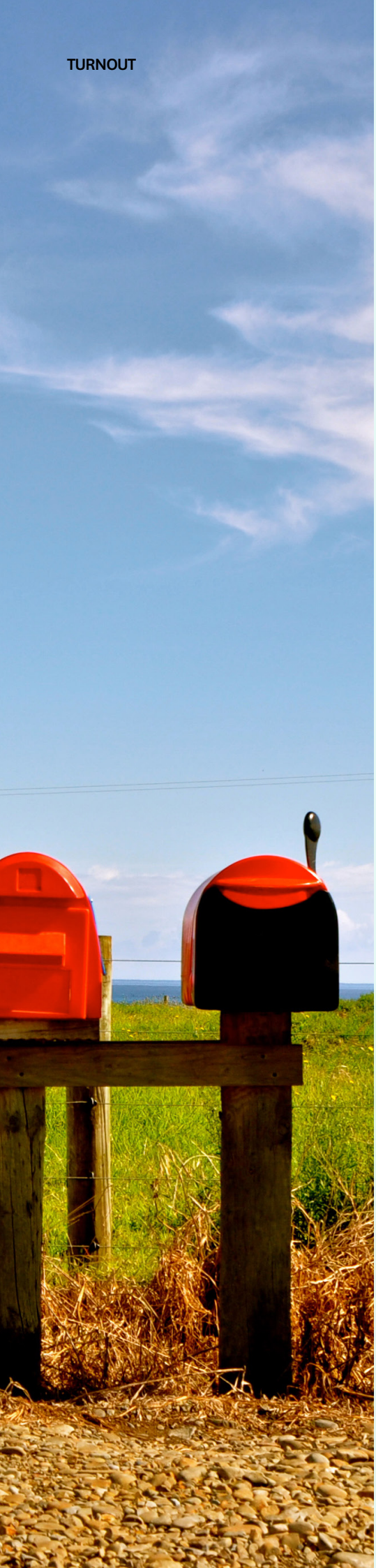
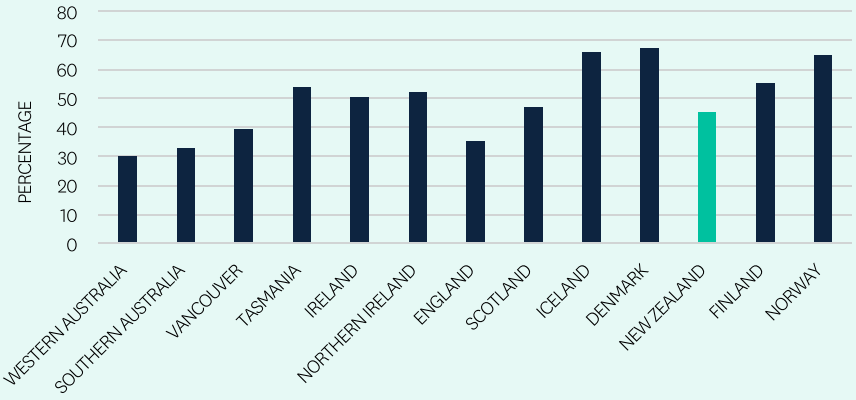


Figure 2 compares average turnout in New Zealand with turnout in local government systems in a number of other unitary and federal councils. As a broad trend, Anglophone countries (countries with legal and constitutional systems indebted to the United Kingdom (Westminister type governments)), tend to have lower levels of turnout.

Figure 2: NZ turnout compared



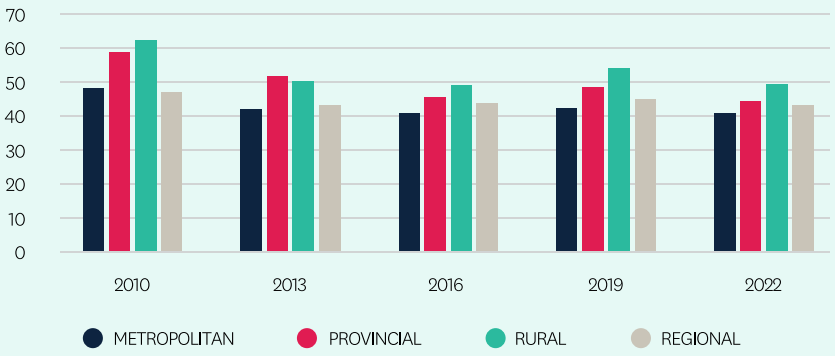
The **biggest differences**, highlighted in Figure 2, **are those** between Scandinavian countries and countries with Anglophone models of local government. The Scandinavian local government model tends to give elected members greater autonomy, a bigger range of funding tools, and responsibiliity for a greater range of local services.

The impact of council size on turnout

An established pattern in New Zealand, and elsewhere, finds that turnout tends to be higher in local governments with smaller population than larger populations – on average, turnout declines as councils become larger. New Zealand has comparatively large (in area and population terms) councils compared to other countries in the OECD.

