

JUDGING POLITICAL PERFORMANCE: GOVERNMENT-CITIZEN ASSESSMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT FAILURE

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ABSTRACT:

In this work, we analyse the assessment of political performance at the local government level by citizens and government. In the context of the Victoria state government (Australia), we conduct an exploratory study on the Greater Geelong City council as one of the few examples of citizen-led process of assessment of a local government failure.

Between 2014 and 2024, several councils across the six states and three territories of Australia were involved in local government's failures for diverse reasons, such as financial mismanagement, corruption, and bullying at the city council level. While every Australian state and territory has its specific legislation, 'local government failure' denotes performance failures of the elected representatives of the local council, which is scrutinised by the state-level government and other governmental agencies. The generally adopted process of failure assessment and intervention is state-government led: a state-level enquiry commission investigates the local government cases and, with ad-hoc legislation, the state government substitutes the directly elected local councillors with state-defined councillors with little to no involvement of the citizens. In the case of Greater Geelong City, citizens were involved in this process. Through the use of the legislation which was produced in dealing with the Greater Geelong City case, and the official media reports, this chapter further questions the actual level of citizens' participation, concluding that the exercise of direct democracy and citizens-led initiatives, albeit welcome, remains restricted.

KEYWORDS: citizen-led initiatives, local government, councillors, Australia, performance failure, de-centralised governance

1. Introduction

Local government provides a dynamic context for examining performance measurement and citizen-government interaction. Sometimes referred to as local authorities (UK) or municipalities (US), it is often associated with the '3Rs' of roads, rates and rubbish, reflecting the centrality of its role in delivering day-to-day services for the common good of the city, community and its people. In democratic systems, determining what is the common good involves electing representatives to act on behalf of the citizenry. The performance of politicians is significantly influenced by the electoral process, where citizens exercise their democratic rights through voting. Elections enable citizens to choose local councillors to speak and act on their behalf. Elections also serve as mechanisms of accountability, enabling voters to reward or punish politicians based on their performance. While the ballot box is the traditional measure of the performance of local government politicians, once elected, problematic political behaviour does not go unchecked. In many European and western democracies, central government retains the power to remove individual politicians or even entire local councils (Loughlin et al., 2011) for significant wrongdoing. The level of citizen involvement in this process is usually limited to bringing local governance problems to the attention of regulators and making submissions to subsequent enquiries through a government-led process. Very occasionally, we observe citizens and communities directly engaged in a process of citizen-led performance assessment (Barbera et al., 2025) such as the creation of citizen juries tasked with resolving representative failures.

This chapter examines a case of citizen participation in resolving a failure of local government in the context of Australia, where each year a number of local councils are dismissed due to the performance failures of their elected representatives. These failures occur for a variety of reasons including financial mismanagement, corruption and bullying, and can lead to governing dysfunction and an unworkable and failing tier of government. The interaction between citizens and government (local and state) in this performance assessment process is the focus of this chapter. *Our research question asks: what is the level of citizen participation in assessing the performance failure of local governments?* To answer this question, we draw on an exploratory case study of the Greater Geelong City Council (in state of Victoria, Australia), that shows the processes used to determine the removal of council, and the subsequent appointment of a citizen jury - tasked with recommending how they would be democratically represented in the future.

Determining when the line of governance failure has been crossed - and the processes required to judge this - can be politically fraught, as citizens, government and others lead, review and seek to influence, initiatives designed to determine questions of (non) performance. This chapter discusses the ways in which citizens interact with government across the various processes that lead to local government dismissal. Citizens and government can view local issues from very distinct vantage points. Yet the voice of voting citizens is essential to this process and the consequences for them significant. In building this deeper understanding of the role of citizens in performance assessment, we provide recommendations to governments and citizens on how to improve citizen-government initiatives aimed at addressing potential local government failures.

2. Local government in Australia

Australia has 537 local councils across six states and two territories, with total annual expenditure \$36 billion. Local government as the third tier of government is often described as the closest level of government to the people (Grant & Dollery, 2012). It has been described as 'giving voice to local aspirations for decentralised governance' (Aulich, 2005, p. 198). Councils deliver a broad range of

services in health, town planning, business development, waste and human and community services as well as infrastructure such as roads, sports grounds and libraries (Tan et al., 2016). Local government raises its own revenue through property taxes (rates) but relies predominantly on state and federal government for most funding for the provision of local services due to its narrow fiscal base (Tan et al., 2016). Some suggest this results in local government being manipulated and constrained by state and federal government (Marshall et al., 2003).

Local government in Australia operates under the authority of state and territory legislation. These laws often specify performance standards and governance requirements including financial management, planning and regulatory duties. But the roles and responsibilities for local councils vary slightly between states and even within states. The subordinate status of local government is clearly demonstrated by the fact that unlike the Commonwealth and state or territory government's which are established in the constitution, local government lacks constitutional recognition. As a result, all local authorities obtain their powers and responsibilities solely from state and territory legislatures through respective state acts and regulations (Marshall et al., 2003). A state minister for local government is usually appointed and regulatory oversight is provided by a state department who oversees and monitors the compliance processes through constitution and legislative frameworks. The regulators main roles (Warburton & Baker, 2005) include:

- setting the legislative framework;
- providing a range of advisory services to local government;
- providing infrastructure and general-purpose funding to local government.

In addition, states and territories have a number of additional public organisations that provide oversight to local government. These include state integrity commissions who investigate corrupt conduct (such as the Queensland Crime and Corruption Commission), Auditor-General departments who play an active role in overseeing the financial management of local government including through financial and performance audits and indicators, the Ombudsman and more recently, state misconduct offices (such as Office of Independent Assessor in Queensland) who review allegations of councillor misconduct or designated Local Government Inspectorate's that investigates complaints, allegations of misconduct and breaches of Local Government legislation. Together, these regulatory, compliance and complaint organisations form a complex combination of accountability arrangements, an 'accountability regime' (Bovens, 2007) which includes the sum of organisations, roles, procedures, rules and doctrines that regulate and govern the local government mosaic.

