

***Knowing the Challenge:
Voter Attitudes to Federal Constitutional
Recognition of Local Government in 2008***

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First Australian Constitutional Values Survey

- Conducted nationally by telephone over 1-8 May 2008
- 1,201 respondents aged 18 years and over (n=1201)
- 1,155 respondents eligible to vote (n=1155)
- Stratified random sample
- Results post-weighted to Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling, sex, area; and Newspoll data on federal voting intention for eligible voters.
- Funded by the Australian Research Council DP0666833
- Griffith University, with Charles Sturt University, University of New England and the University of Melbourne.

Option 1. Purely symbolic recognition
Option 2(a). Pure institutional recognition
(no direct change to status quo)

Question:

“At the moment, the [Australian] Constitution does not actually mention or officially recognise that local government exists in Australia. Which one of the following comes closest to your view?”

Answers:

‘The existence of local government **should be** officially recognised in the Constitution’

OR

‘There is **no real benefit** in making this change to the Constitution.’

**Figure 1a. Base support for constitutional recognition –
by federal voting preference**

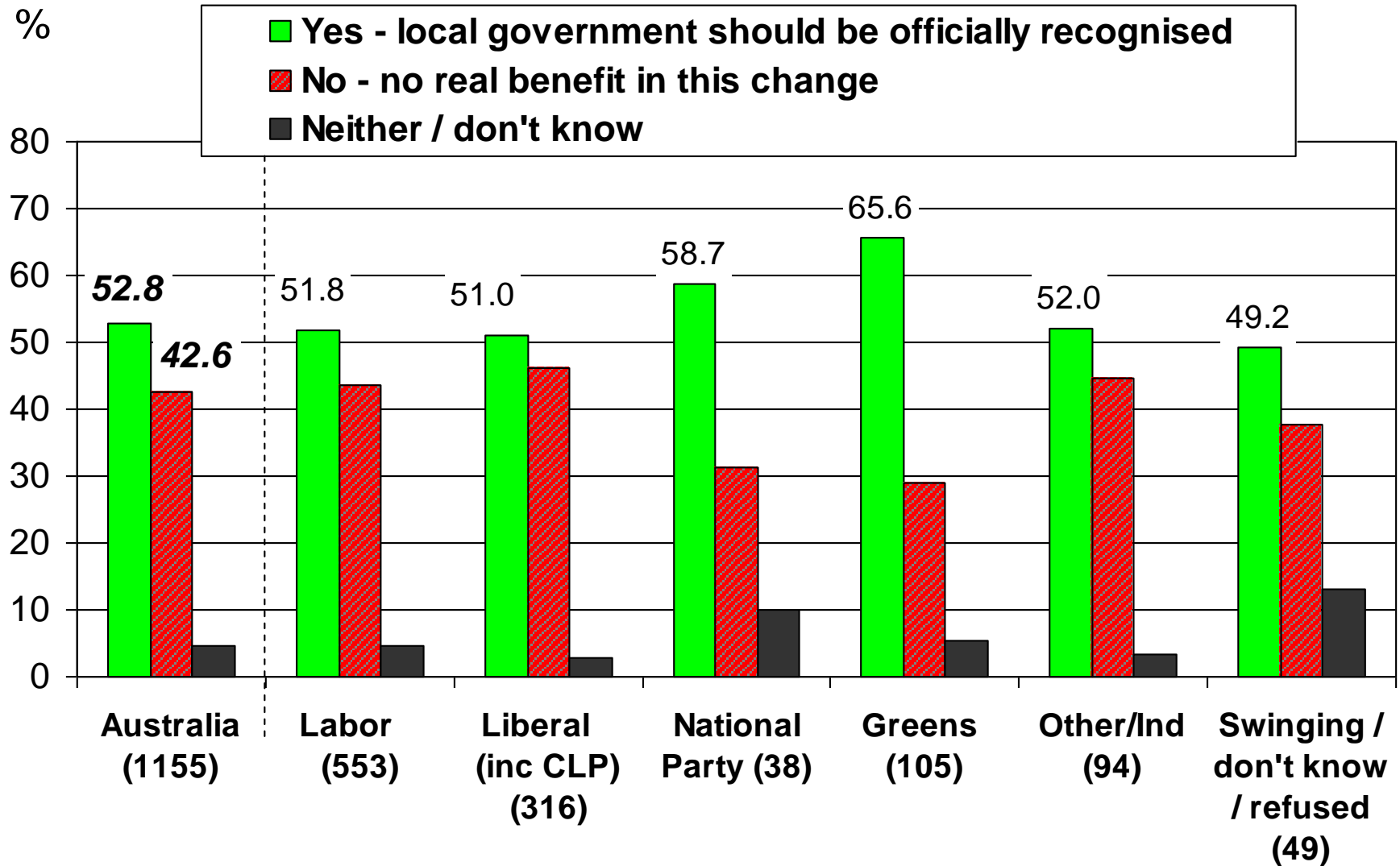


Figure 1b. Base support for recognition – by state

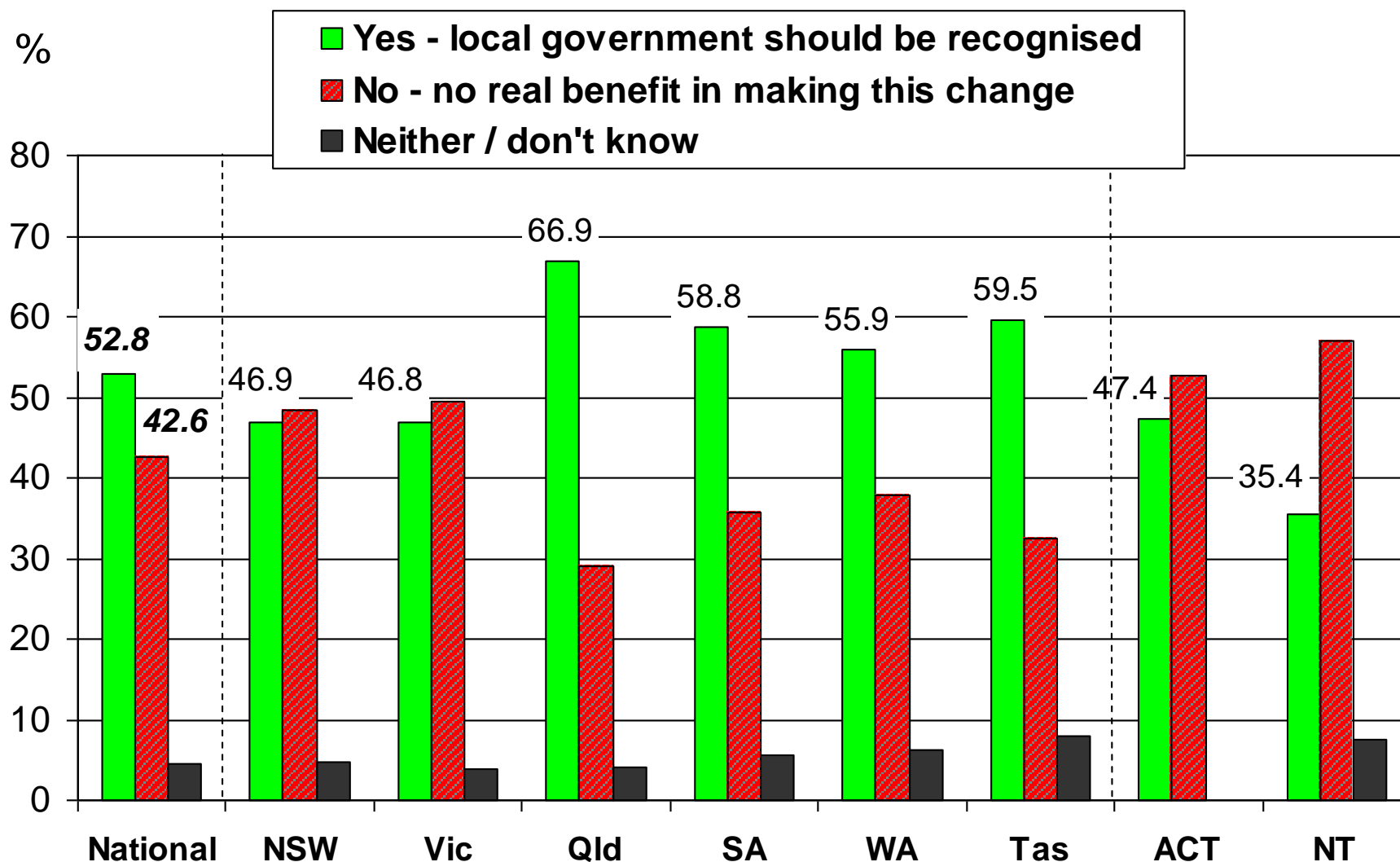
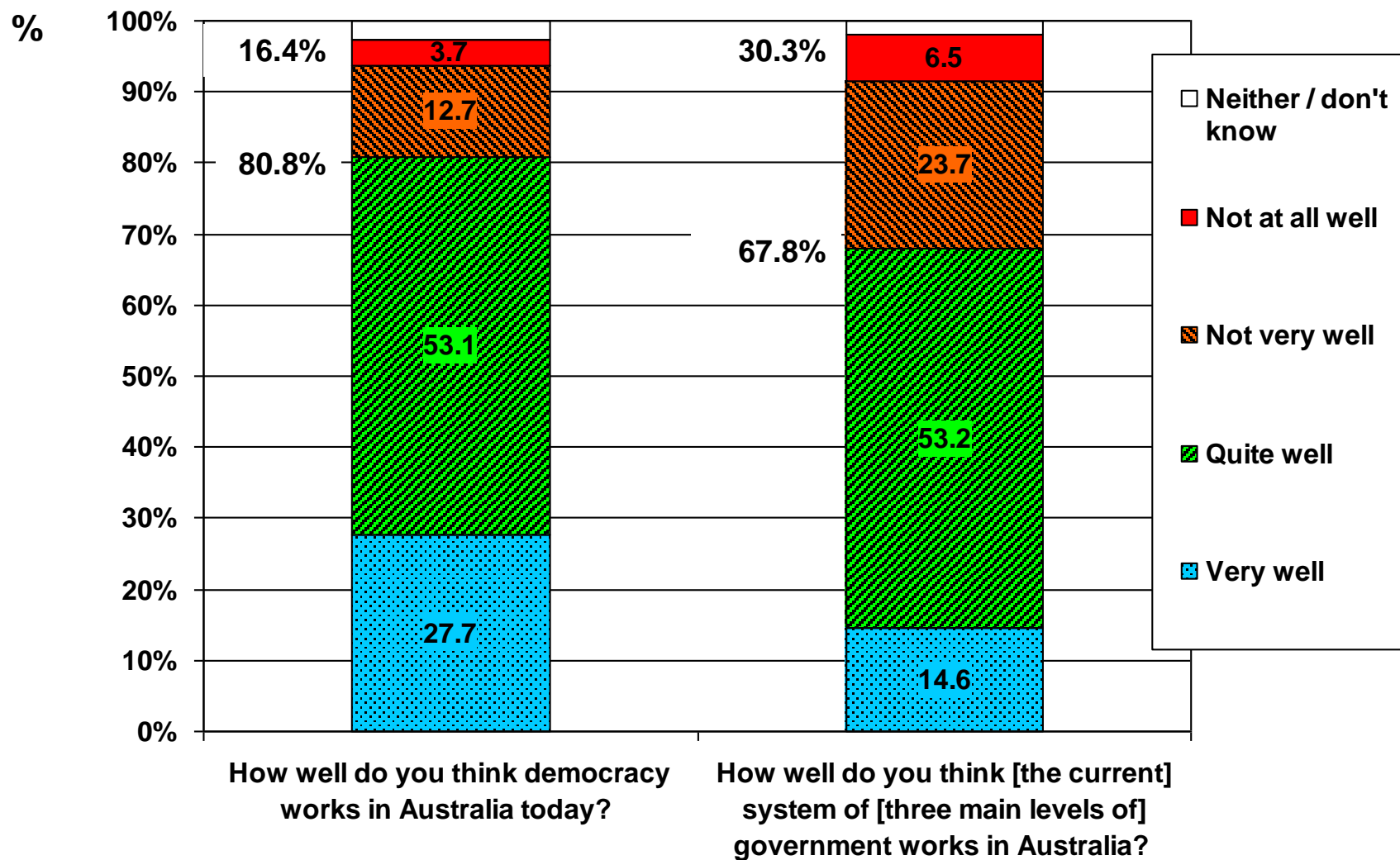


Figure 2. Australians' satisfaction with democracy and their current system of government



Australians' dissatisfaction with federalism

**Current system of government, with
three main levels, does not work well** **30%**

**Current system of three main levels works
at least quite well – but system not delivering
legislative diversity, innovation or collaboration** **39%**

**System works at least quite well, and delivers at
least quite well – but basic federal features remain
undesirable (legislative diversity, ability to innovate,
division of power, ability to elect different parties
at different levels)** **17%**

**Australians critical of the present federal system,
in practice or principle** **86%**

Figure 3. How would you rate the performance of each of the following levels of government?