Figure 3 compares the turnout rates of the four sectors that constitute LGNZ: regional (regional councils), metropolitan (population 90,000 and more), provincial (population between 20,000 and 90,000), and rural (population under 20,000). These groupings used by LGNZ help develop services and policies relevant to councils of different size and capability. Sector turnout reinforces the correlation between smaller size and higher turnout, with voters in the rural sector consistently voting at a higher rate than voters in either the provincial or metropolitan sectors.

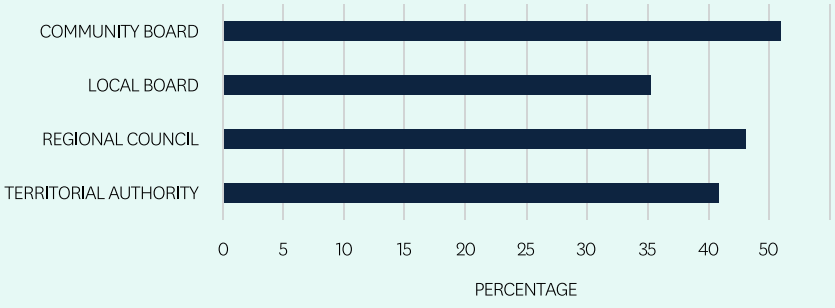
Figure 3: Turnout by sector size



Turnout by type of elected body

Turnout rates also vary by the type of elected body. In 2022, community boards had the highest average turnout rate at 46%. They were followed by regional councils on 43.1% and territorial authorites on 40.9% – see Figure 4.

Figure 4: Turnout by type of elected body

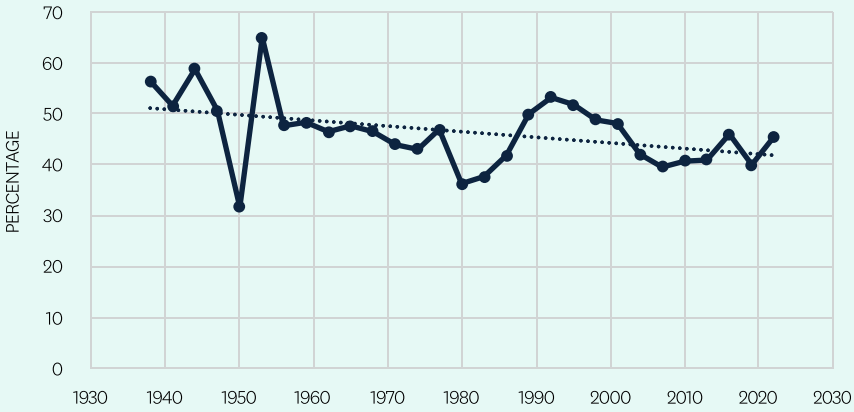


CASE STUDY

Long term trends: Wellington City

Figure 5 shows that turnout decline is not a recent phenomenon. Over the last 80 years turnout in Wellington City has fallen on average, from approximately 56% in 1938 to 45.5% in 2022. The series begins in 1938, as this was the first election to be held after the decision to switch the electoral term from two years to three years. Wellington City is a useful case study as it was largely unaffected by the 1989 reorganisation (apart from the addition of Tawa and Makara/Ohariu), which means that the series data is largely comparable over time.

Figure 5: Historical trends: Wellington City



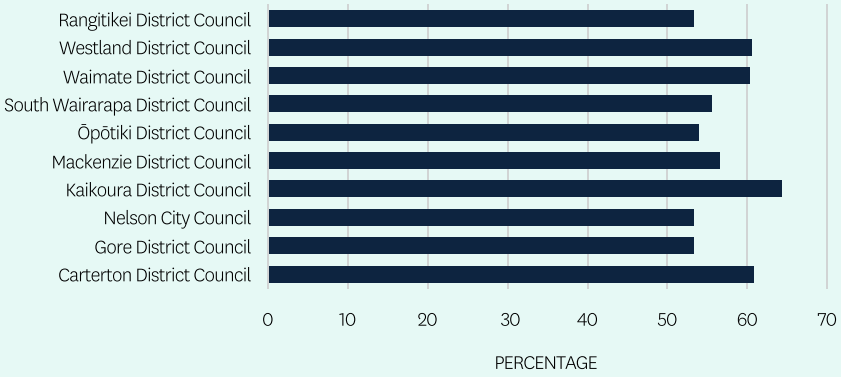
Source: Wellington City Council

The graph also shows the impact of the widespread adoption of postal voting in 1989, which saw turnout in that year jump by 8%, before falling back to the average.

