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A PICTURE OF DIVERSITY AND DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION IN NSW COUNCILS

Report following the December 2021 Local Government
Elections

Short Report by: Tanya Jakimow, Lucy-Jazz Margeit and Kat Henaway
Department of Anthropology, School of Culture, History and Languages
College of Asia and the Pacific
+61 410 827 257
tanya.jakimow@anu.edu.au

The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 2600 Australia
www.anu.edu.au
CRICOS Provider No. 00120C

Politics in Colour
CEO & Business Development, Kat Henaway
<https://politicsincolour.com/>

KEY FINDINGS

The increase in women's representation at the local level has benefited white women only. The percentage of Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CARM) women councillors has remained static.

CARM women remain grossly underrepresented relative to their size in the population, making up only 5.8% of councillors in Greater Sydney and 1.4% in regional NSW.

Women have almost achieved gender parity in the north and east of Sydney (49.1%), but remain underrepresented in Western Sydney (39.6%) and regional/rural NSW (37.3%).

The majority of councils in regional and rural NSW had an increase in female representation (56% of councils), 29% were unchanged, and only 15.4% experienced a decrease in the 2021 elections.

Only 1.2% of the 81 independent councillors in Sydney are CARM women.

Women make up 44% of councillors but only 36.4% of mayors in Greater Sydney, and 37.3% of councillors in regional and rural NSW but only 24.2 % of mayors.

INTRODUCTION

As a liberal democratic political system, Australia's elected representatives should reflect the population of the society they govern. Gender parity is seen as a crucial and achievable aim at all levels of government. There is increased attention in the media and within parties on the need to ensure representation of people Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CARM) people, especially First Nation Australians. Intersections of gender and race (as well as class, (dis)ability, sexual orientation and so on) matter to ensure a diversity of voices within elected office.

Addressing patterns of over/under-representation requires data to understand the current situation and track change over time. In Australia, statistics are readily available at the state and federal level of politics, but generating data at the local level presents a challenge due to the large number of councillor positions and candidates (Tolley 2011). The Office for Local Government produces excellent reports on councillor and candidate diversity drawn from the information supplied in nomination forms (OLG 2017). Yet they are limited in the way they measure CARM representation (with language an imprecise proxy), and its intersections with gender.

This report seeks to address some of these data gaps. It presents a granular picture of NSW councils, and how patterns of over/under-representation changed before and after the December 2021 elections. It answers:

- What percentage of NSW councillors are of European/non-European ancestry?
- How does 'race' intersect with gender in patterns of under/over-representation?
- How do these patterns differ geographically across regions in NSW and Greater Sydney?

It finds that while NSW achieved considerable success in increasing the percentage of women elected to council from 31.2 per cent in 2016/17, to a record high of 39.1 per cent in 2021, little progress has been made in the representation of CARM women, who remain grossly underrepresented. Further, while some parts of Metropolitan Sydney have achieved gender parity, there remains a significant gender gap in Western Sydney and Regional NSW. As being a councillor is often a stepping stone for higher political office (Crowder-Meyer 2019) these findings are relevant for the state of democracy in Australia more generally.

TERMINOLOGY

Following the Diversity Council of Australia, we use the term 'Culturally and Racially Marginalised':

*"to refer to people who are not white – research shows this group experiences racial marginalisation. This includes people who are Black, Brown, Asian, or any other non-white group, who face marginalisation due to their race. The term "culturally" is added because these people may **also** face discrimination due to their culture or background".ⁱ*

In this report we use the term 'white' to refer to Anglo-Celtic and people of other white European ancestry. 'Whiteness' affords privileges and 'social invisibility' in the Australian context, while people of non-European ancestry are subject to racial categorization on account of their name, phenotypical features, skin colour or religion (Stratton 2016). We do not use the term 'Cultural and Linguistic Diversity' (CALD) that is frequently used in discussions of diversity (including OLG 2017) as it includes people from non-English speaking European ancestry, such as speakers of Italian and Greek, who are socially categorised as 'white' in the Australian context. CALD diversity may also fail to capture racialized minorities who are multi-generational Australians speaking English at home.

