

The 2013 Census and Representation in Local Government

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Elections are the lifeblood of New Zealand's democracy; New Zealand has a proud tradition as an extremely inclusive democracy (in terms of the rules about who can vote), and we place considerable faith/authority in Parliament and the institutions it creates by statute. So it is extremely important in New Zealand, more so even than countries with supreme law and entrenched rights, that our voter turnout is high and our institutions truly 'represent' (through composition) our communities. There has been a downward trend in voter turnout at all levels in New Zealand in recent decades. In trying to reverse that trend, evidence is needed of the connections between voters, electoral systems, and elected representatives; how well do New Zealand's politics institutions 'represent' voters?

The census 2013 data provides a national overview of the diversity of the New Zealand population and this can be compared to the survey data about who is elected to local government nation-wide. The Local Government Act 2002 states (at subsection 3, 'purpose') that the 'Act is to provide for democratic and effective local government that recognises the diversity of New Zealand communities'. The Census 2013 data shows the New Zealand's population overall is becoming more diverse. Māori (14.9%), Asian (11.8%) and Pacific peoples (7.4%) have increased in population since the 2006 census. In terms of the gender split, 48.7% of the New Zealand population is male, and 51.3% is female. In relation to age, 23.3% of the overall population is aged between 50 and 69 years, and the median age is 38 (half the population is older and half younger).

Despite the purpose of the Local Government Act, the diversity of New Zealand communities is not recognised in the members elected to local government across New Zealand. After the 2010 local government elections¹ women comprised 34% of elected members. Over 90% of elected members described themselves as New Zealand European, 7% as Māori and less than 1% as Asian. Local governments have the option to change their electoral system to a more proportional system (the single transferable vote) to address this lack of representation. Very few councils have taken up this option. Councils can also introduce Māori wards to address Māori representation specifically; only one council has taken up this option.

¹ The data presented here is from Local Government New Zealand Elected Members' Survey from 2010 (with a response rate of 47.2%). The survey for the 2013 local government elected members has not yet been completed. The information is no longer publically available, and was obtained from Local Government New Zealand on request.