Highest and lowest turnout

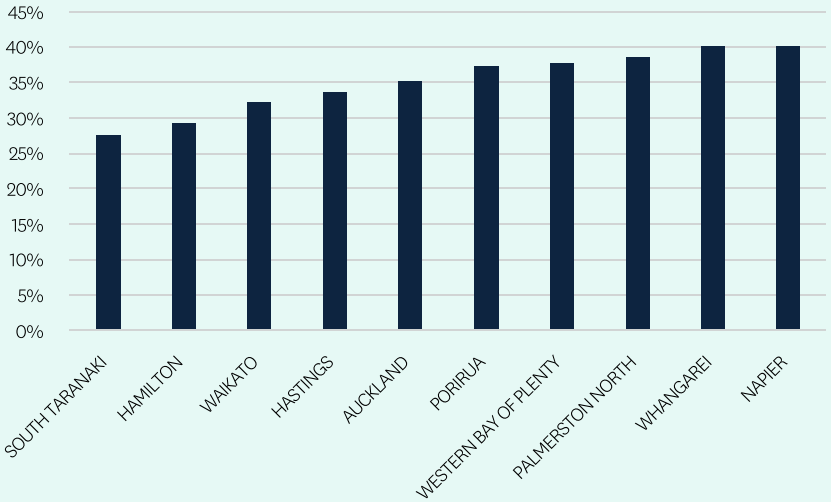
In 2022, the ten councils with the highest levels of turnout had turnout rates above a threshold of 53.3%, approximately 2% lower than the equivallent threshold in 2019. Six of the top ten were in the South Island with four in the North Island (Chatham islands, which usually tops the list, did not hold an election in 2022). All ten councils, except Nelson City, are in the rural sector and have populations under 20,000. Five of the councils were also in the top ten for turnout in 2019 – see Figure 6.

Figure 6: Ten councils with the highest turnout



In contrast to the ten councils with the highest turnout, the majority of which were small and rural, most of the councils with the lowest turnout tended to be either metropolitan or provincial. The odd one out is South Taranaki, with a turnout rate of 27.6% which was well under its historical average, (reflecting the fact that ten of the council's 13 vacancies were uncontested), see Figure 7.

Figure 7: Ten councils with the lowest turnout

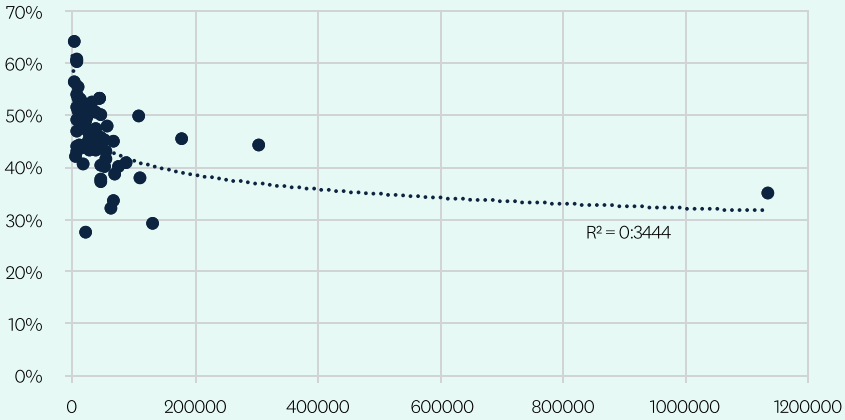


Figures 6 and 7 highlight the trend in NZ local government where voter turnout tends to be greater in smaller councils than larger ones, although figures can vary due to locally significant circumstances. For example, the consolidation of Auckland governance (eight councils), which saw the new Auckland Council's turnout increase significantly that year.

Relationship between turnout and size

The scattergram in Figure 8 shows the relationship between turnout rates and council population. It indicates a small positive correlation between the size of a council and voter turnout, with an increase in size associated with a decline in turnout (R square of 0.3444). Overall, the larger a council's population grows, the more likely it is that voter turnout will decline – a pattern reflecting the problems created when the distance between citizens and their representatives increases.

Figure 8: The relationship between council population and voting



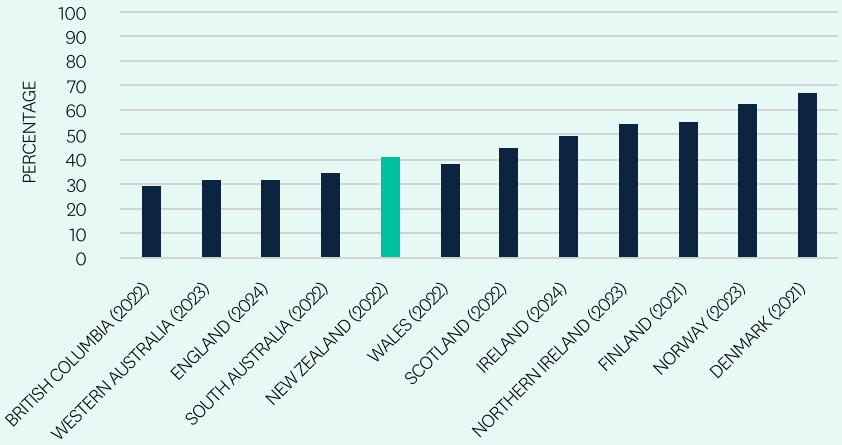
Source: LGNZ

The international context

Turnout in local government elections is heavily influenced by the type of local government system and the degree to which public decision making is largely centralised or decentralised and whether local government is constitutionally recognised.

Voter turnout in New Zealand local governments is similar to other Anglophone systems, such as Western Australia and Northern Ireland, but different to Scandinavian and Northern European systems – see Figure 9.