The role of local councils is predominantly to provide good governance and leadership to the local community through advocacy, decision making and action (LGV, 2025). Local councils operate through a combination of politicians (councillors) and administration (council staff). Councillors are elected by residents and ratepayers of the municipality approximately every four years and their role is to set the overall direction of the council through long-term planning, decision making, local laws, and the plans and policies needed to achieve this. They are also responsible for appointing the chief executive officer (CEO) and managing and reviewing the CEO's performance. In turn, the CEO is responsible for managing the council staff and resources, ensuring council decisions are implemented and overseeing council operations. The councillors are led by a mayor who is the figurehead of the council and undertakes ceremonial duties. The election of mayor differs slightly across councils. In capital cities and some large councils, the mayor is also directly elected by voters on election day, but mostly the mayor is elected from the group of councillors after the election is conferred (Martin & Aulich, 2012). While the large, capital city councils have a number of political party-aligned councillors, most standing do not do so in political aligned groups. This often results in a council of individual, unaligned members with divergent interests. Councillors and the mayor must comply with legislative

requirements including acting in the public interest for the entire community, attending meetings, ensuring their conduct is lawful and complying with codes of conduct.

Ultimately, the mayor and elected councillors are directly responsible to the community for their local government's performance. Therefore, if a local government authority has been assessed as unable to continue to represent their citizens, the entire council is removed and administrators appointed until future elections are held. Over the period 2014-2024, 24 councils across Australia were dismissed by state governments. Table 1 summarises the variety of behavioural reasons associated with their removal which included financial mismanagement, corruption, bullying and dysfunction¹.

Table 1 HERE

The process of dismissing varies across states but in all cases involves a cycle of mostly government-led steps in the assessment of council (non)performance, as shown in Figure 1. The concept of the

¹ Financial mismanagement concerns the mismanagement of public funds, which includes federal and state government grants and ratepayer contributions. According to the Local Government Inspectorate of Victoria (2025): 'The Act [Local Government Act 2020] requires a council to ensure that resources are used efficiently and effectively and services are provided in accordance with best value principles to meet the needs of the community. The importance of responsible administration by local government of public finances cannot be overstated'. Financial mismanagement can occur in procurement, recovery of outstanding rates, use of corporate credit cards, community grant programs and government grants.

The Auditor General of Victoria (VAGO, 2019) defines corruption as 'dishonest activity in which an employee of an entity acts contrary to its interests, abusing their position of trust to achieve personal gain or advantage'.

Fraud is defined (VAGO, 2019) as 'dishonest activity involving deception that causes actual or potential financial loss by an entity or others'. Fraud and corruption are investigated together and they can go from inadequate documentation to support reimbursement claims and approvals to extra entitlements (such as double-dipping) to inappropriate use of credit cards and fuel cards. According to IBAC Strengthening Victoria's Integrity (2023), corruption and fraud can involve councillors, council staff or general issues of corruption.

Other examples are provided: poorly managed conflicts of interest, such as kickbacks to local businesses owned by associates, decisions related to grants and planning; improper influence, unauthorised disclosure of information (to further individual political status, campaigns or interests); increased bias with councillor voting blocs on issues raised, with limited oversight to prevent the conduct; electoral donations and political fundraisers connected to councillors' political parties. In the same areas in which financial mismanagement may occur, corruption implies: fraudulent procurement, misuse of council assets (like cars, machinery and technology), misuse of grant funding (for emergency relief or recovery funding); improper influence, meaning receiving gifts and hospitality; favouritism in recruitment, issuing of licenses, permits of approvals or procurement. General issues concern giving access to information, systems and commodities that can have monetary impacts on businesses and individuals to third parties, including organised crime groups.

WorkSafe Victoria (2025) defines bullying in relation to the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (OHS Act) as the 'repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed at an employee or group of employees that creates a risk to health and safety'. It entails verbal abuse, hostile behaviour, abusive or offensive communication, unfair allocation of tasks, undermining a person's work performance especially with their managers or co-workers, deliberately withholding necessary work-related information or resources, inappropriate interference with personal belongings, unequal application of work rules, and similar issues.

The term 'dysfunction' has been addressed only in generic terms, as part of a good governance framework. In such a broad framework, it defines 'undesirable behaviours' that can lead to bullying and harassment (City of Glen Eira, 2024). Its roots can be found in the Local Government Act (2020), which is recalled in the most contemporary Victoria State Government (2024) 'Guidance on the Model Councillor Code of Conduct'.

cycle is deliberate, as history has shown the majority of councils who initially are dismissed are often again subject to monitoring arrangements following re-election.

Figure 1 HERE

The initiator of a local government performance assessment cycle is more often as a result of citizen making complaints through formal feedback processes, regulatory agency portals or via media reporting. The performance review then follows a predominantly government-led process. For example, in Victoria the *Local Government Inspectorate* would assess and potentially investigate complaints about council operations raised by citizens (LGI, 2025). If the complaint is deemed serious, the LG Minister may appoint independent bodies such as a municipal monitor to provide advice to councils and report back on the effectiveness of 'council structures, operations and governance' (LGV, 2025).

The exact measures used to assess (non)performance are outlined in a 'terms of reference' document and published online. Topics have included 'the relationship between councillors and Council staff... and processes for resolving disputes between councillors...the adequacy of Council's community engagement policies, processes and practices' (LGV, 2025). If more serious governance failures are identified, the Minister can appoint a commissioner/s to establish a formal enquiry into council functioning. These formal enquiries can take the form of more formal legal processes that compel witnesses to testify under oath. Anti-corruption agencies investigate questions of illegality, financial mismanagement and corruption. But most enquiries are undertaken by independent, professionals with knowledge and experience of government processes. Following the receipt of formal reports, the Minister may determine the council unworkable and enact legislation to dismiss the entire council. If so, they would then appoint interim administrators to work with the council until the next election.

