

# Chapter 17

## Local Representation in Australia: Preliminary Findings of a National Survey

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores the challenges of local representation within the context of Australian local government reform. Since the 1990s Australian local government has been undergoing a continuing process of reform that has reshaped the role of the elected members or councilors. In many states, changes to the legislation since the 1990s clearly demarcate the role of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and that of councilors. The CEO generally has management responsibility, while councilors are responsible for strategy and policy making. While a great deal of effort has been expended in developing and effecting these reforms on an institutional level, little is known about whether councilors themselves understand their responsibility or how they view their role. This research seeks to address this gap.*

### INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s local governments across Australia have been undergoing a process of reform (Dollery & Grant, 2011). The main objective has been to make local governments more effective and efficient in order to ensure their financial sustainability and their continuing capacity to provide services to the community (Aulich, Sansom, & McKinlay, 2014; Hearfield & Dollery, 2009). All local government reforms have addressed the administrative, financial, and technical capacity of local councils, but these aspects tend to strengthen only one role of local government – service delivery. They do little to support local representation and democracy. In fact, some scholars have argued that these reform processes may even weaken local democracy (e.g., Kiss, 2003). The democratic role of local government has been “comparatively neglected” in local government reform processes (Grant & Dollery, 2014, p. 9), despite reforms having significantly changed the role of the councilor. As a result, little is known about how locally elected members conceptualize local democracy and their representative role. This chapter

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considers this question by examining the challenges of democracy and representation (i.e., the practice of councilors representing their constituents) within a local democratic framework (i.e., legislation and the subsequent institutions which shape that context). It outlines the preliminary results of a national survey of councilors which gathered data on their understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the local government system.

### **Local Representation**

This discussion begins with a consideration of local representation. The relevant literature on democratic representation is substantial, but it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a thorough consideration of this material. Nevertheless, the following sections examine some of the fundamental elements of representation as they relate to local government. This consideration is important because it demonstrates that representation and local democracy are complex and multi-faceted. Arguably, Australian local government reform has failed to recognize this complexity, contributing to councilors' confusion and lack of clarity about their role.

The two pertinent approaches on which this section focuses address representation in two different ways. The first looks at local democracy in terms of how it should function generally as a system. Haus and Sweeting (2006) developed a typology of democracy which emphasizes the role of citizens and is directly relevant to this discussion of the councilor's role. The second approach considers the role of councilors themselves rather than how the democratic system functions as a whole.

Haus and Sweeting's (2006) typology of local democracy identifies four categories: user, participatory, network, and representative democracy. The first category, user democracy, is based on the notion of the marketization of political relationships. The market becomes the central mechanism for decision-making by measuring (not evaluating) individual preferences and by strengthening consumers' power. Money is the medium by which the relation between supply and demand is expressed. Second, participatory democracy requires the construction, articulation, and promotion of the common good through communication amongst active citizens. This function cannot be delegated. Third, network democracy refers to the organizational networks (inter-governmental and otherwise) on which local governments rely to achieve their community's goals or address their challenges. Finally, representative democracy is described as the representation of society by elected bodies, the legitimacy of the representative conferred by the election being the key defining feature of this category. The focus in Haus and Sweeting's typology is much less on the councilor's role per se; rather, their emphasis is on the functioning of the democratic system as a whole and, in the case of the user, participatory, and representative categories, it is the citizen's role which is described rather than that of the elected member.

The difficulty is that these categories are not mutually exclusive; rather, they describe the various aspects of local democracy that co-exist, sometimes uncomfortably. Arguably, current local government reforms strengthen these various facets of local democracy in different ways and often in isolation. For example, Section 402 of the *Local Government Act 1993 (NSW)* requires councils to establish a community engagement strategy. The purpose of this strategy is to engage the local community for the development and review of the council's 10-year Community Strategic Plan. The Community Engagement Strategy must identify relevant stakeholder groups in the community and outline the methods that the council will use to engage each of these groups. According to the NSW Office of Local Government, an effective

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