

RESEARCH NOTE

Community consultation is unrepresentative and biased

Community consultation models used by local governments tend to favour the time-rich (property owners and older residents) over the time-poor (renters and younger residents).

Executive summary

- **We analysed a sample of 17 community consultation demographics** from across seven metropolitan Melbourne local councils.
- **In 94% of the sample, older residents were overrepresented** compared to the actual demographics of the local government area.
- **In 100% of the sample, homeowners were overrepresented** compared to the actual demographics of the local government area.
- **On average, only 0.2% of the community opted in** to local consultation processes.
- **This underlines the biased and unrepresentative nature of opt-in community consultation practices**
- **Future consultation should be more representative**, using methods such as broad-based polling and deliberative bodies chosen by sortition

Introduction: opt-in consultation biases outcomes toward incumbents

Community engagement is open to all who wish to participate. Surveys can be done from individuals' phones and computers, and the majority of events are open and free. Sometimes, residents even get free coffee and biscuits for their time. Authorities also go to great lengths to publish consultation communications in multiple languages, and ensure that accessibility requirements are met across their processes.

Despite all these efforts, just one in 10,000 residents across our analysed sample participated in community consultation. Given the wide net that consultation casts, why do so few people participate?

The simplest answer is that most people do not participate because they are not interested in participating. This should be expected. People have busy lives that are filled with concerns much more interesting and pressing to them than the marginal machinations of their governments.

Even if a consultation session is hypothetically accessible to all, not everyone will in fact be able to access it. For instance, a residents' workshop held at 4pm on a weekday immediately excludes most working-age residents.

Walkshop at Federation Square, Draft Melbourne Heritage Strategy: Stories of People and Place (4pm)



Mon, 12 May, 4pm - 6pm AEST



Koorie Heritage Trust
Melbourne VIC, Australia

Heritage Strategy 'Walkshop', Melbourne City, 2025

A weekend pop-up in the park might seem accessible, but it often misses young renters working weekend shifts or parents who are too busy with their children to stop and discuss planning policy particulars.



Port Phillip Council pop-up conversation event

Common engagement models like these amplify the structural bias of consultative democracy, which favours "time-rich" residents. These are most often older residents and homeowners, whose higher relative levels of financial security and lower relative levels of family commitments typically afford them more free time.

This structural bias is amplified in the context of local housing and planning policies. Because consultation opportunities are generally targeted at those who already live in the area, the biggest beneficiaries of new housing go unheard: the people who want to live somewhere but currently cannot.

This is not just theoretical: the structural bias of consultation has direct and material implications for policy outcomes. Research from Germany indicates that older voters are less likely to support initiatives with long-term benefits but short-term costs.¹ Similarly, Canadian research has linked a high concentration of homeowners to political opposition to pro-housing rule changes.² Systems that are biased towards older homeowners are likely to fuel a status quo bias and anti-housing sentiment in local decision-making.

¹ Ahlfeldt, Maennig and Steenbeck (2019), [Direct democracy and intergenerational conflicts in ageing societies](#), Journal of Regional Sciences, Volume 60, Issue 1

² Fang, Stewart and Tyndall (2023), [Homeowner politics and housing supply](#), Journal of Urban Economics, Volume 138

Data selection: 17 consultation reports from seven metro councils

This research note tests a simple hypothesis: that Victorian local council consultations are biased toward older homeowners.

To test this, we use quantitative data to analyse who is—and who is not—being heard in community consultations across Melbourne. We examine the reported demographics of those consulted as part of local government-led housing strategies.³

We identified 17 local consultation summary reports with usable demographics data, sourced from seven different councils across Metropolitan Melbourne.⁴

We then analysed these reports in relation to the nearest available Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data to determine the representativeness of the sample in regards to age and housing tenure.