METHODOLOGY

To capture the percentage of 'white' and CARM men and women on NSW councils, we developed a method of classification deployed in studies of local government in the United Kingdom (Thrasher et al. 2013; Muroki and Cowley 2019). Researchers access information from publicly available sources (websites and social media) to make a judgement call on whether a councillor is 'white' or CARM based on their physical appearance and name. The limitations of this methodology are clear. Appearance is not always an accurate indicator of ancestry, names are often spread across large geographical areas, and may change after marriage for women. Such classification is especially complex in the Australian context, but has nonetheless been used to categorise leaders as having a particular cultural background in the absence of other data (Soutphommasane 2017).

Identifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander councillors is highly fraught, as there are fewer cues through appearance or name. We therefore drew upon our knowledge of individual councillors. We know of 27 First Nation councillors elected in 2021 (7 women), verified with the Local Government Aboriginal Network: an increase of at least 18 from 9 in the previous elections (OLG 2017). In our analysis, we include these councillors within the CARM category. We recognise their special status as First Nations Australians and the heightened need to ensure they are adequately represented in all levels of government, including, and beyond, descriptive representation.

In accordance to the importance of cultural marginalization, we classified councillors of Arab, Turkish or Lebanese ancestry as CARM. As Islamophobia is unfortunately common in Australia, councillors who are, or are perceived to be Muslim, often face discrimination. Gender is binary in our report. We were unable to determine the sexual orientation or gender identity of councillors beyond a simple classification into men and women. Again, the process of categorization is fraught with potential inaccuracies and loss of nuance, yet presents an important, if imperfect picture.

With these limitations in mind, a team of researchers categorised sitting councillors at two points in time. In September 2021, Sophie Dewis, Kelly-Ann D'Sylva with Tanya Jakimow classified all sitting councillors at the time, excluding councils under administration, those that had retired or passed away since the 2016/17 elections. The second-round classification was conducted by Lucy-Jazz Margeit with Tanya Jakimow in September 2022, and included all councillors elected in the December 2021 election. The data therefore captures changes to representation pre- and post-the 2021 election, rather than a strict comparison between councillors elected in 2016/17 and 2021. Where we classified councillors differently, we scrutinised each case before making a collective decision. Lucy-Jazz collected further information on parties and mayors presented in this report.

This report compares the percentage of councillors of European/non-European ancestry against the percentage of people with that ancestry within the general population. We use the 2021 census data for NSW, divided between Greater Sydney and regional/rural NSW, and by Local Government Area. Census data does not capture 'ethnicity', so we took the census data for 'ancestry by country of birth of parents', categorising the top 124 according to European/white and non-European/CARM in the ABS ASCCEG.ⁱⁱ Accordingly, we estimate that 73.84% of Sydney's population are 'white', and 26.16% are CARM.ⁱⁱⁱ

