



Democratic Participation

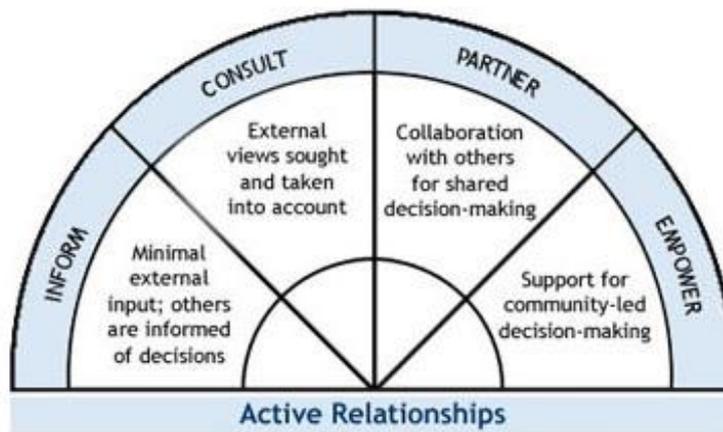
What is this?

Democratic participation can be viewed in different ways. People’s ability to elect representatives for central, regional or city governments, community boards and local health boards is the most established way of participating. Elections also occur at the community level, for example school boards of trustees and incorporated societies.

Democratic participation is also about how people take part in government and other public decision-making processes. People can actively be involved in these processes through information sessions, surveys, workshops, partnerships and other collaborations.

There is a continuum of levels of participation: being informed, being consulted on options, being engaged throughout the process, working together in collaboration or partnership, and being authorized to make a decision. The following diagram is one simple way of showing this. It has been adapted from Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation developed in the late 1960’s, which starts at the bottom with ‘manipulation’ moving through to ‘citizen control’¹

Figure 1 Spectrum of community participation²



Why is it important?

Citizen participation in public decision-making and problem solving gives people a way of contributing to the communities they live in. This contribution is an important aspect of people’s wellbeing. It can bring an ability to influence decisions, as well as opportunities to connect with others in the community and to learn and understand. Underpinning the process is the sense of being valued by community leaders and others in the community. Allowing local communities to be involved in decision making is not only fairer but also more conducive to better decision making. Community input means that decisions will be based on relevant local information; decisions can be better customised to local preferences; and the people most affected by decisions gain greater power to influence decisions.³



Data

Voting is one way of participating. The data presented below provides an overview of voting at a local government level. The proportion of all enrolled electors (both resident and ratepayer) who cast a vote in local government elections is set out in Table 1, below.

Table 1 Voter turnout in Christchurch local body elections 1989-2013⁴

	Percentage of eligible voters who did vote								
	1989	1992	1995	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010	2013
Christchurch City	60	51	50	52	49	39	42	52	43
New Zealand (City Councils)	52	48	49	51	45	43	41	46	39

The proportion of all enrolled electors who vote in local body elections is low and has declined steadily over time. Except for an increase both in Christchurch and nationally in 2010, 2013 figures have once again dropped. Low voter turnout exists despite a high percentage of the eligible population being enrolled to vote: currently 87% of the eligible Christchurch population. Notably, there is some difference by age group with over 90% enrolment for age groups 45 years and older and just 66% for those aged 18-24 years.

Outside of general, local body and health board elections, there are many other ways for community members to be involved in the democratic process. Regional and local authorities make decisions about local issues and services and have regard to local needs and priorities including provision of environmental management, drinking water, wastewater services, parks, libraries and other community services.⁵ In these areas, local government has a greater involvement in the wellbeing of their communities than central government.

In Christchurch, there is the Christchurch City Council and the Canterbury Regional Council. The Regional Council was replaced by central Government-appointed Commissioners in 2010. This changed in the 2016 local elections, and there is now a 7-6 split between elected councillors and Government appointed commissioners. A fully-elected council will return in 2019.

The Local Government Act 2002 (Section 78)⁶ states that a local authority must, in the course of its decision-making process, give consideration to the views and preferences of people who are likely to be affected by, or to have an interest in, the matter. To give greater opportunities for communities to participate in decision making, the LGA 2002 Amendment Act 2014 required local government to develop significance and engagement policies. In November 2014, the Christchurch City Council approved the Significance and Engagement Policy⁷ to give greater clarity and certainty to the community about how and when it can expect to be engaged.



The Council follows a three-step process to inform decision-making:

1. Determine significance
The Council uses agreed criteria to decide if a matter is of higher or lower significance to the community.
2. Link level of significance to level of engagement
The level of significance of the particular issue or decision will help determine the level of engagement to be undertaken.
3. Consider methods of engagement
The level of engagement will in turn influence the range of methods that the Council considers and then uses to undertake the engagement required in a manner appropriate to the significance of the matter.

