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Talk matters: local council debates over electoral reform for Indigenous representation in Canada and New Zealand

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Abstract

This study looks at recent city council debates over introducing Indigenous seats in Canadian and New Zealand municipalities, asking whether debate is respectful and focused on relevant issues, and agreements are decisive and consequential. Despite very different national contexts and local government systems, overall we find similar arguments across the two countries. And while deliberation is generally civil and principled among councils as a whole, individual councillors who voted against Indigenous representation tended to argue in ways that are potentially polarising. We relate our observations to wider arguments about the exclusion of urban Indigenous peoples from local policymaking and the importance of making rational inputs available for citizens' judgement and decision.

Keywords: Deliberative quality, electoral reform, Indigenous representation, Māori wards, Canada, New Zealand

Introduction

Let's keep up a dialogue because that's what coming together means. You can have different views – it's about how we handle differing views (Andrew Judd, former mayor of New Plymouth, New Zealand).¹

This study examines recent city council debates over introducing Indigenous seats in Canadian and New Zealand municipalities. Our main argument, in line with the epigraph, is that talk matters. The quality and substance of council deliberations on Indigenous representation bears influence beyond immediate policy decisions. Deliberations that are respectful, transparent and focused on relevant issues can foster public trust and participation in local governance, and help strengthen relationships between cities and local Indigenous communities.²

What is the nature of deliberations on Indigenous representation at this level? To address this question, we examine debates over adding Indigenous seats to council in six cities: two in Canada (Hamilton, Ontario and Halifax, Nova Scotia) and four in New Zealand (Auckland, Dunedin, Tauranga and Wellington). Focusing on the quality and substantive themes of deliberation, we find only modest differences in support and opposition between countries and important local distinctions, especially in Canada. Councils in New Zealand and Halifax, Nova Scotia demonstrated substantive understanding of mechanisms for Indigenous representation and viewed them as potentially compatible with democracy; however, this was not the case in Hamilton, Ontario. We relate these observations to wider arguments about the exclusion of urban Indigenous peoples from local policymaking, and the

¹ Andrew Judd, quoted in RNZ News, 2 Feb 2021 <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihi/435625/andrew-judd-absolutely-vindicated-by-maori-wards-decision>

² A brief background to the genesis of this study is also relevant. It began with a local news article in Hamilton, Ontario, about an attempt to gain a voice for urban Indigenous residents on the city council. Through a series of conversations with the Indigenous grassroots organisation Circle of Beads, McMaster University's Office of Community Engagement, and the lead author, it grew into a collaboration involving students in a senior undergraduate course on Partnered Research in Elections and Democracy, and then into a summer research project. Through a research agreement between the authors and the organisation, Circle of Beads has contributed to the development of the project through our regular meetings, presentations and written reports. The authors alone take responsibility for any errors in interpretations and findings.

importance of making rational inputs available for citizens' judgement and decision. These issues are particularly important in New Zealand, where the public subsequently faced mandated polls on Māori wards, in October 2025. They are also vital in Canada, where municipal governments' understanding of their responsibilities towards Indigenous communities remains ambiguous.

Indigenous representation in local government: national contexts

New Zealand and, to a lesser extent, Canada have been portrayed as leaders in ensuring that Indigenous peoples' interests are properly considered in the processes of government (Hobbs and Wensing 2023). Both countries have established national frameworks for treaty compliance and the recognition of Indigenous self-governance, yet the ways in which local governance structures engage with these commitments differ markedly. In New Zealand, local authorities have come to occupy a central, though sometimes contested, role in respect to Māori interests. By contrast, in Canada, municipal governments frequently demonstrate limited awareness of their responsibilities towards Indigenous communities, and local officials and residents often remain indifferent to treaty obligations until in a situation of crisis.

New Zealand

In New Zealand's unitary state system, there is a longstanding emphasis on Indigenous representation through Māori electorates (seats) in parliament. New Zealand has also achieved important treaty settlements through the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal in 1975.³ These offer compensation for historical injustices, and recognition of *iwi* (tribes or nations) as political partners to the state. However, settlements involving traditional *rohe* (territories) of *iwi* and *hapū* (sub-tribes) overlap extensively with the political boundaries of local authorities, giving rise to questions about how the actions of these authorities affect Māori interests. This makes the right of Māori representation in local governance vitally important (Hayward 2011, 2021; Bargh 2013, 2016; Webster and Cheyne 2017; Bell 2018; Forges 2024). These rights, and the responsibilities of municipalities to Māori under the Treaty of Waitangi, are recognised primarily through the Local Government Act 2002, which requires local authorities to involve Māori in decision-making processes. In addition, the Local Electoral Amendment Act 2002 provides a framework for councils to establish Māori wards or constituencies, similar to Māori electorates in parliamentary elections. Yet there was little substantive progress in electing Māori to councils until legislative changes in 2021.

Between 2002, when the law came into effect, and February 2021, 24 local councils attempted to introduce Māori wards, yet only three had retained them. This was due primarily to a unique petition and plebiscite requirement in the electoral law that permitted voters to often overturn them (Hayward

³ The Waitangi Tribunal is a permanent commission of inquiry that investigates potential breaches of the principles of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (1840), which is the foundational Treaty for Crown-Māori relations and considered to be New Zealand's founding constitutional document.

