

Article 3

Civic engagement

Harnessing voices to expand choices

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
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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

Table 1
Global tables – Democracy Index 2018

	Rank	Overall score	Electoral process and pluralism	Functioning of government	Political participation	Political culture	Civil liberties
Full democracies							
Norway	1	9.87	10.00	9.64	10.00	10.00	9.71
Iceland	2	9.58	10.00	9.29	8.89	10.00	9.71
Sweden	3	9.39	9.58	9.64	8.33	10.00	9.41
New Zealand	4	9.26	10.00	9.29	8.89	8.13	10.00
Denmark	5	9.22	10.00	9.29	8.33	9.38	9.12
Canada	6 equal	9.15	9.58	9.64	7.78	8.75	10.00
Ireland	6 equal	9.15	9.58	7.86	8.33	10.00	10.00
Finland	8	9.14	10.00	8.93	8.33	8.75	9.71
Australia	9	9.09	10.00	8.93	7.78	8.75	10.00
Switzerland	10	9.03	9.58	9.29	7.78	9.38	9.12
Netherlands	11	8.89	9.58	9.29	8.33	8.13	9.12
Luxembourg	12	8.81	10.00	8.93	6.67	8.75	9.71
Germany	13	8.68	9.58	8.57	8.33	7.50	9.41
United Kingdom	14	8.53	9.58	7.50	8.33	8.13	9.12
Uruguay	15	8.38	10.00	8.57	6.11	7.50	9.71
Austria	16	8.29	9.58	7.86	8.33	6.88	8.82
Mauritius	17	8.22	9.17	8.21	5.56	8.75	9.41
Malta	18	8.21	9.17	8.21	6.11	8.75	8.82
Spain	19	8.08	9.17	7.14	7.78	7.50	8.82
Costa Rica	20	8.07	9.58	7.50	6.67	7.50	9.12
Flawed democracies							
South Korea	21	8.00	9.17	7.86	7.22	7.50	8.24
Japan	22	7.99	8.75	8.21	6.67	7.50	8.82
Chile	23 equal	7.97	9.58	8.57	4.44	8.13	9.12
Estonia	23 equal	7.97	9.58	8.21	6.67	6.88	8.53
United States	25	7.96	9.17	7.14	7.78	7.50	8.24

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.³ 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.⁴

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

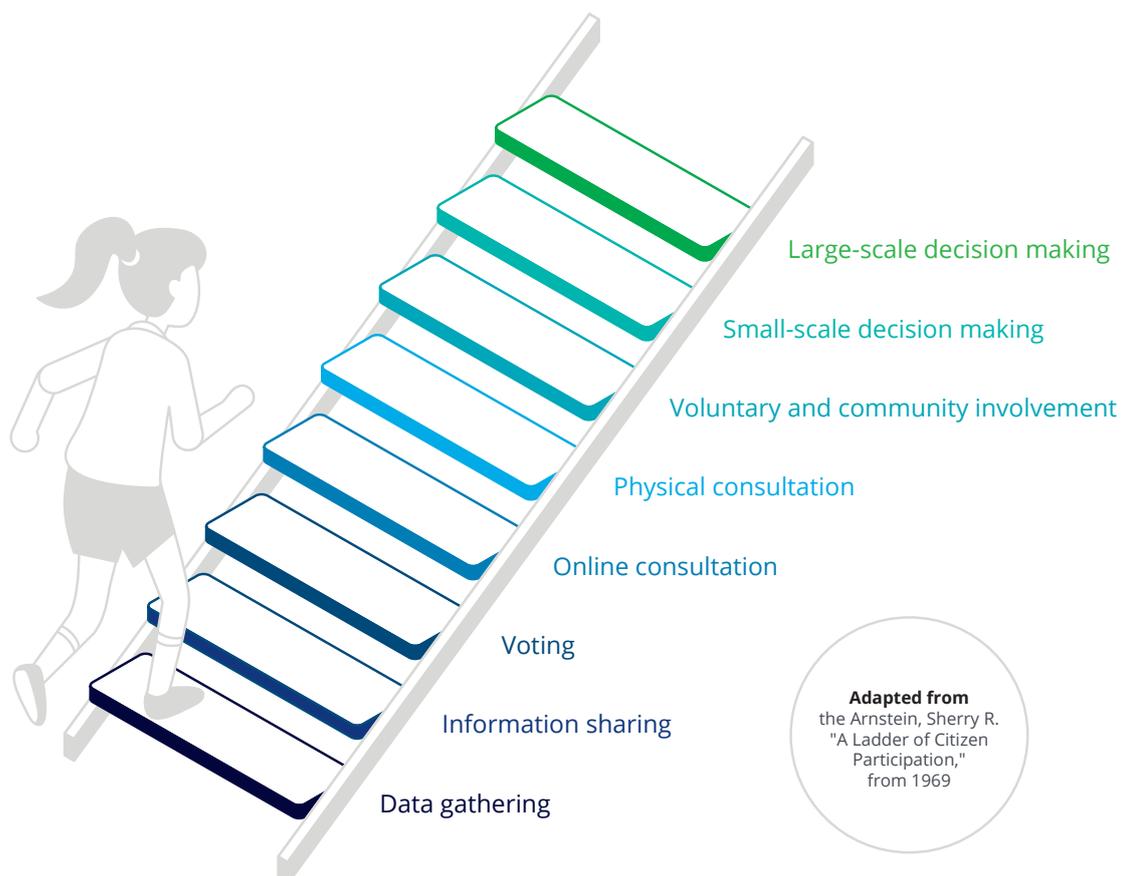
advocacy of New Zealanders and those in positions of power. When faced with competing priorities, it is easy for these interests to fall by the way-side.