Some Council policy and decision making processes have engagement approaches prescribed in legislation which usually details the minimum level of engagement required and in some cases the specific engagement method.

District Health Boards (DHBs) have wide-ranging legal obligations to consult under the New Zealand Public Health and Disability Act 2000 (the Act). The Act specifically requires DHBs to consult on district strategic plans, on proposals for a significant change to policies, outputs, or funding for outputs stated in their most recent annual plan and on sales of land.

Each of these organisations provides opportunities for individuals and groups to become involved in key processes. While it is difficult to gather information on the levels of participation a snapshot is shown below of the interest that can be shown from the community around a range of topics.

- In 2011 (post-earthquakes), the City Council won an international award for its “Share an Idea” consultation, a community public engagement campaign via website for the earthquake rebuild. The campaign received 100,000 comments.⁸
- In 2013, the City Council received 4,060 submissions on the development of Local Alcohol Policy with 161 submitters presenting views.⁹
- In 2014-15, the Christchurch City Council received 4,000 submissions on the Christchurch Replacement District Plan.¹⁰
- In late 2014, the City Council undertook pre-consultation with the Christchurch community on the financial challenges faced by the Council and its Long Term Plan 2015-2025. Over 5,000 people visited the Council’s Smart Choices campaign online, and about 1,000 people participated in face-to-face discussion with elected members during the 30 public events held by the Council.¹¹
- The City Council received a total of 4,725 submissions on the proposed Nga Puna Wai community facility development during the two-month special consultative procedure held in late 2014.¹²



Impact on inequalities

Although councils are elected by the community, councillors and community board members are not aware of every issue facing its community. Good processes need to be in place to ensure everyone, both individuals and groups, has the opportunity to, and are encouraged, to vote and be involved in democratic decision-making.

As discussed above, young people have lower rates of voter enrolment and lower rates of voting participation.¹³ Additionally, people from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to participate in civic engagement as they are likely to be better informed and have better opportunities to provide feedback.

The American Political Science Task Force research on Inequality and American Democracy reported that: *“The privileged participate more than others and are increasingly well organized to press their demands on government. Citizens with low or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government, while the advantaged roar with the clarity and consistency that policymakers readily heed.”*¹⁴

Solutions

The Office of the Community and Voluntary Sector has prepared a number of resources around the benefits of effective community engagement.¹⁵ These resources look at how to encourage participation, making it easy and having flexibility in processes. In 2013, a government task force looked into the possibility of trialling online voting for the 2016 local body elections in order to make it easier for people to vote. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, the trial did not proceed.¹⁶

Information on how to take part in decision-making processes needs to be available to a variety of people (e.g. different age and cultural groups) in a variety of methods (reading material, face to face communication/telephone and web based). Interest and community groups are often directly involved with people who may not feel comfortable or be able to provide feedback, and these groups can act as liaisons to local authorities.

A report on People and Participation in the UK summarised:

*“Participation works best when people feel that they can make a difference, when they have the time to fully engage with the issues, and when there is a healthy relationship of mutual respect. It works worst when it is rushed, ill-informed and vague about the links to formal decision-making or when it allows the loudest voices to dominate.”*¹⁷

Christchurch is undergoing rapid change, local government and central government have adapted planning documents to ensure that the regulatory framework is able to adapt to the many layers of development. The Land Use Recovery Plan and the Replacement District Plan, along with suburban masterplans, lay out simpler



planning rules in order to facilitate redevelopment. The Councils have conducted extensive consultation phases as part of these planning processes.

There is a risk that people may suffer from consultation fatigue due to the number of consultations occurring. It is important that decision makers are clear about the goals of public engagement from the outset. This prevents the public from misinterpreting their role in the process, or overestimating their influence.¹⁸

The use of impact assessments in the planning processes are one way for Councils to ensure that all affected groups are identified and potential unintended negative outcomes are mitigated. Integrated impact assessments have been used to assess recovery plans such as the Lyttelton port Recovery Plan, Waimakariri Residential Recovery Plan and the Land Use Recovery Plan¹⁹ at their drafting phase.

Data limitations

There is a lack of information on the extent to which groups and individuals are aware of, and take advantage of, opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, and what motivates them to do so (or decline to do so).

Connections with other issues

Employment, Education, and Income.

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Read about the Te Pae Mahutonga Māori Health Model at
<http://www.hauora.co.nz/resources/tepaemahutongatxtvers.pdf>