2011).⁴ In a widely publicised case, the New Plymouth District Council under Mayor Andrew Judd voted in 2014 to implement a Māori ward, only to see it annulled by a resounding 83% of voters in the subsequent referendum (Hurihanganui 2018; Piwari et al. 2023). Several other councils decided not to adopt Māori wards out of concerns that polls would overturn them and potentially harm relationships with Māori. The result was that elected Māori representation on city councils remained persistently low, at less than 5% nationwide. In its 2010 report card, the New Zealand Human Rights Commission identified Māori representation in local government as a top ten priority area for action (NZ Human Rights Commission 2010a), while the Commission's special report on the issue warned that "*unless positive steps are taken, Māori representation in local government will continue to languish well below the proportion of Māori in the population*" (2010b, p. 2).

In 2021, the Labour government introduced legislation removing the petition and plebiscite provision on Māori wards since they were not imposed on any other types of local government wards. Following passage of the Local Electoral (Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Act, 44 local authorities enacted Māori wards ahead of either the 2022 or 2025 local elections. However, in 2024, the new right-coalition government reversed this move, framing Māori wards as an undemocratic form of race-based representation and forcing all local authorities that had enacted Māori wards since 2021 to put the issue to voters. Should a municipality not agree to a referendum, the ward must be abolished. All but two cities confirmed their prior decision, and 42 local authorities thus held a Māori ward poll alongside their October 2025 local elections.

Canada

In Canada, Indigenous peoples have an inherent right of self-government under section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982. The implementation of self-government agreements and establishment of self-governing authority for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities have developed gradually through a complex process of treaty negotiations, land claim agreements, and legislative initiatives involving federal, provincial and territorial governments. These arrangements are not uniform across the country; rather, they reflect the diverse historical circumstances, cultural traditions, and political aspirations of Indigenous peoples in different regions, and have resulted in varying degrees of autonomy and legal authority. As municipal governments are subservient to the provinces and territories, responsibilities for Indigenous consultation by local authorities are less developed, and questions of Indigenous peoples' rights and representation in local decision-making rarely surface in the frameworks of municipal governance (Abele et al. 2012; Peters 2012). This remains so, even as cities play an increasingly vital role in Canadian federalism (Hachard 2020), and as almost 45% of the Indigenous population lives in large urban centres (Statistics Canada 2023).

⁴ The law provided that a petition by 5% of enrolled electors can demand a poll to disestablish the Māori ward.

The result is that Canadian municipalities have struggled to build relationships with, and are often unclear about what obligations they owe to, Indigenous peoples (Walker 2008; Heritz 2018, 2021, 2024; Association of Municipalities of Ontario 2019a, 2019b; Anderson and Flynn 2020, 2021). Constitutionally, the duty to consult lies with the federal and provincial governments, acting on behalf of the Crown. Though municipal governments have a role to play in discharging procedural aspects of the Crown's duty to consult, unlike in New Zealand, the courts have generally held that municipalities are not bound to that obligation.⁵ This is because municipalities fall wholly under the jurisdiction of provinces, and there is broad variation across Canada in how provinces delegate responsibility and deputise municipalities to consult with Indigenous communities. In the absence of clear direction from a province, as well as a lack of knowledge, capacity and financial resources, many local governments struggle to effectively discharge this Crown responsibility.

Another challenge is that there is no formal mechanism facilitating Indigenous representation in Canada's parliament.⁶ Consequently, the idea of Indigenous seats on elected decision-making bodies is less familiar in Canada, compared to New Zealand. However, some provinces have devised so-called 'protected constituencies' where the bodies responsible for drawing electoral boundaries create districts such that minorities are present in high enough concentrations to advance their community's representation within an elected assembly. In Ontario, two such districts were created ahead of the 2018 provincial election to promote more effective representation of Indigenous and Francophone minorities in the far north (Pelletier et al. 2017). But most notable is Nova Scotia which, beginning in 1991, introduced four protected constituencies including one for the Black population and three for the Acadian Francophone population (Keefe 2017). Further, Nova Scotia's House of Assembly Act designates one seat for the Indigenous Mi'kmaq population, whose traditional territory encompasses most of the Canada's Atlantic provinces, though the Mi'kmaq have thus far declined to occupy it. The province also added a seat for African Nova Scotians to each of its seven regional (English language) school boards in 2010, however these elected boards were dissolved in 2018. As we will see, these innovations to advance representation for historically marginalised groups informed the Halifax Regional Council in its consideration of Indigenous seats.⁷

⁵ While the question is not settled in law, lower-level courts have held that municipalities have a duty to consult only if the province expressly delegates it to them (City of Brantford v. Montour et al. 2010 ONSC 6253; Neskonlith Indian Band v. Salmon Arm, 2012 BCCA 379).

⁶ Various models for advancing greater Indigenous representation in parliament have been explored in Canada, including (among others) guaranteed representation in the Senate, and a 'House of First Peoples' that would participate in the legislative process alongside the lower and upper houses. The former proposal was part of the Charlottetown Accord, a comprehensive constitutional reform package that was rejected by Canadian voters in a referendum in 1992.

⁷ Mi'kmaq, Acadian and African Nova Scotian populations have a long historic presence in Nova Scotia, and each has been subject to systemic discrimination and efforts of dispersal and assimilation. All three groups are recognised as founding cultures of the province.

Theoretical framework and expectations

Having sketched the historical and institutional context concerning Indigenous representation in local governments in both countries, we now develop the theoretical framework that undergirds our empirical analysis. This framework draws on a set of normative justifications for why talk matters, joining together ideas about deliberative democracy and electoral reform. We then look briefly at the municipal sphere and elucidate several expectations for deliberations regarding Indigenous representation on local councils.