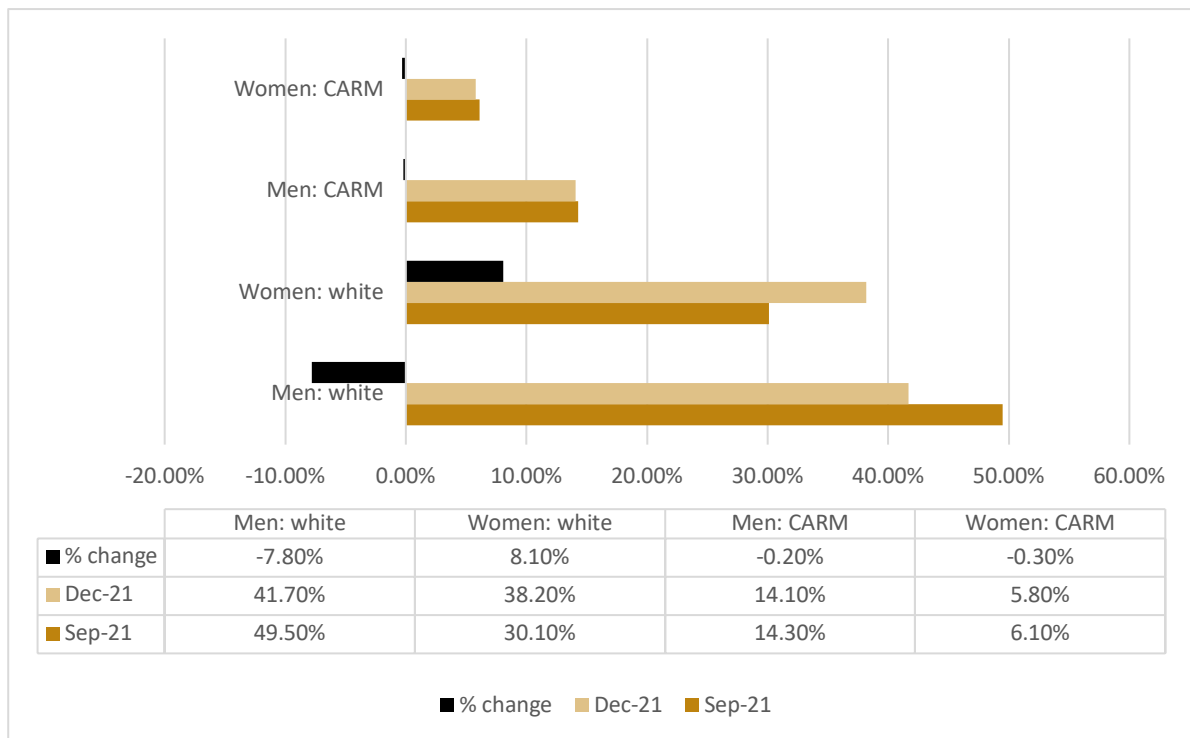
These numbers *under-estimate* the percentage of CARM, as ancestry is based on the birthplace of parents, and hence would not capture non-European Australians who have migrated to Australia two or more generations back. We have also made assumptions of a 50/50 split between men and women. For example, in Greater Sydney, we calculate that 36.92% of the population are 'white' men, 36.92% white women, 13.08% CARM men, and 13.08% CARM women, not accounting for non-binary people or differences in gender across ancestry groups. Again, some caution is required in reading our findings. Nonetheless, these estimated figures help us to track how councillors approximate the population they represent beyond simply gender.

FINDINGS

With these qualifications in mind, we present the findings across three sections. The first section presents the data from Greater Sydney councils, and reveals patterns and variations across the city. Section 2 examines the data from regional and rural councils. The final two sections present data about political parties and representation at the higher level of mayor.

GREATER SYDNEY

The overall findings reveal that while gains have been made in the representation of white women, the number of CARM women councillors has not increased. Given the different demographics between Greater Sydney and regional/rural NSW (LGAs outside of Sydney) we present the data separately. Table 1 shows the percentage of councillors by age and ancestry prior to, and after the 2021 elections. White men made up 49.5% of councillors in September 2021, but only 41.7% after the election: a decrease of 7.8% points. The percentage of councillors who are white women increased by a similar percentage, 8.1% points. At the same time, the percentage of CARM councillors, men and women, remained static, with small decreases of 0.2 and 0.3 percentage points respectively. In short: *gains made in women's representation are restricted to white women.*



Chart/Table 1: Percentage change in the percentage of councillors by gender and 'race' in Greater Sydney