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.⁵

Figure 1
Ladder of citizen participation



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 free media.” Expression, association and voting rights are all relatively conventional forms of participation.^{7,8}

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.¹⁰

2. A more sophisticated approach to government consultation

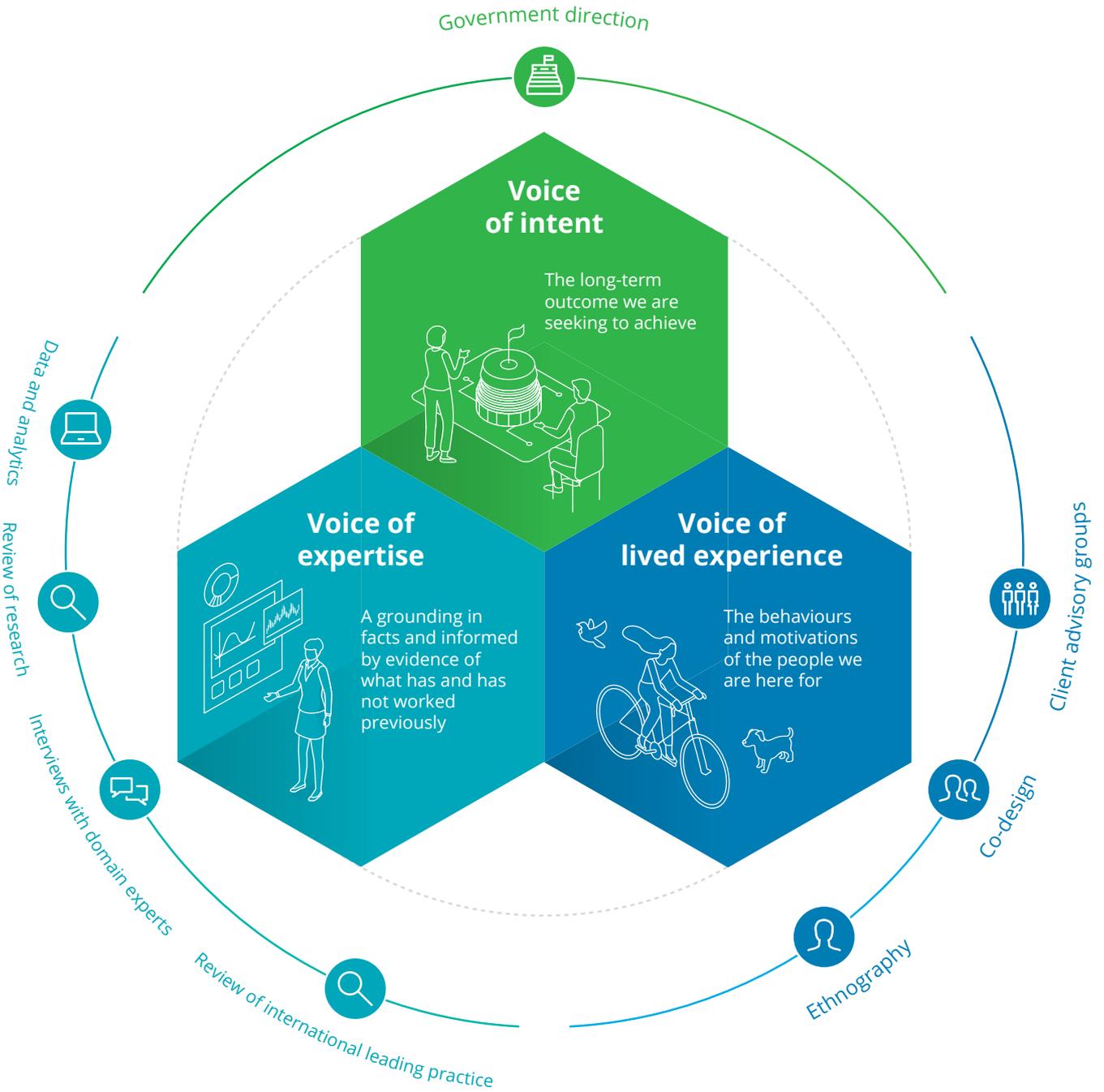
Not only is it important to engage with expert citizens and everyday makers, but the way in which they are engaged is also critical. Although consultation and co-design is popular across government, it is often difficult to harness the most important voices to inform decision making.

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.

Figure 2
The three voices model of community engagement



Endnotes

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