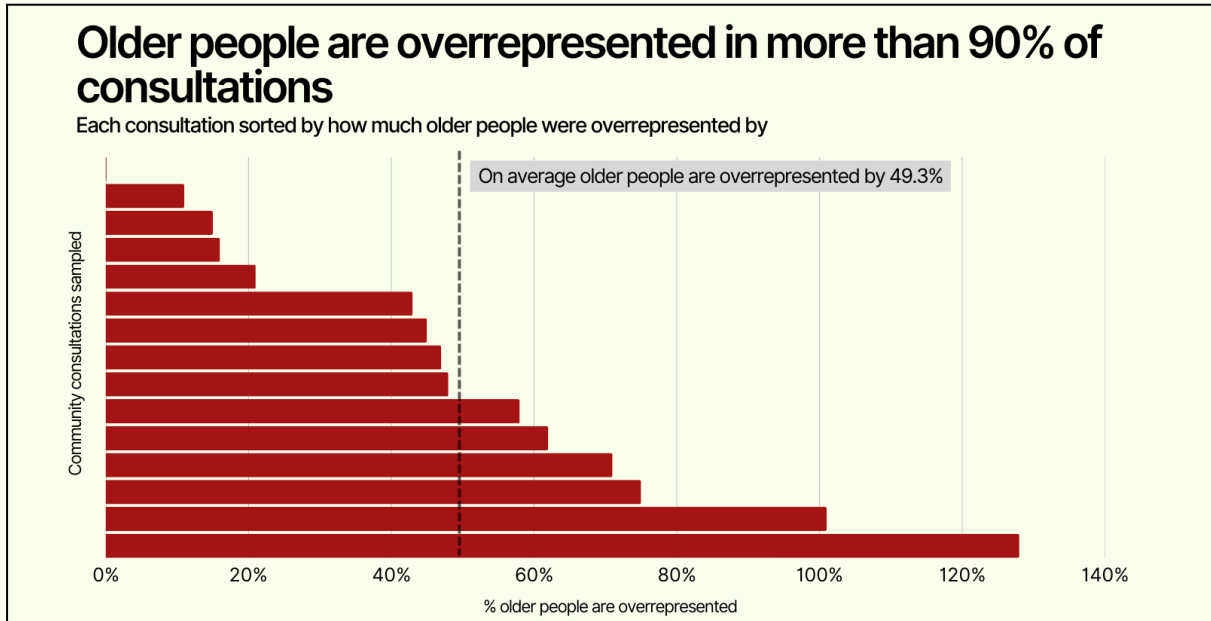
Councils publish consultation cohort demographic data in varying degrees of detail, with many councils failing to publish any demographic data at all. Where data is published, it is inconsistent, and often does not align with data the ABS collects. As such, within our analysis the lower bound of "older people" is in some cases 45 and in other cases 50. All data is contained in Appendix 1.

³ We focused on 'housing strategies', 'structure plans', and 'affordable housing strategies'.

⁴ Councils included: Bayside, Boroondara, Melbourne, Merri-bek, Port Phillip, and Yarra.

Opt-in community consultation leads to overrepresentation of older people and homeowners

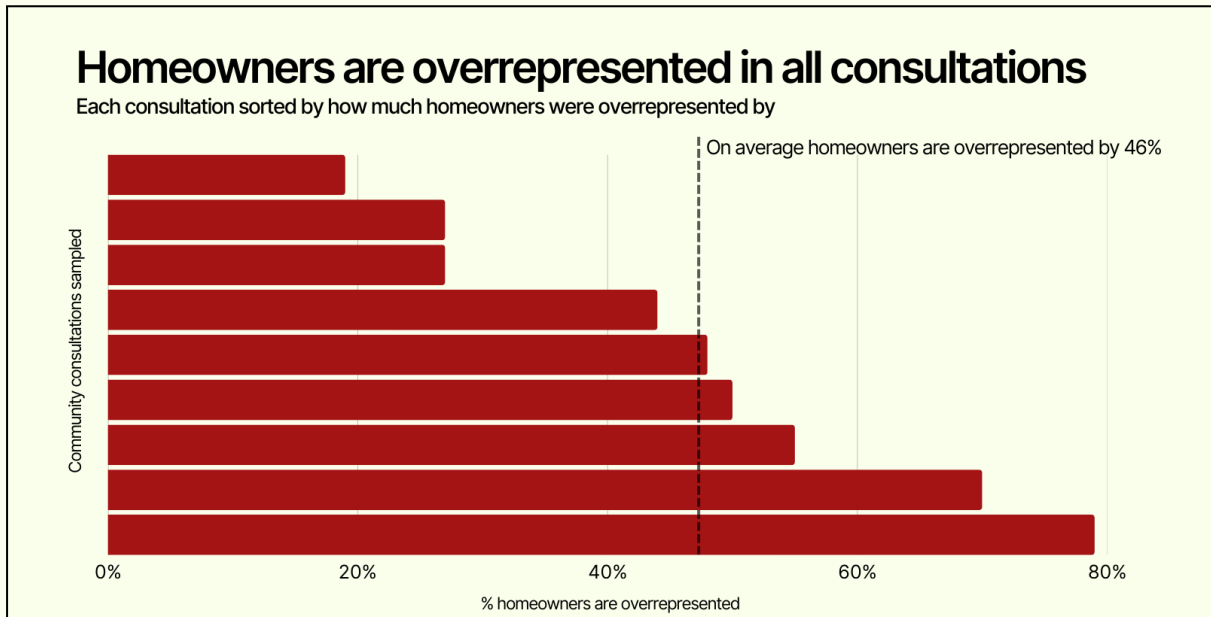
Older residents are overrepresented in 94% of sample consultations



Across 17 consultation reports, only 15 reported the ages of respondents. Of these 15, older people were overrepresented in 14 (92%).

