

City of Melbourne council election: local residents struggle to be heard

Voting rules mean this weekend's poll will be dominated by people who live elsewhere

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The City of Melbourne covers an area which votes for progressives at a high rate at state and federal elections but thanks to voting rules is dominated by people who live elsewhere, with local residents playing a small role in electing the council.

The council has been led by the lord mayor, Robert Doyle (a former state Liberal leader), for the past two terms, with a council dominated by councillors supported by local business interests and non-resident property owners. Thanks to rules which give a large number of votes to non-residents, and a postal voting system which works more efficiently for non-residents, Doyle and his coalition are likely to keep power in the city for the next four years.

The City of Melbourne is quite small, covering a relatively small area in central Melbourne. In addition to the Melbourne central business district, whose ratepayers have helped build up a large budget, the council covers Docklands, Carlton, North Melbourne, Kensington and Parkville. The council does not cover other inner-city suburbs such as Fitzroy, Richmond, Collingwood or Brunswick.

If you're a local resident you get one vote in the election. If you own property in the area but live elsewhere, up to two owners of the property can enrol to vote. Up to two representatives of local businesses can also enrol. Indeed, it's compulsory for these non-residents to enrol and vote.

Similar rules have now been implemented for City of Sydney elections, but that council covers a larger area with a lot more residents. The residential population of the City of Melbourne is relatively small: 18 other Melbourne-area councils are more populous than the city.

Thanks to these favourable rules and the narrowly drawn council boundaries, approximately 60% of the City of Melbourne roll is made up of business owners and out-of-area property owners, with local residents only making up 40% of the roll.

The city's election is conducted entirely by post (like most Victorian councils), which also favours businesses and property owners over local residents. While the non-residential roll is highly accurate and compiled by the council, the local resident population is highly transient and this has meant that many ballot papers haven't reached the correct person.

As of Wednesday, barely 35% of ballots had been returned - this compares with roughly

45% in 2008 and 2012, and about 55% in 2004. With no option for voters to cast a vote on Saturday at a local polling place, voters' last chance will be to drop their ballot in to the local council offices on Friday.

All of this adds up to a voting system designed to keep the council in the hands of money, and out of the hands of residents. A majority of councillors live outside the council area, and largely rely on the votes of business and out-of-area property owners to win election.

The attempted introduction of such a system in Sydney was met with outrage, as it was a transparent attempt to remove Clover Moore from power. No such outrage was seen in Melbourne as successive Liberal and Labor governments in the 1990s and early 2000s enhanced the role of property owners and business in controlling the city council. There should be no doubt: the voting system is designed to prevent the election of a Clover Moore-style lord mayor who would prioritise the interests of residents over property owners and business.

Doyle is running for a third term as lord mayor. He was first elected in 2008 to succeed John So, and won a second term in 2012 with just over 40% of the primary vote. Doyle had previously served as leader of the state Liberal party from 2002 to 2006.

There is a wide range of candidates challenging Doyle, including the pollster Gary Morgan and the former federal MP Phil Cleary. But the main opposition on the council comes from the Greens, whose MPs hold the overlapping federal and state electorates, and the party primarily gains its vote from local residents.

The City of Melbourne is one of the fastest-growing council areas in the country. More than 25,000 more voters are enrolled this year than in 2012. The local council has a large budget and is overseeing significant changes to the city centre, and the new council will have a lot of influence over what direction that council takes. But the voice of local residents will come second as these big decisions are made.

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