

Local Democracy at Work: An analysis of local government representatives and democracy in New South Wales, Australia

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I, Su Fei Tan, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Abstract

Data from the 2016 report from the Australian Election showed that between 2007 and 2016 the percentage of people who said they were not satisfied with democracy increased dramatically - from 14% to 40%. This level of dissatisfaction calls for a considered examination of Australian democracy and the efforts being made to address its perceived deficits. This research focusses on one important, yet often neglected, aspect of the Australian federal system, local government. Since the 1990s local governments across Australia have been undergoing a process of reform. The main stated objective has been to strengthen local democracy and make local governments more effective and efficient in order to ensure their financial sustainability and their ongoing capacity to provide services to the community. The central foci of this study are local representation and democracy. It uses Bourdieu's theories of habitus, field and capital together with Habermas's conceptualisation of deliberative democracy and its constituent parts, to investigate the role of locally elected councillors in the Australian state of New South Wales. Drawing on 28 semi-structured interviews with councillors and general managers, this study investigates elected members' motivations for running for office and the consequent implications for local democracy. It examines the role of the councillor and compares their responsibilities and functions as described in the legislation with councillors' actual understanding and experiences. In this regard the role and power of the general manager is also examined as this position is pivotal within the local government system. Finally, the processes of councillor decision-making are examined, with a particular focus on the volume of material that elected members must consider when trying to identify the best options for their communities. The study concludes with a discussion of suggestions for further research and comments on the utility of using the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu and Habermas in consideration of the question of local democracy and how councillors view their role.

Glossary

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
CCT	Compulsory Competitive Tendering
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CWA	Country Women's Association
GM	General Manager
IP&R	Integrated Planning and Reporting
LGA	Local Government Area
NPM	New Public Management
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
P&C	Parents and Citizens Committee
Qld	Queensland
SA	South Australia
Tas	Tasmania
Vic	Victoria
WA	Western Australia