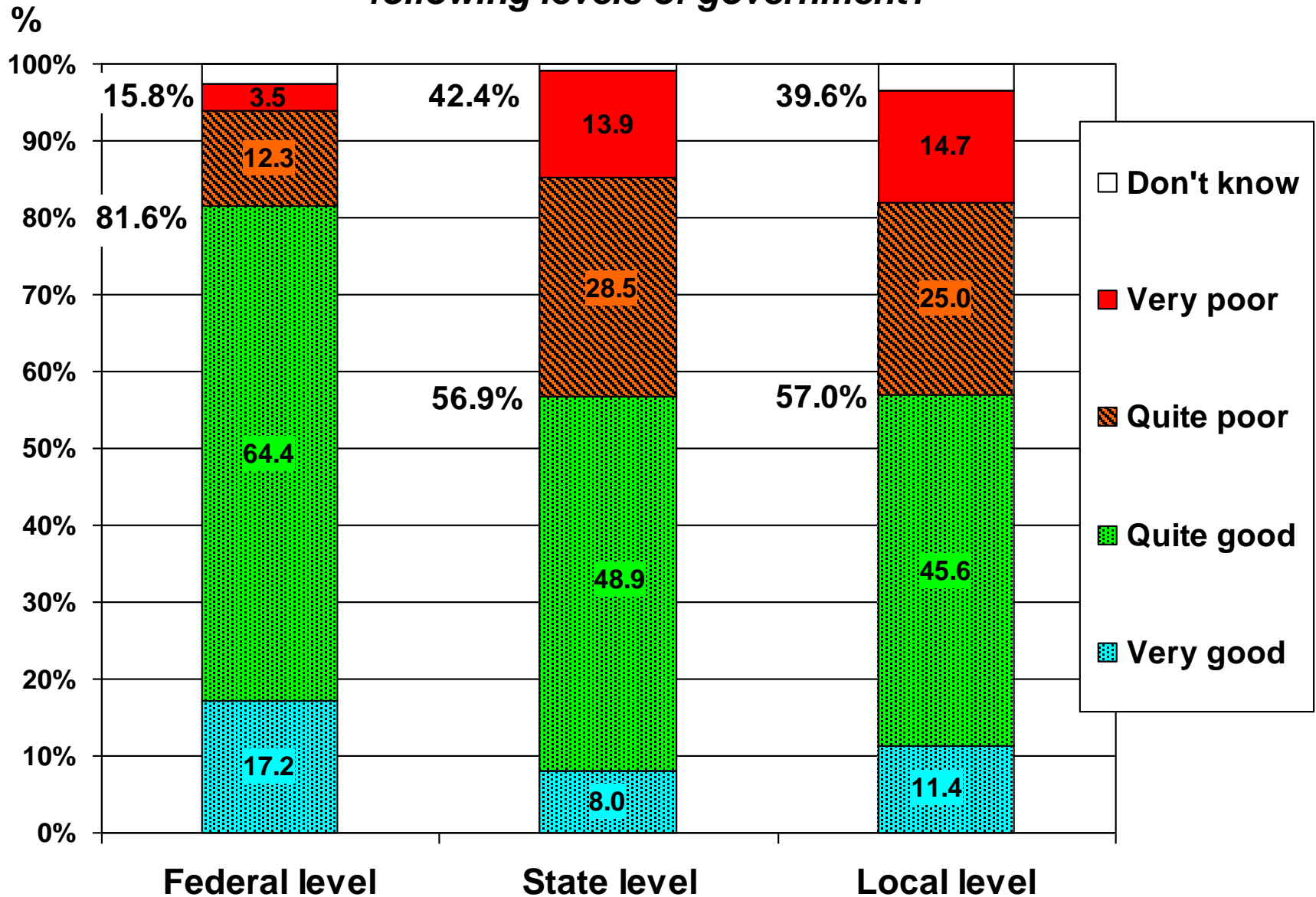


Figure 4. Which one level of government do you think does its [particular] job the most [and least] effectively?

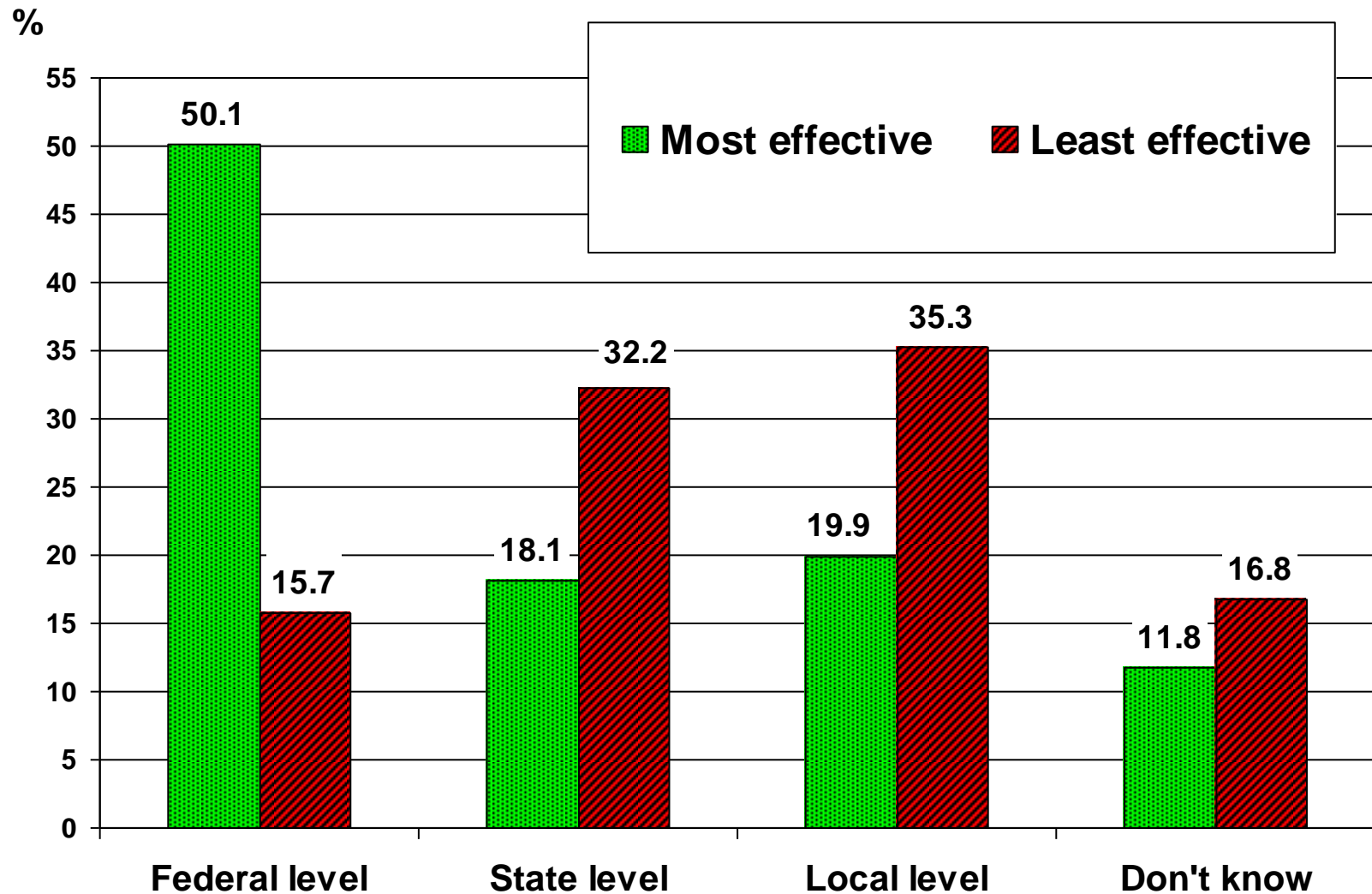
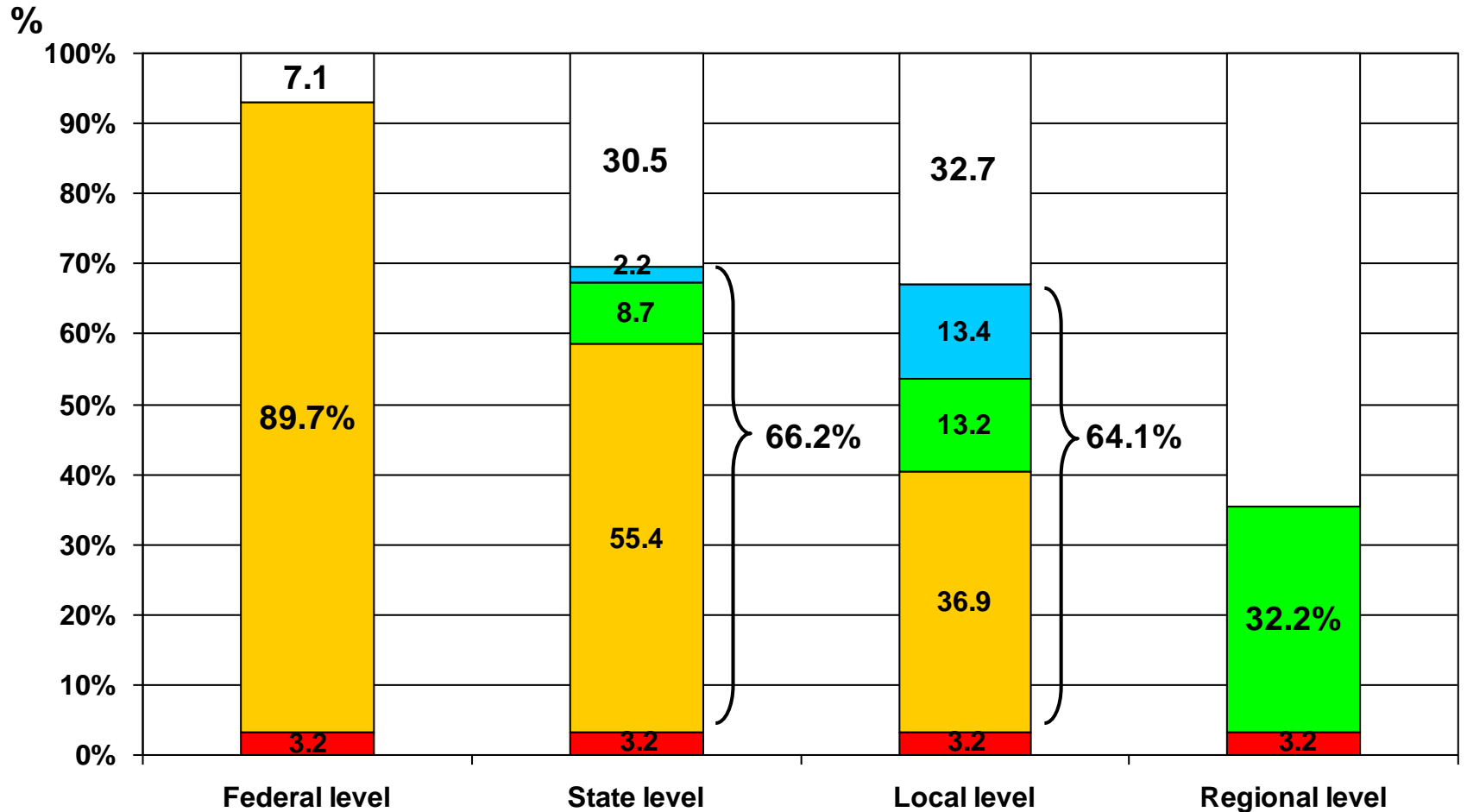