Interestingly, the performance assessment of one of these councils followed a more unusual process. *Greater Geelong City Council* was dismissed by the Victorian parliament on the 16th October, 2016. During the parliamentary debate the government 'committed to consult the Greater Geelong community about the structure of its future elected council' (LGV, 2025). As a consequence, the government proposed a Geelong citizen jury of 100 citizens who would 'recommend how Greater Geelong would be democratically represented by a future council' (LGV, 2018). Barbera et al. (2025) describe citizen-led performance assessment as a proactive model where citizens redefine their relationships with government through direct collaboration and influence. This citizen-led model sees citizens directly involved in gathering and generating data used to measure performance in one or more phases of the performance assessment cycle (Barbera et al., 2025). As pointed out by Barbera et al., (2025), there is limited research and experiences in this area which raises the question of how much the initiatives are citizen led, and how do they work? This reflects a significant change to the normal local government performance assessment cycle outlined in Figure 1, and provides an interesting case to examine our research question: *what is the level of citizen participation in assessing the performance failure of local governments?*

3. Theoretical framing

Accountability is the founding principle for organising relations between rulers, the ruled and public officials (Olsen, 2015). Accountable government is the basis of democratic order, whereby a concatenation of accountability connections can be drawn from the people to the actions taken on

their behalf by government and administrators. This is sometimes referred to as a principal-agent model of accountability, whereby the public elects political representatives to the parliament who, in turn, rely on the executive and ministers to implement laws and policies through the actions of government departments and public administrators (Peters & Pierre, 2018). Political accountability (sometimes referred to as democratic) then, relies on the structure of accountability arrangements that connects each principal and agent through this process. 'Each principal in the chain of delegation seeks to monitor the execution of the delegated public tasks by calling the agent to account. At the end of the accountability chain are the citizens, who pass judgement on the conduct of the government and who indicate their (dis)pleasure at the ballot box' (Bovens et al., 2008, p.231).

Bovens (2007) uses 'narrow accountability' as an analytical approach which focuses on the formal legal sense of holding elected and administrative offices to account. In contrast to 'broad accountability' which focuses on the use of accountability as a contested, normative concept. Political accountability is an exceedingly complex phenomenon. It involves multifaceted accountability relations between elected politicians (state and local), voters, and public administration resulting in inevitable tensions between authority and democracy.

Local government provides a dynamic context for examining public accountability, given the complexity of accountability relations and routines between these groups involve competing ideas and ideals. As Olsen (2015) points out; 'While accountability as routine is fairly well understood, it is more problematic to capture democratic accountability in periods with ideological battles over political order and attempts to "reinvent" government' (p. 437). Accountability scholars have emphasised tensions between two distinct political roles of local government. On the one hand councils have obligations to deliver goods and services to local communities within the constrained financial environments set by state governments, which limits their autonomy. While on the other, their community participation obligations makes them the cornerstone of a democratic system by providing a vehicle for the expression of local democracy (Grant & Dollery, 2012). These competing accountabilities can lead to democratic battles between layers of government and public administrations. For example, Sweeting and Copus (2012) explain "there are tensions inherent in the role of councillors which include different sorts of relationships with citizens and parties, the concern with both local responsiveness and national priorities and the political and managerial roles that councillors assume" (p. 22). The most serious outcome of these tensions is the removal of democratically elected councillors.

Barbera et al. (2025) outline that an emerging body of studies target the experiences of citizens' participation in the assessment of government performance (e.g. Ammons & Madej, 2018; Berman, 1997; Clark, 2021; Heikkila & Isett, 2007; Ho & Coates, 2004; Holzer & Kloby, 2005; Loeffler & Bovaird, 2021; McKenna, 2021; Rivenbark et al., 2019). While Barbera et al. (2025) do not explicitly address the accountability aspect, which is somehow implied by their study, they identify three potential models of interaction between the State and citizens (Jakobsen et al., 2019) regarding performance assessment. In their work, performance is also broadly defined, since it does contain elements of public service performance and political elements such as involvement in processes and policies, which impact on both decisions and public service delivery.

While the participation of citizens is said to be at the core of democratic states (Jakobsen et al., 2019)(Jakobsen et al., 2016), the three models differ in terms of governance and expectations around the level of involvement of citizens.

In government-led initiatives, responding to the most traditional way of conceiving citizens' participation, 'the government is the owner of the process and decides who, when and how gets

involved and to what extent this impacts decisions and public services delivery' (Barbera et al., 2025) as also represented by Edelenbos et al. (2018) and King and Cruickshank (2012). In citizens' participation to government initiatives, government may allow some performance co-assessment, such as in the cases of Bovaird and Loeffler (2012), Cepiku et al. (2020); (McKenna, 2021), where the government takes the initiative of initiating the process and defines the forms of engagement and how they are translated into actions and decisions, while citizens can provide feedback on the service receive, such as in Kroll et al. (2019) and So (2014). In citizen-led performance assessment, pro-active citizens, often in organized or semi-organized groups, seek to redefine their relationship with government by bringing issues to the attention of the government, providing alternative accounts on government actions (counter-accounts, see Meijer and Potjer (2018) and both initiating and managing the process of assessment.

According to Barbera et al. (2025) the three propositions and models of interaction are subjected to an evaluation of contextual, and individual conditions. Contextual conditions refer to areas where democratic participation entails freedom of speech, press, association (Schatz, 2013), human rights and the environment protection. As part of the contextual conditions, organizational conditions, such as accessibility, decentralization, competences, information, resources and ability to play a key role in communication ('boundary spanners') also play a role in Ammons and Madej (2018), van Meerkerk and Edelenbos (2016). Individual conditions refer to the personal characteristics, perceptions and attitudes of the actors involved.