Principles of democratic deliberation and representational reform

The essence of democracy in any pluralistic society is to govern through discussion and debate. In the tradition of democratic theorists including Stephen Macedo (1999), Iris Young (2002), Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (2004), it is only through deliberation in which individuals come together as equals to speak and act in public, that we may find common good for all members of society. Premised on the open and inclusive exchange of information, deliberation aims to surface arguments, facts, opinions, and values, so that decision-makers become aware of differing perspectives. Individuals can then shift or refine their positions, not by coercion, but through transparent reasoning and shared understanding. From this perspective, the legitimacy of democratic decisions rests not just on majority vote, but on the openness, inclusivity, and integrity of the deliberative process.

These principles overlap with best practices of electoral and representational reform. Because reforms to add Indigenous voices to council can create winners and losers, shifting the balance of power in an elected body, political actors may be tempted to approach the issue in pursuit of their own electoral or partisan advantage (Boix 1999). It is therefore vital that such deliberations are rooted in a maximalist vision of democracy. Electoral and representational reforms should not be a zero-sum contest, but an opportunity to strengthen democratic legitimacy, trust, and fairness. According to Toby James (2026 forthcoming), the priority is striving to form a political consensus, however this goal can be supported by following five other principles which are transparency, inclusivity, evidence-based decision-making, reasonable timeframes, and accountability.

The local governance context

At the core of our study is the recognition that local governments are not sufficiently inclusive of Indigenous communities, or attentive to their interests. The challenge to repair this representational deficit is not an easy one, however there are grounds for optimism about local councils' deliberative capacity on the issue. An important consideration is that most Canadian and New Zealand city councils are formally non-partisan. In strictly partisan debates (as in national parliaments), decisions are often effectively made before they are debated, leaving little room for meaningful exchange and persuasion. This is especially true on matters of electoral reform, where parties' pursuit of their own electoral advantage often takes priority. In contrast, non-partisan municipal councils can be more collaborative,

pragmatic and solution-oriented. Because they deal with tangible everyday concerns, where decisions frequently affect people they know personally, councillors may feel a stronger sense of accountability and responsibility to deliberate in good faith. The smaller scale of councils may also foster more collegial debate, compared to large parliamentary bodies. In theory, these factors create conditions for reasoned deliberation. Yet others have expressed scepticism about deliberation and civility in city councils (Cuff 2019; Bélisle 2025; McMahon 2025). Amidst growing signs of toxicity and dysfunction, there have been calls for codes of conduct for city councils across both Canada and New Zealand. Further, both countries have low and declining turnout in local elections. When the public is disengaged, there is less pressure on council members to justify their decisions or engage in robust debate.

Expectations

Underlying these principles of deliberation and best practices for electoral reform is the argument that consensus decision-making tends to produce higher democratic legitimacy. We examine this proposition by looking at whether higher (lower) quality debate over Indigenous representation tends to produce more consensual (divided) council decisions. We also explore the quality of discourse on both sides of the issue. Optimistically, we expect principled and civil discourse among councillors whether they vote for or against Indigenous representation. However, it is possible that opponents may show greater disrespect and argue in ways that are potentially polarising.

Further, we examine similarities and differences between countries. In New Zealand, we expect that familiarity with Māori electorates and the Māori voter roll for national elections should give rise to substantively more informed debates. Yet we acknowledge that the Māori wards issue – and Indigenous rights generally – have become increasingly marked by divisiveness, misinformation and political maneuvering. So there is no guarantee that New Zealand councils will be models of reasoned debate on this issue. On the Canadian side, where the question of Indigenous representation on city councils remains exploratory, councillors could be more even-handed and open to consider, in light of the discussion, what their policy attitudes should be. While deliberations in Halifax may be informed by Nova Scotia's distinct institutional path and mechanisms for effective minority representation, these are likely less familiar in Hamilton, Ontario, which may produce substantively different debates in the two Canadian cases.

Research design

To explore these questions, we undertook a focused analysis of debates on Indigenous representation in six local councils spanning the two countries. We assess council debates in two ways. As a quantitative yardstick, we apply the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) which is rooted in Habermas' discourse ethics and emphasises fairness, reciprocity, and respect in communication. We combined this with thematic analysis to elucidate the substantive ideas and arguments expressed through the debates.

Case selection

While our samples are not nationally representative, they facilitate in-depth analysis and theoretically informed comparisons. They consist of four councils in New Zealand: Auckland Council, Dunedin City Council, Tauranga City Council and Wellington City Council; and two in Canada: Halifax Regional Council (Nova Scotia), and Hamilton City Council (Ontario). All held debates within the past five years on whether to introduce Indigenous seats onto their city councils. In Canada, Hamilton and Halifax are the only local governing bodies we know of that have formally addressed the issue. Both face similar legal barriers, as provincial statutes do not explicitly provide for Indigenous representation on council. Halifax voted in 2023 to ask the provincial government to consider changing this legislation, whereas Hamilton voted in 2024 not to study or request such a change. With few local councils having debated such motions, the Canadian comparison is illustrative rather than representative.

