

MAV Webinar: Are single-member wards worse for women's representation?

Research findings from Deakin
University



March 2025
Further information:
genderequality@mav.asn.au

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

The Municipal Association of Victoria acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria, and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters, and culture. We pay our respect to Elders past and present who carry the memories, traditions, cultures, and aspirations of First Peoples, and who forge the path ahead for emerging leaders.

We support local government's commitment to strengthen relationships with Victoria's First Peoples communities and for it to encourage greater unity, knowledge, cultural awareness and respect for the first occupants of our land — through its strong community links and local representation.

A vibrant, sunlit community garden scene. In the foreground, a man in a grey t-shirt and dark shorts is bent over, working in a raised garden bed. Behind him, a woman in a white t-shirt and blue jeans is also working. The garden is filled with various plants, including tall sunflowers, leafy greens, and other vegetables. In the background, a modern building with large windows and green accents is visible through the trees. The overall atmosphere is one of active community participation in sustainable living.

The
Municipal
Association
of Victoria

SHAPING OUR FUTURE

Helping local councils build a resilient & sustainable Victoria

MAV Councillor Development Program

Mayors
Institute

Victorian
Convention
of Councillors

Professional
Development
Program

Webinar Series

Welcome MAV Board Members



President, Cr Jennifer Anderson; Cr Shannon McGuire, Metro West; Cr Li Zhang, Inner Metro South-East; Mayor Cr Jo Armstrong, Wimmera Southern Mallee Central Highlands; Cr Stuart James, Metro Deputy President, Metro East; Cr Rochelle Halstead, Gippsland.

Cr Karen Sherry, Metro North; Mayor Cr Kris Bolam, Metro South; Cr Les McPhee, Loddon Campaspe Mallee; Mayor Cr Michael Gobel, Goulburn Ovens Murray; Cr Ruth Gstrein, Non-Metro Deputy President, Great South Coast Barwon.

Overview of Session

Welcome

Brief overview of MAV's program of promoting women in local government:

- gender equality and preventing family violence
- councillor professional development

Deakin University research findings

- questions and answers

Close



Cr Mary Rogers

First female councillor
elected to Richmond City
Council in November 1920

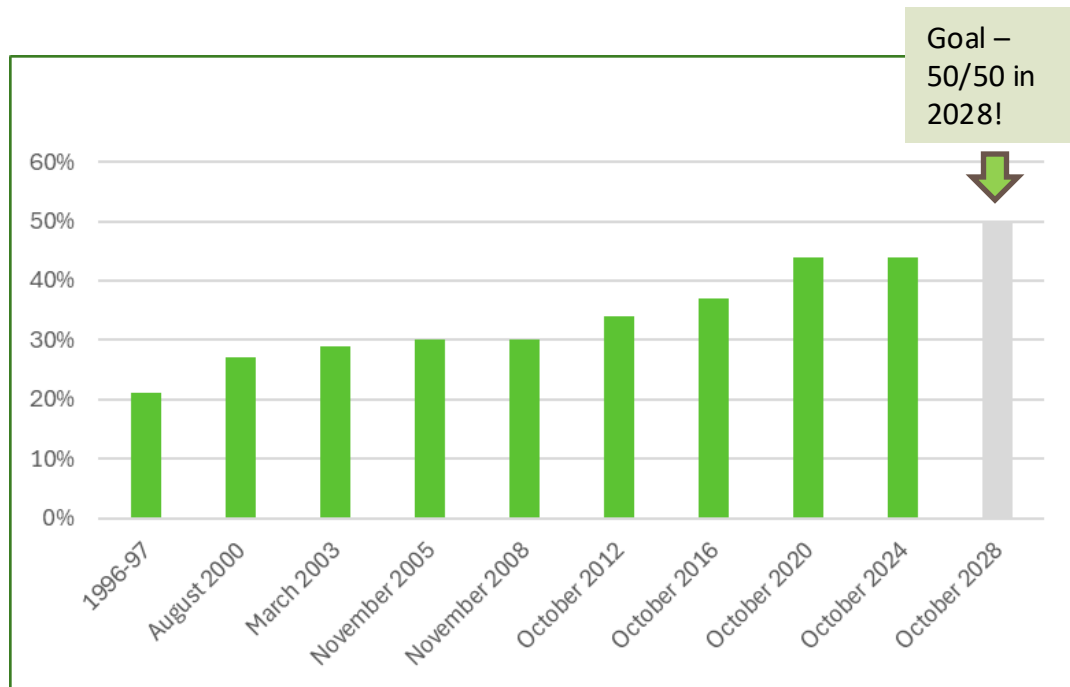


CR. N.G. IBBOTT.