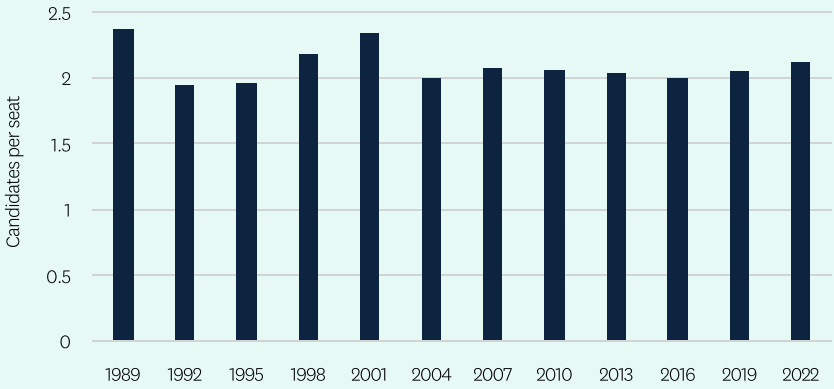
Figure 9: Voter turnout in selected countries



Competition for seats >

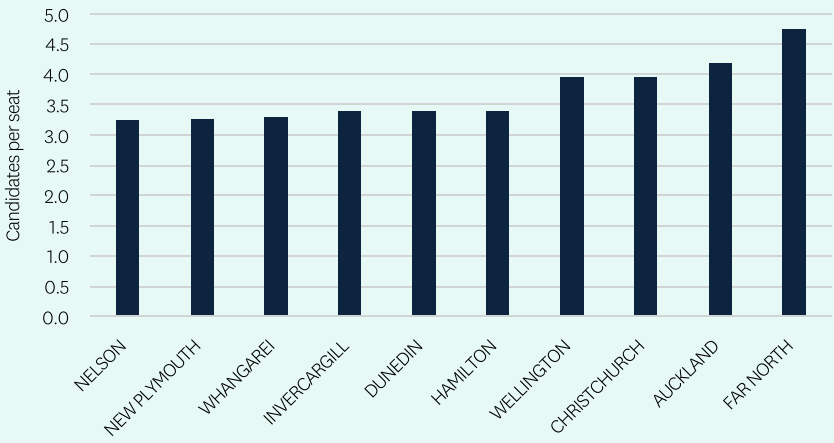
Competition for seats is commonly used to measure the health of a democracy. The level of competition is determined by dividing the number of candidates by the number of available seats - mayoralty, governing body, communty, and local board. In New Zealand competition has been relatively constant over the last two decades, with a ratio of approximately two candidates per seat – see Figure 10.

Figure 10: Competition for seats



Competition tends to vary by type of local authority, with competition more intense in urban authorities than rural or regional ones (see Figure 11). The 2022 exception to this trend was the Far North District Council (FNDC), which had the highest number of candidates standing for each seat. FNDC was also the most competitive council in 2019.[2]

Figure 11: The 10 most competitive council races



[2]Competition for seats varies considerably around the world. For example, competition for seats in the 2024 Queensland local elections saw 1,422 candidates compete for 578 positions, while in the 2020 Finnish local elections 35,627 candidates competed for more than 8000 seats. In New Zealand 3,413 candidates competed for 1,610 seats.

Representation ratios

Where the competition ratio measures the number of candidates standing for each vacancy, the representation ratio measures the number of residents or, as calculated below, the number of eligible residents each member represents **– the more citizens an elected member represents, the higher the representation ratio.**

Voter turnout tends to be higher in those councils with a small representation ratio, where each elected member represents a smaller number of local residents. Democratic and economic theory suggests that elected members who represent small constituencies are better placed to engage with those constituents, listen to their concerns and create a local presence. Seen from an international perspective, New Zealand has a relatively high representation ratio – see Table 1.

Table 1: Ratio adult population to representatives

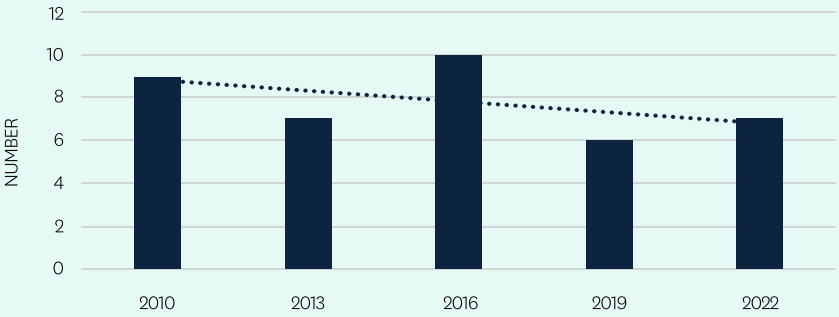
	Population 18+	Number of councillors/Mayors	Ratio
New Zealand	4,169,300	911	1:4577
Queensland	3,900,000	578	1:6747
Finland	4,400,000	8859	1:497
Denmark	4,600,000	2436	1:1888
Iceland	276,000	490	1:563
Ireland	4,043,000	949	1:4260

Mayoral contests

Mayoral contests generally receive the most media and public interest during local elections, particularly when the individuals involved are well known. Because of this interest, strongly contested mayoral races tend to result in higher turnout levels. In contrast, elections without contest for the position of Mayor often have lower turnout levels.

