

Local democracy: quick facts 2019

“Local government is not solely a matter of the management of local services, it provides the democratic machinery for the expression of local opinion on all matters of public policy” (Prof John Roberts, VuW, 1968).

Local government is our ‘basic’ level of democracy. It provides a mechanism for people to participate in local public affairs and have a say about the manner in which their communities are run and the local services provided. It also enables people to learn about democracy and become ‘active citizens’. Local democracy is more than simply voting. These ‘quick facts’ provide a snapshot of the state of local democracy in New Zealand, its strengths and weaknesses and areas for improvement.

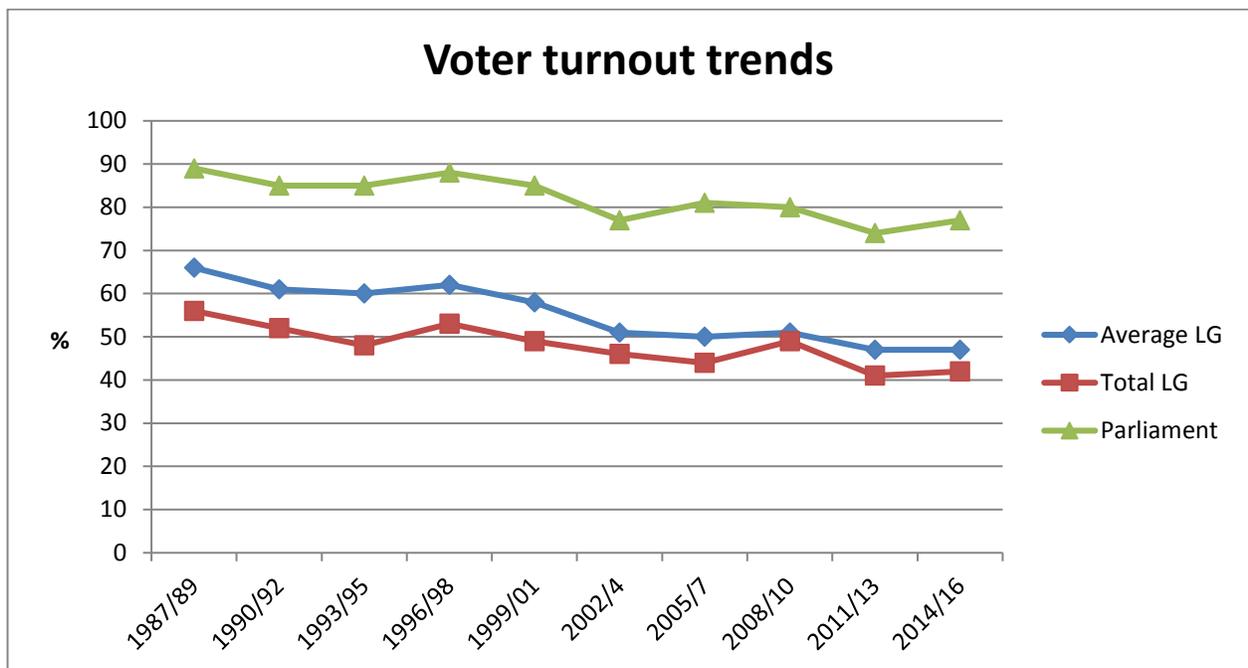
Turnout in local government elections

Turnout in the 2016 local authority elections averaged 47 per cent, as it did in the 2013 local government elections. In contrast, turnout at the 2017 parliamentary elections increased to 77 per cent, 30 per cent greater than the local authority average. Of note is the fact that turnout for both local and national elections has declined at a similar rate since 1988/89. This trend is mapped in figure 1.

Figure 1 also includes the total number of eligible voters who voted in the 2016 local authority elections. This figure was 42 per cent, which was a slight increase on the 2013 turnout figure of 41 per cent. Unlike the average turnout rate, which is the average of the turnout rates in all 67 territorial elections, total turnout is the proportion of all registered voters who actually voted.

One advantage of the average measure is that it better describes trends throughout New Zealand than the total turnout number. The total turnout measure is strongly influenced by the number of people who voted in our three biggest cities, which make up nearly 50 per cent of eligible voters.