Table 1. Level of government considered least effective at its particular job, by state and territory (2008)

[illegible]

Figure 5. The future – what levels of government should we have?



■ Other / don't know
 ■ Keep same number (inc DK)
 ■ Create more
 ■ Less
 ■ Abolish

Table 2. Support for structural reform of federal system – by state

%	Aust	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	ACT	NT
Keep system the same	31.0	28.7	29.9	33.5	28.0	37.0	32.2	43.5	29.0
Reform the system	65.8	68.9	68.4	59.6	68.3	61.8	63.4	51.3	66.9
Don't know	3.2	2.4	1.7	6.9	3.7	1.2	4.4	5.2	4.1
<i>How reform?</i>									
Abolish federal government	7.1	7.9	6.5	8.1	4.4	7.4	1.0	4.3	13.8
Abolish state governments	30.5	39.8	26.2	27.1	29.4	22.4	21.0	36.4	10.5
Abolish local government	32.7	<u>39.4</u>	31.5	24.8	<u>36.8</u>	30.2	26.6	17.4	31.8
Create more states	8.7	5.1	10.0	12.1	8.4	7.6	16.8	7.1	18.6
Create regional governments	32.2	32.8	37.4	27.7	30.8	28.3	37.8	20.0	21.3

Option 2(b). Institutional recognition plus 'due process' protection for local government

Question:

“Some people have suggested that other changes could be made to the Constitution concerning local government. ... [P]lease say if you would be in **favour** or **against** making [each] change...”

Option:

“For the Constitution to make it harder to amalgamate local governments or change their boundaries.”

Figure 6. Support for recognition that would make it harder to amalgamate or change boundaries of local governments