This case study will flesh the conceptualization of Barbera et al. (2025) by examining the level of involvement of citizens in local government performance evaluation and State initiatives that apply to the relationship between State and local councils in Australia. This will involve both extending features of State-citizens interactions, as outlined by Barbera et al. (2025), and investigating the design or re-design of accountability relationships between State, local councils and citizens. The media coverage of the specific application of the Westminster tradition in such a context will be also considered.

4. Research design and method

We present here therein an exploratory case study based on the Greater Geelong City Council (2016-2023). The case study has been reconstructed through a thread of documentation, which includes both media pieces and official documents. The media pieces are supported by evidence coming from consulting groups (such as such as the Spence Consulting (2023) 'Victorian Councils' dismissals 1998 to 2019 (Part 2)') and local Council's minutes for the relevant timeframe (City of Greater Geelong Council Meetings, 2015 to 2017). Our search timeline regarding the media was 01/01/2014, a year before the first external review, to 01/01/2017 covering the completion of the citizen jury process, although for completeness we sourced also more recent media pieces on the Monitors' work (2023).

We used 'Factiva' (a digital archive of global news content covering 18,000 sources from 159 countries in 22 languages and available from the university library) to select media pieces that included, as key terms, 'Geelong', 'council', 'issue/s' and 'problem/s'. Around 240 pieces, including newspaper articles, letters to the editor, editorials, general reporting, digital pieces (such as online commentaries and podcasts) resulted from running 'Factiva' on those key terms. In a first step, pieces were selected if they referred to any types of problems or issues at the Geelong Council during the timeframe of analysis. In a second step, we closely examined how the specific issues that conducted to the inquiry in the Greater Geelong City Council, were framed and qualified by the media. We paid specific

attention to reports from two longstanding daily newspapers – The local Geelong newspaper “*The Geelong Advertiser*” and the state-wide paper “*The Age*” to cover the public opinion in a wider fashion.

A summary list of the main digital pieces covering the specific case investigated is below:

- the presentation of the original Inquiry into Greater Geelong City Council (2015);
- the dismissal of Greater Geelong City Council, in 2016 as reported through the website of the Premier of Victoria Hon Jacinta Allan MP (2016a; 2016b),
- the comments to the dismissal of the Council in *The Age* (2016), *The Guardian* (2016), the *BBC* (2016), *The Mandarin* (2016a; 2016b), *9News* (2016), *Geelong Advertiser* (2016) and *Government News* report (2016);
- the introduction to the appointment of Administrators for Geelong, in 2016, as commented through the website of the Premier of Victoria Hon Jacinta Allan MP (2016c);
- the presentation of the City of Greater Geelong Amendment Bill 2017 through the website of Natalie Hutchings State Member for Sydenham (2017);
- the local media representation (City of Greater Geelong history, 2025) of the different phases, from the dismissal of Greater Geelong City Council, to the appointment of the Administrators, the appointment of a Citizen’s Jury, their recommendations to the State Government and the Parliament, the approved bills to proceed with the restructuring of the Council according to the Citizen’s Jury recommendations;
- the Local Government News Roundup (2023) podcast on Geelong monitors’ appointment to report on the situation post-restructuring.

During our coding, we intend understanding if and how citizens played an actual role in the process of reviewing the performance of Greater Geelong City Council and how the media could shape audience perceptions and, especially, represented public opinion in this case (Maier et al., 2019). Therefore, we specifically marked the use of adjectives referred either to the Council/Councillors/Mayor and to the qualification of the public reaction. We assumed that such representation might have an influence on regulatory agencies and oversight bodies to undertake investigations.

According to Arnaboldi et al. (2017) the issue of representativeness of social media data involve a two-folded problem. The first one is the consideration that only part of the population may be interested in their use. The second one is that the media themselves may be biased towards the representation of the news (see also Brown and Deegan (1998) and they do not guarantee that the entire population of data is available. A challenge relevant to the practice is the use of controls to ensure that valuable insights from media information are governed or a certain construction of knowledge is ensured (Quattrone, 2015). In this study, we recognise the ambiguity and incompleteness of media representations (Dambrin & Robson, 2011) and we moderated it by including a vast range of media sources.

Concerning official government documentation, we obtained copies of the two independent reports commissioned by the local council CEO (Culture Review 2015-2016) and the Local Government Minister (Moran et al., 2016), ‘Commission of Inquiry into Greater Geelong City Council 2016’. They included the allegations of serious bullying, which led to the dismissal of the City of Greater Geelong Council. We also sourced copies of the Geelong Citizen’s Jury report and recommendations (2016), following the dismissal of the City of Greater Geelong Council and the Victorian Government’s commitment to consult the Geelong community (see Local Government Victoria, 2025). The Government response to the Citizen’s Jury recommendations is available from Local Government Victoria (2025). That was read and analysed together with the Bill to implement the jury’s practical

recommendations. Finally, the relevant Municipal Monitor report (2023) concerning the latest progress on implementing the Commission's recommendations were sourced from Local Government Victoria (2025).

This official documentation is composed mainly by reports, which are around 12 pages long, and around 6,000 words each. It helps to establish the correct timeline of events, and the way in which accountabilities were designed/re-designed along the process, as it will be specified later. To understand deeper the role of citizen in the legislative process we downloaded the Hansard transcripts for the state government lower chamber: The Legislative Assembly, and the upper chamber: The Legislative Council. The Hansard transcripts (or Hansard, in brief) are an essentially verbatim record of what was said in the two houses of Parliament and incorporates questions on notice answered on a sitting day. The Hansard is used in Britain (see UK Parliament, 2025) and many Commonwealth countries, such as Australia (see Parliament of Australia, 2025)².

We used the Hansard over the three days covering the tabling of the legislation to remove the council: *The Local Government (Greater Geelong City Council) Act 2016* and the debate in both chambers in response to the legislation.

The analysis of the official documentation is two-folded:

- the Bills are used to reconstruct the timeline of the interventions, following the 2016 Inquiry;
- the Moran, Munro & O'Brien's Inquiry (2016), Citizens' Jury Report (2016), Hansard transcripts (2016), and Monitor report (2023) are analysed for the political discourse delivered and the performance associated.