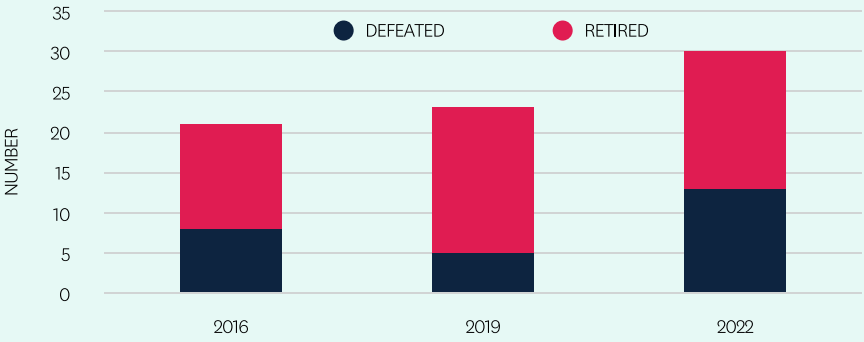
Over the last four elections, the number of uncontested mayoral elections has fluctuated between seven to ten. The trend, however, is for the number of uncontested mayoral races to diminish – see Figure 12.

Figure 12: Uncontested mayoral seats



Not only is the number of uncontested mayoral elections declining but the number of competitive mayoral races appears to be increasing. The 2022 elections saw a record number of Mayors lose their seats in competitive elections, as well as a high number of Mayors who chose to retire. Overall, there were 30 new Mayors following the 2022 elections, and 31 if the Tauranga by-election is included. This meant that 42% of the Mayors in the 2022-25 term were first-term Mayors – see Figure 13.

Figure 13: Contested mayoral races



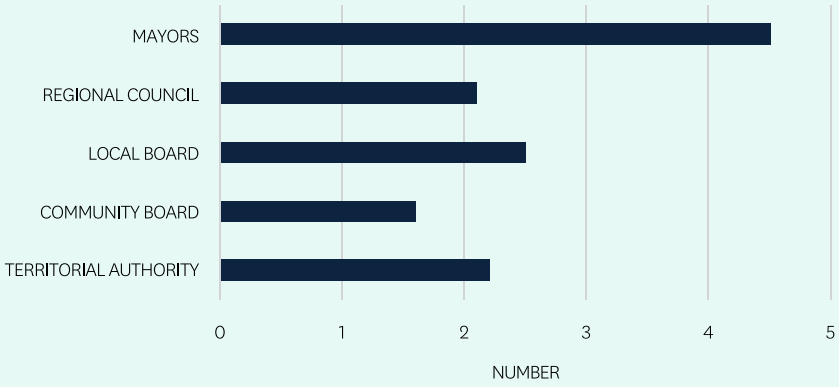
The most contested wards/constituencies were:

- In first place: the Banks Peninsula and Riccarton Wards of Christchurch with seven nominations for each seat
- In second place: Buller, where 11 candidates stood for two seats on the West Coast Regional Council.
- In third place: Paekawakawa/Southern in Wellington, where 10 people stood for two seats.

Competition by type of local body

Competition varies between the different types of local body. In 2022, mayoral elections attracted 4.5 candidates for each vacancy with local boards having the second highest level of interest, attracting 2.5 candidates per vacancy. Community board vacancies had the lowest level of interest at 1.6 candidates per vacancy – see Figure 14.

Figure 14: Competition by type of elected body



Competition for Māori wards and constituencies

Thirty five councils had Māori wards or constituencies in the 2022 elections. Twenty nine were territorial councils and six regional councils. A total of 65 Māori ward/constituency members were elected in 2022. The top two contested Māori wards were:

- Ratio 5:1. Kaipara District Council (Te Moananui o Kaipara Māori Ward): 5 candidates to 1 seat.
- Ratio 4.5:1. Far North District Council (Ngā Tai o Tokerau Māori Ward): 18 candidates for 4 seats.

The following wards had a ratio of Ratio 3:1:

- Hamilton City Council (Kirikiriroa Māori Ward)
- Tararua District Council (Tamaki nui-a Rua Māori Ward)
- Waikato District Council (Tai Runga Takiwaa Māori Ward)
- Waipā District Council (Wāipa Māori Ward)
- Wellington City Council (Te Whanganui-a-Tara Māori Ward)
- Whangārei District Council (Whangārei District Māori Ward).

Fourteen of 45 – just under one third – of Māori wards and constituencies were uncontested, but overall, competition for seats is greater, with an average of 2.15 candidates per seat. Uncontested Māori wards/constituencies can reflect the tendency of iwi and hapū to seek a candidate who already has the support of their community.

Most uncontested elections

- Southland District had the most uncontested elections, with seven uncontested positions – similar to 2019.
- Hastings was second behind Southland, with six elections uncontested.
- There were 35 uncontested district council and 13 uncontested regional council elections.
- Palmerston North was the only city council with an uncontested election.
- Southland and Waikato districts each had three more seats than candidates.