Without improvements in the percentage of CARM women councillors, they remain grossly underrepresented in local government. Table 2 presents the data comparing different categories of councillors with their percentage in the population to arrive at the extent of under/overrepresentation. For example, we can see in the case of white men, after the elections they comprised 41.7% of councillors, but only 36.9% of the general population, an overrepresentation of 4.8% points. While still overrepresented, this is an improvement from prior to the election when they were overrepresented to the tune of 12.6% points. In continuation of the above, we can see that white women have benefited from this change, who were underrepresented by 6.8% points prior to the election, but are now slightly overrepresented. Again, *the biggest concern is the underrepresentation of CARM women, who comprise 13.1% of the population, but only 5.8% of councillors, an underrepresentation of 7.3% points.* Clearly, efforts to improve gender equity in local government need to focus on increasing the numbers of CARM women contesting and winning council elections.

Gender: ancestry	% of councillors	% of population	+/-	% of councillors	% of population	+/-
	Councillors as of September 2021			Councillors as of January 2022		
Men: white	49.5%	36.9%	+12.6%	41.7%	36.9%	+4.8%
Women: white	30.1%	36.9%	-6.8%	38.2%	36.9%	+1.3%
Men: CARM	14.3%	13.1%	+1.2%	14.1%	13.1%	+1%
Women: CARM	6.1%	13.1%	-7.0%	5.8%	13.1%	-7.3%

Table 2: Percentage under/over-representation for councillors by gender and ancestry in Greater Sydney

We next tested for differences across Greater Sydney. The ‘Red Rooster’ line, first developed by University of Sydney students Chrysanthos and Ding (2017), is a crude division of the city into areas with a more diverse mix of culture and ethnicity west of the line, compared to the less diverse areas east of the line. Initially based on presence of different types of fast-food restaurants (with variations including the El Jannah line and Harris Farm Line), this division has since been used to identify patterns in terms of income, housing density, and lockdown measures during Covid. While crude, we tested the extent to which representation patterns also reflected these differences. We counted 14 councils east of the line (blue) and the same number west of the line (green, see figure 1) based on the ethnic diversity of the populations. We did not include councils nominally within Greater Sydney but which are distinct from metropolitan councils (such as Blue Mountains and Wollongong).

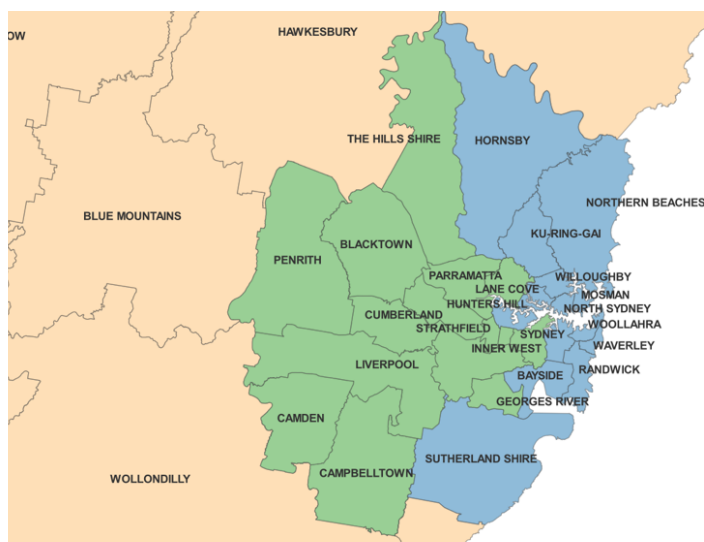


Figure 1: Our version of the ‘Red Rooster line’

Data presented in Table 3 reveals several striking patterns. First, east of the Red Rooster line, white women are the most overrepresented category by 9.9% points, greater than the overrepresentation of white men. They remain underrepresented, however, west of the Red Rooster line by almost the same percentage. Part of these differences are on account of the demographic variations east and west of the line that we do not account for in our calculation based on the census data for Greater Sydney. At the same time, the percentage of CARM women east of the line at 2.3% is well below their percentage of the population even given these differences, and is a cause for concern.

