New Zealand has a strong, proud history as a liberal democracy. We regularly score at the top of international league tables in measures of political participation, electoral process and civil liberties. Yet despite this, we are also a country with an inequitable distribution of wellbeing – between old and young, rich and poor, Māori and Pākehā. Those who are disadvantaged by this – the young, the poor and Māori – are the same groups who are less likely to participate in formal civic processes, such as voting or consultation. Yet even if these groups were to vote in numbers, they would still be a minority within a system that is designed to reflect the voice of the majority.

If we are to create a fair future for all and reduce these inequities, we need to look at alternative ways of ensuring the voices of minority groups are heard and considered through civic decision making processes and reconsider the way we measure civic participation as a country.

By Anne Molineux and Dr Michael Macaulay

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In partnership with
**The state of our democracy**

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, New Zealand is ranked fourth highest globally and the highest in the Asia Pacific region across the five categories of civil liberties, political culture, and political participation, functioning of government, electoral process and pluralism.¹ We also rank highly according to the World Bank Governance Indicators, where we score in the upper 90th percentile across all six indicators.²

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Source: Democracy Index 2018. The Economist Intelligence Unit.
Our country is seen to be world-leading in protecting the rights of minority groups and marginalised communities. Despite this, inequities affecting wellbeing persist. The younger generation faces a challenging housing market that looks unlikely to ease. Māori and Pasifika continue to underperform across major socioeconomic indicators. The gap between those who earn the most and the least continues to widen.

Those most impacted by these inequities are also the least likely to have their voice heard through formal civic engagement processes. Voter turnout among young people, Māori and Pasifika communities and those from low socio-economic areas is the lowest in the country. Civic engagement processes often assume a level of literacy, education, time and self-advocacy that can create an additional barrier to participation among minority communities.

Even when these groups do participate, the voices of the minority can be overwhelmed by the more numerous and well-articulated voices of the majority. In these cases, we leave it to our politicians – with their own biases and incentives to be re-elected – to navigate what can often be competing interests. The recent discussion on a possible capital gains tax is a good example of this – where the interests of the typically articulate, time-rich, voting baby boomers were pitted against the interests of those with the most to gain – the often less politically literate, time poor, less likely to vote millennials.

While our Bill of Rights Act provides basic protection of the human rights of all, this does not go as far as providing for the social, economic and political wellbeing of all. Enabling the wellbeing of minority and disadvantaged groups – particularly where the enablers may differ from the general population – depends on the goodwill and advocacy of New Zealanders and those in positions of power. When faced with competing priorities, it is easy for these interests to fall by the way-side.

If we are to address the inequitable distribution of wellbeing – we must reframe the way we think about civic participation.

**Rethinking civic participation**

There is no single definition of civic participation that can be applied to New Zealand (or any jurisdiction) but there are long accepted frameworks that chart the various forms, and degrees, of participation. Sherry Arnstein’s classic “ladder of participation” spanned from political manipulation as the least participatory mode, up to full citizen control.

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**Figure 1**

Ladder of citizen participation

![Ladder of citizen participation diagram](image-url)

Adapted from the Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation." from 1969
More recently, civic participation has been described as being either ‘thick’ or ‘thin’.6 Thinner forms of participation are more passive, such as information gathering, data sharing and small-scale consultations, while thicker forms of participation reflect direct decision making on both small and large scales.

There is a rich history of research that details the benefits of thick forms of citizen participation, from enhanced levels of integrity and accountability through to increased levels of public trust in institutions.

The way we measure the quality of democracy potentially adds to the relatively narrow way in which participation is discussed. The World Bank Governance Indicators use Voice and Accountability as one of its measures, which is defined as “the extent to which a country’s citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and voting rights are all relatively conventional forms of participation.”

Yet we know that New Zealand already has a wellspring of greater civic engagement. At the last count there was an estimated 1.2 million volunteers engaged in a vast range of activities.9

Harnessing untapped sources of participatory democracy

We need to look beyond voter turnout if we are to enhance civic participation in a way that will ensure the wellbeing of minority groups. While increasing voter turnout is important, this is only one dimension of civic participation – and even with increased voter turnout, many of the groups experiencing wellbeing inequities are minorities within a democracy that privileges the majority.