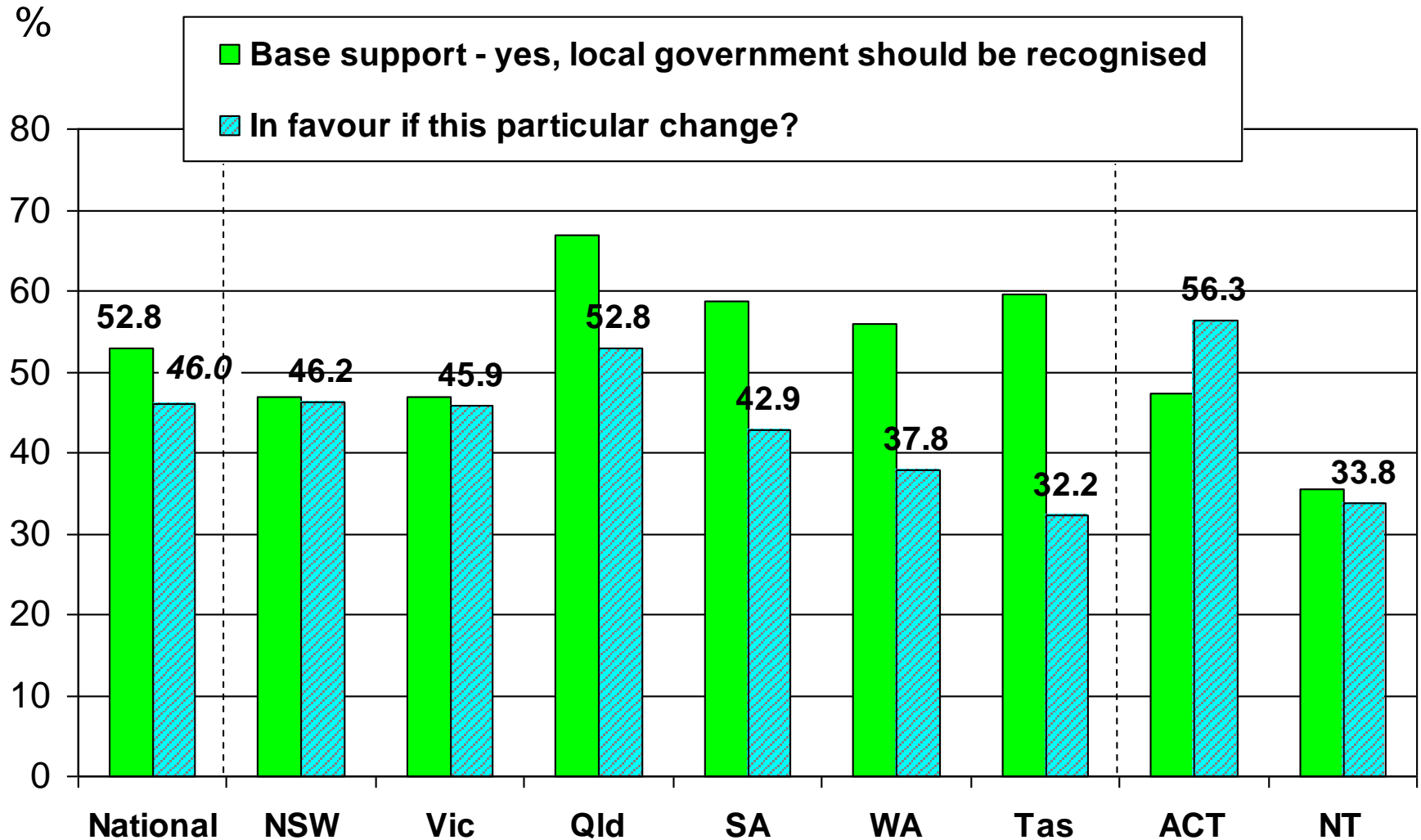
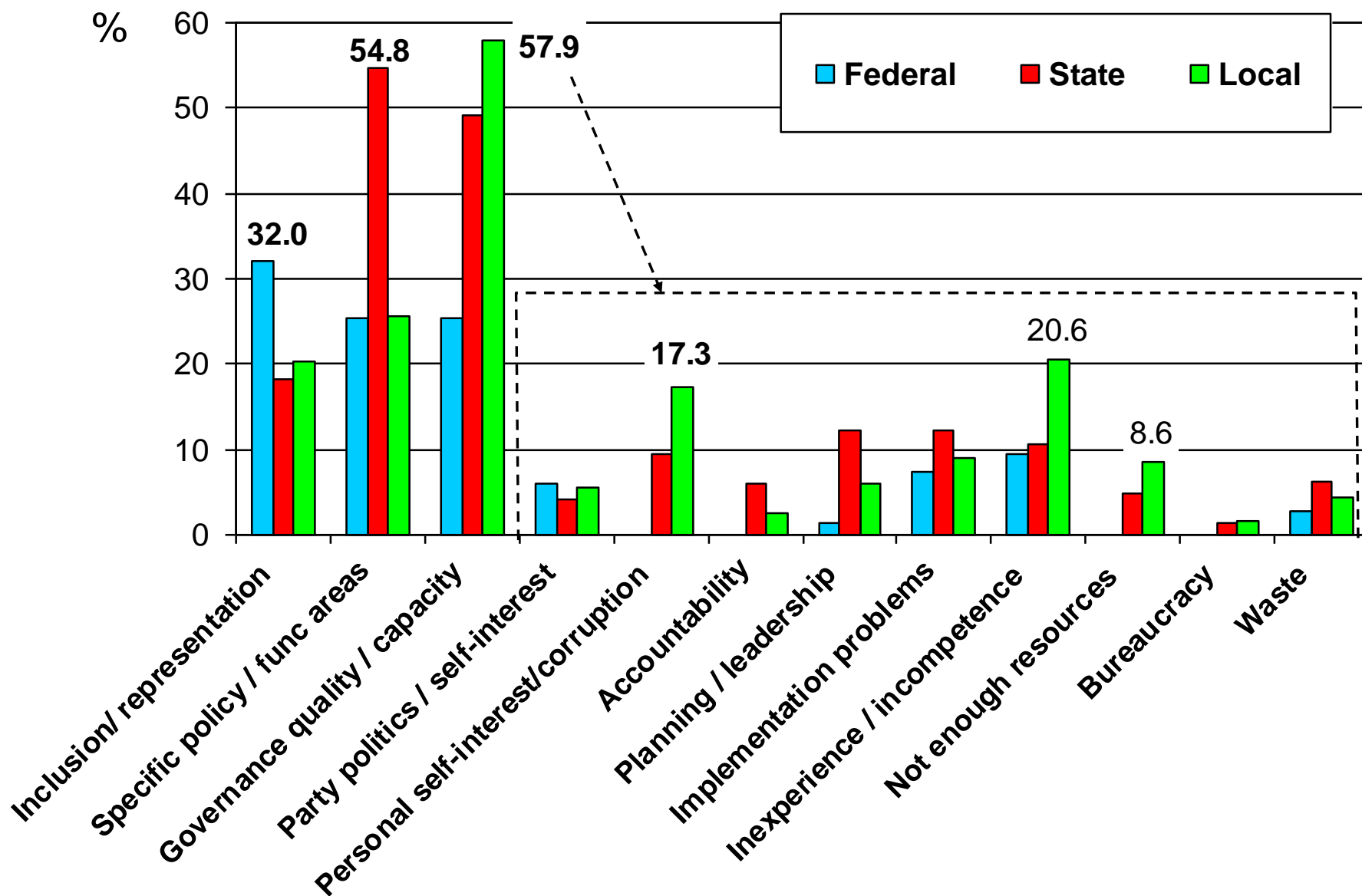


Figure 7. Australians' main reasons for considering particular levels of government to be the least effective



Option 2(c)! Institutional recognition, plus strengthening the quality and integrity of local democracy