There are 78 local authorities in New Zealand, of which at least 85% have considered Māori wards (NZ Human Rights Commission 2010b, pp. 27–30). As no selection of these would be perfectly representative, we focused on the 2021–2023 timeframe and chose cases as similar as possible to the two Canadian municipalities to ensure the debates we analysed took place in comparable contexts. As the Indigenous population share is much lower in Canada than New Zealand (5% versus 17.8% of the total population, respectively), we narrowed our focus to New Zealand cities where Māori comprise 10% or less of the electorate, based on the Māori voter roll. We focused on the largest municipalities (>125,000), to best match the overall population and urbanisation of the Canadian cases. Five cities met these parameters, including two that voted for Māori wards (Wellington, Tauranga), two that voted against (Auckland, Christchurch), and one (Dunedin) that passed a motion to add *mana whenua* representatives, which are appointed to council committees but with no vote at Council.⁸

Table 1: Cities included in analysis

| Municipality | Population | Indigenous population | Māori electorate* | Council size | Decision | Date |
|---------------------|------------|-----------------------|-------------------|--------------|-----------------|------------|
| Halifax, NS** | 435,295 | 3.8% | | 17 | 14-2 (approved) | 14/11/2023 |
| Hamilton, ON*** | 597,010 | 2.2% | | 16 | 7-8 (defeated) | 12/07/2024 |
| Auckland, NZ | 1,656,486 | 12.3% | 6.9% | 21 | 9-11 (defeated) | 26/10/2023 |
| Dunedin City, NZ | 133,300 | 10.6% | 5.0% | 15 | 14-1 (approved) | 30/06/2021 |
| Tauranga City, NZ | 161,300 | 18.3% | 10.0% | 10 | 6-4 (approved) | 12/04/2021 |
| Wellington City, NZ | 520,971 | 15.5% | 4.5% | 16 | 13-2 (approved) | 13/05/2021 |

* Population registered on the Māori voter roll, as share of total registered voters.

** NS = Nova Scotia *** ON = Ontario

⁸ *Mana whenua* means the Indigenous people (Māori) who have historic and territorial rights over the land. It refers to *iwi* and *hapū* (Māori tribal groups) who have these rights in a specific locality, and whose interests are represented by tribal authorities.

Data and methods

To measure deliberative quality, we use the DQI, which has been widely applied to quantitatively assess parliamentary debates (Steenbergen et al. 2003; Steiner et al. 2005; Bächtiger et al. 2022). Comprised of seven dimensions, the DQI focuses on the inclination to argue in a respectful and reasoned way. *Participation* (0–1) assesses whether speakers are interrupted or there is equality of speaking opportunities. *Justification* (0–3) examines whether reasoning is clearly linked to the demand being considered. *Content of Justification* (0–2) considers whether speakers appeal only to their own self-interest, or to the common good in terms of benefits of the majority or helping the least advantaged. Respect is a core concept of the DQI, with three distinct measures to operationalise whether participants respond to others as equals in discourse: the first assesses *respect toward groups* (0–2); the second considers *respect for demands* (0–2); while the third measures *respect for counterarguments* (0–3). The point is that a speaker may disagree with their political opponents but should still take demands seriously and demonstrate appreciation for the reasonableness of participants' interests and arguments (Bächtiger et al. 2022, p. 84). In our study, respect toward groups also implies recognition of the rights and interests of Indigenous peoples that the Crown is obligated to protect. Finally, *constructive politics* (0–2) assesses whether participants take an unbending position or are willing to compromise and build consensus. The DQI is applied to each speech unit and can total from zero (low quality) to 15 (high quality deliberation) over these dimensions. See Appendix for the detailed scoring rubric.

Our corpus consists of debates in each city, transcribed from video-recordings on the respective council's YouTube channel. While all councils involved public delegations, we focus only on debate among elected decision-makers after a motion is tabled. Debates ranged from one hour to 90 minutes, for a corpus totaling over 37,500 words. Each city was assigned two coders who independently scored debates using the DQI rubric. Coders followed the transcript alongside the video-recording to capture relevant non-speech acts.⁹ Any disagreements were identified and resolved between the pair, or a third coder was assigned as tie-breaker.

In addition to discourse quality, we also examine the substantive themes of debates. After having been immersed in the data through the DQI coding, each pair of coders returned to a careful reading of the full debates to code meaningful segments, which were then grouped into broader themes to capture recurrent patterns. These were refined and defined through discussion, ensuring they were distinct and well supported across all debates. We also conducted further investigation in Hamilton, Ontario and Auckland to gather a more fulsome understanding of subtexts and behind-the-scenes developments hinted at during debates. In Hamilton, we consulted with Circle of Beads, a grass-roots group of urban Indigenous leaders spearheading improved representation on council. In New Zealand, we conducted

⁹ These included, in one instance, a councillor turning their back on discussion, which counts as a sign of disrespect.

an informational interview with Auckland Councillor Kerrin Leoni, who is herself Māori and elected to a general ward.¹⁰

Analysis and findings

Discourse quality across councils

To demonstrate the DQI coding, consider this excerpt of a speech by Councillor Vandervis (Dunedin) which scores 3/15, reflecting uncivil discourse. Though acknowledging counterarguments and providing justifications, the councillor begins by explicitly disparaging the prior speaker:

In all my years on council I have never noted so many extraordinary unacceptable statements as I have just heard in the last 10 minutes. Your Worship has said, it's not our business to know how these representatives will be chosen. Worship has also said 'the interests of minorities are never going to be served by a popular vote'. The very foundation of democracy has been rent asunder because in fact, the popular vote and democracy is what has historically served the interests of minorities better than any other system we ever had before...

