

**Submission  
No 33**

## **2012 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS**

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**Date Received:** 8/02/2013

8<sup>th</sup> February 2013

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
[electoralmatters.committee@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:electoralmatters.committee@parliament.nsw.gov.au)

**Re: 2012 Local Government Elections Inquiry**

Dear Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the following submission to the 2012 Local Government Elections Inquiry.

We write to you as Labor Councillors on the City of Sydney Council, Leichhardt Municipal Council, and Marrickville Council and to draw your attention to the following recommendations:

1. The NSW Government should fund coordinated campaigns to raise awareness of local government elections;
2. Efforts should be targeted into specific parts of the community to encourage voters underrepresented in local government elections to participate;
3. Polling booths should be those used in State and Federal elections;
4. Allow out of area voting; and
5. Count mayoral ballots and preferences to determine a two-candidate-preferred result.

Good democracy relies upon participation. Low voter turnout at elections is an issue of social and economic justice, welfare, and human rights. With low turnout, particularly amongst specific demographics including ethnically diverse and low socio-economic communities, social and economic groups in society are not represented. As Lijpart puts it, "unequal participation means unequal influence".<sup>1</sup>

In the local government areas that we represent, turnout at the 2012 elections was 69.2% (City of Sydney), 77.2% (Leichhardt Municipal Council), and 79.3% (Marrickville Council) of the possible voters. Many people, once fined, commented to us that they were not aware of the local government elections. This was particularly problematic in the City of Sydney with the 2012 Heffron by-election conducted two weeks prior to the local government elections.

**Recommendation 1:**

**NSW Government funded and coordinated campaigns to raise awareness of local government elections**

With voter turnout at local government elections historically low when compared to Federal and State elections, there is an onus upon the NSW Government and the NSW Electoral Commission to coordinate campaigns to raise awareness of local government elections and that voting in these elections is compulsory. With fixed election dates for local government elections, there is significant potential for thorough and well-resourced advertising and

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<sup>1</sup> Arend Lijpart 1998, 'The Problem of Low and Unequal Voter Turnout – and What We Can Do About It', *Political Science Series*, No. 54, p.5.

awareness campaigns to be coordinated by the NSW Government. Initiatives that could be undertaken include:

- Concerted voter registration campaigns to enrol voters in advance of the closing of the electoral roll;
- Direct mail campaigns to voters to raise awareness of local government elections and how to cast a valid ballot; and
- High-visibility advertising in the week leading up to election day to publicise booth locations, concurrently raising awareness of the election.

### **Recommendation 2:**

#### **Targeted efforts into specific parts of the community to encourage voters underrepresented in local government elections**

Voters from low socio-economic backgrounds are often underrepresented in elections, including local government elections. The strength of a democracy rests upon the inclusion of all citizens to exercise their voice through a ballot to choose their elected representatives. Further, accountability in government is strengthened when voter interest and participation in elections is high. It is vitally important for the strength and responsibility of local government to increase the voter turnout at elections, including the voter turnout for voters from low socio-economic backgrounds. Without a broad diversity of voices contributing to the election of democratic representatives, tendencies emerge for special interest groups to dominate the program and direction of local government, distorting the responsibility of councils to govern in the best interest of communities.

### **Recommendation 3:**

#### **Polling booths should be those used in State and Federal elections**

Many people have commented on the confusion caused by some polling booths used at State and Federal elections not being open for local government elections. Many people consider it a tradition to revisit the same polling booth every election and when these are changed, it can affect the capacity for people to cast their ballot, especially people who have work duties or other appointments on election day and may not have time to locate another polling booth.

### **Recommendation 4**

#### **Allow out of area voting**

Out of area of area voting is conducted for people who cannot cast a ballot in their own electorate during State and Federal elections. It is a convenience that lowers barriers to participation in elections and can be well-administered by the Australian Electoral Commission and NSW Electoral Commission. The same opportunity should be granted to people voting in local government elections in order to lower barriers and make voting as convenient and easy as possible. This is particularly pertinent for people in the City of Sydney and Marrickville Council with the boundary between these LGAs running along King Street, Newtown, leading to inconveniences on election day regarding which booth to visit to cast a ballot for people in that community.

## **Recommendation 5**

### **Count mayoral ballots and preferences to determine a two-candidate preferred result**

In the City of Sydney mayoral ballot, the NSW Electoral Commission did not count past first preferences and thus, did not calculate a two-candidate preferred result. In this instance, it should be compulsory for all preferences to be distributed with the determination of a final two-candidate preferred result so that the voting intentions of the community can be made clear.

We believe these changes would significantly strengthen local government in NSW.

Regards,

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