Cr Nellie Ibbott

First Victorian female Mayor in
1943 (elected to Heidelberg
City Council in 1928)

Percentage of women elected to Victorian councils



Promoting Gender Equality in Local Government

Victorian Local Government Women's Charter

2003 – present

Gender equity, Diversity and Active citizenship

Victorian Government grant funding to the MAV for preventing violence against women

2010 – present

- MAV Gender equality, preventing family violence and all forms of violence against women network
- 27 councils receive State funding for the *Free from violence* program
- Gender equality & prevention of violence e-news

In the lead up to Election 2024

25 Stand for Council sessions

- 1,086 participants
- equal number of men and women
- 40% nominated as candidates

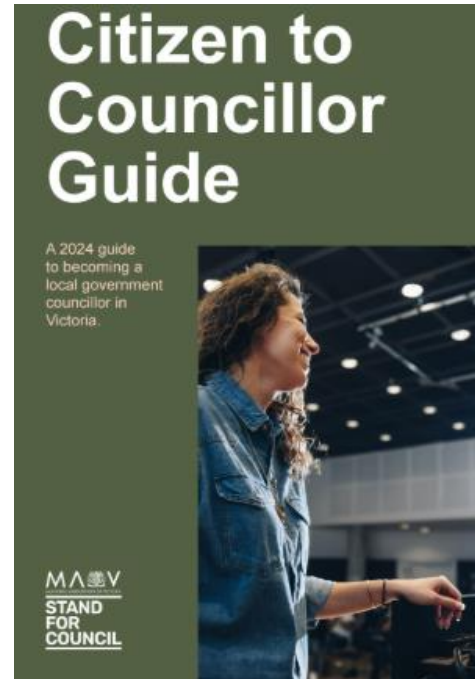
Additional Sessions

for First peoples, CALD people, young people, LGBTIQA+ people, and women.

Make Good Happen

Citizen to Councillor Guide & Active Citizen Guide

Women's local leadership & networking event



Women in the 2024 Victorian Local Council Elections



Dr Amy Nethery
Associate Professor of Politics and Policy

Dr Evan Joymas
Lecturer, Politics and Policy



**What impact do electoral
systems have on women's
success in local councils in
Victoria?**



Victorian State Government
target of female representation in
local councils by 2025.

Between the 2016 Victorian local council elections and the 2022 Victorian local council elections many councils changed from a multi-member ward structure to a single-member ward structure.

We wanted to learn whether the changed electoral circumstances will help or hinder the Victorian Government achieving its target.

EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP

Most literature on multi-member systems suggests that multi-member systems have a higher percentage of female winners.

However, most literature on multi-member systems comes from Europe where party lists are used.

In cases with party lists, the party will often apply a quota, or head the list with a prominent candidate, and have other candidates “ride” on the ticket.

The Victorian system is not a party-based proportional system *and* most council candidates do not express a party affiliation (even if they have one). Therefore candidates cannot “ride” party recognition.

Will the number of female candidates decrease when there are more single-member systems?

METHOD

The VEC and Victorian Government do not collect data on sex or gender of candidates for local council elections.

If the Victorian Government has an ambition for a specific percentage of female representation, *our initial recommendation is that the Victorian Government should have a method of tracking this information.*

Without this data, we used candidate statements and pictures to perform a “best guess” of gender. Because gender-identity is a self-identity and there is no objective external indicator of identity, this method has limitations. Moreover, candidate statements are predominantly written in first-person.

We inspected photos and statements for each council for the 2016, 2020 and 2024 elections and compiled a best guess of the gender identity of each candidate and winner.

Melbourne City Council was excluded from the data due to its significantly distinct electoral system.

METHOD

The VEC and MAV organise councils into different categories based upon council type and location:

MAV	Small Shire		Large Shire	
	Hindmarsh Shire Loddon Shire Mansfield Shire Murrindindi Shire Pyrenees Shire Queenscliffe Borough Towong Shire West Wimmera Shire	Alpine Shire Ararat Rural City Benalla Rural City Central Goldfields Shire Gannawarra Shire Hepburn Shire Indigo Shire Northern Grampians Shire Strathbogie Shire Yarriambiack Shire	Bass Coast Shire Baw Baw Shire Campaspe Shire Colac Otway Shire Corangamite Shire East Gippsland Shire Glenelg Shire Golden Plains Shire Mount Alexander Shire Moyne Shire South Gippsland Shire Southern Grampians Shire Surf Coast Shire Swan Hill Rural City Wellington Shire	Macedon Ranges Shire Mitchell Shire Moorabool Shire
VEC	Small Rural	Rural		Rural Interface

METHOD

The VEC and MAV organise councils into different categories based upon council type and location:

MAV	Regional City	Interface	Middle-Outer Metro	Inner Metro
	Ballarat City Greater Bendigo Greater Geelong Greater Shepparton Horsham Rural City Latrobe City Mildura Rural City Wangaratta Rural City Warrnambool City Wodonga City	Cardinia Shire Casey City Hume City Melton City Mornington Peninsula Shire Nillumbik Shire Whittlesea City Wyndham City Yarra Ranges Shire	Banyule City Bayside City Boroondara City Brimbank City Frankston City Glen Eira City Greater Dandenong Kingston City Knox City Manningham City Maroondah City Monash City Whitehorse City	Darebin City Hobsons Bay City Maribyrnong City Merri-bek City Melbourne City Moonee Valley City Port Phillip City Stonnington City Yarra City
VEC	Regional Urban	Metro Interface	Metro	

METHOD

The electoral systems have seen a shift from multi-member to single member wards:

	2016	2020	2024
Councils with single member wards	8	16	46
Councils with multi-member wards	49	39	11
Unsubdivided	19	21	20



Have women done better each year?

	2016	2020	2024
% of candidates who were women	33.1%	38.1%	39.1%
% of winners who were women	38.0%	43.2%	44.4%
number of councils with 1 woman or fewer	16	8	7

NB: these statistics are the percentage of women elected to all Victorian councils which went to election in that particular year, including the City of Melbourne.



A closer look at which councils had only one woman elected in 2024:

Alpine Shire

Gannawarra
Shire

Hindmarsh
Shire

Loddon Shire

Swan Hill Rural
City

Towong Shire

Yarra Ranges
Shire

No council in
2024 had 0
women
elected.



Does electoral system type correlate with women's candidacy or success?

% of winners who were women	2016	2020	2024
in single-member	32%	49%	49%
in multi-member	41%	45%	43%
in unsubdivided	32%	36%	35%

Unsubdivided councils regularly perform worse, while single member councils vary. Note that the biggest change to single member was between 2020 and 2024.



Does locality correlate with women's success?

% of winners who were women	2016	2020	2024
in small rural	35%	32%	42%
in rural	36%	38%	37%
in rural interface	36%	48%	41%
in regional urban	33%	42%	44%
in metro interface	36%	46%	39%
in metro	44%	52%	57%

Metro areas regularly performed best. There was a significant bump for most council types in 2020. Only rural council types have not seen any improvement over the 2 elections.



Which councils have more than 50% of women councillors?

Banyule*
Bayside
Brimbank
Darebin
Glen Eira*
Greater Dandenong*
Hobson Bay*
Kingston*
Knox

Manningham
Maroondah
Maribyrnong*
Merri-Bek*
Moonee Valley
Stonnington

* Indicates councils who have a female majority in 2024 but not in 2020



A closer look at metro interface

(which went backwards in women's success in 2024)

	2016	2020	2024
% of female candidates	32.1%	36.0%	33.8%
% of female winners	36.0%	46.3%	38.5%
single-member seats	16	25	91
multi-member seats	73	42	0

Note: The total number of seats in competition in 2020 was smaller as Casey City Council did not have an election in that year.



Does candidate pool size correlate with women's candidacy or success?

	2016	2020	2024
% of candidates who were women	33%	38%	39%
% of candidates who were female winners	11%	13%	13%
% of female candidates who won	34%	33%	34%

Roughly the same percentage of women won regardless of candidate pool size and what proportion of the pool were women.



Does incumbency correlate with women's candidacy or success?

It is possible that female incumbents see more success than female challengers. This might suggest whether the 2024 results were a legacy of the success of women in 2020 rather than a repeat of the same conditions.

This data has not yet been fully collected and analysed.

CONCLUSIONS



Most electoral system features, such as ward type, candidate pool and locality do not have a correlation with women's success in local councils.

However, the data shows an increase in women's success from 2016 to 2020, and a smaller increase from 2020 to 2024.

Was 2020 an outlier? Longer-term data analysis to assess trends is needed.

Improvement in 2020 and 2024 (to a lesser extent) suggests non-electoral factors such as culture, funding or social context.

Further research questions:

To what extent did the Covid-19 lockdowns and the move to organising on zoom impact the 2020 results?

What does this data tell us about what sort of funding/resourcing has greatest impact?



CONCLUSIONS

Victoria must collect gender and diversity data for all candidates running for public office.

MAV and VEC should align locality categories of council type. We prefer MAV's categories.

Longitudinal research is needed to understand the longer-term trend and if 2020 was an outlier.

Evaluation of funded programs/resources for female candidates would also be helpful.

THANKYOU

Please email me at
amy.nethery@deakin.edu.au