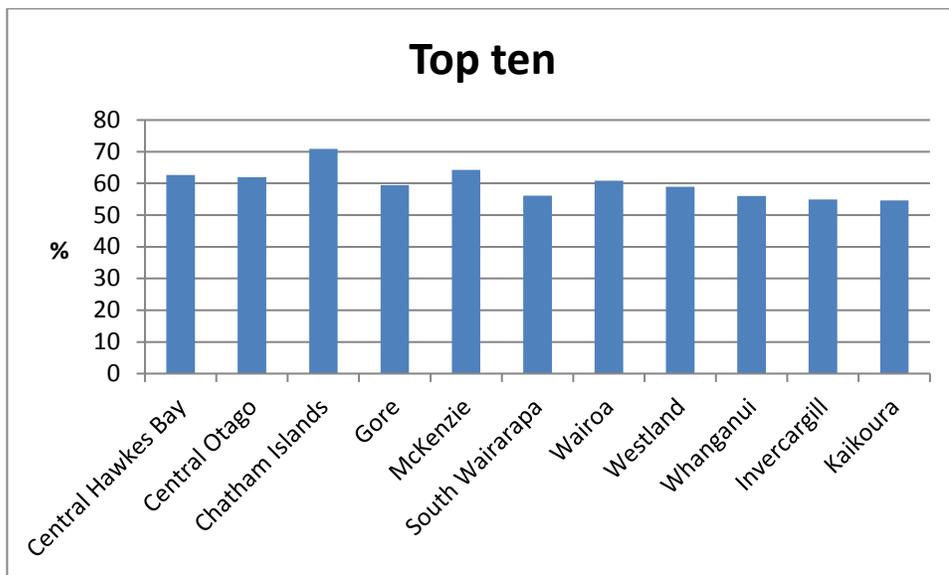
Figure 1: Turnout



Source: DIA, Electoral Commission.

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

Figure 2: Councils with the highest turnout



Source: LGNZ

As in 2013, the councils which received the highest levels of turnout tended to be smaller rural councils, and often in the South Island. Two interesting exceptions were the provincial cities of Whanganui and

Invercargill. Whanganui District Council was also in the Top 10 in 2013. McKenzie District Council had the highest turnout rate for a mainland council in both 2013 and 2016.

Turnout rates tend to fall as councils become larger, reflecting both increasing representation ratios and the increasing distance between citizens and their representatives (see table 1 below).

Table 1: Urban turnout rates – large cities (percentage)

City	2013	2016
Auckland	34.9	38.4
Hamilton	38.3	33.6
Tauranga	37.8	38.3
Wellington	41.5	46.2
Christchurch	42.9	37.8
Dunedin	43.1	45.7

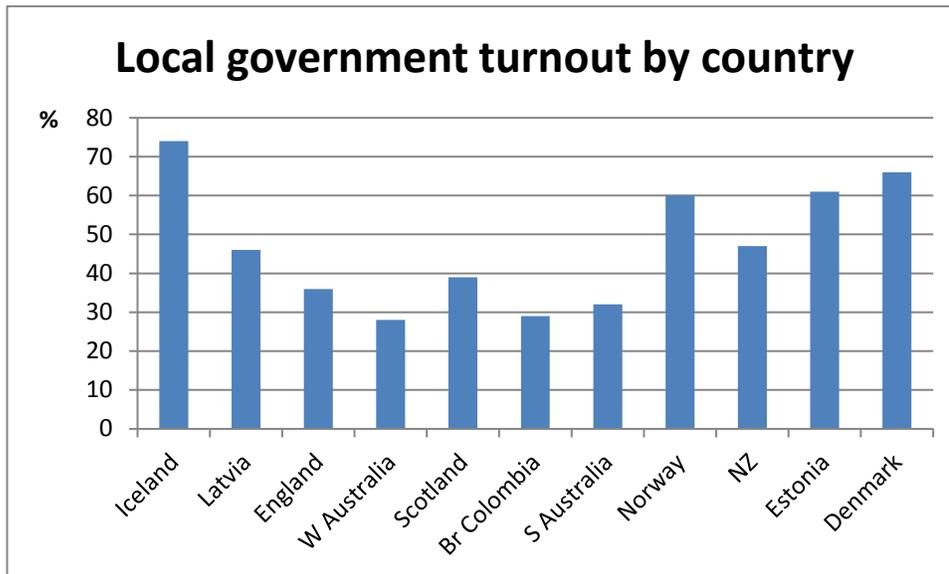
Source: LGNZ

One of the main turnout stories of the 2016 elections was the increase in the Auckland Council and Wellington City Council votes, which explained the overall increase in total voter turnout.