As CARM women make up a larger proportion of the population west of the line, their underrepresentation by 3.2 percentage points based on overall Sydney census data is even more regrettable. We can also see that CARM men are underrepresented east of the line, and overrepresented west of the line. Anecdotally, CARM women face difficulties in being selected for party tickets over CARM men. The underrepresentation of CARM women has been shown to be

related to the struggles of CARM men to get a footing within political parties in the United Kingdom (Hussain 2021), and is a crucial area for further research in Australia.

Gender: ancestry	% of councillors	% of population	+/-	% of councillors	% of population	+/-
	East of the Red Rooster Line			West of the Red Rooster Line		
Men: white	41.6%	36.9%	+4.7%	39.1%	36.9%	+2.1%
Women: white	46.8%	36.9%	+9.9%	29.7%	36.9%	-7.2%
Men: CARM	8.7%	13.1%	-4.4%	21.4%	13.1%	+8.3%
Women: CARM	2.3%	13.1%	-10.8%	9.9%	13.1%	-3.2%

Table 3: Percentage under/over-representation North and South of the Red Rooster Line post-election

While crude, our analysis shows two areas in need of action: a) increasing the number of CARM women contesting and winning council elections across all of Sydney, and; b) focusing efforts on reaching gender parity in West and South-West Sydney.

REGIONAL AND RURAL NSW

We examined the data from 92 regional and rural councils in NSW, with a total of 863 councillors. Of these, 540 are men (down from 618 prior to the election), and 322 are women (up from 244) (a gap in data explains the missing councillor). That women now make up 37.3% of councillors outside of Sydney (see also Raue 2022) is a dramatic improvement from the last election, when women councillors made up 31% in regional towns/cities, 30% in large rural shires, and 22% in smaller rural councils (OLG 2019: 11). Much has been said about there no longer being any all-male councils, down from 4 in 2016/17 (OLG 2019: 11). Also worth celebrating is that the majority of councils in regional and rural NSW had an increase in female representation (51, or 56% of councils), with 26 unchanged, and only 14 (15.4%) experiencing a decrease in female representation.

No. Councils	<10%	10-19%	20-29%	30-39%	40-49%	>50%
Pre-election	4	11	34	19	14	9
Post-election	0	5	18	34	15	19

Table 4: Number of councils by percentage of female representation

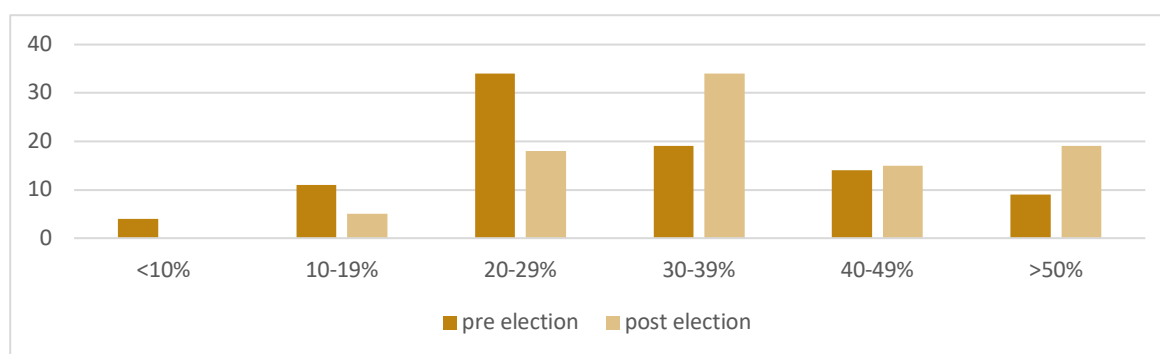


Figure 2: Comparison of number of councils with percentage female representation pre/post election