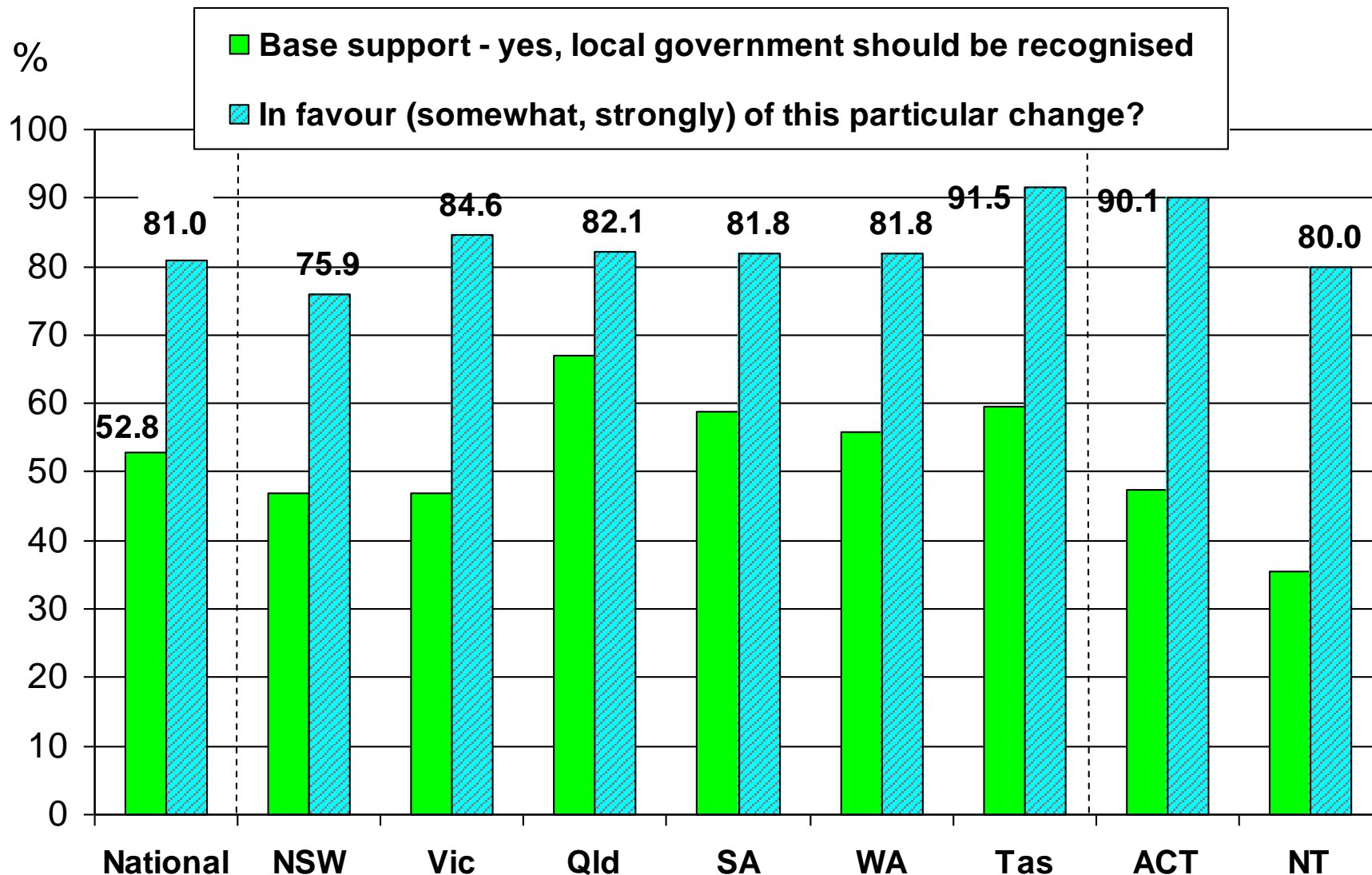
Question:

“Some people have suggested that other changes could be made to the Constitution concerning local government. ... [P]lease say if you would be in **favour** or **against** making [each] change...”

Option:

“For the Constitution to set rules and standards of accountability for local government.”

Figure 8. Support for recognition that would set rules and standards of accountability for local government



Option 3. Institutional plus financial recognition (Strengthening the financial position of local government)

Question:

“Some people have suggested that other changes could be made to the Constitution concerning local government. ... [P]lease say if you would be in **favour** or **against** making [each] change...”

Option:

“For the Constitution to guarantee a reasonable level of funding for local government .”

Figure 9. Support for recognition that would guarantee a reasonable level of funding for local government

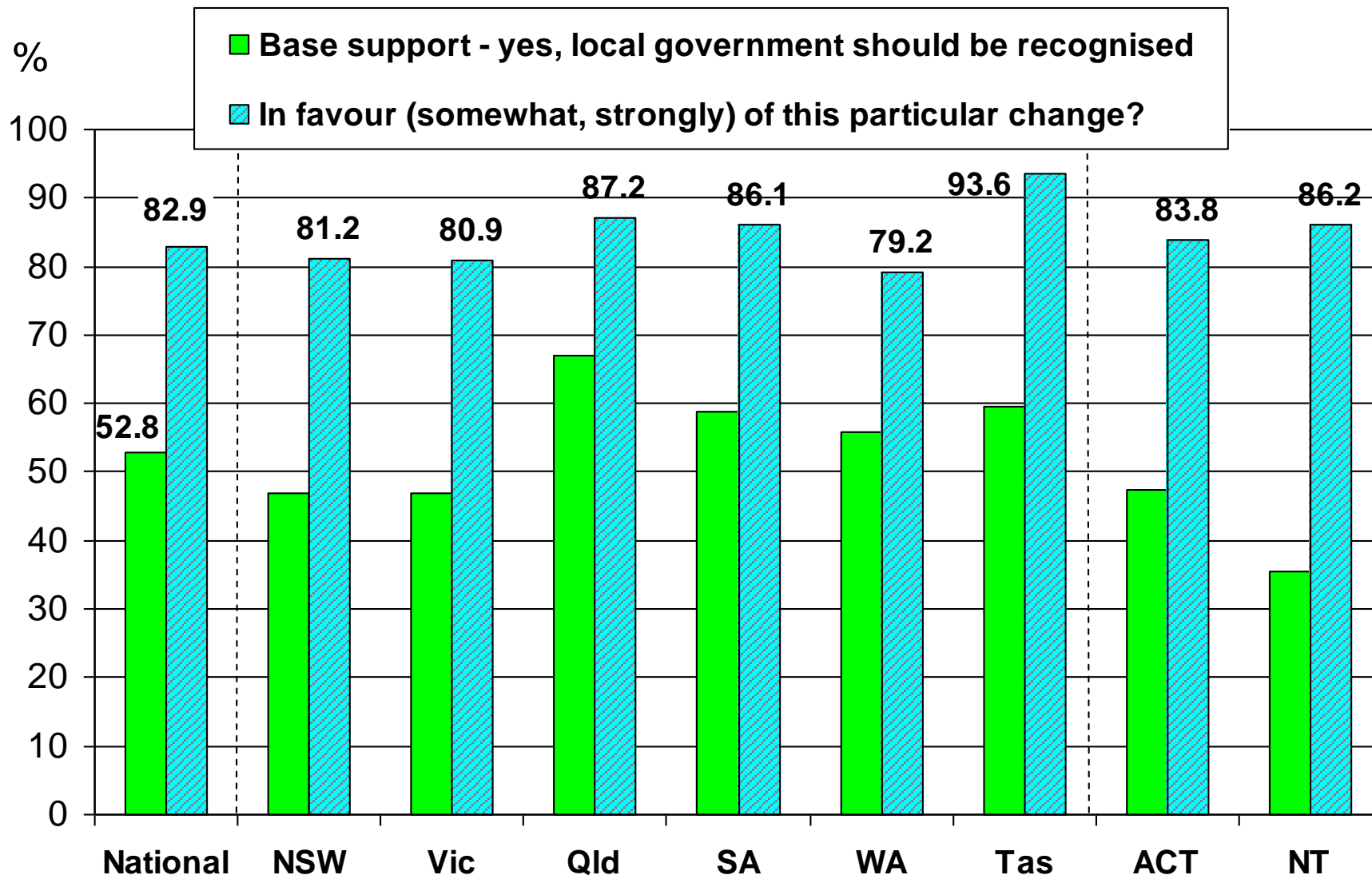
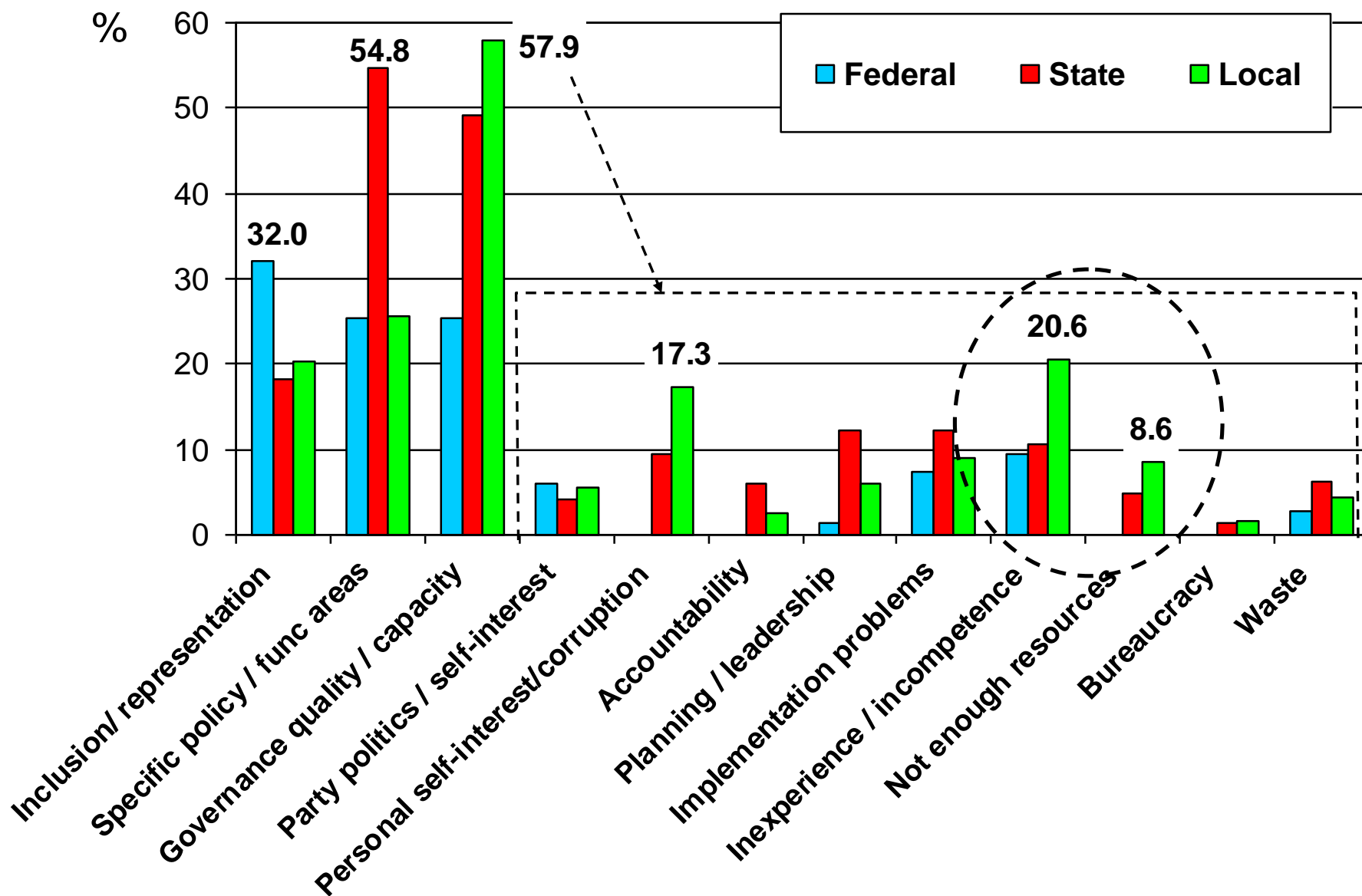


