

Local democracy: quick facts

You cannot have a community of any kind without some means of reaching agreement among its members about who gets what ... Who gets what at the local level is the responsibility of local government. Local government is the most thoroughly political activity that there is. (Hon. David Lange, Wellington July 1998.)

Local government is our 'basic' level of democracy. It provides a mechanism for people to participate in local public affairs and have a say in the way in which their communities are run and the local services provided. It also enable people to learn about democracy and become 'active citizens'. Local democracy is more than simply voting. As these 'quick facts' highlight a healthy democracy is also characterised by active competition for seats and elected governance bodies that not only represent their communities but are also representative of their communities, that is community diversity, should also be reflected around the council table.

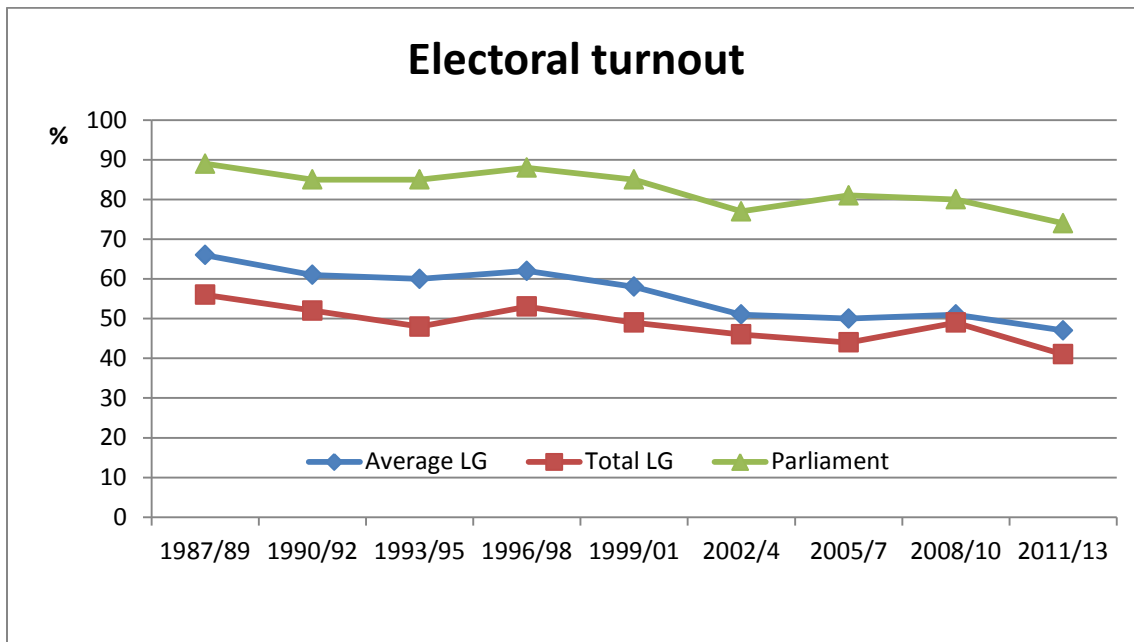
Turnout

On average turnout in local government elections is approximately 30 per cent less than turnout for parliamentary elections. Figure 1 shows that turnout for both elections has declined at a similar rate since the late 1980s, a trend that is common in many parts of the OECD. A summary of the main reasons given for difference and the decline is set out at the end of this document.

Local authority elections occur on the second Saturday of October every third year. The date is set in law and applies in all cases except where specific circumstances apply, such as a natural disaster, in which cases the Minister of Local Government can postpone an election for affected local authorities.

The graph in Figure 1 distinguishes between total local government turnout and average local government turnout. The average figure is the average of the turnout figures in all 67 territorial authorities. The average figure is less influenced by turnout in New Zealand's small number of very large councils (Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch) and thus paints a more accurate picture of interest across the country.