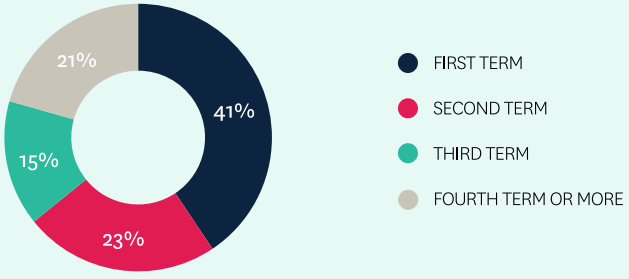
Turnover rates

The turnover of elected members, that is, the proportion of members who are new, rather than returning, can be an indication of community interest (both supportive or antagonistic) in an election. Turnover rates varied according to the type of elected body – see Table 2.

Table 2: Turnover rates by elected body	Turnover rate
Territorial authorities	45%
Community boards	59%
Local boards	40%
Regional councils	44%

In the 2022 elections the highest turnover rate was amongst community boards, followed by territorial authorities. High rates of turnover meant that some local bodies lacked institutional knowledge and experience – see Figure 15.

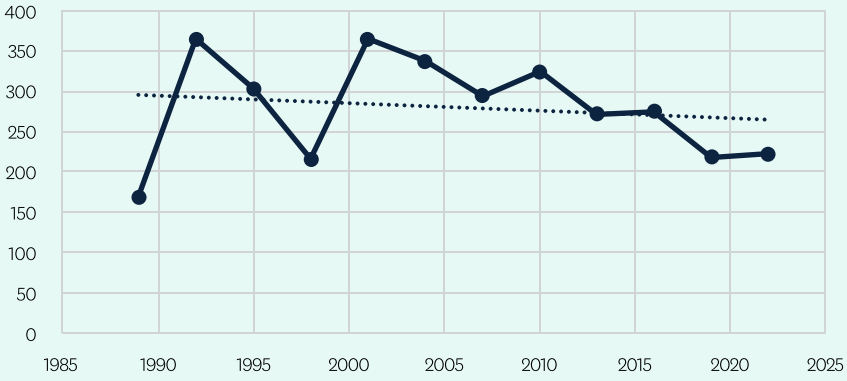
Figure 15: Members elected in 2022 – levels of experience



Members elected unopposed (uncontested seats)

Just as competition for seats tells us something about the vibrancy of local democracy, so does the number of seats which are not subject to an election at all. These are seats where an incumbent is not challenged or where there is only one contender. A high proportion of uncontested seats could suggest a lack of community interest or a belief that the local council is not relevant. The number of uncontested seats in recent elections has been trending downwards. This figure includes all seats – governing bodies, local boards and community boards – see Figure 16.

Figure 16: Uncontested seats 2010-2022



In 2022, there were 562 people standing in more than one election. Most had entered two races, with 27 individuals having run in three.

One candidate, Richard Osmaston, stood in eight elections – the mayoralties of Marlborough District, Buller District, Grey District, Nelson City, Tasman District and Westland District, as well as for council in Grey District and Tasman District. He was elected to none.

Manurewa local board was the most contested local board with 29 people seeking eight seats.

Profile of elected members >

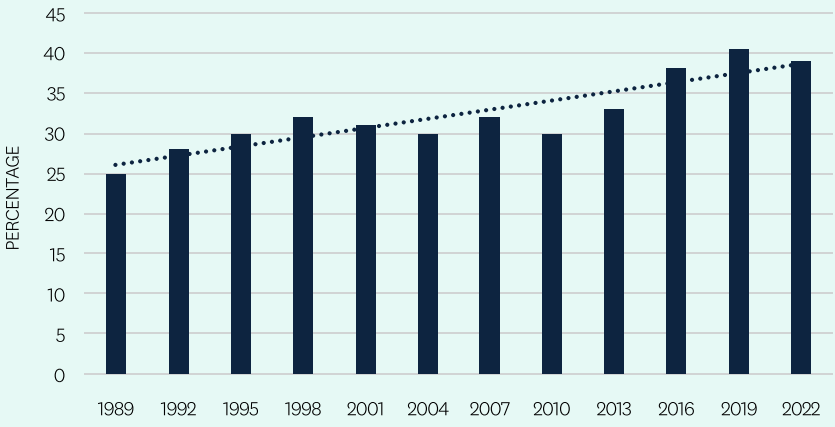
A test of any democracy is the degree to which elected representatives are actually representative of the electorate. Historically, those elected to local authorities tend to be older than the electorate, mostly male, and generally Pākehā. This profile has begun to change.

The cohort elected at the 2022 elections is significantly different to that elected a decade earlier. In contrast to previous cohorts, 2022 was characterised by a greater number of young (under 40) members, more women, and more Māori.

Women

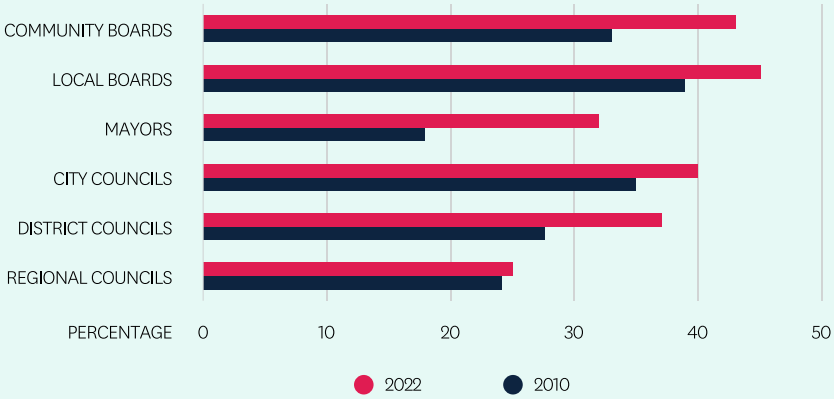
The proportion of female elected members has trended upward since the reform of local government in 1989 and currently sits at at 39% – see Figure 17.

