



**National Council of
Women of New Zealand**

Te Kaunihera
Wahine O Aotearoa

National Office
Level 4 Central House
26 Brandon Street
PO Box 25-498
Wellington 6146
(04)473 76 23
office@ncwnz.org.nz
www.ncwnz.org.nz

20 December 2013

S13.28

**Submission to the Justice and Electoral Select Committee:
Inquiry into the 2013 local elections**

The National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ) is an umbrella organisation representing 30 organisations affiliated at national level and a further 40 organisations affiliated at branch level. It has 22 branches throughout the country attended by representatives of these organisations, as well as individual members. NCWNZ's function is to represent and promote the interests of New Zealand women through research, discussion and action.

This submission has been prepared by the NCWNZ Public Issues Standing Committee and the Parliamentary Watch Committee after limited consultation with the membership of NCWNZ, and with reference to prior submissions and NCWNZ policy.

The majority of the members who responded to the consultation had voted in the local body elections. The members consider it their civic duty, the only way to influence who was elected, and too hard won a right to waste. The right to vote should never be taken for granted if we want to live in societies that reflect our needs and wishes. They were interested in the issues. Some commented that they voted to prevent a candidate from being re-elected. They also commented that everyone should vote and those who do not have no right to comment adversely on any subsequent policies the council or Government make.

Those who did not vote indicated it was because they did not know the candidates, were new to the area, or they were disillusioned with local politics – that nothing would change by casting a vote.

Identification of factors behind the low voter turnout

On speaking to people who received their voting papers and did not vote, many felt that local body elections had no status from a parliamentary perspective. Some also felt that there were no real problems in their locality so saw no reason to participate. Finally many felt that although they knew the Mayor and Deputy Mayor, the other councillors had extremely low profiles and were obviously not interested in their constituents and too many were of the older generations.

Few respondents mentioned attending any meet the candidate meetings, which did not appear to be well advertised.

Perhaps the most obvious problem was the dearth of young potential councillors and those young people (under 30) in the main did not get elected.

A comment was made on the lack of diversity in ethnic and socio-economic background amongst the candidates.

Voting methods and processes, and The potential for voter confusion when voters are presented with two voting systems on the same ballot paper

Most respondents understood the instructions, though comment was made that they may have been difficult for some people, eg those with limited reading ability or people for whom English is not their first language. Positive comments were made about having instructions in a range of languages.

People did find it confusing that different methods of voting were used, and the requirement to rank the Health Board candidates was particularly criticised.

The preference was for a single voting system.

Methods of increasing voter participation in future local authority elections

General comments made about the perceived reasons for low turnout included a lack of visibility of the candidates and some difficulties in finding information about the candidates.

The value of local body activities is in what they do within their authority's boundary and how they inform the local people about what they have done. Local freebie newspapers are one source for this information as the mainstream newspapers concentrate on the major cities, eg there is little in the Dominion Post about activities in Porirua, Kapiti, Lower Hutt or Upper Hutt in comparison to Wellington City.

It was felt by some that the social interaction side of voting has disappeared and many wondered if the voter turnout would have been higher if people had the option to vote at a booth.

A number of suggestions were made that might improve voter turnout:

- Have advertised times when candidates will be on hand to talk with electors.
- Use a central location where people know the candidates will be available.
- Use modern media as well as traditional media to promote the elections, particularly social media tools such as Facebook, twitter, LinkedIn, and youth networks.
- Better promotion of candidate meetings.
- Door knocking, not just by candidates, but to explain the voting system.
- Having small local social occasions to meet candidates.
- The background information provided by the candidates requires improvement. It should include such things as what the candidates had previously achieved, their education/work experience, work or business background, their interests, what volunteer organisations they belonged to or the individual service they had given, as well as the statement on what they intend to achieve if elected. Some also commented that there needs to be a standard set of questions that candidates respond to giving their perspective on a set range of topics.

- More television coverage, not just the sensational or the strong personalities.
- Using an on line local debating chamber.
- Teach civic education in schools. This should also include explanations of the different ideological perspectives.
- One person commented that the Electoral Commission might like to show some real people in their next election, instead of the strangely alienating orange cartoon character.
- Most of those who commented on compulsory voting were loath to see it introduced. The preference was to encourage people to vote rather than make it compulsory.

The appropriateness of the three week voting timeframe

Most deemed the three week voting period to be long enough. There were a number of people who believed that it could be shorter, stating that two weeks would be sufficient.

For those who voted on receipt of their papers, there were comments made that too much information became available later in the three week period. The information should in the main be available at the time the papers are released.

A shorter turnaround time might encourage people to vote when their papers are received and get them straight back in to the mail.

The security of, and potential for increased participation as a result of the introduction of, electronic voting

When asked if they would vote electronically, the majority indicated that they would though this was not necessarily their preferred way to cast a vote. It is seen as a way to encourage younger people to cast a vote, but that it may deter many older people from participating and the overall result may well be fewer people voting.

For those not electronically enabled there would need to be options, such as free access to computers to cast a vote, and maintaining a parallel paper system. Some concerns were raised about the potential for double voting when parallel systems are used. More were concerned that introducing electronic voting might disenfranchise some segments of the community.

Many made comparisons to the recent electronic Census of Population returns, and commented that there needs to be strong security around the system. There needs to be a mechanism that validates the voter against the local body roll.

Online voting forms would need to be available in multiple languages.

There needs to be a mechanism for the voter to review their input before they enact the mechanism to submit their vote.

The question of how scrutinising would occur needs to be addressed.

Conduct and performance of the electoral institutions including the Electoral Commission

Those few who commented found the Electoral Commission staff very friendly and informative, and doing their utmost to encourage people to vote.

Barbara Arnold
President

Beryl Anderson
Convener, Public Issues Standing Committee