Figure 7. Australians' main reasons for considering particular levels of government to be the least effective







THINKING
BIG

'We need to fix federalism because it affects most aspects of public policy. In effect, we need two principles of power moving in opposite directions. Power has to be both concentrated and devolved. Think of involving people at local levels along with centralised governance.'

Paul Kelly

Australia 2020 Summit Report, p.320

What is involved in 'fixing' federalism?

1) A constitutional framework which better allocates the right roles, responsibilities and resources of government to the different levels (national, state, regional, local)

-- *Beginnings* of some new frameworks under COAG, new Australian Council of Local Government

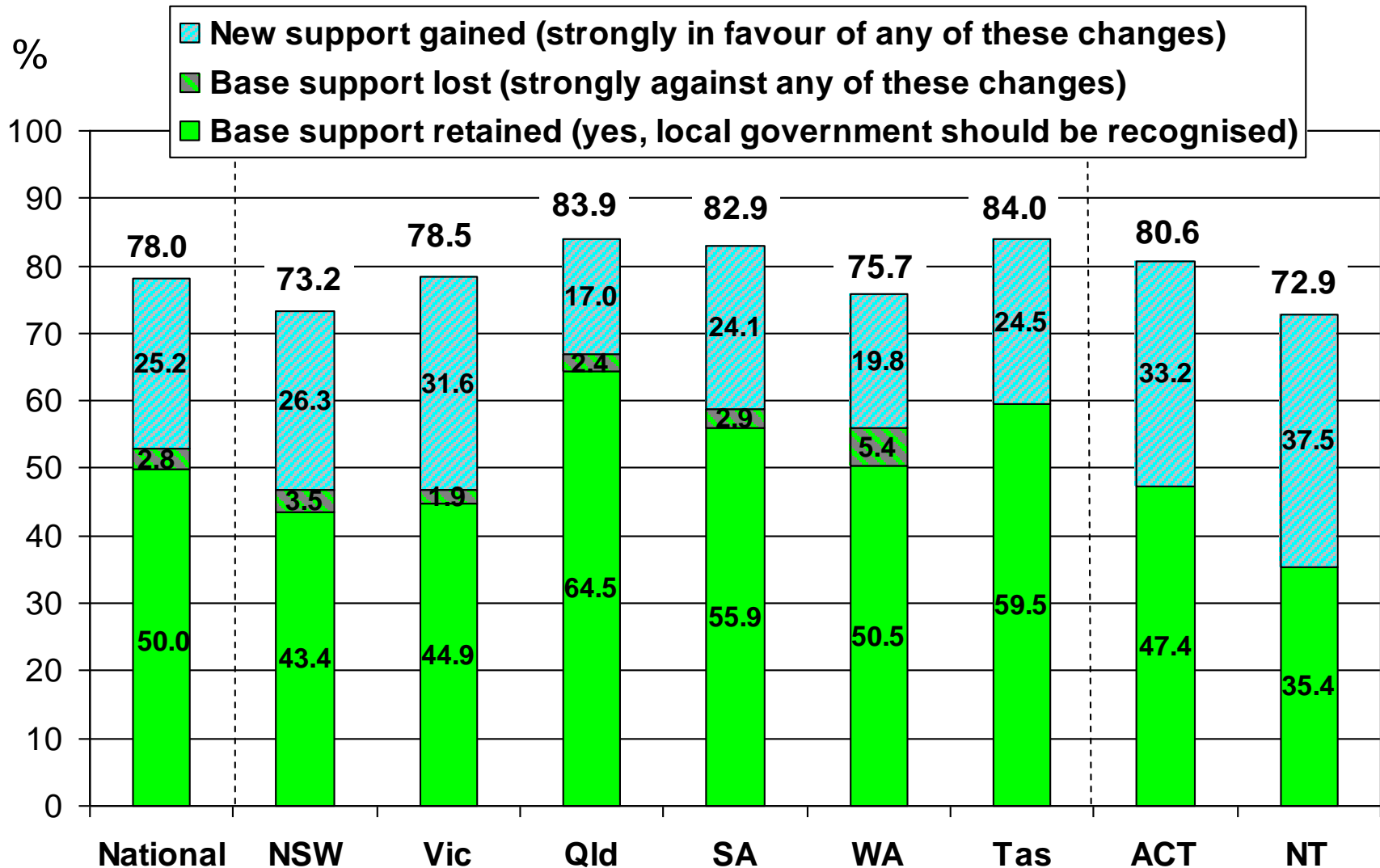
2) Devolution of capacity and resources to local and regional levels, along with centralisation / harmonisation.