Figure 17: Proportion of female elected members



The proportion of women in local government, however, varies noticeably by type of local body. As Figure 18 highlights, local boards and community boards have the highest proportion of women while regional councils have the lowest. The proportion of women on community boards and district councils has grown by approximately 10% since 2010, while there's been little change in the gender balance of regional councils in that time.[3]

Figure 18: Gender breakdown by local body



The number of women elected to the role of Mayor has also gradually increased – see Table 3.

Table 3: The number of women Mayors (out of 67)

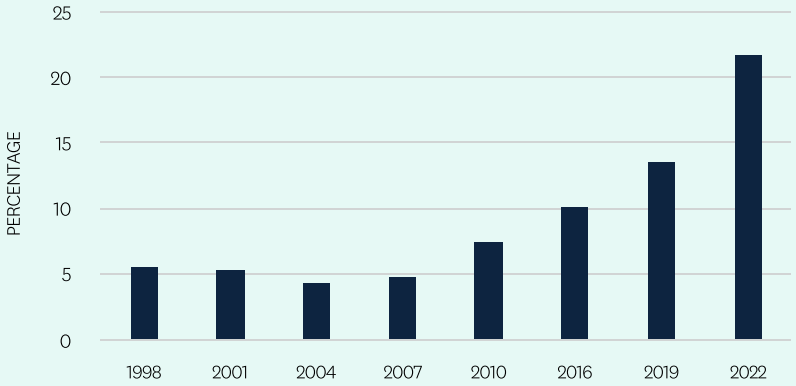
Election	Women Mayors
2016	13
2019	20
2022	21

[3]The LGNZ census of elected members found that approximately 2.5% of members identified as non-binary and gender non-conforming, and approximately 2.5% preferred not to say.

Māori

The proportion of members who identify as Māori has increased from 13.5% in 2019 to 21.6% in 2022. Some of this growth (approximately 60 members) is associated with the increase in the number of Māori wards/constituencies which occurred following changes to the Local Electoral Act in 2018. Māori members are more likely to be younger and female than non-Māori members – see Figure 19.

Figure 19: Proportion of members who are Māori



Approximately 54% of the respondents who identified as Māori were first time members, with women making up 57% of all Māori members. Since LGNZ initiated its post-election census of members, the lowest share of members who are Māori was in 2004 (Please note that since 2010, local board and community board members have been included in the census).

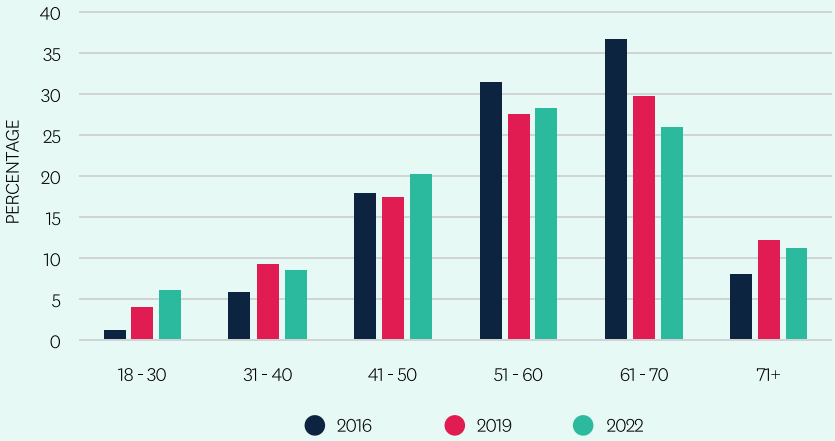
Thirty-five councils had Māori wards or constituencies in the 2022 elections. Twenty-nine were territorial councils and six regional councils. A total of 65 Māori ward/constituency members were elected in 2022.[4]

[4]Two councils, Upper Hutt City and Kaipara District, voted in 2024 to abolish their Māori wards. Of the remaining 33 councils with Māori wards/constituencies, all but three (Wairoa District and Waikato and Bay of Plenty regions) will hold polls at the 2025 local elections to determine whether those wards and constituencies will exist for the 2028 local elections.