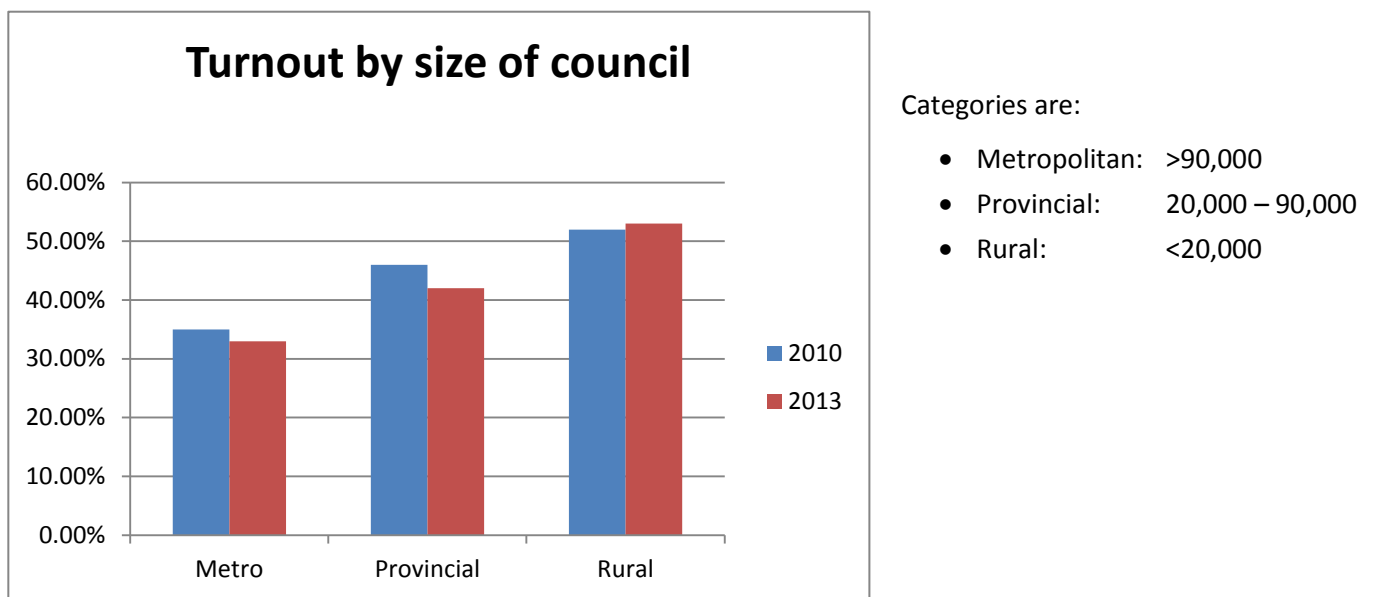
Figure 1: Turnout



Turnout by council size

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.