Towards the end of his speech, this councillor is interrupted by Mayor Hawkins (who is chairing the debate), leading to a point of order in which he chastises the mayor for a “*snarky remark that I believe is an abuse of your position, and I want it withdrawn.*” Following a brief adjournment, the next speaker (Councillor O’Mally) begins his intervention by implicitly denigrating other councillors:

I want to draw attention to the pronunciation of words in this chamber especially the word Māori. We should be holding ourselves to a higher standard and if we can't learn how to pronounce that word correctly, then we should stop maybe having too many judgements about what we do next.

An example of more respectful speech comes from Councillor Kroetch (Hamilton, ON), who takes time in his intervention to:

...thank members of Council who reached out and contributed to improving the language of the motion. My initial draft was less fulsome, and I appreciate the collaboration in making it broader, so that the staff report can reflect a range of considerations. That will help us understand the implications for governance in the City of Hamilton. Lastly, I want to acknowledge the concerns that were raised...

A very different example is from Councillor Pauls (Hamilton, ON), whose speech exemplifies weak justifications, as well as disrespect for demands by misconstruing the motion, which in this case was a request to study options for Indigenous representation on council, not a proposal for an unelected seat.

¹⁰ This research was approved by McMaster University’s Research Ethics Board in accordance with the standards set out by the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2 2022). The Statement provides, among other things, a framework for ethical conduct of research involving Indigenous people (Chapter 9) and encourages collaboration between researchers and Indigenous organisations and communities of interest in the development and oversight of projects, where appropriate. According to institutional policy, the use of public-meeting data does not require consent; however, our interview with the elected representative in New Zealand was undertaken with informed consent.

This excerpt is from a speech unit that scores 3/15 on the DQI:

The reason I can't support this motion, as Councillor Jackson said, is that the individuals are not voted in. The matter is that we can and should educate ourselves on Indigenous matters – we want them to come and speak to us with their inquiries and what they'd like us to do. But to sit at the table without being elected is a different story.... I've noticed that whenever we say we want more information, we end up implementing the idea. I think the intention here is clear: they want a seat at council. That's how I understood it. We go in circles asking for more study, more research. But the intent is apparent.... I know how hard it is to get elected. I've done it three times – knocked on doors until I lost weight. I will not support this motion.

Once debates were coded, the DQI for each speech unit was converted from the original 0–15 indicator to a decimal, and an aggregate score was calculated for each council. We also calculated the average DQI score for the subset of councillors voting for or against the motion in each city. These figures are presented in Table 2.

Our analysis suggests moderate to good-quality discourse. Apart from Hamilton, ON, all councils have scores DQI over 0.50. While this is a small sample, we see no relationship between overall discourse quality and voting outcome. However, councillors who voted against Indigenous seats scored substantially lower than those supporting the motion (average DQI 0.43 versus 0.64), suggesting they are debating the issue in ways that are less respectful and potentially polarising. There is a modest correspondence between high (low) quality of discourse and more consensual (divided) decisions, though Auckland is an exception to this trend. The level of discourse in New Zealand is not systematically better than in Canada, though it is apparent that the two Canadian city councils performed very differently on this measure. Nor do we find that councils for the smaller cities in our sample (Dunedin, Tauranga) engage in higher quality deliberation than larger cities.

Table 2: Aggregated DQI scores by city

| | Motion defeated | | Motion passed | | | |
|------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| | Hamilton ON (7-8) | Auckland (9-11) | Dunedin (14-1) | Halifax (14-2) | Wellington (13-2) | Tauranga (6-4) |
| Whole of council | 0.45 | 0.64 | 0.59 | 0.68 | 0.58 | 0.53 |
| Voted for | 0.53 | 0.69 | 0.62 | 0.74 | 0.63 | 0.61 |
| Voted against | 0.38 | 0.59 | 0.20 | 0.62 | 0.40 | 0.41 |

It bears mention that Dunedin, which passed the motion (14–1) on *mana whenua* representation, is the most consensual, though this is also the most incremental of the motions debated across the six cities. Similarly, after Hamilton City Council narrowly voted against *studying* the option of an Indigenous seat, a subsequent more tepid motion was introduced by the mayor, who described her proposal as “*something that gathers us, rather than divides us*”.

In response, Councillor Kroetsch (who presented the initial motion) questioned whether political consensus among councillors should be the priority:

*No one is going to say ‘we don’t want to further our relationship with the Indigenous community’ no one is **not** going to support this.... Sure, we can be preoccupied here about whether our votes match up and were all unanimous on something – that’s a job we can be preoccupied about. But we have a responsibility to not create division in the community either. So outside of this space, the actions we take have impacts on the community. I think it’s creating a lot of division, frankly, doing what we did today. I get it, you want to have votes that are unanimous. But this council has not shied away from having divisive votes.... This motion is not resolving [the request brought by the Indigenous community] in any way. I’ll support it because, of course, it’s a no-brainer to support. But I’m just saying out loud why this doesn’t do any of the things it’s reported to do.*

That this motion passed unanimously (15–0) highlights a paradox underlying our DQI analysis and the principles of electoral reform. There is an evident trade-off between striving to form a political consensus among council, versus changing a status quo that serves to advantage those holding power. We return to this issue below, in discussing the importance of mayoral leadership in these debates.