International turnout figures

Turnout in local government elections varies considerably around the world. As a general observation, turnout in systems which have a large range of responsibilities and functions tends to be higher than turnout in those systems, such as New Zealand's, which have a small number of responsibilities (see figure 3).

Figure 3: International turnout rates



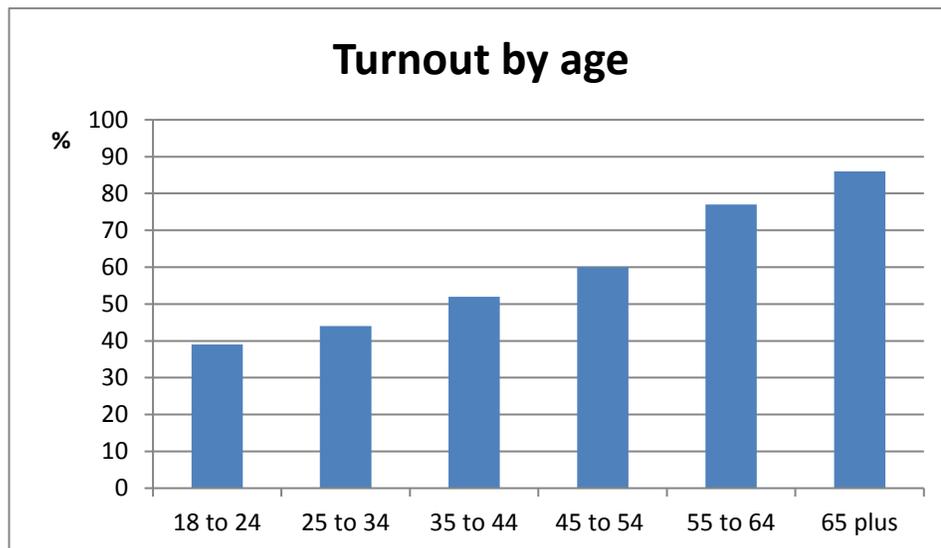
Source: Figures compiled by LGNZ

Figures should represent the average turnout of local governments within each country. Other than Estonia and Denmark, all figures come from elections held since the beginning of 2012.

Voting by age

Voting in local authority elections appears to be positively correlated with age, with peoples' propensity to vote increasing with age. Post-election surveys undertaken by Auckland Council and LGNZ highlight the degree of correlation (see figure 4).

Figure 4: Turnout and age



Source: Auckland Council/LGNZ post-election report

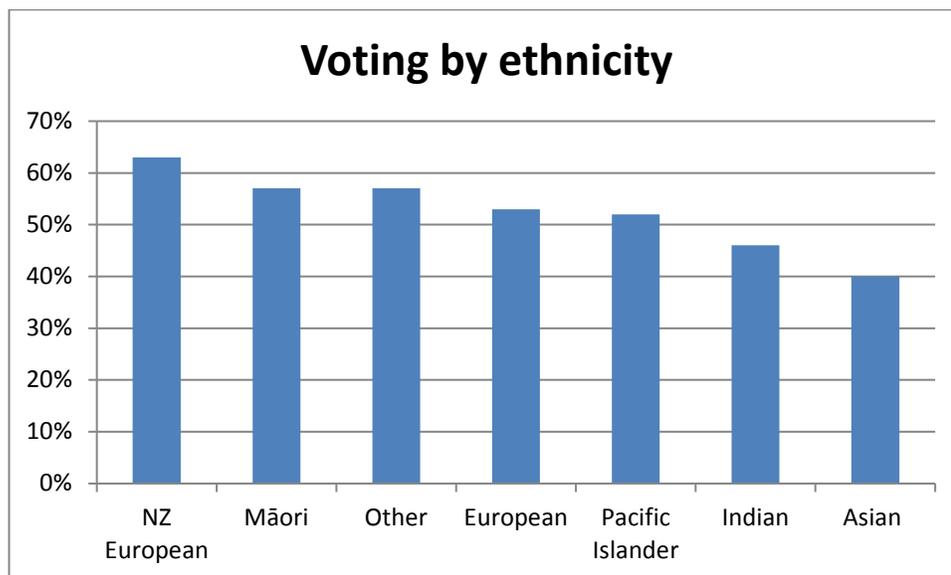
Given that voters tend to be older, it is perhaps no surprise that approximately 75 per cent of members elected in 2016 are over the age of 51.