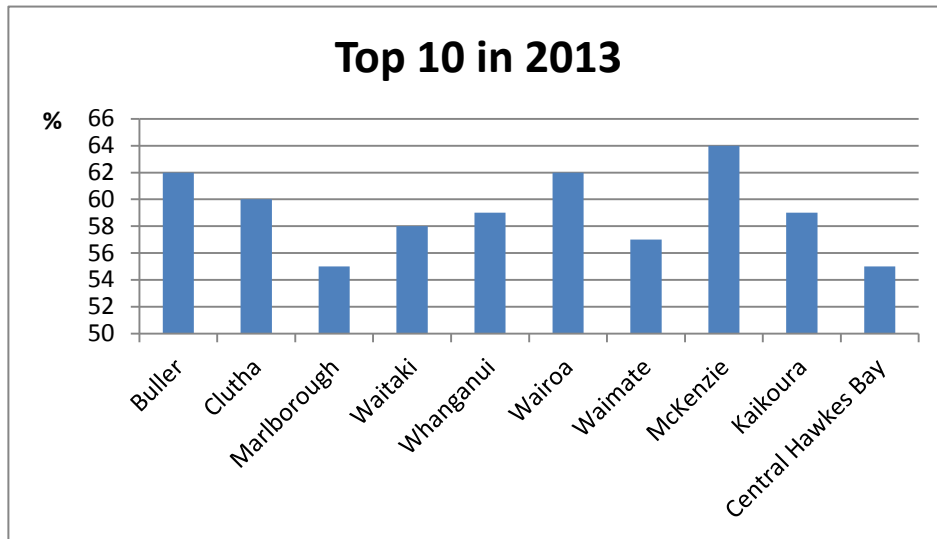
Figure 2: Council size



Highest turnout in 2013

In the 2013 turnout in ten councils was 55 per cent or above. Eight of those councils were in the South Island and eight had populations under 20,000. Overall turnout in the South Island is higher than turnout in the North Island.

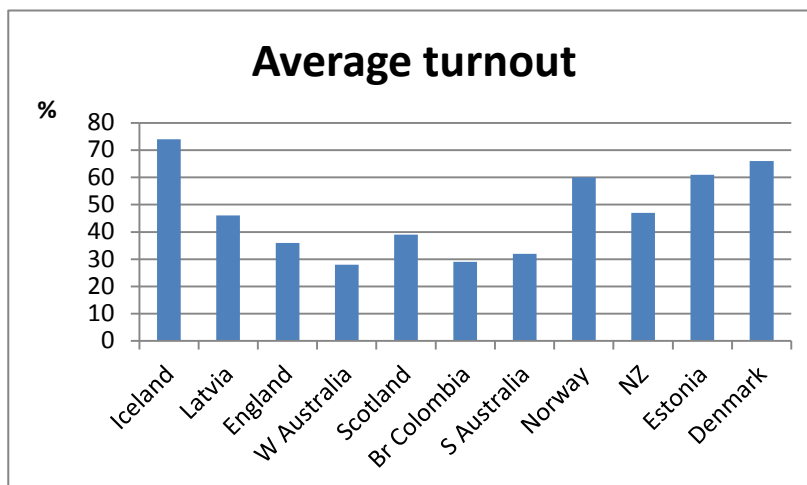
Figure 3: Councils with the highest turnout



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 4.

Figure 4: International turnout rates

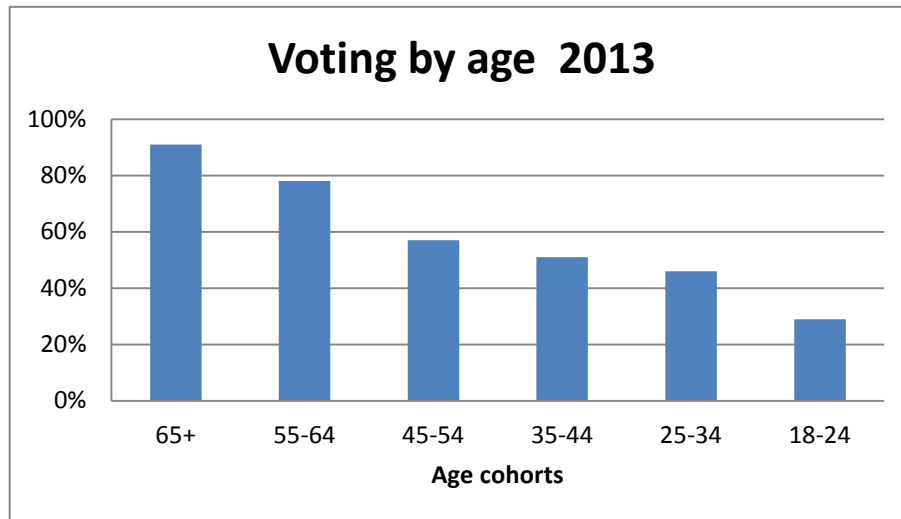


Figures represent the average turnout of local governments within each country. Other than Estonia and Denmark, all figures come from elections held since the beginning of 2012.

Voting by age

Voting in local authority elections appears to be positively correlated with age. Surveys undertaken by LGNZ in 2001 and 2004, and more recently by Auckland Council following the 2013 elections, highlight the degree of correlation, see Figure 5.