Discursive themes across councils

This brings us to our thematic analysis, which looks beyond isolated speech segments to examine the substantive reasoning espoused by proponents and opponents of Indigenous seats. While debates were wide-ranging, the key themes identified concern minimalist versus maximalist democratic principles, treaty-based partnerships with Indigenous communities, and dynamics related to mayoral leadership.

Democratic principles: References to ‘democracy’ were ubiquitous across these debates. Many speakers expressed a minimalist view focused on the procedural aspects of holding competitive elections and reaching decisions by majority vote. For example, Councillor Tadeson (Hamilton, ON) expressed that he was “*open to an Indigenous seat, if elected by Indigenous residents city-wide, similar to how the mayor is elected.*” But others asserted that an Indigenous-specific representation mechanism would be an ‘anti-democratic’ or ‘racist’ deviation from the principle of ‘one person, one vote’. As Councillor Vandervis (Dunedin) exclaimed:

We are about to suggest anti-democratic, race-based representation on two of our committees.... Obviously, it’s not democratic and worse, that actually the fundamentals of democracy, that the interests of minorities are never going to be served by the popular vote according to our mayor, are a reason that we are doing all of this. We, the elected representatives of Dunedin, in this motion, are throwing elected representation to the dogs.

Along similar lines, some insisted on wider public consultation and putting the matter to a referendum. Invoking the ‘Voice’ referendum in Australia, Councillor Williamson (Auckland) opined that “*the general public should have the say when it comes to constitutional change*” and expressed his apprehension about:

Eleven out of 20 councillors deciding something of this magnitude ...what I would have preferred is if we had said no to any decision today and instead committed to a referendum

at some stage in the future. Because if the people of Auckland want Māori seats, they should be the ones to decide it.

Others, such as Councillor Leoni (Auckland), directly contested this argument:

It's disheartening to hear some of the kōrero [discussion] that's been brought up today around consultation, when we know that Māori are only 10–13% of this population. The European population will always outweigh Māori voices in this city, so it's not correct to say that those consultation numbers represent equal representation of views.

Proponents of Indigenous representation tended to express a maximalist conception of democracy, invoking principles of inclusion, equality, and good governance. Some, like Councillor Elder (Dunedin), suggested the skills and expertise that Indigenous representatives would bring to the table would lead to better council decision-making:

...the Treaty says that the Māori aren't a minority, that they're partners. And the decision we're making now, we're actually honouring that. If we had a business and we had a partner, and yet they couldn't make decisions, they couldn't be at the decision-making table, I would say that business was dysfunctional to say the least.

Many, such as Councillor Hills (Auckland), refuted the argument that Indigenous seats were a racist mechanism: “*This is about equality and about fulfilling our Treaty partnership obligations – not about race.*” Still others focused on the prejudice experienced by Indigenous people and worried about these debates emboldening racists. This theme was especially prominent in New Zealand, where Māori wards have been a polarising issue. As Councillor Condie (Wellington) reflected:

...this is going to be a difficult conversation, and parts of our community are going to find this a very difficult conversation. I think the important thing is that we conduct this in a way that is done with respect, that people who are participating in the conversation are well-informed, and that this conversation doesn't subject our Māori community to further harm from racism, to the extent that we can make that happen.... And I would like to encourage all our councillors, to implore you that if you are speaking to people in your community who strongly oppose this, that we as councillors work hard to make sure that conversation remains respectful and well-informed. They absolutely have their right to express their views, but I think we all have a role to play as leaders to make sure that we conduct this conversation in public in a way that respects our Māori communities.

Finally, debates in New Zealand and Halifax reflected familiarity with alternative electoral systems and their capacity to satisfy the requirements of democracy. For example, Deputy Mayor Free (Wellington) alluded to New Zealand’s switch to a mixed-member proportional (MMP) electoral system at the national level:

Our ideas about what's democratically fair have been changing rapidly over the last two decades or even a little bit longer. And I want to reflect on the MMP system, which is an example where you don't necessarily vote directly for all the people that have opportunity to make decisions in parliament. Instead, you share the power in a way that means there are people you entrust directly and there are parties that get to choose a lot of people to be on the list. And that gives you the opportunity, in parliament, to choose people with a range of experience and values to actually be there... It's not first past the post, which is what we used to consider democratic, it's a different system. I think we can move to

different systems in our local councils as well and it's still democratic. And it will be enriching, I'm very confident of that.

Councillors in Halifax mentioned New Zealand's experience with Māori electorates, as well as arrangements to advance minority representation in other legislative bodies in Nova Scotia. These were extensively described by Councillor Mason, who introduced the motion. Councillor Russell, who spoke against it, cited his experience on the school board and *"the challenges of trying to balance the advocacy of representing the population in a geography, versus the population of some individuals that are scattered across all of the geographies."* In New Zealand, several speakers addressed the corollary problem that Māori councillors elected to a geographic ward cannot represent Māori interests across the city. As Councillor Filipaina (Auckland) explains:

...Then they pointed to me. They asked me, 'So you don't need Māori seats because you're Māori and you can speak for Māori issues.' And I said, 'No way at all.' Because I do not have the mandate to speak on behalf of Māori...across Tāmaki Makaurau. I got voted by my local community – in the Manukau ward – and I speak for that community. I do not have the mandate to speak on behalf of Māori in Auckland.