The number of councillors in each council is small, so fluctuations within each council over the short term are not indicative of wider trends. At the same time, we can identify councils that have stubbornly low numbers of women (Blayney, Mid-Western Council, Port Stephens) and those that have had consistently high numbers of women (Bega Valley, Forbes, Port Macquarie, Singleton, Upper Hunter) to see what lessons we can learn. Perhaps most significant are those councils that have seen sharp increases in women's representation in the last election (Berrigan, Cowra, Moree Plains,

Narromine, Snowy Monaro, Tweed Valley, Upper Lachlan and Wollongong) all of which went from a third or less women, to over a half. Possible explanations are outlined in our report on the 2021 elections, and include factors such as the number of vacancies, the culture on council, the extent of encouragement, and workshop opportunities (Jakimow 2023). Testing these factors for their explanatory power across each of these councils would yield valuable knowledge as to how to increase female representation across the state.

When it comes to the representation of CARM people in regional and rural councils, the picture is less encouraging. As Table 5 shows, only 23 CARM men and 12 CARM women were elected outside of Metropolitan Sydney, a tiny 2.7% and 1.4% of councillors respectively. While in some ways these figures are expected as the majority of migrants from non-European countries settle in capital cities, Table 5 also shows that when compared to the census data, CARM people are still underrepresented in local government. The majority of CARM councillors are First Nations, with only 2 women and 5 men of non-European migrant background. As demographics are rapidly changing in regional towns and cities in particular, more efforts are required to understand, and address the underrepresentation of CARM men, and especially women, outside of Greater Sydney.

Gender: ancestry	No. of councillors	% of councillors	% of population	+/-
Regional and Rural NSW				
Men: White	517	59.9%	46.1%	+13.8%
Women: White	310	35.9%	46.1%	-10.2%
Men: CARM	23	2.7%	3.9%	-1.2%
Women: CARM	12	1.4%	3.9%	-2.49%

Table 5: Percentage under/over-representation in Regional and Rural NSW

POLITICAL PARTIES AND INDEPENDENTS

Much attention is given to how different parties aim for, and achieve, gender parity, and the representation of CARM people among candidates and elected representatives. We have generated data on these questions, with the caveat that due to the time-intensive nature of this exercise, and the potential for manual error, it is not a perfect data set (we welcome corrections!). We only categorised councillors, not candidates, and not all councillors were able to be identified with a party. Nonetheless, the imperfect picture tells a story, and it is that CARM women fare poorly as independents.

Party	Total	White Men	White Women	CARM Men	CARM Women
Labor	120	42	35.00%	47	39.17%
Liberal	100	47	47.00%	32	32.00%
Greens	28	8	28.57%	18	64.29%
Minor	54	22	40.74%	24	44.44%
Independent	81	40	49.38%	29	35.80%
Not Classified	15				

Table 6: Percentage of councillors by party, gender and ancestry in Greater Sydney

Table 6 presents our data for Greater Sydney. Perhaps unsurprisingly, white men are most overrepresented within the Liberal Party, although they do only marginally worse than Labor in the election of CARM women councillors. Labor have 56 women to 64 men, with better representation of CARM men. The Greens have the best female representation, but according to our numbers, have poor representation of CARM men and women, with only Dominic WY Kanak in Waverly, and Marghanita Da Cruz in Inner West (again, we invite corrections).

The more important story we feel is the lack of independent female CARM councillors. We counted only one, barely 1.23% of all independents. They have better representation in minor parties, the same as CARM men. Given parties tend not to select candidates in Northern Sydney councils, there appears to be a relationship with the underrepresentation of CARM women east of the Red Rooster line, and the number who are successful as independent candidates. The question is where causation lies. Independent (particularly so-called teal) candidates in state, and especially federal elections, are growing in political importance, yet the 'community independents movement' would be the first to admit that they have fielded predominantly 'white' candidates. Proactive measures to address the underrepresentation of CARM women and men in community led campaigns seem necessary. On the flip-side, the success of Dai Le as first independent councillor for Fairfield, and then Federal member for Cabramatta, perhaps offers lessons for CARM female independents in Western Sydney.