Figure 5: Turnout and age

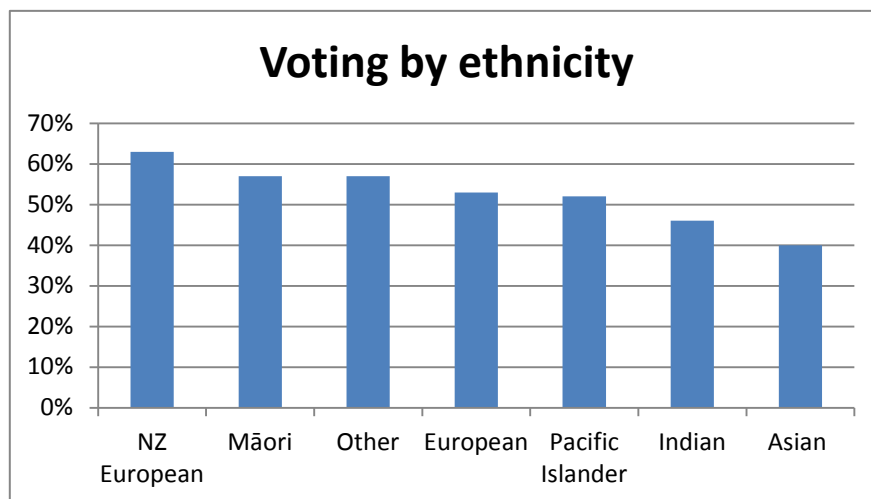


(Source: <http://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/EN/AboutCouncil/HowCouncilWorks/Elections/Documents/voteturnout09022016.pdf>)

Voting by ethnicity

Voting behaviour 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 ethnicity, as an ethnic group which is older, more qualified, and with higher rates of home ownership should also have higher levels of participation. The two ethnic groups that vote more than others are New Zealand European and Maori; see Figure 6.

Figure 6: Voting by ethnic group



(Source: Auckland Council *Elections Research 2013*)

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 because 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.

Why people vote or don't vote

When asked, people provide a number of reasons for why they don't vote. Surveys undertaken by LGNZ, the Local Government Commission and Auckland Council show the reasons fall within four broad categories:

Reasons for not voting:

- Didn't know enough about the candidates 31%
- No interested 14%
- Forgot or left too late 24%
- Too busy 14%

Reasons for voting:

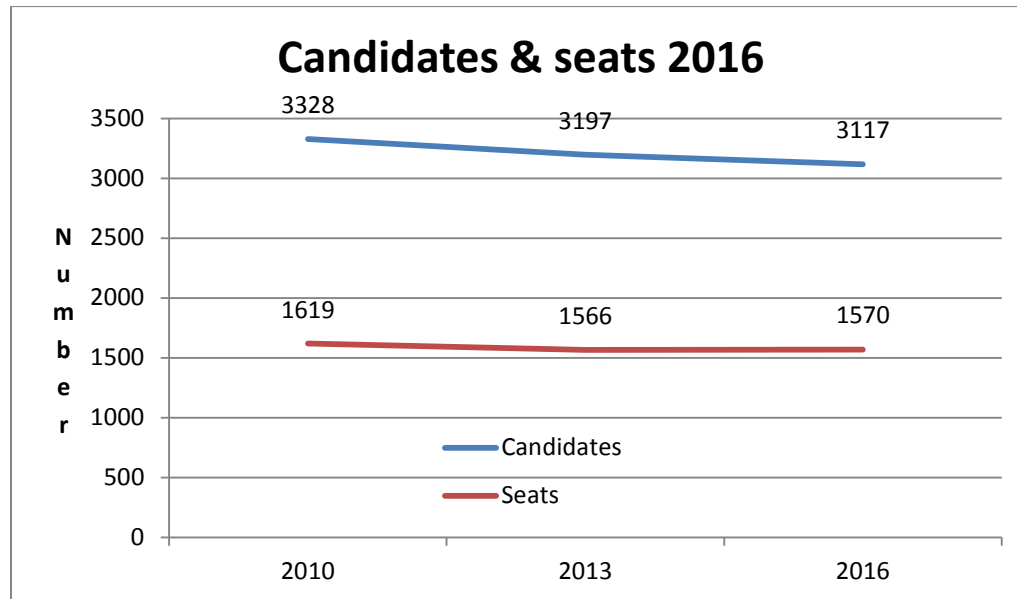
- Democratic duty and belief in democracy 26%
- To have my say 17%
- You cannot complain if you haven't voted 7%