Treaties and shared governance: Another theme concerned the responsibility to respect Indigenous rights of self-governance, and advance actions around truth and reconciliation. While addressed in all councils, not everyone explicitly endorsed these obligations, or agreed they merited a change in council composition. For example, Councillor Beattie (Hamilton ON) framed his remarks around the *Calls to Action* of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), claiming to be *"more educated than some – I've read all 600-plus pages of the TRC. I've read all 94 Calls to Action."* Yet he argued that a seat would be an imposition of settler-colonial concepts on the Indigenous community.

In the multiple sessions and meetings and learning opportunities I've had with Indigenous speakers, elders, and scholars over the past nine years, a recurring theme always presents itself: that of treaty nations – two separate and distinct nations running in parallel. I believe the term is the 'Two Row Wampum'. There's a quote I hear often that I visualise clearly: that each will travel down the river of life side by side – neither will attempt to steer the other's vessel. That's the direction I believe is required and needed to continue to move forward. I'm having trouble wrapping my head around this motion aligning with that principle. I think the motion you, mayor, are bringing forward, should this one fail, will perhaps better allow us to position ourselves to have that take place.

In both countries, opponents referred to representational gains by women and various ethnic minority communities as evidence that group-based considerations were unnecessary. Or they argued that introducing provisions for Indigenous representation would trigger a 'domino effect' of demands by other groups. In contrast, those supporting Indigenous seats emphasised the distinctiveness of treaty-based partnerships with Indigenous peoples, a relationship not shared by other groups. Councillor Day (Auckland) addressed this explicitly:

I accept the Treaty of Waitangi as the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand. And I recognise Māori as Tangata Whenua [people of the land] of New Zealand. I recognise myself as Tangata Tiriti [people of the Treaty], which you all are too. You are all Tangata Tiriti, through my English descendants who co-signed that Treaty. We're a multicultural society, but the very special position of the Indigenous people in this country does give

them certain rights. So the clarion call of ‘one law for all’ – it’s fine on one level, but it doesn’t apply to others.

Councillor Mason (Halifax) expressed similar reasoning:

They are the original people of this land, and the treaty speaks to a shared responsibility of this place. We don’t have those written obligations with other so-called special interest groups. There is an obligation between the Crown and the sovereignty of the Mi’kmaw to consider their involvement...

As did Councillor Cuttell (Halifax):

Really, in my opinion, it’s about a government-to-government relationship. Acknowledging that, you know, we are in Mi’kmaw territory. Whether you’re Acadian or a newcomer who arrived here yesterday, we’re settlers on this land. I think that’s the main distinguishing factor why we might consider a Mi’kmaw seat.

Mayoral leadership: Mayors have a unique capacity to articulate a shared vision and drive the agenda in a way no other individual actor in a city can (Graham 2019). In New Zealand, the case of Andrew Judd speaks to the impact a mayor can have in moving public debate about Māori representation forward (Coster 2020; Judd 2024). Mayors can also have the opposite effect, such as Kaipara’s Craig Jepson who drove that city’s decision to disestablish its Māori ward, leading to tense protests (Botting 2024, 2025). Across the cities in our study, only Dunedin’s motion to improve Indigenous representation came from the mayor. Mayors voted in favour in just three cities (Dunedin, Tauranga, Wellington), one voted against (Hamilton, ON), while two abstained or were absent (Auckland, Halifax). In both Hamilton and Auckland, the mayors worked behind the scenes to advance alternative more conciliatory plans, which contributed to the main motion’s defeat.

Councillor Kerrin Leoni drew attention to this issue in Auckland, explaining that “*the mayor’s role should be to set the standard because they’re the leader of the city, and if you want to see change happen, then they’ve got to be able to lead on that.*”¹¹ Though Auckland’s mayor was not present for the debate, several councillors spoke to his intent to undertake a wider representational review. Councillor Stewart asserted: “*Mayor Brown has said he wants to review the number of councillors and local boards. Until we do that, it’s premature to be locking in Māori wards.*” Likewise, Councillor Fletcher justified her vote against the motion:

...I think all of us really want the same outcome. But it’s a question of delivery.... And I know that the mayor is supportive of Māori seats, I don’t believe he is opposing them – but I think it’s got to be done comprehensively, with the support of all of us behind him. Therefore, I don’t think we should ambush that by rushing this today, when it’s a much wider, more considered discussion that we need to have.... I support the mayor in wanting to defer this to be able to take into account the additional work that we know needs to happen.

In Hamilton, ON, the mayor had apparently communicated an alternative motion via email to councillors shortly prior to the meeting. Her motion on “*Furthering a collaborative path between the*

¹¹ Interview with authors April 21, 2025.

City of Hamilton and urban Indigenous residents as per council's approved Urban Indigenous Strategy" was not included in the public agenda, yet several councillors indicated they would vote against the original motion in anticipation of the mayor's proposal. More explicitly than others, Councillor Beattie expressed relief this would dispel any perception that council was neglecting its responsibilities to Indigenous peoples:

...I think the possibility exists that this may be framed incorrectly. That if the motion we're talking about here fails, it may be viewed as an obstruction to truth and reconciliation. I think it's possible that those who may vote against this motion may be framed as being against truth and reconciliation... I think the motion you, mayor, are bringing forward – should this one fail – will perhaps better allow us to position ourselves to have that take place.... I am interested in moving forward with the proposition that you are potentially bringing forward in a few moments.