Party	Total	White Men	White Women	CARM Men	CARM Women
Labor	71	33 46.48%	34 47.89%	0 0%	4 5.63%
Liberal	24	15 62.50%	8 33.33%	0 0%	1 4.17%
Greens	35	11 31.43%	22 62.86%	0 0%	2 5.71%
Minor	13	8 61.54%	5 38.46%	0 0%	0 0.00%
Independent	497	305 61.37%	169 34.00%	20 4.02%	3 0.60%
Not Classified	218				

Table 7: Percentage of councillors by party, gender and ancestry in Regional and Rural NSW

Table 7 presents the data for regional and rural NSW. We can see that CARM men and women fare even more poorly as independents and in minor parties than in Sydney. Labor had more women than men councillors elected, while 62.5% of Liberal councillors are white men. The National party did not field any candidates that we know of, but we do know that some councillors, notably Shibli Chowdhury, a male CARM councillor in Dubbo, is a National Party member. Hence the numbers are particularly hard to interpret in regional and rural NSW, as also indicated by the high number that were not classifiable.

MAYORS

The final set of questions we sought to answer from the 2021 election data was whether representation patterns at the level of councillor was the same or different to representation in the highest office in local government: Mayor. Table 8 presents this data.

	Total	White M	White W	CARM M	CARM W	Total M	Total W
Greater Sydney	33	16	12	5	0	63.64%	36.36%
Regional/Rural NSW	91	69	22	0	0	75.82%	24.18%

Table 8: Numbers of mayors according to ancestry and gender, and percentage by gender only

The first striking point is that the percentage of women elected to mayor is far below the percentage of councillors: only 36.36% of mayors compared to 44% of councillors in Greater Sydney; 24.18% of mayors and 37.3% of councillors in Regional and Rural NSW. These results reflect global trends, where women are underrepresented at the intra-level of local government (that is, they occupy lower positions within each level of government) (Tolley 2011). As Mayoral elections are scheduled for September 2023 in most LGAs, and with more women than ever having experience as councillors, there is some hope for better female representation in the position of mayor if not this year, than after the 2024 elections.

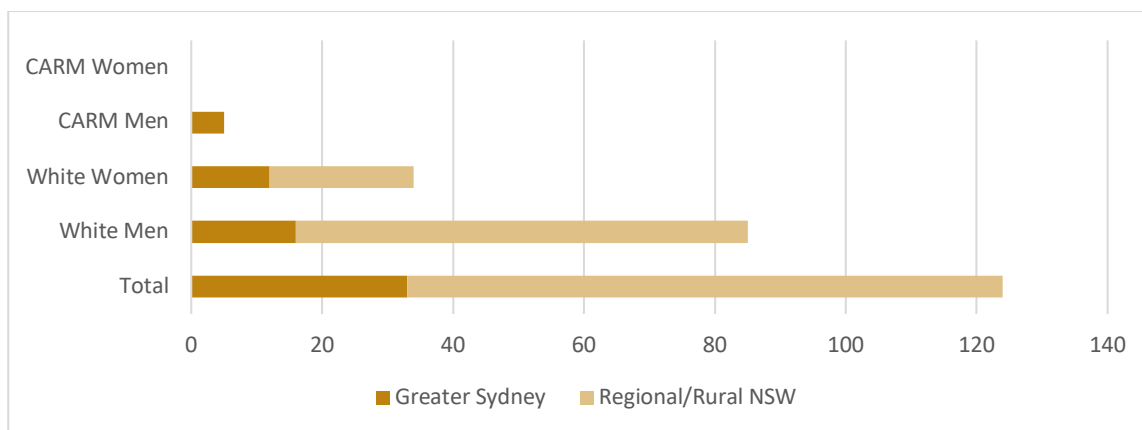


Chart 3: Numbers of mayors according to ancestry and gender, and percentage by gender only

Table 9 considers whether women fare better in popular elections for mayors, or when the mayor is elected by fellow councillors. Interestingly, in regional and rural NSW, women have a slightly better chance of being elected by the general public, than in the chamber. It is the reverse in Greater Sydney, where 41% of mayors elected by the chamber are women, nearing their proportion of councillors in general. The explanation may lie in whether the council is party-dominated, or consisting of primarily or entirely independents. Women may fare better in the negotiations within parties, than across independent councillors. This remains speculation until further data is generated.