There is also a strong correlation between a person's age and whether or not they voted and how long they had lived at the same property.

Number of seats

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 7.

Figure 7: Number of candidates



Representation ratio

The reduction in the number of seats at the same time that the population is growing has resulted in a steep increase in the ratio of citizens to seats. A high ratio is often considered to have a negative correlation to voter turnout with turnout declining as the number of elected members' decreases. Increasing the representation ratio impacts on the ability of councils to reflect the diversity of their particular communities (fewer positions therefore less ability for minority groups to get around the table) and potentially limits the ability of representatives to steer management.

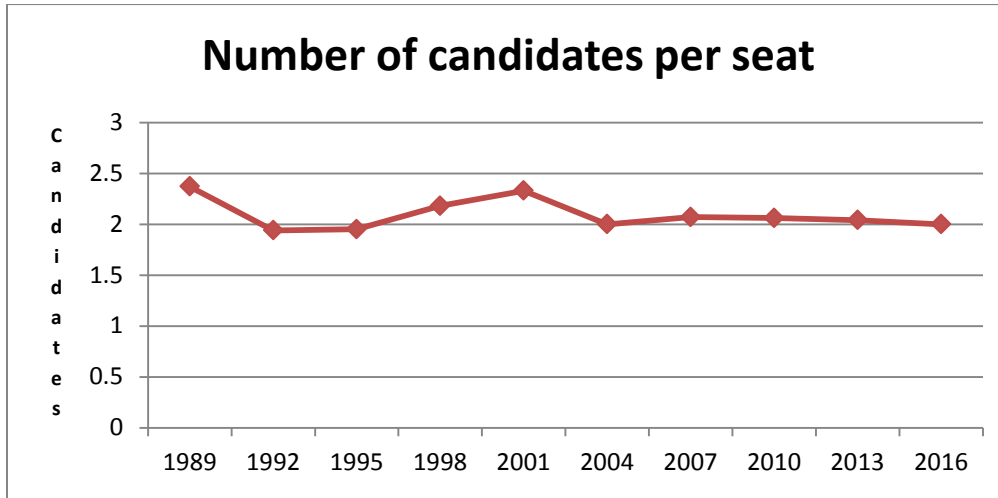
Country	Ratio
France	1:120
Germany	1:250
United Kingdom	1:2,600
New Zealand	1:5,000
Scotland	1:4,229
Wales	1:2,376
NSW	1:3,942
South Australia	1:2,088

The representation ratio shows the number of citizens in a country represented by a single councillor.

Competition for seats:

Competition for seats is a well accepted measure for the health of a democracy. Competition for seats in NZ local government has been relatively consistent since local government reform in 1989 sitting around two candidates per seat. See Figure 8.