Voting by ethnicity

Voting behavior is influenced by a number of factors, such as the level of education, age, civic literacy and length of time that a person has lived at the same address. These factors can also impact on the turnout rates of different ethnic groups. For example, an ethnic group which is older, more qualified, and with higher rates of home ownership would also be expected to vote at higher rates than other groups.

Information on turnout by ethnicity is sourced through post-election surveys of voters and non-voters commissioned by Auckland Council and LGNZ (Post Election Report 2016). The two ethnic groups that vote more than others are New Zealand European and Māori (see figure 5).

Figure 5: Voting by ethnic group



Source: Auckland Council/LGNZ post-election report

Factors affecting turnout

There are a broad range of theories that have been designed to explain why people vote or not. The more empirically based theories focus on the characteristics of those who vote or don't, and show that voting tends to be associated with higher levels of education, property ownership or at least having lived at the same address for a reasonable length of time. It also helps to know something of civic affairs (in other words, people who are not aware of the role of local government are less likely to vote for their council).

Another group of theories looks at the characteristics of communities. To explain why residents of smaller local authorities in the South Island vote at a materially higher rate than equivalent communities in the North Island, theorists look at the age of the population (the further South you go, the older the average population, therefore more willingness to vote) and the level of homogeneity. Homogenous communities are likely to have higher social capital due to shared values and consequently there is likely to be a greater sense of civic duty and willingness to trust candidates.

From a political economy point of view, turnout in local government elections is related to ‘salience’, that is the question of local government’s role and how relevant it is. A system with a high level of salience provides incentives for citizens to invest the time and energy necessary to ‘search’ information on candidates and monitor the performance of their local authorities.

Salience is also related to tax burdens. From a ‘rational’ perspective, choosing to meet the cost of voting, such as the time and effort required assessing candidates and policies, is relative to the level of tax paid. In other words the incentive to vote is greater in the case of central government elections, where the tax impost is close to 40 per cent of household income, than local government elections, where the average impost is under 4 per cent of household income.

Reasons given for not voting

When asked, people provide a number of reasons for not voting. The three most common reasons involve lack of interest, lack of information about candidates and policies, and being too busy.

Table 2: Reasons given for not voting

Reason for not voting	Percentage
<i>Lack of interest</i>	
I can't be bothered voting	6.4
I'm not interested in politics or politicians	10
I don't think my vote will make a difference	2.6
Don't know	5.4
Total	23.4
<i>Didn't have enough information</i>	
I don't know enough about the policies	8.2
I don't know anything about the candidates	18
I can't work out who to vote for	6.4
Total	32.6
<i>Too busy or other commitments</i>	
I will be away from home over the voting period	3.3
Work commitments/poor health	5.6
Forgot/missed deadline	14.4
Total	23.3