Across sample consultations, older people were overrepresented by an average of 49%. In one Port Philip Structure Plan consultation, 82% of those consulted were 50 or older—a 128% overrepresentation compared to their share of the total population (36%).

Homeowners are overrepresented in 100% of sample consultations



Only 9 of the sample reports clearly measured the housing tenure of the respondents. Of these, all consultations (100%) had an overrepresentation of homeowners.

On average, homeowners were overrepresented by 46% in the sample. Yarra City Council's 2019 Social and Affordable Housing Strategy, for instance, was informed by 79% homeowners and just 21% renters—a massive overrepresentation of owners in the context of a renter-majority LGA (56% renters, 44% owners).

Victoria needs better, more representative consultation

Opt-in community consultation is worse than no consultation

This research note adds to the overwhelming evidence demonstrating the bias of community consultation processes toward older, wealthier incumbents.⁵ But problems with these processes go well beyond who has a say, and has just as much to do with why they might be saying anything in the first place.

When community consultation is opt-in, those who opt-in will be those who feel they have something to gain. Residents will generally engage in a consultative process only in the case that they are motivated to achieve a given outcome. This outcome might be the blocking of a social housing project or safe injecting room, or it may be stopping a supermarket from opening within walking distance of an incumbent convenience store. It may be a member of YIMBY Melbourne, trying to get more housing built in their area.

Because of the opt-in nature of prevailing community consultation processes, it is unlikely to provide authorities with much useful information about the world as it exists. Instead, it will provide information about what a certain subset of residents would like the world to become. This may be valuable, but it is worth noting that residents' stated preferences for the future are unreliable—every year, millions of people buy gym memberships that they never use. People oppose supermarkets that they then go on to shop at. They oppose change happening, and then embrace it once it has.

Moving beyond opt-in consultation

For councils to improve the representativeness of their consultation, they will need to move away from outdated opt-in consultation models and toward more representative or deliberative processes as the main community engagement mechanism.

Representative polling is simple and makes sense

Representative polling is used to gauge opinions on all matters across our political system. A well-designed survey fairly administered will return much

⁵ See: Einstein, Palmer and Glick (2018), [Who Participates in Local Government? Evidence from Meeting Minutes](#), Perspectives on Politics, Volume 17, Issue 1

more representative results than Victoria's prevailing opt-in community consultation processes.

A clear case study of the difference between opt-in consultation and representative polling emerged in the case of Jericho Lands, a major housing development in Vancouver, Canada.⁶ The opt-in consultation saw a 38% approval rate for the project; the subsequent representative polling saw a 65% approval rate for the project. This demonstrates the way that opt-in consultations are biased toward incumbent complainers, and away from change and progress.

Representative polling is definitionally fairer than opt-in consultation, and should be used more regularly by Councils to get a clearer sense of what the average resident actually thinks.⁷

Deliberative processes are more complex but may yield better outcomes

Some authorities have taken to using deliberative processes for consultation. These typically involve smaller, demographically representative groups, who give feedback and deliver recommendations on a given project, or over the course of a government's term. Groups are usually selected using a process called sortition, wherein members are randomly selected until a demographically representative cohort is formed.

Types of deliberative processes appropriate for local council processes include:

- Citizens Jury: a deliberative process involving a smaller number of citizens—who match the demographic profiles of the LGA—meeting over a number of weeks to deliver collective recommendations.
- Standing Citizens Panel: an ongoing deliberative panel, comprising 30-40 citizens, rotating over a 1-2 year period, who are consulted on an ongoing basis.

⁶ [Phase 4 Public Engagement Summary — Jericho Lands Policy Planning Program](#), City of Vancouver

⁷ It is worth noting that the random selection of representative polling is important, and it is not sufficient to simply weight opt-in consultation answers by demographic. The type of person who participates in community consultation is definitionally an outlier, and should not be considered automatically representative of any given demographic.

We've seen these models used in Victoria before such as with City of Yarra's [2036 Community Vision](#), and seen international success such as in Hutt City Council's representative citizens panel model which enabled their successful upzoning program.⁸

Improving the opt-in status quo

Implementing better, more representative processes across local councils may prove a challenge. Many stakeholders, including voting residents, reap benefits from the systemic bias of current consultation processes. It will require bold and progressive leadership, in the face of a powerful land-owning status quo, to improve these processes. YIMBY Melbourne looks forward to seeing that leadership in action.

In the interim, however, there are a number of basic changes authorities can make to improve opt-in community consultation.

Many councils have consultation policies that make it extremely challenging to access information on who was consulted. For example, a large number of councils:

- Never publicly published consultation summary reports,
- Publish consultation data in unusable formats such as poorly labelled line graphs or pie charts,
- Publish consultation data with abnormal age bucketing that makes it challenging to compare with Census data.