	Popularly elected mayor					Internally elected mayor				
	Total	M	%	W	%	Total	M	%	W	%
Sydney	11	8	73%	3	27%	22	13	59%	9	41%
Regional/Rural NSW	24	17	71%	7	29%	67	52	78%	15	22%

Table 9: comparison of gender of mayor by mode of election

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Initiatives to increase the diversity of NSW councillors remain necessary in a context in which women and CARM women (and to an extent men) remain underrepresented. This research aims to identify where efforts should be concentrated in order to achieve local representation that better reflects NSW's diverse population. We do not present explanations for these patterns of over/underrepresentation in this report, but see Jakimow 2022 and Jakimow 2023 and the bibliography.

Generating data of councils is particularly difficult given the number of positions, and the 'low-information' context of local government (Breux et al. 2019). It is nonetheless important, not least because local government is often a stepping stone for higher levels of government. The data we have generated is not perfect; both the methodology, and its execution, have limitations as outlined above. We provide an appendix of our classification of councillors with the hope that errors can be identified, and this report corrected accordingly. We believe, however, that our findings are robust enough that the general conclusions stand despite variations in numbers across categories. In the least, we hope it serves as a discussion point for further research and action.

Based on the above data, we have the following recommendations:

- Initiatives to improve gender equity in NSW local government must be attentive to the intersecting disadvantages faced by CARM women. Resources should be prioritised to address their gross underrepresentation across NSW.
- Political parties should generate their own data (if they are not doing so already) on the percentage of CARM candidates, those in safe seats, and those elected.

- Community Independent movements should consider support of CARM men and women in local government elections; more research is required as to why few CARM women win elections as independents, compared to other groups.
- Continual effort is required to increase the number of all women elected to council across regional and rural NSW and Western Sydney.
- The focus on the underrepresentation of groups should be matched with attention to the overrepresentation of 'white' men, developing policy that can disrupt the patterns of their dominance in local government.
- Future data collected about candidates and councillors could usefully include questions on ethnicity. Data based on self-identification would lead to a more accurate picture as to the diversity of NSW councils and the identification of any patterns of under/over-representation. Analysis of this data should be intersectional, to capture the intersection of race, class, gender, age, (dis)ability and so on.

Addressing the problems identified in this report requires an understanding of how practices, institutional norms, gender norms, policies and electoral rules shape over/under-representation. A report that outlines preliminary findings in this regard is available on request (see also Pietsch 2018). Finally, while this report has examined diversity in respect to gender, ancestry and its intersections, diversity is also important in consideration of age, (dis)ability, income, non-binary gender identity etc.

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ⁱ <https://www.dca.org.au/research/project/culturally-and-racially-marginalised-carm-women-leadership>

ⁱⁱ According to the ABS Australian Standard Classification of Cultural and Ethnic Groups (ASCCEG), European ancestry broad groups were: North Western European and Southern and Eastern European. Non-European groups were: Oceania, North African and Middle-Eastern, South-East Asian, North-East Asian, Southern and Central Asia, Peoples of the Americas and Sub-Saharan African. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/classifications/australian-standard-classification-cultural-and-ethnic-groups-ascceg/latest-release#data-downloads>. We included South African ancestry as 'white' as the majority of migrants from the country are white Afrikaans.

ⁱⁱⁱ Data taken from: <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/ancestry?WebID=250>