Source: Auckland Council/LGNZ post-election report

Representation ratio

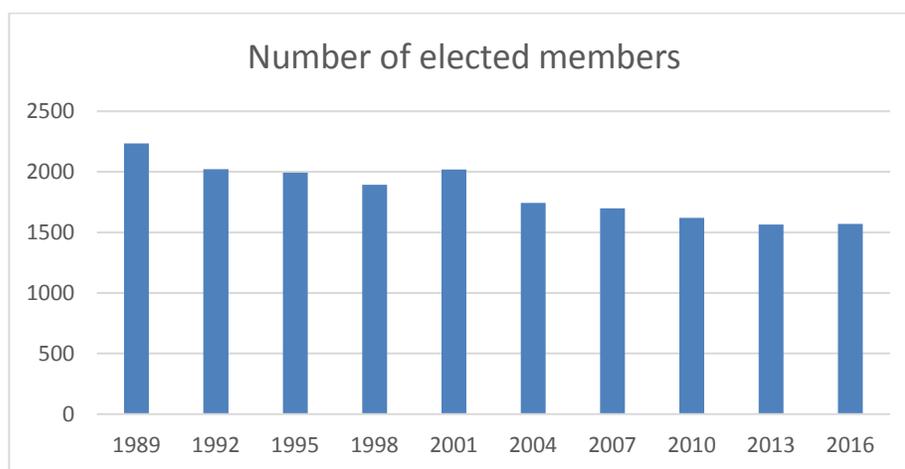
The representation ratio describes the number of citizens represented by each elected member and has a direct bearing on willingness to vote and perceptions of political responsiveness. A high ratio is often considered to have a negative correlation to the level of voter turnout, with lower turnouts associated with high representation ratios. Councils with high representation ratios are less able to reflect the diversity of their communities (fewer positions, therefore less ability for minority groups to get around the table), respond to community concerns and potentially steer management. Table 3 compares representation ratios in a number of local government systems.

Table 3: Representation ratios

Country	Ratio
France	1:120
Germany	1:250
United Kingdom	1:2,600
Scotland	1:4,229
Wales	1:2,376
NSW	1:3,942
South Australia	1:2,088
New Zealand	1:5,000

Since 1989, New Zealand has witnessed a gradual reduction in the number of locally elected positions. This has also been reflected in a similar decline in the number of candidates, which is reflected in competition for seats (see figure 6).

Figure 6: Number of local government elected members



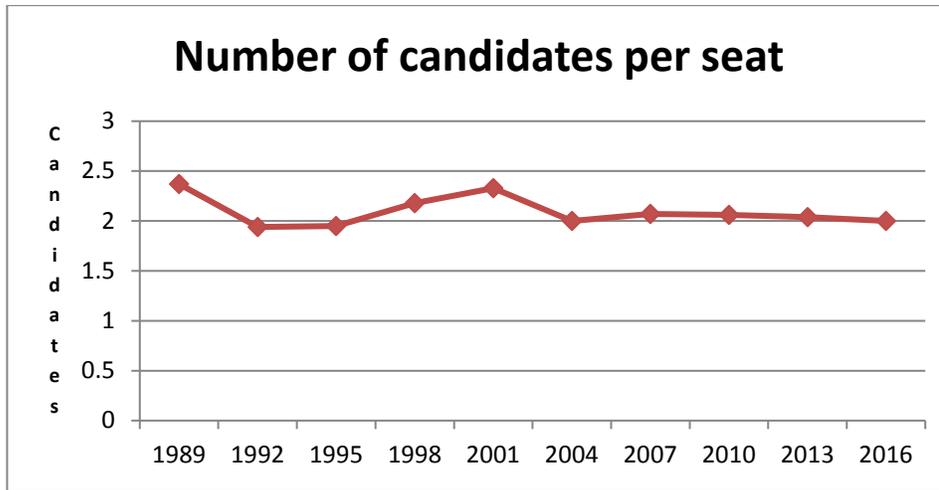
Source: DIA

The number of elected members (councillors, mayors, community board and local board members) has fallen significantly since 1999, although stabilising over the last two elections.

Competition for seats

Competition for seats is often regarded as a measure for assessing the health of a democratic system, as it reflects the degree of community interest in participating in the task of local governance. Competition for seats in New Zealand local government has been relatively consistent since local government reform in 1989, at approximately two candidates per seat (see figures 7 and 8).