Additionally, a majority of the community consultations analysed did not measure the housing tenure of the respondents—despite the subject of consultations literally being *housing*.

We call on the Victorian Government to create consultation guidelines, ensuring that community consultations conducted by all authorities—including the Victorian Government itself—are more transparent.

We recommend that the following information be recorded and publicly released at the conclusion of all consultation processes:

⁸ [Yarra 2036 Community Vision 2025 Reflection and Update Addendum](#), City of Yarra; Maltman and Greenaway-McGrevy (2024), [Going it Alone: The Impact of Upzoning on Housing Construction in Lower Hutt](#), Economic Policy Centre, Working Paper No. 18

1. Number of respondents
2. The housing tenure of the respondents
3. The age of respondents
4. The income of respondents

These statistics should be formatted to align with the ABS's QuickStats pages, allowing authorities and researchers to benchmark the biases of any given consultation.

Conclusion

This research note adds to the overwhelming evidence that current models of opt-in community consultation are structurally biased towards older homeowners, and engages a tiny fraction of the overall community.

The information received as part of current consultation processes should not be relied upon for any consequential decision making, and should be substituted with more representative processes, such as broad polling or narrow deliberative groups selected through sortition.

We caution all governments from inferring broad community sentiment on critical issues like housing from the kinds of people who show up to council meetings. These are definitionally weird people—YIMBYs included.

Appendix 1

No.	LGA	Project	Year
1	Bayside	Moorabbin Activity Centre Program	2017
2	Bayside	Bayside: Housing Strategy Review	2019
3	Boroondara	Boroondara Housing Strategy	2023
4	Boroondara	Camberwell Junction Structure and Place Plan	2023
5	Melbourne	Affordable Housing Strategy	2020
6	Melbourne	Housing Strategy	2014
7	Merri-bek	Affordable housing on Wilkinson St, Brunswick	2021
8	Merri-bek	Designing our Neighbourhoods	2022
9	Merri-bek	The Coburg Conversation	2024
10	Port Phillip	Housing Strategy - Phase 1 Community Engagement	
11	Port Phillip	Housing Strategy 2024-2039	2024
12	Port Phillip	South Melbourne Structure Plan - Phase One Summary Engagement Report	2021
13	Port Phillip	South Melbourne Structure Plan - Phase Two Summary Engagement Report	2022
14	Port Phillip	South Melbourne Structure Plan - Phase Three Summary Engagement Report	2023
15	Yarra	Social and Affordable Housing Strategy	2019
16	Darebin	2-60 Townhall Avenue, Preston, for the purpose of Affordable Housing	2018
17	Darebin	Draft Darebin Housing Strategy	2015

No.	Older people definition	Older people overrepresented?	Nearest census (older people)	Respondents (older people)	% Difference
1	>45	Yes	51.0%	72.9%	43%
2	>49	Yes	43.0%	62.2%	45%
3	>49	Yes	38.0%	60.0%	58%
4	>49	Yes	38.0%	42.0%	11%
5	>45	Yes	22.9%	37.0%	62%
6					
7	>49	Yes	27.0%	31.0%	15%
8	>49	No	27.0%	27.0%	0%
9	>40	Yes	43.0%	50.0%	16%
10	>50	Yes	36.0%	53.1%	48%
11	>49	Yes	32.0%	56.0%	75%
12	>50	Yes	36.0%	82.2%	128%
13	>50	Yes	36.0%	43.5%	21%
14	>50	Yes	36.0%	72.2%	101%
15					
16	>55	Yes	23.5%	40.3%	71%
17	>50	Yes	32.0%	47.0%	47%

No.	Homeowners overrepresented?	Nearest census (homeowners)	Respondents (homeowners)	% Difference
1				
2				
3	Yes	68.70%	87.10%	27%
4				
5	Yes	29.99%	46.39%	55%
6	Yes	31.52%	47.14%	50%
7	Yes	56.00%	71.00%	27%
8	Yes	56.00%	95.00%	70%
9				
10	Yes	47.31%	68.00%	44%
11				
12				
13				
14				
15	Yes	44.10%	79.00%	79%
16	Yes	54.70%	80.70%	48%
17	Yes	57.10%	68.10%	19%

No.	% of LGA population consulted	No. consulted	LGA Population
1	0.16%	167	101,306
2	0.24%	243	101,306
3	0.04%	62	167,900
4	0.20%	340	167,900
5	0.15%	218	149,646
6	0.50%	744	149,646
7	0.08%	140	171,357
8	0.15%	257	171,357
9			
10	0.34%	348	101,965
11	0.06%	63	101,942
12	0.24%	241	101,965
13	0.40%	406	101,965
14	0.19%	194	101,965
15			
16			
17			