² It is named after Thomas Curson Hansard (1776–1833), a London printer and publisher, who was the first official printer to the Parliament at Westminster (Australasian & Pacific Hansard Editors Association, 2025). In the State of Victoria (Australia, where the Great Geelong City Council is located, see Parliament of Victoria, 2025), the two Houses of Parliament have 128 members in total, 88 in the Legislative Assembly (lower chamber) and 40 in the Legislative Council (upper house). The leadership in the Parliament is exercised by the monarch (King or Queen of the United Kingdom), represented by the Governor, who acts on behalf of the monarch. The Council is led by a President and the Assembly by a Speaker (presiding officer). Parliament functions as the legislative branch of the Victorian level of government. It passes laws or amends existing laws to assist the governance of the State on behalf of the Victorian people, to whom Parliament is answerable through elections. Victoria uses a blend of statutory law and common law. The Parliament makes statutory law while common law is decided by the judicial branch of government. The government follows the Westminster tradition of having an executive government whose members come from an elected legislature, a fact that is enshrined in Victoria law.

Parliament holds de facto power over branches of Victoria's level of government due to its exclusive power to appropriate funds for any government business. Parliament's ability to scrutinise government business is assisted by independent arbiters, such as the Auditor-General and Ombudsman.

The leader of the political party or coalition with a majority of seats in the Legislative Assembly is invited by the Governor to form a government. The leader of that party is appointed as Premier and other senior members are appointed as ministers with various portfolio responsibilities. The Premier and the ministers must be sitting members of Parliament as well as the Leader of the Opposition.

The Parliament of Victoria is a bicameral legislature (see Parliament of Victoria, 2025) and it usually fulfils its legislative role by first proposing bills in the Legislative Assembly, and then reviewing them in the Legislative Council. The Council is described as a house of review. Majorities in the Legislative Council are rare, so the government of the day must negotiate with other parties to pass much of its legislative agenda. Common practice is that the houses sit in staggered dates, the Assembly usually meeting first in order to pass bills that the Council later debates. These houses sit in separate chambers.

The analysis of this official documentation has been inspired by Liguori and Steccolini (2018), who used the discourse analysis to investigate how politicians represented and justified reforms at the Parliament level. As outlined by Liguori and Steccolini (2018: 163): ‘Several calls have been advanced to consider more closely the relationship between codified discourses and practice to improve our understanding of the discourse/practice dynamics within organisations’ (see also Hyndman & Liguori, 2016; Hyndman et al., 2018; Llewellyn & Milne, 2007). Following the study of Liguori and Steccolini (2018), the official documentation, which has been examined for this exploratory case, is composed of reports and transcripts available to the general public (mainly through the internet). Our case contrasts the reality investigated by Liguori and Steccolini (2018), as we assume that in the Victorian political and legislative realm, the official documents analysed do not simply represent a means for political information towards the general public. Instead, the arguments mobilised are aimed at involving the public in the political debate that ensues.

The above-mentioned key terms are the drivers for the following codification. While we focussed on adjectives in regards to the media sources, we looked at accountability relationships and ways in which accountabilities were portrayed (in terms of expected performance behaviour and economic performance) or re-designed. For instance, in relation to the ‘issues’ suffered by the Greater Geelong City Council that drove to the dismissal of the Council, Moran, Munro & O’Brien (2016: 23) detail: ‘On another occasion, in relation to the observed activities of outdoor staff, he [the Mayor] is alleged to have said, “Are they f..king dumb?” And to a staff member in relation to another executive, “Tell him to f..king do something instead of just talking about it”. Evidence was also given that he yelled and swore at a junior staff member about some logo samples: “Tell them to just give me some f..king logos ... tell them I don’t want all this other f..k shit, I just want some f..king logo ideas.”’ This sentence outlines how the Mayor is assumed to be accountable to his staff in terms of behavioral performance. Contrasting and evaluating this sentence before the Victoria’s State definition of bullying, the sentence entails an example of accountability break due to lack of behavioral performance, in terms of abusive and offensive communication from a public officer to his staff members and undermining people’s work and recognition in front of peers.

Against this background, in the next section we explore the interactions between citizens and government across the review cycle (Figure 1) required to dismiss an elected local government following governance failures at Greater Geelong City Council.

Findings

The process of removing a group of elected members of council involves a complex chain of performance review actions designed to ensure the voices of both citizens and the politicians impacted are fairly represented. In reality, the review process involves competing beliefs, perceptions and arguments as citizens and politicians contest the measures themselves and rebut the microscopic attention questioning their performance.

Local council elections: Assessing political performance at the ballot box

The state of Victoria has a total of 79 local councils and local government elections are held every four years. The 2012 Victoria local government elections were the first-time Geelong residents directly elected the mayor (a change strongly supported by citizens), along with twelve councillors (previously the mayor was elected after the election from the councillors). Following the mayor’s resignation in 2013 due to health concerns, Darryn Lyons, a Geelong born, former celebrity paparazzi photographer and UK media personality stood for mayor. Also known as the ‘mohawk mayor’ (Casson, 2016) he ran a strong social media campaign and was elected from 16 candidates with 29.79% first preferences, famously stating at the start of his campaign that every election needed a “comedy candidate”. Local

government outside the large metropolitan areas tends to have very few political party-aligned candidates, though it is more common in some mayoral elections. At Greater Geelong council all councillors and the mayor were elected as independents, but some were also aligned to major political parties. For example, the mayor and another councillor were members of the Liberal Party.