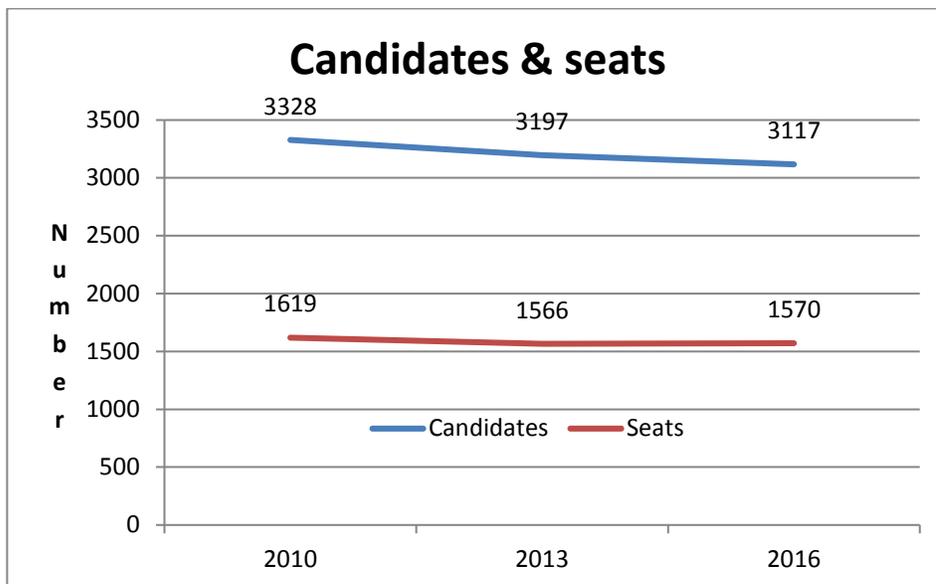
Figure 7: Competition for seats



Source: DIA

Figure 8 shows the trend over the last three elections of declining candidate numbers.

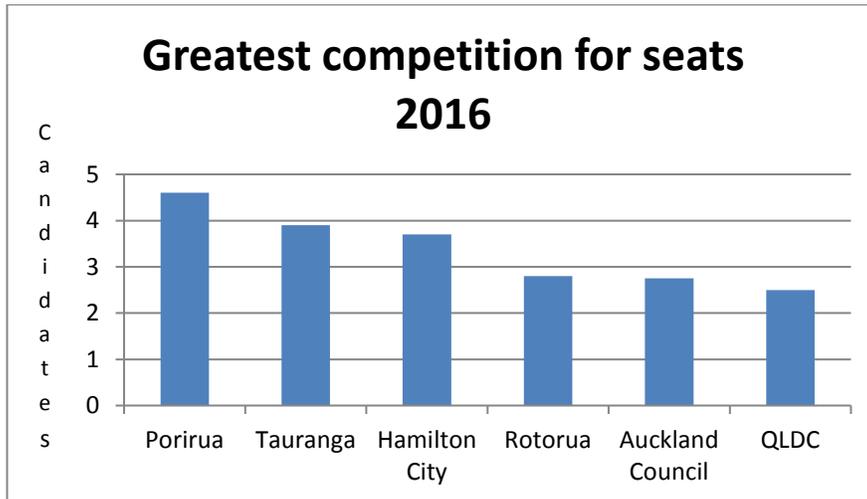
Figure 8: Number of candidates



Source: DIA

Competition for seats varies considerably by type of council, with more competition in urban local authorities than districts or regions. Figure 9 shows the average number of candidates per seat for the six councils with the highest averages. Notably, five of the councils are in the North Island and four had no incumbent mayor. Turnout rates are often higher in councils where the incumbent mayor has stepped down.