Age

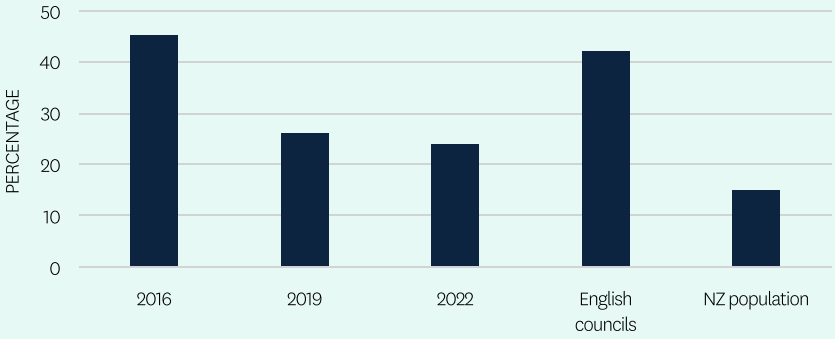
Since 2016, there's been a notable increase in the proportion of members in the 18-30, 31-40, and 41-50 age groups. The share of members older than 61 years has also declined from 41.8% in 2019 to 37% – see Figure 20.

Figure 20: Age of elected members



The median age of members elected in 2022 is approximately 55 years, compared to 55-60 in 2019. By comparison, the average age of elected members in England is 60 – see Figure 21.

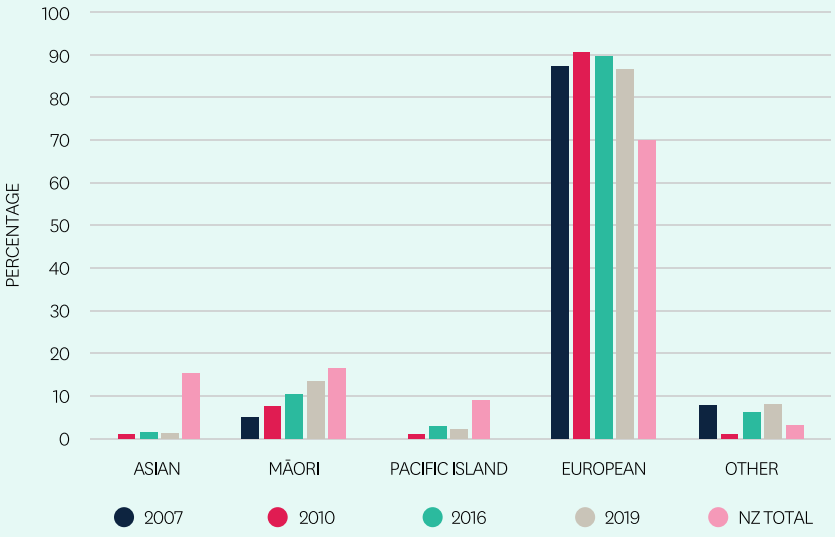
Figure 21: Number of members 65 and older



Ethnicity

Figure 22 tracks the composition of elected members according to their ethnicity since 2007. The two major trends have been a decline in the share of members who identify as European, and an increase in members who identify as Māori. The share of members who identified as Asian and Pasifika in the survey is likely to be less than the actual number due to the sample size, given that most Asian and Pasifika members are concentrated in a single council, Auckland Council.

Figure 22: Ethnic diversity 2007-2022



Comparing candidates and elected members

Table 4 compares the profile of those who stood for election in 2022 (the candidates) with those who were elected[5]. Findings were as follows:

- Candidates over the age or 40 are more likely to be elected than those under 40, making up 69% of candidates but 85% of members.
- Candidates who were already members had a better chance of being elected than candidates who were non-members.
- Candidates with a graduate degree were more likely to be elected, although this did not apply to candidates with PhDs.

[5]Sources. Information on candidates was provided by Policy Local, which undertook its own survey. Information on elected members came from the 2022 Census of Elected Members conducted by LGNZ.

Table 4: Candidates and members compared

	2022 Candidates	2022 Elected members
Under 30	6.1%	6.1%
Under 40	19.6%	14.66%
Over 40	69.4%	85.4%
Already an elected member	32%	40%
Graduate degree	24.9%	38.36%
Masters/honours degree	19.7%	17.21%

When we compare the impact of occupation on a candidate's chances of being elected, we find that full time elected members have twice the chance of being elected than a candidate who was not a full-time local politician, and that being self-employed, but not employing staff, reduced your chance of being elected – see Table 5.

Table 5: Main occupation

	Candidate	Member
Being an elected member	17%	34%
Self-employed no staff	22%	14%
Retired	6%	8%
Employer	11.8%	11%
Employee	29.9%	20%

Sources: Candidate data courtesy of Policy.NZ; member data courtesy of LGNZ

OTHER RESOURCES

Local electoral reform: Draft position paper, published by Local Government New Zealand's Electoral Reform Working Group, March 2025, available from https://d1pepq1a2249p5.cloudfront.net/media/documents/LGNZ_ERWG_draft_position_paper.pdf

Elected members' census 2022: The profile of people elected at the 2022 local government elections, November 2023, available from https://d1pepq1a2249p5.cloudfront.net/media/documents/Elected-members-census-2022.pdf

Rewarding, interesting, and frustrating: How elected members feel about their time in local government January 2020, available from https://d1pepq1a2249p5.cloudfront.net/media/documents/Rewarding-interesting-and-frustrating.pdf

Local government voters 2022, About the people who voted in the 2022 local government elections, November 2023, available from https://d1pepq1a2249p5.cloudfront.net/media/documents/Local-government-voters-2022.pdf

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