Citizen assessment of ongoing political performance

Over the year following Lyons's election, problems at Geelong council were repeatedly raised – occasionally at council meetings but predominantly in the media by citizens, whistleblowers and journalists. A reoccurring theme was suggestions of bullying and dysfunction that appeared to be entrenched behaviour over many years. While much of the media reporting related to political infighting between councillors, newspaper reports also described accusations that individual councillors were “carrying out intimidating and aggressive behaviour towards staff at the council” (Smethurst, 2014). But it was a local psychologist who decided to blow the whistle on the bullying allegations (six were proven) against local council officers that appears to have been the catalyst for government intervention. As the whistleblower later describes in a letter to the editor, in making his decision he was prompted to act on behalf of those who were powerless to take action. “When I began discussions with journalist Mandy Squires about the issue, she explained that others were coming forward but were reluctant to make their identities known. She asked if I would be willing to put my name to the allegations about bullying because anonymous allegations carry far less weight” (McMullen, 2016). The paper then published a series of reports into alleged bullying involving 5 out of 13 councillors and a number of council staff that appeared to have prompted the government to push the council to conduct an inquiry into the matter. As the editorial states “Today we air claims by a psychologist that bullying is endemic inside our council... it is our hope that by raising the matter today there will be more scrutiny — not just internally but also by the State Government” (Editor, 2015). This highlights the importance of the media in amplifying citizen voices.

Outsourcing performance assessment – the role of consultants

The Halliday Review

In February 2015 the CEO of Greater Geelong City Council announced an external review into workplace culture to be conducted by a former Sex and Disability Commissioner (Susan Halliday) and a workplace survey would be completed accounting firm EY. The reports would cost \$200,000 but the terms of reference for the review were not publicly outlined, despite calls from the Local Government minister to do this. The aim of the reports were tabled at a council meeting and stated they were to review the current workplace culture and processes, the councillor code of conduct and recommendations for any changes needed to these” (Squires, 2015). Her review included speaker to employees, councillors, business people and “members of the broader community” (Halliday, 2016). In her final report she quotes a member of the public who summed up a common theme from citizens: “It seems they forget it's our money, and that should be used to benefit us. I'd like to know how much it ends up costing us rate payers – when workers and councillors do this bullying. That's money lost to the community” (Halliday, 2016, p. 10). In completing her review into the effectiveness of council policies and procedures, Halliday found a culture of bullying existed at the council and unprofessional and inappropriate behaviour by both senior staff and councillors occurred, the councillors failed to operate as a team and did not act in an equitable manner to vulnerable community members. The EY report summarised the quantitative results of a staff survey and became the subject of an interesting letter to the editor at the Geelong Advertiser by Mr Bob Thompson who said: “GEELONG council's bullying review will “be determined by those conducting it” (GA 14/2). And it appears the probe would be the responsibility of an accountancy firm looking at “procedures, policies and codes

of conduct”. That will take 20 minutes. Meanwhile, the bullies will continue as they are now — a protected species, not accountable to anyone. Maybe that is why an accountancy firm was named to look into the epidemic of bullying. It appears the CEO thinks accountability is the responsibility of accountants... we want the investigation done by the Local Government Inspectorate, that has powers to sort this mess out” (Thompson, 2015).

The Commission of Inquiry into Greater Geelong City Council

The Local Government Minister publicly announced she had received feedback from members of the Geelong community and the council and she would be considering those views in the context of the report findings. Given the allegations of serious bullying at the council, the Local Government Minister then appointed another independent review with wider powers, the *Commission of Inquiry into Greater Geelong City Council* (The Commission) led by three experienced independent members, to determine if failures of council governance arrangements contributed to these findings. The government had the option to appoint a *municipal monitor/s* (individual experts in local council governance) which are commonly used to provide advice to councils with governance problems. Commission of Inquiries are rarely used by the Minister and are often a precursor to gather independent evidence of dysfunction before sacking of a council. The Commission was “to examine the Councils’ governance structures and processes” which were further outlined in a Terms of Reference (Moran et al., 2016). The three-person commission conducted 56 private and public hearings with staff and councillors to complete their inquiry but did not appear to interview any members of the public.

The Commission developed ‘A Framework for Good Governance in Local Government’ (p19 to assess the quality of governance and performance of the council. A traffic light system indicated green (good practice), yellow (concern) and red (poor performance) were then allocated across eight ‘pillars’ of governance performance: Direction and leadership; culture and behaviour; structure, systems and policies; decision making; communications and community engagement; capability, risk and compliance; and monitoring and review. The analysis of performance against the framework for good governance showed “a patchy picture of governance – glimpses of good against a backdrop of major areas for concern” (p66).

The Commission’s final report concluded “Council is substantially dysfunctional, that governance and performance is well below standard and that there has been, overall, a failure to provide good government to the City. A fresh start is needed” (p.10). They recommended that ““Greater Geelong City Council be dismissed and Administrators appointed to perform the powers, functions and duties of the Council until a new Council is elected” (Moran et al., 2016, p.10). A further recommendation of the Commission was to also make the position of deputy mayor directly elected “to strengthen support to the Mayor and enable a greater sharing of the workloads of office” (Moran et al., 2016, p. 13). This was an interesting outcome as the report pointed to the political accountability problems created by a directly elected mayor as opposed to the previous model where the mayor was elected by the councillors. “Having been democratically elected by the residents of Geelong, he believes that he has a strong mandate to pursue his agenda for the City. As with his predecessor, Mayor Lyons has been undermined by many Councillors who effectively repudiated the legislated basis of the office. Such the lack of support for the Mayor crosses party and independent Councillors. In addition, the Mayor has received insufficient support from the organisation” (p. 25). It appeared the issue of a democratically elected mayor contributed to the bullying and dysfunction of the council as a whole.

While the three-person Commission recommended the dismissal of the Geelong council, that decision could only be enacted through a state government political process involving an amendment to the *Local Government (Greater Geelong City Council) Act 2016*.