Following council's 7–8 vote (defeating the motion to study options for Indigenous representation), Mayor Horwath's motion was introduced and passed unanimously. Subsequently, the Indigenous advocacy group Circle of Beads criticised mayor and council for a process that lacked transparency, undermined their efforts at collaboration, and eroded trust. They explained to the media:

The mayor put forward her own motion but did so without any consultation or discussion with us, which highlights the ongoing challenges with Reconciliation and lack of understanding among municipal leadership of its responsibilities and obligations to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action. These responses demonstrate that the City of Hamilton has a long way to go on its road to Reconciliation and commitment to the principles of the Urban Indigenous Strategy, which had been ratified in 2019 (Coleman 2024).

This brief analysis suggests that mayors play an important role in the dynamics and outcome of debates. Consistent with the 'weak mayor' model that characterises local government in both countries, mayors appear more focused on building council cohesion and maintaining the support of their political colleagues, which can forestall bold or contentious decisions on issues like Indigenous representation or electoral reform.

Discussion

This study asks whether city councils live up to the ideals of deliberative and consensus-oriented decision-making, and examines their substantive reasoning in debates regarding Indigenous representation in local governance. Our findings, based on a review of six councils in Canada and New Zealand, are mixed. On strict discourse quality – which concerns not shouting at each other, making and listening to reasoned arguments, and basing decisions thereon – some municipal councils performed poorly, while others did moderately well. The level of discourse, as we measured it, does not clearly predict how councils voted, nor the level of consensus they achieved. However, we found that individual councillors opposing the measures were generally less civil and less reasoned in their argumentation.

Despite distinctive national and local frameworks for Indigenous representation, the thematic content of debates was strikingly similar across countries. Proponents were more likely to demonstrate a

fulsome understanding of treaty-based obligations to Indigenous peoples and articulate a more encompassing perspective of democratic principles. Opponents subscribed to a constrained view of democracy fixed on majority rule, equated Indigenous peoples with other minorities, and often critiqued Indigenous representation mechanisms as ‘racist’. Yet New Zealand city councils, and that of Halifax, also showed an appreciation of how such mechanisms work in practice, suggesting that institutional familiarity and policy learning are a factor in adoption. Hamilton, Ontario’s city council was the least informed and determined not to study the issue further.

Council debates are, to some degree, performances. In some instances, they mask back-room tradeoffs and score-settling on unrelated agendas. In others, councillors may adopt divisive stances signalling their position in relation to polarising national conversations. Yet ideally – especially within a relatively small and non-partisan deliberative body – they should strive to weigh the claims and reasons before them in a visible, recursive way, making sure that debate is respectful and agreements are decisive and consequential. Reasoned and inclusive deliberation plays a crucial role in shaping public responses on contentious issues (Parkinson 2020), builds trust in the decision-making process, and encourages citizens to engage in respectful, principled dialogue. Reaching well-reasoned and decisive decisions is especially important in the context of our study, given the potential for disinformation and divisiveness on issues of Indigenous rights (Parkinson et al. 2021; Remeikis and Butler 2023; Mayo 2024; Allison et al. 2025). In Canada, our findings call attention to municipal councils’ uncertainty about their obligations to Indigenous peoples, and the need for more informed deliberations among local elites. In New Zealand, council debates and leadership potentially influenced the broader public that stood poised in October 2025 to endorse or reject the resolutions reached by their local governments.¹² In both contexts, the tenor and content of these deliberations holds lessons for how councils can debate difficult issues and move reconciliation forward responsibly, bearing in mind the repercussions for the health of local democracy.

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¹² In October 2025, voters in 24 of 42 NZ localities voted to remove their Māori wards by 2028. However, nationwide 54% voted to keep rather than scrap their Māori wards. A question for future research is whether the quality of council debates influenced these outcomes.

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Appendix: DQI Scoring Rubric¹³

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|--|
| Participation (0–1) | 0 – Speaker is interrupted or formally cut off | 1 – Normal participation; no disruption | | |
| Level of Justification (0–3) | 0 – No justification for the demand | 1 – Inferior justification; reason stated but weak or unclear link to demand | 2 – Qualified justification; reason clearly linked to demand | 3 – Sophisticated justification; two or more well-developed justifications |
| Content of Justification (0, 1, 2a, 2b) | 0 – Explicit appeal to their own interests/self-interested | 1 – Neutral (no appeal to group or common good) | 2a – Appeal to common good in utilitarian terms (eg benefits the majority) | 2b – Appeal to common good via different principle (eg helps the least advantaged) |
| Respect Towards Groups (0–2) | 0 – Explicit disrespect toward groups (eg negative stereotypes or remarks) | 1 – Implicit respect (no positive or negative mention) | 2 – Explicit positive reference to social or affected groups | |
| Respect Toward Demands (0–2) | 0 – Explicit disrespect toward others' demands | 1 – Implicit respect (neutral mention or acknowledgement) | 2 – Explicit respect toward opposing demands | |
| Respect Toward Counter-arguments (0–3) | 0 – Ignores or avoids counterarguments | 1 – Acknowledges but dismisses or degrades counterarguments | 2 – Acknowledges and responds neutrally to counterarguments | 3 – Acknowledges and engages constructively with counterarguments |
| Constructive Politics (0–2) | 0 – Positional politics; no attempt to compromise or engage alternatives | 1 – Proposes an alternative, but unrelated to the current agenda | 2 – Offers a mediating proposal or compromise relevant to the issue being discussed | |

¹³ Adapted from Steenbergen et al. 2003.