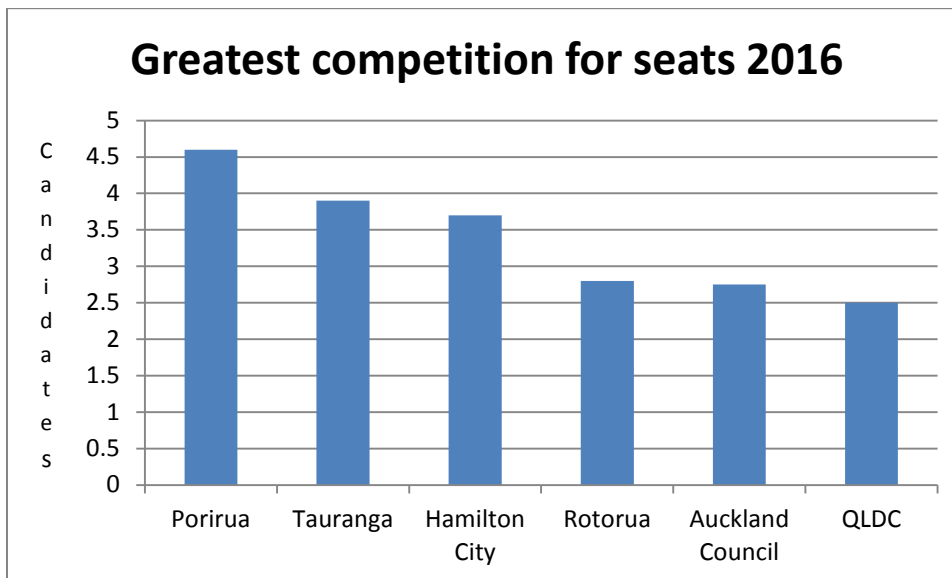
Figure 8: Competition for seats



Councils with the most competition for seats

Competition for seats tends to be greatest in urban local authorities, this is highlighted in the completion for seats in the 2016 elections, see Figure 9. One common feature in Figure 9 is that four of the five councils have no incumbent mayor.

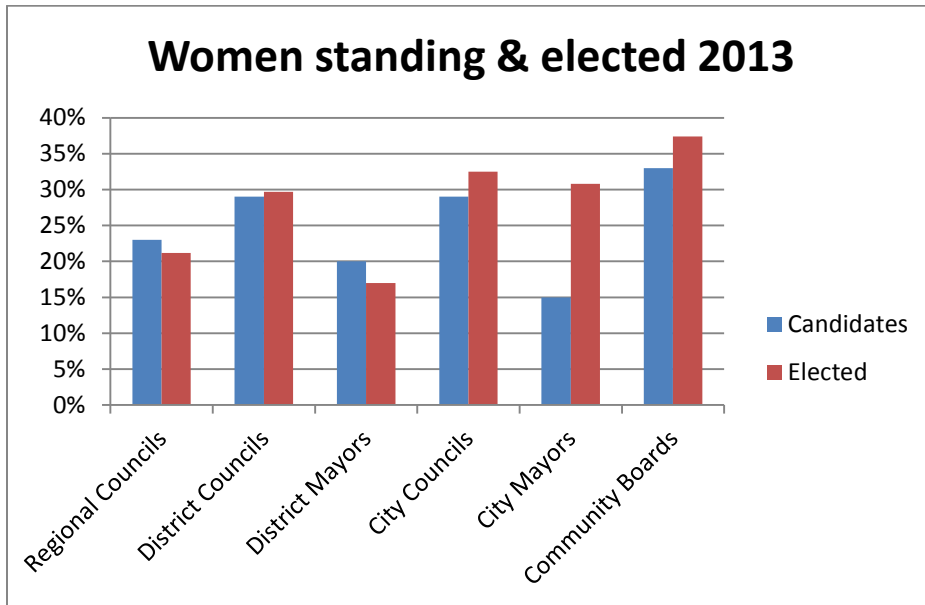
Figure 9: The six most competitive council races



Proportion of women standing and being elected

The proportion of elected members who are women has been between 30 per cent and 33 per cent over recent years, a rate that varies by type of position. Return data also shows that women tend to have a greater chance of being elected than men. Figure 10 shows that while 15 per cent of city mayoral candidates in 2013 were women they made up 30 per cent of the elected positions. The pattern did not apply to regional councils and district mayoral races.

Figure 10: Women’s participation as candidates



Age

Recent elections have reinforced the tendency for the proportion of members aged over 50 to average over 70 per cent, see Figure 11.

Figure 11: Proportion of elected members 50 years old or older