State government framing of local government performance failure

The local government minister tabled a Bill to remove the existing council of GGCC on the 12th April, 2016. The proposed Bill implanted the recommendations of The Commission of Inquiry to dismiss the council and appoint administrators until the next local council elections, in October 2020, which would mean no elected councillors for the next 4.5 years, and the council being run by administrators. The direct election of the deputy mayor as recommended, was also part of the bill. The Minister introducing the bill to the Legislative Council justifies the removal of democratically elected councillors as follows: “The serious nature of the commission’s findings and the failure of councillors to act in accordance with their statutory obligations, clearly warrant removal of the council as soon as possible. This action ensures and recognises the right of electors to be represented with probity, integrity and accountability, and in the interests of the community rather than competing sectional or personal interests. Removal of an elected council is a last resort and undertaken only in exceptional circumstances. While this is regrettable, the government has a responsibility to protect communities from governance failings by their local representatives” (Victorian Parliament, 2016, p. 1761-1762).

Three interesting points were made during the debate of the bill. The first is a discussion of the framework for good governance laid out in the Moran review which formed the basis of the performance assessment of the council. Mr Davis MP points to the problem that these ‘pillars of good governance’ were applied to the council retrospectively, they were not a set of agreed standards used by the council or government beforehand (p. 1766). The second was the majority of the debate in both houses focused on the how 4.5 years till the next council election would “see a significant loss of local democracy for a very long period” (LC, p.1764). This resulted in an amendment to the Bill to bring council elections forward to 2017. Thirdly, the clause related to the direct election of a deputy mayor was omitted and in its place the government committed to consult the community about what a future model for governance would look like, including whether the mayor and deputy should be directly elected.

The Geelong Citizens’ Jury: The citizen’s role in assessing political performance

The Local Government Minister announced a Geelong Citizens’ Jury as the primary method of community consultation and would recommend how Greater Geelong would be democratically represented by a future council. The future structure of the council (and how the position of mayor and deputy would be decided) was a central issue for the jury. A citizen jury was the proposed solution as the “question of the best structure cannot be resolved through posing one or two basic questions and so is not amenable to a referendum. A citizens’ jury model enabled the community to be fully informed of the issues and options, to put forward its views and ideas and to deliberate and decide what it wants and expects from its future council” (Local Government Victoria, 2017a).

The jury consisted of 100 citizens randomly selected. All residents were sent an invitation to participate and asked to register their interest. Members were randomly selected from the 15,000 registered residents using census data to ensure the final jury represented Geelong in terms of gender, age and geography.

The process and deliberations of the jury was aided by a non-profit organisation “newDemocracy Foundation” (nDF), a non-partisan research foundation whose goals is “finding improvements to how trusted democratic decisions can be made which represent the informed general will of the people”

(LGV, 2017). Wider community feedback was gathered through direct submissions to the jury, a Vote Democracy Geelong survey, community sessions and workshops. The jury met and deliberated over four Saturday's, and the public could also observe the jury in action.

The jury was asked to consider this question: *Our council was dismissed. How do we want to be democratically represented by a future council?* The jury could make two types of recommendations to the Minister (LGV, 2017):

1. Practical recommendations for an electoral structure that complies with current Victorian local government legislation including:
 - How the mayor is elected
 - If a deputy mayor is needed and how they would be elected
 - The number of councillors
 - Whether the municipality should be divided into wards and if so, how would they be structured
2. Aspirational recommendations that may not be compliant with existing legislation and any other ideas about how local democracy can be improved

The evidence used to make its recommendations included background information provided by Local Government Victoria (LGV), submissions from academics, community feedback, presentations from speakers requested by the jury and other information as requested. The final report recommended the mayor be elected by the council from among the councillors, serving a two-year term (LGV, 2017a). The citizens therefore rejected the recommendation from the independent Commission of Inquiry (and initially accepted by the government) the mayor and deputy be directly elected. The jury also sent this interesting comment to their future elected council:

The people of the City of Greater Geelong have spoken for the benefit of us all. We expect that our elected State representatives and our future Councillors shall listen to what has been said. We want those acting on our behalf to keep focussed on the democratic process and like us, put aside individual and partisan agendas, to give Victoria's second largest city the framework to succeed (LGV, 2017b, p. 2).

The aspirational recommendations included a request by the citizen's jury to broadcast meetings through multiple media platforms and create a citizens of Geelong online portal (LGV, 2018a). The government accepted all the jury's 'practical' recommendations and 'supported' a majority of aspirational recommendations on how to improve local democracy in Greater Geelong (Local Government Victoria, 2017c). The jury also asked the government to "provide regular opportunities for community engagement through the use of citizens' juries and committees to advise council and review decisions and performance in areas of major spending and planning. They will also review the formation and adherence to the annual council budget." (p. 8), which the government supported 'in-principle', though this was not legislated.

Not all citizens agreed with the removal of democratic elections for mayor, as one local resident wrote in the Geelong Advertiser:

The problem was not the mayoral model. The problem was the inflated personalities who ran amok in City Hall — many for years... Secrecy was the cause of this disaster. Now the jury is recommending it to be the solution. Voters in Geelong have already been ripped off. Further removing Geelong residents from the democratic process will not punish the guilty, nor will it heal the wounds of the bullied (Mueller, 2016).

The problem of individual personalities proved very relevant to explaining why local democracy continues to require interventions from both citizens and government.

The Geelong citizen jury was an unusual, and to date, one-off approach to incorporating citizen views into the problem of local government non-performance at Geelong council. While the jury recommended the process be used again for oversight of the day-to-day actions of council we have found no evidence that this has been done.

Discussion

The Geelong case offers a number of useful insights into government-citizen interactions in the assessment of local government political performance and the implications for accountability relationships between the state, local councils and citizens.

Citizen-led political performance assessment

The Geelong case offers two new insights into citizen-led performance assessment. We see it is the interplay of contextual and individual conditions that prompt affected citizens to become involved in local government performance. Pro-active citizens bring problems of political performance to the attention of government (local and state) using a variety of avenues: raising issues directly with elected members, using question time at council meetings, responding to surveys and calls for submission to inquiries and through the media. In our case, it is the local newspaper who played a central role in amplifying individual citizen concerns and putting the question of the local council's performance at the centre of the community conversations. It is through the selection and emphasis of these sustained stories of dysfunction and bullying that the media framed Geelong City Council as a political failure in need of urgent state government intervention. News frames shape audience interpretations of issues and events and in our case government officials and citizens' perceptions and attitudes (Entman et al., 2009; Matthes, 2012).