3) Improvements in democratic integrity, accountability, responsiveness, and collaborative capacity at all levels.

***How will federal constitutional recognition of
local government contribute to these?***

Figure 10. Potential support for substantive, reform-driven recognition

(Changes to state there must always be a system of local government, set rules and standards of accountability, and guarantee a reasonable level of funding for local govt)



(My personal recommendation:

Aim at a new Chapter of the Constitution, providing, e.g.:

- There must be a system of local government in all States and throughout the Commonwealth;
- Local government shall be directly chosen by the people;
- The States and Commonwealth may make laws with respect to ensuring the integrity of local government and its accountability to the people;
- Commonwealth shall ensure that a minimum share of public revenue is provided to local government;
- Commonwealth may make grants to local government, take over debts;
- Commonwealth and States shall cooperate with local governments, as well as with each other, in all affairs concerning local government; and shall support regional cooperation between local governments;
- Local government shall be represented in all federal inter-governmental arrangements.

)

Option 4. Commonwealth power to make laws

Question:

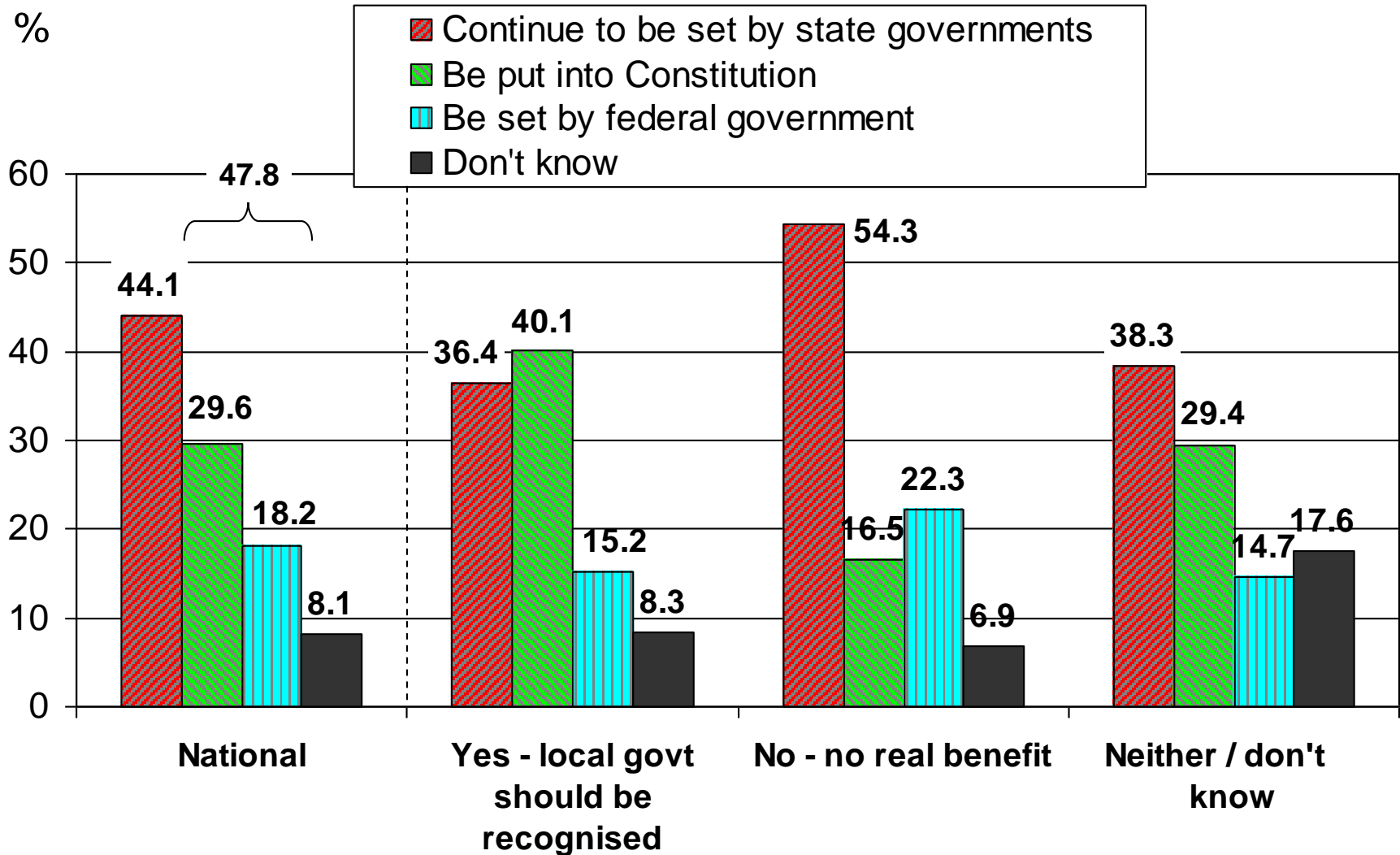
“Currently, the roles and responsibilities of local government are set by state governments. Do **you** think the roles and responsibilities of local government should...?”

Answers:

1. ‘Continue to be set by state governments’
2. ‘Be set by the federal government instead’
3. ‘Be put into the Constitution, and not set by either state or federal government’

Figure 11. Preferred source of constitutional / legislative power over local government

Roles and responsibilities of local government should ...



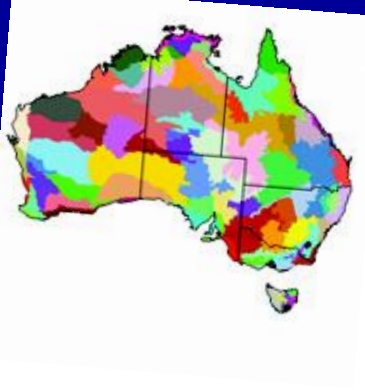
Conclusions: knowing the challenge...

Many Australians will not easily vote for symbolic recognition alone – i.e. they will not generally vote ‘**for**’ a thing they perceive as having problems or as failing.

But they may well vote for substantive forms of recognition, where these clearly go towards helping **reform local government and improve its effectiveness.**

Most Australians will vote for substantive options for recognition that go towards helping reform local government, *and* contribute meaningfully to **reform of the federal system of government as a whole.**

Recognition best seen as **an important step in the development of our system of government for the future,** not simply as fixing a past mistake, or as an end in itself.



The Federalism Project

www.griffith.edu.au/federalism

Good luck !