We consider three pathways that would broaden our approach to civic participation:

1. Connecting the voices of expert citizens and everyday makers

The concept of step on/step off citizenship enables citizens to choose to interact with democratic decision making by acting as expert citizens or everyday makers.10

The expert citizen is typically portrayed as a full-time professional, often working within a community organisation, with deep knowledge of the participatory process. They are ‘insiders’, interested in good governance with expertise in networking and negotiating their way around the system.

In contrast, everyday makers are concerned with how they can enhance their own personal capacity for self-governance and co-governance, and are generally more sceptical of representative democracy. They are not interested in the grand dramas of national politics, instead focusing on local community issues.

Research shows that, although there can be friction between these two groups, greater levels of participation increases the success of working together on key decisions. Studies of local government in England and Wales, for example, showed that giving citizens a direct and concrete assignment enhanced participatory democracy far more strongly than usual consultation channels, as it allowed people to work directly together and harness their voices and expertise. Through participation, the knowledge, understanding and contribution to local governance was enhanced: direct participation led to concrete improvements in accountability, trust and integrity in local authorities.12

2. A more sophisticated approach to government consultation

Not only is it important to engage with expert citizens and everyday makers, but the way in which they are engaged is also critical. Although consultation and co-design is popular across government, it is often difficult to harness the most important voices to inform decision making.

Standard consultation processes assume that if someone cares enough about the proposal in question, they will take the time to write a submission or lobby the relevant decision makers. In practice, this disregards the time pressures, competing priorities and political literacy levels of much of the community.

The three voices model of community engagement (see Figure 2) offers greater balance, using the tension created between the different voices to develop an integrated solution:

a. The Voice of Intent is the outcome that is being worked toward, whether to enhance transport flows in a city or improve education outcomes among a certain cohort. This is often defined by politicians, but done well (as outlined below) would be developed in collaboration with communities.

b. The Voice of Expertise is the data and evidence-driven view of why the current state operates as it does, and the interventions that have worked elsewhere to address similar challenges. This voice recognises that any solution must be grounded in facts, and that there will typically be best practice when it comes to, for example, the design of a city’s transportation network.

c. The Voice of Lived Experience seeks to understand the behaviours and motivations of those impacted by the policy, in order to develop solutions that enable rather than ignore these. This recognises individuals as experts in their own lives. For example, a citizen is unlikely to be an expert in transportation network design, but is an expert in the factors that influence their decision making about whether to take a car or the bus. Focusing on those impacted by the policy requires reaching out into communities to identify those whose voices need to be heard to develop balanced policy.
The long-term outcome we are seeking to achieve

A grounding in facts and informed by evidence of what has and has not worked previously

The behaviours and motivations of the people we are here for

Figure 2
The three voices model of community engagement
Intentional decision making and policy design using the three voices model ensures those involved in the process are those who have the greatest interest in the policy – not simply those with the time, skill and inclination to participate in a government consultation process. By treating citizens as experts in their own lives, the resulting policy can take account of both the behaviours and motivations of individuals, and the best practice and evidence provided by domain experts.

3. Sharing power with interested communities

Arguably there is no better way to harness civic participation than by sharing decision making power with citizens themselves. Models of self-determination are relatively recent in New Zealand, but have been in place within other Commonwealth nations for many years.

The advantage of power sharing arrangements and self-determination models is that they shift power away from settings where the interests of minority communities need to be balanced against those of the majority, and into the communities of interest.

There is a particular opportunity for this in New Zealand given Te Tiriti o Waitangi. We have seen this through alternative legal constructs – such as the provision of legal personhood to rivers, mountains or national parks, such as Te Urewera and the Whanganui River.

Other innovations include partnership models between the Crown and iwi that define common objectives based on community priorities, supported by Crown funding. The partnership between Police and local iwi to reduce family harm in Tairawhiti, Whāngaia Ngā Pā Harakeke, provides an example of this.

Looking beyond New Zealand, we see examples of the delegation of authority and decision making to community-led bodies. For example, many Canadian provinces delegate responsibilities – and associated funding – for child care and protection to aboriginal organisations.

In all of these cases, the challenge lies in ensuring the power sharing or power delegation mechanism is adequately defined and robust enough to endure beyond individual relationships.

There is a strong case to look at more meaningful practices to expand our current approaches to civic participation in a way that ensures all voices – and those of minority communities in particular – are considered within civic decision making. In doing so, we will increase the accountability of decision makers to the currently silent minority groups who have the most to gain from reducing the inequitable distribution of wellbeing within New Zealand.

Arguably there is no better way to harness civic participation than by sharing decision making power with citizens themselves.
Endnotes


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