Our second insight is that when given the opportunity, citizens choose to redefine their relationship with government, overturning government-led political outcomes in favour of alternative suggestions that reflect the diversity of views of voters. In the case of the citizen jury, citizens rejected the proposed model of a directly elected mayor and deputy mayor. Weighing up research and evidence from experts and academics alongside those of their fellow citizens' preferences and viewpoints. That the jury was chosen to reflect the diversity of the voters shows disadvantaged groups do in fact get involved whereas previous research suggests they are often underrepresented in public participation forums (Heikkila & Isett, 2007). We suggest the choice of forum and process of personally inviting individuals may be a positive factor in encouraging citizen involvement in local decision-making, overcoming issues of apathy in co-assessment. This leads us to wonder if we incorrectly judge the lack of involvement as a lack of interest (McKenna, 2021). Instead, our case suggests when potential serious failings come to their attention citizens are prompted to get more involved, possibly as the stakes are higher.

Mechanisms of public accountability in government-led performance assessment

Our case brings to light the connections between *accountability* and *good governance* in assessing the performance of local government. In the case of Greater Geelong, the state Victorian intervened assumed responsibility for assessing and rectifying the numerous governance failures. This top down approach reflects a 'narrow accountability' role (Bovens, 2007), where the state government was accountable to citizens for the actions of their local politicians. This obligation was both formal (Local

Government regulations) and informal (The local government minister could choose the mechanisms of assessment).

We can also see the complex nature of mixed accountability relationships between local government and state in the retrospective application of governance standards used by the Commission of Inquiry. These standards had not previously been agreed by the council or councillors but became the benchmarks of their performance. We wonder if these same benchmarks apply to other councils under investigation, and if not, raises issues of fairness and transparency of performance required for good governance. It was interesting that the Geelong citizen jury recommended citizens directly participate in council processes and performance through the use of more citizen juries and committees, arguing “this will improve council transparency and accountability” (LGV, 2017b, p. 7). We suggest this suggestion might address the ongoing performance issues in local government. They may not solve every governance problem, they so address accountability issues of making local government more accountability to its citizens for performance failures. We say this noting that the Local Government Minister intervened again at Greater Geelong City Council in January 2023. The monitors were re-appointed for another 12 months to 31 December 2024 (Premier of Victoria, 2024).

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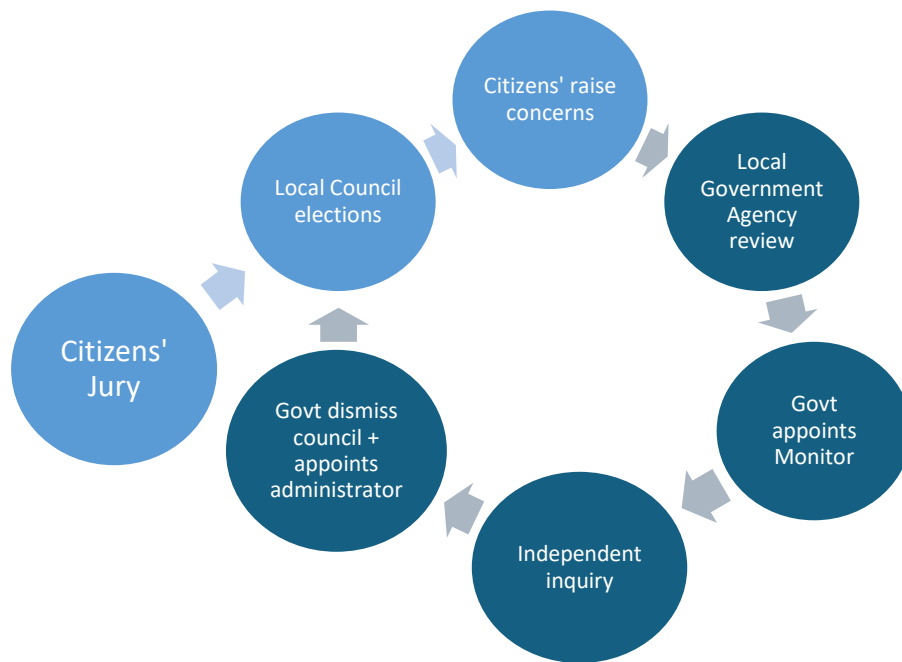
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Table 1: Dismissed Local councils 2014-2024

Council	State	Year	Corruption	Inappropriate Payments	Financial Mis-management	Conflict of Interest	Bullying and Dysfunction
Canning	WA	2014	No	No	No	No	Yes
Litchfield	NT	2015	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Greater Geelong	VIC	2016	No	No	No	No	Yes
Huon Valley	TAS	2016	No	No	No	No	Yes
Palmerston	NT	2017	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
CentralGoldfield	VIC	2017	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Glenorchy	TAS	2017	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Ipswich	QLD	2018	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Logan	QLD	2019	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
South Gippsland	VIC	2019	No	No	No	No	Yes
Cooper Pedy	SA	2019	No	No	Yes	No	No
Darebin	VIC	2019	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Ballarat	VIC	2019	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Perth	WA	2019	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Whittlesea	VIC	2020	No	No	No	No	Yes
Casey	VIC	2020	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Balranald	NSW	2020	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Central Coast	NSW	2021	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Wingecarrabee	NSW	2021	No	No	No	No	Yes
Moir	VIC	2023	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Barkly Regional	NT	2023	No	No	No	Yes	Yes

Source: Authors

Figure 1: Cycle of government-citizen led performance assessment of local council governance failures



Source: Authors