Figure 9: The six most competitive council races 2016

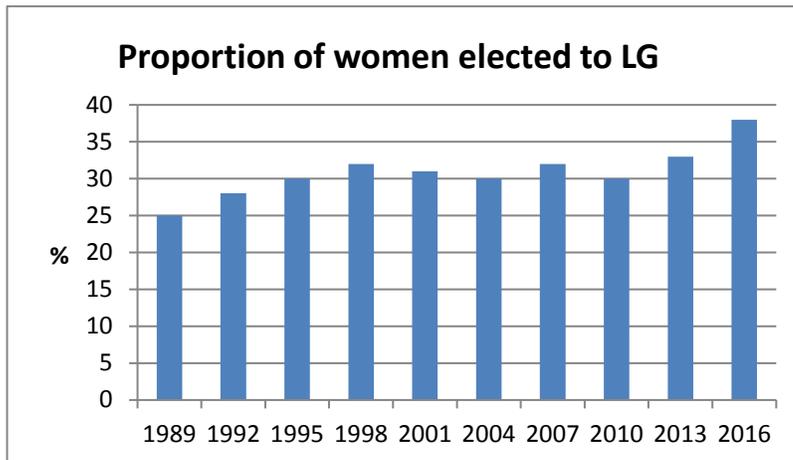


Source: LGNZ. QLDC = Queenstown Lakes District Council

The profile of elected members following the 2016 election

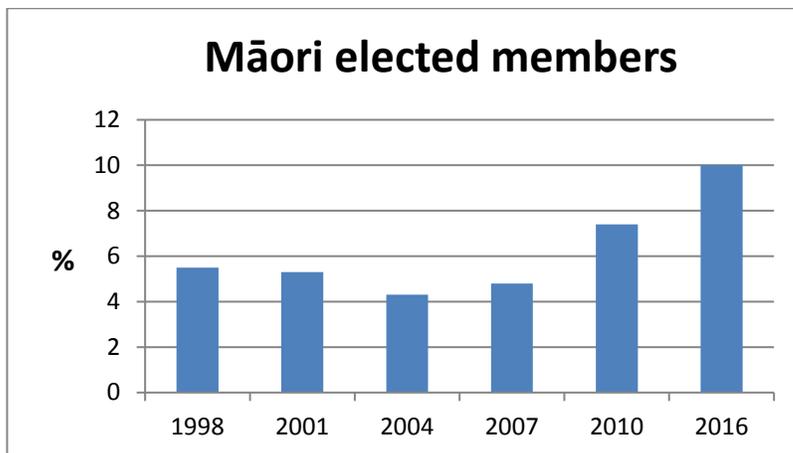
The outcome of the 2016 local authority elections was notable for at least two developments. First, it resulted in the highest ever proportion of women elected members at 38 per cent, and second, it resulted in the highest ever number of elected members identifying as Māori, at 10 per cent (see figures 10 and 11).

Figure 10: Proportion of women elected members since 1989



Source: DIA

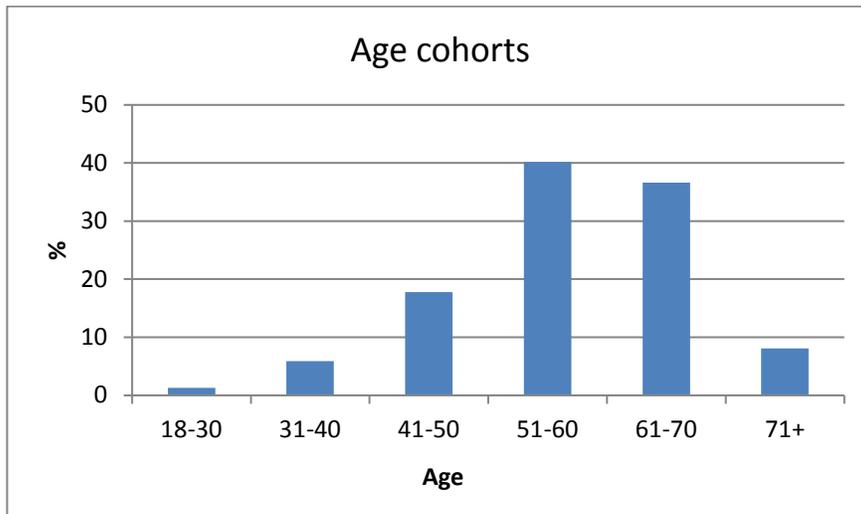
Figure 11: Proportion of Māori elected members



Source: Auckland Council/LGNZ post-election report

Please note that from 2010 onwards, post-election surveys have, in addition to councillors and mayors, included local and community board members. This reflects the increasing range of decision-making roles delegated to sub-municipal bodies (local boards and community boards). The 2016 elections saw little change in the age profile of elected members.

Figure 12: Age of elected members



Source: LGNZ elected member survey